

To the Dark Tower Came

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 08 Jul 1998

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Robert Borski — 08 Jul 1998, 21:34

"To the Dark Tower Came" seems interpretable in several different ways, so I'm hoping others will post their interpretations. mantis has already linked it to "At the Point of Capricorn" and I'm sure born-again poster Jim Jordan could wrangle some Christian symbology from it. Anybody else care to wade into the fray?

Me, I see TtDTC as being primarily allegorical--as befits a story literalized from a vivid dream, I suppose, since this is how apparently the story came to Gene Wolfe.

The tower represents knowledge; more specifically, the knowledge that has been accumulated during one's lifetime. One of its commonest names is Spire Sans Summit; you never stop accumulating knowledge while you live, and you can never acquire all that there is. There's also no up or down in the tower; knowledge can be pursued in any direction. There are lots of "throne rooms," perhaps symbolizing kingdoms of knowledge, i.e., interests special to one's livelihood or avocation, where one is at least a localized authority. Occasionally, the body of knowledge has a grander scale and perhaps might be deemed a universal truth or dictate of science; this might be the orrery encountered.

Kent and Gloucester are Youth and Learning, respectively--GW tells us this himself. (Also note Kent's association with his comic book namesake, the ubermensch). The two might also be Astolpho and Oliver from The Song of Roland. They are knights aspirants (the child-rem of the epigraph), or courtiers in service to the king, who for obvious reasons I'll call Lear. Lear symbolizes the brain, and he may be senile; but the etymology of 'senile' is given an alternate spin by Gloucester, suggesting it may relate more to antiquity (i.e., while the neocortex is recent, it sits atop a much more primitive brainstem that we've inherited from our animal forebears) than madness. Senile doesn't necessarily have to mean decrepit of mind here, although by the story's end it sure seems to.

Gloucester and Kent have a semi-silly argument about whether what they're seeing outside the window is fog or clouds ("It's a tv!" scream I. "No, it isn't!" screams everyone else), at the conclusion of which Kent says, "I believe in intellectual democracy; I know that I am right, but I concede the possibility that you're right too." Perhaps Gene Wolfe is trying to tell us here that various interpretations of his work are possible and each may be valid. Witness the two different etymologies for 'senile.' Also this, from the intro, in reference to Westwind: "When I wrote this particular story, I was speculating upon what God might do if only He had the technology. Or at least that's what I believe now. Others have found a great many other things in there, and sixteen years is a long time." Perhaps this "democracy of ideas" explains why Gene Wolfe is so reluctant to answer specific questions about his work. Or as Gloucester asserts: "I won't argue definitions with you."

The ivy-climbers outside the tower conflate a number of ideas for me: they are the jack-and-jills who climb the beanstalk hoping to find gold at the top, in the giant's castle, as well as perhaps Ivy Leaguers or Iv[or]y Tower aspirants. Is Wolfe saying these people are pursuing false goals

and that smugness of intellect (or the assumption of exclusivity) is as foolish as staking one's future on a handful of magic beans? Are academics more interested in salaries and tenure than teaching people to think? Is the vampire bat--"shamed by its own malignancy"--the student populace who wish to absorb intellectual nourishment from the faculty rather than nourish themselves through self-development? (Note how the spittle of Kent/Youth resembles the skull of the vampire.) Both climber and bat seem contrasted with those who *truly* attempt to improve the lot of mankind, but are assassinated (Jesus, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, et al).

[The bat might also represent the harpies Astolpho rescues Prester John from in Song of Roland.]

Accumulating knowledge is also difficult and sometimes tiring, Wolfe seems to imply. Note how both Kent and Gloucester wish "to courtier no more." The pursuit of knowledge may take one as well into labyrinthine realms, where the maze is as much vertical as horizontal (cf. the tower as abyss) and the dark minotaur waits--in TtDTC this may be the zodiacal talking bison, who represents the dark side of Daedalean knowledge. (Einstein, seeking to unlock the universe, paves the way for atomic weaponry; "A little knowledge is a dangerous thing," etc., etc.)

But perhaps the chief danger to an individual's pursuit of knowledge is time itself, and biological aging--symbolized by the rats of the story. Not only do they kill Kent/Youth, but they're eating away at the foundation of the tower, and when Lear appears at the end of the story, he may be truly senile in the conventional sense, having reverted to childhood, attended by bacchantes who might serve his physical needs, but whose eyes are votive candles lit to a life no longer possible.

As for the psychoanalytical angle mentioned by Wolfe in his intro, while a Freudian might guess the dream symbolized a fear of impotence, my best take on it is that Gene Wolfe fears the knibbling of rats at his brain and the diminishment of his mental capabilities over time.

Any of you yet experiencing tip-of-the-tongue phenomena, where the name or the title you're seeking lays just beyond mental grasping and it's driving you crazy?

Hi ho, the dairy-oh, the rat eats the cheese.

Call me Gorgonzola.

Robert Borski (Emile's brother)