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The Whorl list — 3 messages, 2 voices, 06 Dec 1996

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Peter Cash — 06 Dec 1996, 14:22

I really don't feel that I completely understand what happened on top of the airship. Why did Mucor possess Horn (that is what happened, right?)? Did Mucor "push" Horn off, or did she have nothing to do with it? Was Silk going to jump?

Throughout the scene on top of the airship, I get a feeling of building menace. You know something bad is going to happen, but it's not clear why--and when it happens, it's not clear what happened.

Can anybody help me understand this better?

Peter

Questions or problems to whorl-owner at lists.best.com

Peter Cash — 06 Dec 1996, 13:57 · follows Peter Cash

Jim Jordan <jbjordan at gnt.net> wisely wrote:

Subject:

Date: Tue, 03 Dec 1996 23:50:49 -0600

Quetzal - Quetzalcoatl was the mythical "white man" who was expected to arrive among the Aztecs and change things forever. The Mayans called him Culculcan, as I recall. "Quetzalcoatl" means "feathered serpent." Perhaps a dragon/cherubim association. Quetzal knows his Bible (the pre-Bible of the Urth-universe) and corrects someone in "Exodus" who ascribes a Biblical saying to Pas.

So Quetzal is pretty ambiguous. Perhaps a "converted" vampire who rejects human blood for animal blood?

I would agree with "ambiguous". He is clearly presented as a "good guy" in the narrative; we are supposed to like him. I don't think that this means he is necessarily good, however. Remember what happened to the Aztecs when their Quetzalcoatl came--in the shape of Cortez. As for him knowing scripture-- remember that "Even the demons believe, and shudder" (James 2:19)

Pas's motivation - Why would a horrible tyrant like Typhon build a huge spaceship and send away all his slaves, leaving him alone? That does not make a lot of sense -- unless somehow the entire project was masterminded by Quetzal as a way to get home? Perhaps Quetzal had the power to hypnotize Typhon somehow. The Severian Quintet shows lots of aliens present on Urth.

Perhaps he was bringing a food supply home. There are indications that Quetzal has been on board since the beginning...

Fifth Head of Cerberus - First, there is no doubt that a shapeshifter takes the place of the scientist in the third part of the book. Second, unless Wolfe has indicated something, I would not take these novellae as in the

same universe as Urth. They seem to be set in the future of our own oscillation. Is there some more concrete reason to associate Ste. Anne and Ste. Claire with Green and Blue?

Aren't the two described as green and blue planets in close proximity? I thought they were, but upon searching I couldn't find the reference in Fifth Head. I was really struck by the parallels when I finished Exodus--"Oh no, they've gone _there_!" I had assumed that the passengers of the Whorl were the earlier settlers who were assimilated by the shapeshifters. I agree that there are some problems if you take the description of the culture on the two planets at face value--mention of the French colonists, for example, doesn't seem to belong in the same timeline as Pas. But what if all the colonists were in fact shape-shifters, and their "human" culture was built only on a sketchy knowledge of Earth history?

Re-reading the last two chapters of volume three of the Book of the Long Sun, in preparation for volume four, I suddenly realized that Father Silk is not only a good pastor, but a Christ figure in the sense of acting out the events in Jesus' life. Wolfe would say a "Christian figure," since we are all to live in Christ and be Christlike; but here, as in the Book of Acts and in Cordwainer Smith's "Scanners Live in Vain," there is an allegorical presentation of this matter.

The reader should bear in mind that Wolfe is a devout, practising Roman Catholic strongly influenced by G.K. Chesterton, and that a number of his other works are Christian allegories.

I would agree that there are Christ-like elements in Silk--just how far the comparison goes is a matter of conjecture.

Consider: (Spoiler Warning: Numbers 1-17 come from the first three volumes only; after that you are at risk.)

1. Silk's "enlightenment" and call by the Outsider // Jesus' baptism. Some have thought that this might merely be a downloading of information from Mainframe, but Mainframe is not the Outsider, and it becomes clearer and clearer that the Outsider is the God of the Bible.

I think so too.

2. The Crow (Night Chough) who accompanies Silk // the Holy Spirit Dove who accompanies Jesus.

The dove only comes in at Jesus' baptism--it doesn't follow him around, talking up a storm. Odin, on the other hand, walked around with two crows--Thought and Memory. What's the significance of the fact that the night chough was bought as a pagan sacrifice? ... good points deleted ...

6. Silk dies and is buried at the end of volume 3, and then is raised to life again by the Outsider // Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection.

I don't recall this. How does Silk die, and how is he resurrected?

7. Silk leads the Whorl's inhabitants to a new land // Jesus and the New Creation.

Does Silk do this? Is this what he is supposed to do? First of all, it's not clear to me that Silk was in any way necessary to the landers' departure from the Whorl-- the "Plan of Pas" could have been brought to fruition without Silk. I don't think Silk has anything to do with this plan--remember that the Plan is that of Pas, the evil and pagan god, and not the Outsider. As far as I can tell, the Plan is to provide goodies for the vampyric shape-shifters of Green to munch on.

I think that the ending is actually tragic, inasmuch as Silk has misunderstood his Calling from

the beginning, and never quite "got" it--at least insofar as we are told. Silk's calling (by the Outsider) isn't to lead his people to the new worlds-- which are populated by devils--but to _save_ them. Silk thinks he's supposed to "save" his Manteion--but he never understands what salvation _is_. The kind of salvation the Outsider has in mind is salvation from sin, from the "evil of the world" that Silk ruminates on with Horn on top of the airship.

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11. Big, lumbering, good-hearted Auk is Silk's Peter.

Yes, there are similarities. But Auk was a violent thief, whereas Peter was a fisherman.

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16. We know from the Severian Quintet that two-headed Pas is the wicked and titanic Typhon // the devil. He rules the whorl, and makes himself god there (Pas means "all"). Clearly, leaving the whorl and moving to a planet will mean deliverance from this Luciferian Overlord.

Ah, but does it? Or does it mean the completion of his diabolical Plan? ...

19. Silk travels to the angelic realm of the fliers. Compare ascension of Jesus.

Again, I see this as more ambiguous than you do. Mainframe is more of a parody of heaven than its symbolic representation. What do you make of Silk's desire to speak with his father there, and his inability to do so? Who does Silk think his father is, I wonder? Given his Virgin Birth, and given that the source of implantable embryos must be high-tech, it seems to me that he must have come from Mainframe. Does he think that Mainframe _is_ his father? Again, I'm not sure whether to see this as Christ symbolism or parody.

20. Silk's personality joins Pas and his lover, replacing Pas's dead head, and thus is "seated at the right hand of the Father." Compare Jesus's enthronement with Father and Spirit at His ascension. The "Pas" in Mainframe is not quite the same as Typhon, in this regard. He is a kind of "Good Lucifer."

I remember Kypris (Aphrodite) making the offer to Silk; I don't recall that he accepted it. And I don't share your view of the Mainframe Pas as a "good Lucifer". Being seated at the right shoulder of _this_ god strikes me as eminently undesirable.

21. Hyacinth's gross waywardness and infidelity are pictures of the sinfulness of Christ's Church-Bride. Wolfe makes sure we are both horrified and forgiving of her sins.

I don't know about this; I'm not in the least inclined to forgive Hyacinth's final sin, which is to run out on Silk. But then again, I don't really know what to make of this action; Wolfe has been far too elliptical here. Given my negative view of the "new worlds", she may have been doing Silk a favor. But then what happens to Silk?

In the end, I can't help but see in Hyacinth's action the re-emergence of a pattern that has been characteristic of her as long as she's lived: she takes advantage of lovers, then leaves them when she perceives that her advantage lies elsewhere. Consider that she's been the "special friend" of, at one time, Oosik, Blood, and the guardsman they meet just before they go underground. Remember how Silk remarks that while she must have meant a great deal to the young officer, he meant nothing to her? Remember that Hyacinth is a hooker--and the Hooker with a Heart of Gold is really too good to be true.

It may be that Silk understands all this, and loves her anyway (he makes some remarks to this effect after discussing Hyacinth's escapades with the Trivigaunty general). But that doesn't

make me like Hyacinth more.

22. When Silk returns to Viron, it is armageddon, the end of the world battle. Compare the prophecies of Christ's return.

Maybe it's armageddon, maybe it's just plain confusion. I can't tell what's going on, and it seems pretty pointless.

24. At the last moment, Silk's own wayward bride, Hyacinth, prefers this world to the world to come, and Silk rushes forth to save her at all costs. A moving finale, and a picture once again of the abiding sinfulness of the Bride of Christ.

Not exactly my reaction, as you can tell...

~~~~~  
Die Welt ist alles, was Zerfall ist.  
(apologies to Ludwig Wittgenstein)  
~~~~~

Questions or problems to whorl-owner at lists.best.com

Jim Jordan — 18 Dec 1996, 20:20 · follows Peter Cash

At 01:57 PM 12/6/96 -0600, Peter Cash wrote:

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Point taken.

Pas's motivation - Why would a horrible tyrant like Typhon build a huge spaceship and send away all his slaves, leaving him alone? That does not make a lot of sense -- unless somehow the entire project was masterminded by Quetzal as a way to get home? Perhaps Quetzal had the power to hypnotize Typhon somehow. The Severian Quintet shows lots of aliens present on Urth.

Perhaps he was bringing a food supply home. There are indications that Quetzal has been on board since the beginning...

Again, good point.

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That would not seem to work with "Fifth Head," which depends on a contrast between shape-shifters, true humans, and clones.

My own thought would be that IF there be any connection, it is just that in the Urth universe there are also a pair of planets corresponding to those in "Fifth Head," but which were not settled as in "Fifth Head." I imagine the next book in the series will settle this one for us.

snip

2. The Crow (Night Chough) who accompanies Silk // the Holy Spirit Dove who accompanies Jesus.

The dove only comes in at Jesus' baptism--it doesn't follow him around, talking up a storm. Odin, on the other hand, walked around with two crows--Thought and Memory. What's the significance of the fact that the night chough was bought as a pagan sacrifice?

Probably more of Wolfe's ambiguity and myth-mixing. In the Severian Quintet, Severian is both a Christ (=Christian) figure and an Apollo figure.

6. Silk dies and is buried at the end of volume 3, and then is raised to life again by the Outsider // Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection.

I don't recall this. How does Silk die, and how is he resurrected?

Chapter 9. Hardcover pp. 321ff. He is covered by dirt (dead and buried), and his soul departs to visit his mothers and fathers (both physical and adopted). It is clear from the ensuing descriptions that Silk was covered for quite some time, and considered dead.

7. Silk leads the Whorl's inhabitants to a new land // Jesus and the New Creation.

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to me that Silk was in any way necessary to the landers' departure from the Whorl--
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"save" his Manteion--but he never understands what salvation is. The kind of
salvation the Outsider has in mind is salvation from sin, from the "evil of the world"
that Silk ruminates on with Horn on top of the airship.

You may be right, but I don't think so at this point. I asked Wolfe about salvation once, and he commented that Jesus fed people, and that people need food and a place to live before they can do much else. Thus, Severian "saves" Urth by providing a new sun, and Silk "saves" his church by getting them out of the ship and to a planet. The Increate/Outsider wants this salvation as well, and may USE Pas and others for His ends (for, as Wolfe says elsewhere, they are His servants, too, though they don't know it).
So I don't see the end as tragic, though it is only a partial salvation, as you note.

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Yes, there are similarities. But Auk was a violent thief, whereas Peter was a fisherman.

Yes. Wolfe wants us to see those who are saved as having been sinners first, and thus adds this feature to his Peter.

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Hmmm. Good question.

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It is probably both.

BTW, Silk **REJECTS** the offer of a visit from his parents (p. 348), right? And Silk knows both his sets of parents, as I pointed out above.

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It is true that we are not shown his accepting the offer. But there was something that made me think he too her up on it. I don't have time to reread the remaining 50 pages of the book to find it.

Anyway, the offer itself carries the same symbolic-parodic weight. Perhaps it is a temptation: to join an anti-trinity?

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I don't think we are supposed to like Hyacinth. People are corrupt, more than they realize; right? Christ's Bride often (usually?) acts like a whore, acts like she did before He saved and married her. But He loves her anyway. I think that is the point.

I think Silk's running after Hyacinth is the Good Shepherd leaving the 99 and seeking the one sheep who is lost. Remember that Wolfe likes the parables a lot, as we see in "The Detective of Dreams."

I enjoyed your interaction. Do you have any replies to mine?

Jim Jordan

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