

Cherry Jubilee

The Urth list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 16 Jul 1998

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Robert Borski — 16 Jul 1998, 00:06

Gene Wolfe's "Cherry Jubilee" might be read as a simple Agatha Christie-like whodunit set aboard a spaceship traveling to Mars, but like all of Wolfe's stories set in space (perhaps because both heaven and space are traditionally thought of as being skyward), it has a strong religious subtext. It's also of a piece with THE FIFTH HEAD OF CERBERUS in its thematic approach to cloning.

Cherry Houdini is the clone of escape artist Merry Houdini. Merry (as in Xmas) represents one half of Mary, Christ's mother, while "Cherry" (a popular euphemism for virgin) represents the other half. Cherry also represents the immaculately-conceived Christ child; only as we so often see in stories by Wolfe such provenance--because it seeks to emulate, if not usurp, God--is unholy. Witness Number Five's association with the Anti-Christ or the soldiers in "The HORARS of War." Wolfe always links these figures with perdition and in "Cherry Jubilee" this unholiness leads to death of Merry/Mary by her own "daughter," who drives a knife into her chest while her arms are spread crucifixion style.

Also present in this perversion of the traditional Nativity/Crucifixion is Smith, aka Smitty, an American spy who succeeds in bribing Cherry into dating him--if she refuses he'll turn her in as Merry's killer (the Captain of the ship has actually been blamed). Smitty, I warrant, is the evil equivalent of Joseph the Carpenter, husband to Mary (both blacksmithing and carpentry require skilled use of the hands). Smitty's further association with blacksmithing aligns him with the fires of Hell--which Mars, the soi-disant red planet, symbolically represents. And what better vehicle to transport people to Hell than a rocketship owned by Godless Communists, the Reds?

Others present (and who in turn are each speculated upon as being the killer by KGB agent Vera Oussenko) include Comrade Petrovsky and his wife Anna, who, in addition to being based on Petrov and Anna Pavlova in Tolstoy's ANNA KARENINA, may also be thought of as Peter, one of Christ's apostles and the first pope, and Anne, mother of Mary (the same association of Anne with cloning is seen, of course, in Fifth Head).

As for Captain Bogdanoff, I wonder if he's not based on film director Peter Bogdanovich--another Peter with a Russian name. Bogdanovich, for what it's worth, was romantically involved with 1980 Playmate of the Year Dorothy Stratton (whom Cherry and Merry physically resemble). Stratton was eventually killed by her estranged husband (which recapitulates the Jubilee aspect of the story: i.e., the husband is taking back his "property"). Captain Bogdanoff has been sleeping with Merry in the story, and soon (if he can get the Party to clear him of murder charges) may do so with Cherry, since she's masquerading as Merry. Meanwhile, back here in the real world, Peter Bogdanovich soon began dating the late Dorothy Stratton's younger sister, who I'm sure bore at least a sororal resemblance (Bogdanovich may have even married her--I'm not sure). So there are extended parallels.

Robert Borski

mary whalen — 16 Jul 1998, 22:35 · follows Robert Borski

This is Sean Whalen (prion).

When I saw that Robert Borski had written a post about "Cherry Jubilee" I read the story for the first time so I would be able to understand his discussion. I'm glad I did, as he analyzed the religious allusions in the work I wasn't aware of. However, at the end of the story, the Captain is not the one blamed by the authorities. His father-in-law, a party official, has enough influence that Oussenko's story is not accepted by the law, and Oussenko is locked up on the ship, where she will be returned to Earth for sentencing. Just a minor point.

Also, even though this is a crime/mystery story of Wolfe's, I was actually able to figure out the ending before it happened, in contrast to usually not understanding the ending even after I'm done!

prion

gmcintyre — 17 Jul 1998, 08:22 · follows mary whalen

Hello, everyone! It's been a while since I've posted.

I wanted to follow up Robert Borski's post about CJ, specifically his point about Peter Bogdanovich/Dorothy Stratten. In 1980, Stratten starred in Galaxina, playing an android with whom the captain falls in love. I don't want to belabor this point, but I had to add that little tidbit.

Thanks.

Rory McIntyre