

A Thesis Presented to
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Analysis of Gender in Gene Wolfe's *Book of the New Sun*

by

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Part 1: Honors Introduction

During my senior year of high school, I was rather unlucky in that none of my friends had the same lunch period as me. The prospect of sitting alone, doing nothing but eating the sandwich I had packed was not a pleasant one, so I decided that I would turn to reading as a way to entertain myself. I wasn't sure what to pick up at first, but after scouring internet forums related to science fiction and fantasy novels, I decided that Gene Wolfe's *Book of the New Sun* would work. It more than delivered. The surreal imagery, enigmatic story, and complex protagonist suited me perfectly. In the end, I suppose it was a blessing that I did not have any friends to sit with, because I quickly discovered my favorite series of novels.

Although I have always been a fan of science fiction and fantasy, I have carried this love alongside a degree of frustration. These are genres brimming with concepts and ideas to explore. One could argue that there are few activities out there more liberating than the act of writing genre fiction. It's a realm that allows the writer to include whatever they want, regardless of how "realistic" it is. Despite the endless possibilities, much of this genre is shamelessly derivative. I don't believe that borrowing from other authors makes a piece of fiction inherently bad. My problem is that I feel that much of the field of science fiction and fantasy is quite same-y, with authors often relying on worn out cliches when they could be writing something more creative and original. *Book of the New Sun*, however, is most definitely original.

The main character of the series is a young man named Severian. While at the beginning of the series he is training to be a professional torturer, it isn't long before he is exiled from the guild he belongs to after confessing that he has let a captive named Thecla kill herself so she can escape a more agonizing death. As Severian travels, he encounters various difficulties and

eventually comes to discover that his role in the world he inhabits is much greater than he originally thought.

Part of what makes the series so unique is the setting, the storytelling, and the protagonist. The story is set on “Urth,” a far future version of our own world where the sun has faded to crimson. Advanced technology does exist, but for the most part only extremely wealthy humans and extraterrestrial beings are able to access it. For the vast majority of people, life is not unlike that of a peasant in the Middle Ages. In addition, biology and culture are far different from what we know today. Although human beings still exist, most of the flora and fauna is completely exotic.

Book of the New Sun is a series that can be difficult to get into. On a first reading, it is easy to see the story as being aimless and confusing. However, this is intentional. These books are meant to be read through multiple times, allowing the reader to piece together clues about the characters and setting that they may not have previously picked up on. When compared to other novels, the reading experience is more focused on absorbing the world and surreal atmosphere and less about the plot itself.

Severian narrates the story. This can make interpreting the events of the plot difficult since he is not always completely honest. Although he is not *always* lying, a perceptive reader can tell that he is attempting to paint himself in a better light than he deserves. Severian does not have the most finely tuned moral compass, but having been raised by an organization of professional torturers, it is easy to understand why he holds his self-centered and power-obsessed worldview. Although he is not exactly relatable, he is most definitely interesting. This is largely due to how the author explores the effect that the guild has had on his mentality.

After reading these books, I started browsing internet forums revolving around discussion of them. My reasons for this were twofold. Firstly, Wolfe is the sort of author who likes interspersing various puzzles and mysteries throughout his works, and I wanted to see how other people interpreted the “solutions” to these conundrums. Secondly, I was just happy to find other people who enjoyed these novels as much as I did. After all, nobody I knew in real life had ever heard of them. While I found many fans of the series, it also had detractors, as any book or series inevitably does. A common complaint people had about *Book of the New Sun* was that they viewed it as being misogynistic, often citing how Wolfe writes female characters and Severian’s oftentimes sexist attitudes. While I understood these complaints, I thought they were not entirely fair. Severian is not meant to be a “good guy” in the traditional sense. While it is true that the protagonist has a misogynistic worldview, this is not portrayed positively. It is one of many aspects of the main character that is meant to put off the reader. However, I did not want to completely dismiss these criticisms. After all, I don’t know many pieces of media that aren’t “problematic” in some way or another.

While my interest in novels was growing throughout high school, my interest in topics relating to social justice heightened as well. I was particularly curious about issues relating to gender. The more I thought about it, the more I felt that gender roles were rather arbitrary, not doing much other than giving people reasons to feel bad for not living up to nonsensical expectations. I also started to realize the necessity of concepts such as feminism, given how all people face oppression based on sex and gender identity.

My interest in Wolfe’s work persisted during my college years, as well as my interest in gender issues. Being an honors student as well as an English major, I figured that my thesis was going to center around analysis of literature. I quickly decided to write about *Book of the New*

Sun since it persisted as my favorite series. During my first semester of my senior year, I started discussions with Dr. Reginio and Dr. DeGraff concerning the content of the books and how I might go about analyzing them. At first, I wasn't sure about the angle from which I was going to tackle Wolfe's work. In the beginning, the top contender was social class, but I decided that there simply wasn't enough in the series revolving around that topic. I then considered religion. Although the series is rife with religious ideas, the concept of writing about it just did not seem particularly engaging to me personally. Finally, I decided that I would analyze the books from the perspective of sex and gender. I was already interested in gender issues as a whole, and I knew that the series had plenty of material to draw on concerning this theme. I began reading through the books once more, taking note of specific passages that may concern my topic. I was also inspired to pick up some supplementary materials, those being the *Lexicon Urthus* and *Gene Wolfe's Book of the New Sun – A Chapter Guide*, both by Michael Andre-Driussi.

Starting the writing was quite difficult considering the fact that the author purposefully makes the content difficult to understand. If there's one thing I learned while creating the thesis, it is to take notes *obsessively*. Having created an outline from which to write, I wrongly thought that I was good to go, knowing what parts of the texts to draw from. However, the necessity of making additions that I previously did not think of was constant. An embarrassingly large amount of time was spent not on writing but simply on scouring the books, trying to look for a specific passage that I did not expect to incorporate into my writing. I also learned the importance of specificity within writing, as Dr. Reginio would frequently point out my vague use of the word "this," a word which I would often use to begin my analysis after including a quote. I don't think I would have made it through college understanding why such writing comes off as vague, so my thanks go out to Dr. Reginio.

When I first started, I viewed Severian and his guild as a critique of patriarchal notions of masculinity, but at the same time thought that the ending of the series contained some rather sexist implications considering gender roles and “morally pure” representations of one’s gender. Surprisingly enough, this initial idea didn’t change much throughout the writing process. I’d chalk it up to having already read the books back in high school. In a general sense, I knew what to expect concerning the series’ attitude towards gender. In all honesty, I don’t think I could have gotten this thesis project done if it weren’t for the fact that I was analyzing a series that I had already read and already cared so much about.

Although I certainly disagree with the sexist elements that come at the end, I still love these books. The way Wolfe criticizes patriarchy make me wonder if the problematic elements are even intentional (not that intentionality or a lack thereof is an excuse for sexist writing). While writing this thesis has made me more aware of some of the more disconcerting ideas that come out, I have also found more appreciation for how Wolfe is subtly able to tackle the topics of patriarchy and toxic masculinity. The depth of how the series handles this discussion makes me want to read through once more to see if the author can write about other concepts with an equal degree of complexity. I feel that my ability to analyze texts has been heightened, but not in a purely academic sense. Thorough analysis of a text makes for better reading experiences in general, even when the reading is simply being done for entertainment. This was certainly the case for me.

Finally, I would like to thank Dr. Reginio, Dr. DeGraff, and Dr. Grove, the three members of my thesis committee. The fact that all three were willing to participate despite no prior knowledge of Wolfe makes me even more grateful. Without the three of them I never would have been able to make this project a reality.

Part 2: Thesis Introduction

Upon starting Gene Wolfe's *The Shadow of the Torturer*, the reader will be immersed in what seems like a distinctly patriarchal story. The beginning of the series concerns a member of a violent all male organization pining for the love of a woman. Although it is not a particularly "action packed" story compared to many other novels within the world of speculative fiction, it certainly has its share of sex and violence, all of which comes from a masculine point of view. However, as one continues the series, the ways in which the author criticizes patriarchy and toxic masculinity become more apparent. Severian's journey is largely about moving his identity away from the guild he was once a part of. He can only become the planet's savior after abandoning the cruel ideology that was imposed upon him throughout most of his life. The story is about an immoral person gradually donning a new identity in order to defeat the violent and power-obsessed aspects of himself. However, this does not mean that the story is completely free of misogyny. Particularly towards the end of the series, the implications of the narrative reveal a rather traditional view of gender roles. Within Wolfe's *Book of the New Sun*, the character of Severian, the organization he belongs to, and his interactions with other characters serve to point out how patriarchy pushes men towards toxicity and cruelty. The text argues that men must eschew certain "masculine" characteristics such as the need to exert power and seek domination in order to dismantle oppressive systems that restrict people's autonomy. However, it also argues

for a worldview where it is “right” for people to embody traditionalist roles based on their gender.

Part 3: The Torturers’ Guild

Within the first few chapters of the series, Wolfe establishes the Torturers’ Guild as an overarching institution representing masculine cruelty. Early in *Shadow* the author shows that for centuries the organization has only taken in males (Wolfe 17). The next chapter displays the guild’s positive attitude towards violence and dehumanization when Master Palaemon casually explains to a group of young apprentices the procedure of applying a form of torture known as the “half-boot.” He takes care to mention that “nothing said by a client under questioning is heard by [the torturer]” (Wolfe 23). It should be noted here that the terms “questioning” and “clients” are used euphemistically. It is clearly shown that prisoners are kept in the Matachin Tower against their will and that during the process of torturing, no interrogation is meant to take place. The purpose of the torture is violence, and only violence. There is little thought put towards rehabilitating victims or extracting confessions from them. By using these euphemistic terms, the guild discourages members from questioning their practices. If one is to think of those they are harming as “clients,” the perpetrator gains a bulwark against self-reproach in that they are granted permission to view the victim as having come into these circumstances upon their own volition. The term “questioning” plays a similar role in that it allows the torturer to view their task as practical when in reality the job is simply cruel.

Wolfe reveals the arbitrary nature of the guild’s punishments within the third chapter. Severian describes the process of victims coming to the Matachin Tower, narrating:

“Those who arrived without papers would be held until further word concerning their disposition was received – probably for the remainder of their lives. Those who had exchanged papers with someone else had exchanged fates; they would be held or released, tortured or executed, in another’s stead.” (Wolfe 27)

No mention is made of the guild attempting to prevent or even discourage the act of “exchanging fates.” The guild operates mostly as a mechanism by which the state can order brutality. In addition, the fact that so many prisoners are kept for the entirety of their lives gives readers the impression that the act of torturing *them* is not as important to the guild compared to the act of torture itself. In other words, “clients” are dehumanized to the point where administering brutality in the “correct” way is not important as long as some kind of brutality is being administered. Pain is not inflicted to discourage whatever behavior led to the person being tortured. It would not even be correct to say that the guild “punishes” victims, since “punishment” implies that an attempt at rehabilitation is being made. The idea that the group exists for the purpose of discouraging crime is discredited by an apparent lack of knowledge among commoners. Soon after Severian is exiled from the guild, he has a brief conversation with a constable who says, “I had supposed [the guild] reformed out of existence long ago” (Wolfe 93). If the guild was created as a scare tactic to discourage certain behaviors among citizenry, it would only make sense for people to know about it. If people do not know about the organization, there is no way they can be deterred from acts that might cause them to end up in the guild’s clutches. Thus, the reader is forced to question if there is anything necessary about the organization’s existence.

The only time a woman (who isn’t a “client”) is involved in the proceedings of the guild is during “Holy Katharine’s feast,” an annual celebration wherein the mock execution of the titular maiden is performed and experienced members are elevated in rank (Wolfe 73-75). When a torturer is ascending from apprentice to journeyman, they are tasked with following a script,

part of which involves saying, “You are a counselor of Omniscience. Though I must slay you, I beg you spare my life” (Wolfe 75). What is strange is that despite the lofty language used to address the character of Katharine, very little attention is given to her apart from her role in the festival. After the ceremony is over, Severian narrates, “What became of the maid I do not know. She disappeared as she has each Katharine’s Day I can remember. I have not seen her again” (Wolfe 76). Within this procession femininity is simultaneously revered and demeaned. The language used shows a great degree of respect, yet the character’s only role is to be “killed” and then ignored until the next year. The implication of the event is the idea that femininity as a concept is something apart from wider society where average humans lie. Femininity is consecrated, yet still firmly beneath the boot of masculinity. By holding a performance where the torturer pretends to execute a glorified symbol of the feminine, the event ultimately serves to venerate the idea that the torturer’s hold a position not only above women, but above humans at large.

The reader sees how the guild’s penchant for brutality has affected Severian when he states, “The executions I have seen performed and have performed myself so often are no more than a trade, a butchery of human beings who are for the most part less innocent and less valuable than cattle” (Wolfe 19). Again, this is an instance where attention is brought to the concept that members of the guild occupy a position above the “cattle” of most people. This strict hierarchical divide functions as another method by which members are absolved from the guilt that might otherwise be brought about by their violent actions. It is made clear from this quote that Severian’s view of morality is very skewed, having spent so much time within a culture that treats murder and torture and simply a “trade” that justifies itself.

This moral decay of the protagonist comes into play in the first chapter of *Shadow* where Severian involves himself in a battle and ends up killing a man in order to protect a revolutionary leader named Vodalus (Wolfe 14). He admits that he “knew nothing...of the dogmas of the movement Vodalus led” (Wolfe 14). His narration of the scene downplays what may have been going through the minds of those fighting against Vodalus (likely men simply trying to protect corpses buried in the necropolis). In the mind of Severian, violence is not connected to harm or cruelty but rather to power and the exertion of one’s will. Thus, since in this instance Severian’s will aligns with Vodalus (inasmuch as Severian appreciates the concept of rebelling against the Commonwealth), he views murder as justified. Another example of Severian connecting violence to power comes at the beginning of the fifth chapter of *Shadow*. After his friends Drotte and Roche are elevated to journeymen, Severian is left as the oldest of the apprentices, thus making him their “captain.” To assert his authority, Severian attacks a younger member named Eata. His narration states, “

“Eata was the oldest except for myself, and fortunately for me I had been friendly enough in the past that he suspected nothing until it was too late to make effective resistance. I got him by the throat and banged his head half a dozen times against the bulkhead.”
(Wolfe 36)

He then orders Eata to assist him in subduing the other apprentices, describing the event with the words “In the space of a hundred breaths (and very quick breaths they were) the boys had been kicked into submission. It was three weeks before any of them dared to disobey me, and then there was no mass rebellion, only individual malingering” (Wolfe 36). Severian views the event purely in terms of achieving a goal, not taking into account the idea that he may be able to establish his authority in a more peaceful manner or that he is likely to damage his relationship to Eata. He views power as very important and does not seem to acknowledge the idea that there such a thing as nonviolent methods for sustaining his social position.

Severian's views towards violence and power tie into his views towards women. In the earlier books within the series, Severian's attitude towards women seems demeaning and simple. He has two modes of thinking of them, either seeing them in a way that places sexuality above everything else, or in a manner that seeks to remove their sexuality (except where he is concerned) in an effort to emphasize a perceived "purity." Severian's anxiety concerning chastity and female sexual purity comes into play shortly after he meets Dorcas. When she expresses fear based on "what thoughts may return to me when I lie again with a man," Severian anxiously asks "Again? Do you remember a time before?" (Wolfe 181). After being revived within the Botanic Gardens, it is clear that Dorcas remembers very little of her life before she died (Wolfe 173). Severian interprets this lack of knowledge as a naïve and "virginal" nature, and later ends up declaring a "love" for her (Wolfe 189). One can surmise that Severian, having been brought up in a culture that reveres power over women (as well as men), views carnal knowledge of a woman as a sort of power. Thus, he feels agitated when it is revealed that he may not possess as much of this "strength" as is hypothetically possible.

Severian's experience meeting Jolenta, on the other hand, shows a way of looking at women that emphasizes perceived promiscuity. When thinking about her, Severian expresses a desire to "fill her eyes with tears and tear her hair as one burns the hair of corpses to torment the ghosts that have fled them." This violent fantasy is based on the apparent facts that "she had boasted that she made tribadists of women" and that "she came near to making an algophilist of [Severian]" (Wolfe 350). To him, women who have had too much sexual experience to be "claimed" via the exertion of his sexuality deserve to be punished. Once again there is no consideration given to the autonomy or rights of anyone besides himself. Instead, there is only

his perspective relating to how and why power can and should be deployed over others and his dehumanizing duality in terms of how he views women.

Part 4: Severian's Memory

Within *New Sun*, Wolfe encourages the audience to question how Severian chooses to frame his story. Early on in *Shadow* Severian states “It is my nature, my joy and my curse, to forget nothing” (Wolfe 11). With this claim, the character persuades the reader to view his retelling of events as authoritative. Isn't someone with a photographic memory more capable of narrative objectivity compared to someone without such a trait? However, shortly after making this statement, the protagonist seems to contradict himself. Recalling a moment from his earlier years within his guild, he states “I realized for the first time that I am in some degree insane” and “Now I could no longer be sure my own mind was not lying to me; all my falsehoods were recoiling on me, and I who remembered everything could not be certain these memories were more than my own dreams” (Wolfe 27). Thus, his previous assertion is called into question. In his book *Gene Wolfe's Book of the New Sun: A Chapter Guide*, author Michael Andre-Driussi points out several instances where it is made clear that Severian's memory isn't as perfect as he claims it is. One example of this (among many) can be found in that same first chapter of *Shadow*, where Severian tells that his fellow guild member Roche pointed out the weapons carried by the guards outside the necropolis. However, soon after this, his narration points to the idea that it was the character Drotte who drew attention to the pikes carried by the guards (Andre-Driussi 4). Some readers may see these discrepancies as examples of Severian simply being dishonest, but by having the character compare his memories to “dreams,” Wolfe pushes the issue beyond the realm of lying and truth telling. It is likely that Severian is not being honest when he states that he “forgets nothing.” However, the question then becomes if he is trying to

forge a narrative in order to make himself look good, or if he is making a genuine effort at retrieving the truth from his memories. That said, it is clear that he feels uncertainty pertaining to what is a “memory” and what is a “dream.” Wolfe highlights the subjective nature of people’s memories. To what degree is it even possible to tell oneself the “truth” pertaining to past events? This creates yet another question that looms over the series. The audience is not only forced to question the degree to which Severian is telling them the truth, they must struggle with the idea that maybe Severian is not telling himself the truth.

Within Severian’s narration, discrepancies such as these represent one of several ways that Wolfe questions the nature of speculative fiction. In *Decoding Gender and Science Fiction*, author Brian Attebery discusses how much of the world of science fiction is founded upon the story of the “superman,” a masculine figure who justifies his own position as the hero of the story by, in some way, being more than a “regular” human (Attebery 62-63). Although Severian does embody this role by gradually becoming a messiah figure, the author encourages the reader to question if he deserves this role by casting doubt upon Severian’s narration of his own story. The traditional idea of a speculative fiction novel is one wherein a male author asks the audience to immerse themselves in a plot that is driven predominately by male characters and “masculine” ideas (scientific progress, violent struggles between good and evil, or political strife for example). When a story that tackles certain themes is created, it is inevitable that the work in question will contain a message about these themes. It is because of this inherent presence of a message that although the author may not agree with the characters in their work (or the ideas the work itself argues for), the author cannot avoid voicing a certain stance. Within the canon of *New Sun*, the novel the audience is reading is an autobiographical text penned by Severian. By casting

his honesty into doubt, Wolfe encourages the reader to question not only the character, but traditional views of masculinity.

The Torturers Guild represents the patriarchal ideas that cast their shadows over speculative fiction. While it would obviously be hyperbole to say that feminine writers and viewpoints are absent from the genre, it is safe to say that they are underrepresented. Wolfe encourages readers to question this patriarchal power in a manner similar to how Severian questions his guild more as his quest progresses. At the same time, Severian is a product of the Torturers' Guild. He represents those who craft these patriarchal narratives. The author casts into doubt Severian's ability to tell his own story in order to encourage the audience to question the degree to which other storytellers are able to tackle topics (especially gendered topics) in a "truthful" or "accurate" manner.

Part 5: The Role of Sex in Severian's Narrative

Another way Wolfe subverts representations of masculinity comes in how he treats sexuality. In many male-dominated speculative fiction stories, sex is treated as a reward for the protagonist. On an initial reading, it may seem as if *Book of the New Sun* follows this pattern, but like with many aspects of the story, there is much more going on beneath the surface of the plot and its apparent adherence to genre conventions. As previously discussed, Severian is a man who has grown up within a culture that prioritizes masculinity and power above all else. Thus, it is no surprise that he does not view sexual encounters in a way that is particularly moral or in a way that deviates from patriarchal patterns.

One of the most obvious examples of Severian's perpetuation of patriarchal indoctrination comes in his rape of Jolenta in *Claw*. While Jolenta is sleeping seemingly "half

drugged,” Severian describes himself “freeing” her breasts and thighs (Wolfe 350). In *Urth* it is made clear that what he did went further, as he states, “I might have been said to have raped [Jolenta], though I believed then and believe still that she wished it” (Wolfe 159). There is an irony in his use of the word “freeing,” as all he was doing was constraining Jolenta and making her a victim for the sake of his pleasure. This displays how his upbringing in the Torturers’ Guild has distorted Severian’s views of women and sexuality. It is questionable if Severian even understands the concept of consent. After all, for most of his life he was being trained for a job that requires an explicit violation of consent and bodily autonomy. Passages such as these ones encourage readers to analyze Severian’s other sexual exploits and ask themselves how accurate the narrator’s telling may be. His language reflects his ideological indoctrination, and both suggest the idea that the denial of bodily autonomy for women is inherent to traditional concepts of masculinity.

Another important character whom Severian seems to have engaged in sexual relations with is Thecla. Although their relationship is not initially portrayed as having any carnal aspect to it, this is brought into question in the middle of *Shadow*. Shortly after he meets Agia, he states, “I had clasped women so before – Thecla often, and hired bodies in the town” (Wolfe 115). The fact that he draws attention to his “clasping” of Thecla in the same phrase as when he mentions interactions with prostitutes implies that the relationship did contain some sexual component. In addition, a more explicit scene of sexual conduct between Severian and Thecla is described in the middle of *Claw* (Wolfe 261). Of course, due to the power dynamic between the two of them (with Thecla being confined in her cell, awaiting torture by members of Severian’s guild), such an interaction would also fall under the definition of rape.

Similarly, power dynamics play an important role in regards to Severian's sexual encounter with Pia. When Severian first meets Pia she is the slave to man named Zambdas (Wolfe 229). Eventually, Severian is able to help free her. Afterwards, the two reunite and have sex. Severian narrates, "She lay upon my chest afterward and wept for joy – not so much the joy she had of me, I think, but the joy of her freedom" (Wolfe 245). Severian frames Pia's crying in a positive light, saying that she was glad to finally be free, but what if it was an unwanted sexual encounter that was eliciting this response from her? Before this occurs, Severian states "I, who had entered Thecla so often when she was unchained but a prisoner, now entered Pia when she was still chained but free" (Wolfe 245).

It is no coincidence that Wolfe brings to mind Severian's sexual encounters with Thecla alongside his encounter with Pia. The narration draws attention to the unbalanced power dynamics present in both scenarios (further accentuated by the fact that Severian is armed, unlike Pia). It is also important to note that Severian does not provide the specifics of what happened between him and Pia before they started having sex. While it is unknown if Severian forced himself upon her in the traditional sense, clues such as these highlight the idea that the encounter was not nearly as romantic as the narration presents. In both scenarios Severian brings up the concept of having or lacking freedom. What is ironic is that he is unaware of how he is unknowingly constraining the women he is interacting with. For example, Severian being armed puts Pia in a position where she knows that she could potentially be subject to violence if she were to reject him. By bringing up her "freedom" he (whether consciously or not) causes the reader to create an association between this sexual encounter and Pia escaping slavery, when it seems likely that she is yet again being taken control of. The language also takes away the autonomy of both Pia and Thecla. Severian portrays himself as "entering" the two of them. The

actions of the women are ignored, and the euphemism Severian uses for intercourse brings to mind the concept of taking control of someone. Clearly these interactions are one-sided. It does not seem like Severian is engaging in a mutually agreed upon act as much as it appears that he is using the bodies of these women.

Although Wolfe does make efforts to undermine Severian's views of masculinity, there are often times when the way he does so is itself rather problematic. Throughout the course of *New Sun* Wolfe employs the "seductress" trope. The characters of Agia, Cyriaca, and Burgundofara can be seen as falling into this category. In *Shadow*, a rather peculiar moment occurs when Severian describes Agia as having a "cruel attraction" to him. Agia then kisses Severian after saying, "I hate men who grab me" (which Severian had just done) (Wolfe 115). Severian narrates this part in a way that displays how naïve he is to the idea that Agia is using seduction in order to mock him. The fact that he describes Agia as being attracted to him makes him seem like a sort of seducer, but the reader can tell that it is Agia who is playing that role. Although Agia does not ever have sex with Severian, she does try to seduce him shortly before his battle with Agilus (Wolfe 156). However, later on it is made clear that she planned for Severian to die in this battle. Thus, the reader can infer that Agia's attempted seduction did not have much to do with attraction towards Severian (indeed, there are times when it is shown that she does not seem to have much respect for him at all) as much as it had to do with her simply wanting to entertain herself via the act of sex (as well as the act of toying with Severian).

Another case of Severian being used in a sexual manner comes when he is seduced by Cyriaca (Wolfe 55). Wolfe writes "I had been disrobing her as she spoke, and kissing her breasts" (Wolfe 55). Again, the writing indicates that Severian is the one who is in control and taking action. He wants the reader to think that Cyriaca is succumbing to him. However, later on

it is made clear that Cyriaca has engaged in a string of adulterous behavior meant to spurn a lord she once loved (Wolfe 59). Once again, Severian is not the conqueror but rather a pawn in someone else's game. Finally, there is the case of Burgundofara. The scene is quite similar to the one between Severian and Cyriaca, with the protagonist narrating, "when I embraced and disrobed her she did not object" (Wolfe 158). However, it is later revealed that she is working against Severian (Wolfe 205). This is another case where Severian portrays himself as the seducer when the reality is that he is the one who has been seduced.

In the field of speculative fiction, it is not hard to find stories that celebrate feats performed by male heroes. Other tales are far more skeptical, drawing attention to the more toxic aspects of how our culture views the role of manhood in a patently patriarchal society. Wolfe ties both ideas together. Severian represents both physical violence administered by the state as well as sexual violence. However, he wants the reader to view his sexual encounters as something to be admired. He tries to spin his story in a way that paints him as being seductive and charismatic. Because of this, it often requires a close eye to understand when the context of Severian's sexual encounters is darker than he is letting on. By writing in a way that encourages the reader to doubt Severian's narration, Wolfe comments on portrayals of masculinity not only in media but in our culture as a whole, asking readers about how exactly one can know when a portrayal of masculine power should be praised or condemned. By asking the audience to take a closer look at the storytelling of his protagonist, he asks the audience to take a closer look at other definitively "masculine" pieces of media.

However, the way Wolfe undercuts patriarchal values can sometimes betray his own adherence to these values. This can be seen in his fondness for the "seductress" trope. On the one hand, this does make the point that masculine storytelling often undercuts feminine autonomy in

order to portray the main character as being more charismatic or sexually dominant. However, this also carries some misogynistic implications. Throughout *New Sun*, it is very clear that Severian has a tendency to perceive women in a manner that either overplays or undercuts their sexuality. It is quite difficult for him to think about women in a way that does not focus on sex. When female characters get the better of him using sex, Wolfe ends up portraying them in a manner similar to how his protagonist may see them. Although they may have autonomy when interacting with Severian, this autonomy boils down to how they utilize their sexuality. If this is so limited in its scope, can it really be called autonomy? Female characters are constrained by the author, put into positions where although they have power over Severian, this power is portrayed through a patriarchal lens.

Part 6: Severian's Relationship with Dorcas

While Dorcas serves as an important part of Severian's moral development, her relationship with him is used to represent the harmful and distinctly patriarchal aspects of his personality. Severian's relationship with Dorcas is yet another case where he is unable to ascertain the unbalanced power dynamics present between the two. In *Shadow*, Severian first meets Dorcas at the Botanic Gardens where she suddenly appears from out of the water, seemingly saving Severian from drowning (Wolfe 141). It is clear that she feels disoriented and has little recollection of her past. When asked how she got to where she is, she simply responds, "I don't know," and when Agia asks her if she remembers coming to the Botanic Gardens, Dorcas responds in the negative (Wolfe 142). Wolfe shows that she has very little recollection of her own past. There is a degree of misogyny in how Dorcas is portrayed. Although she is intelligent, she is also presented as a "blank slate" of sorts. She helps shape Severian, but a reader also gets the impression that she is partially shaped by Severian due to her lack of

knowledge pertaining to her own self. It is a way in which the author gives Severian power over Dorcas in an uncritical sense.

Soon after her introduction, Dorcas tells Severian that she loves him (Wolfe 163). Throughout the series, Severian characterizes the relationship between him and Dorcas as romantic. However, there are several clues that point to the idea that Dorcas stays with Severian not because she loves him, but because she fears what he might do to her if she does not manage to stay on his good side. There are thematic clues that imply that Dorcas' view of Severian is not as caring or romantic as Severian would have the reader believe. Throughout the series, Wolfe creates an association between Severian and water. In the first chapter of *Shadow* the plot of the series begins with Severian having had "so nearly drowned" in a river near the Matachin Tower (Wolfe 9). In the twenty-first chapter of *Claw*, titled "Hydromancy," Severian interacts with a strange, fountain-like device that seems to show him visions that foretell his future. One of these visions is "angry waves, becoming soon a long, sullen swell" (Wolfe 338). This imagery relating to violent waves foreshadows the apocalyptic flood that Severian brings about near the end of *Urth*. In the chapter after "Hydromancy," Dorcas states, "What a frightful thing water is," to which Severian responds, "Why do you hate it? It seems beautiful to me" (Wolfe 344). Wolfe combines Dorcas' fear of water with Severian's praise of its beauty in order to imply that Dorcas is afraid of Severian, viewing him in a manner similar to the substance that previously caused her death and entrapment. The concept that a fear of water represents a fear of Severian calls to a passage before Severian first has sex with Dorcas where he asks, "Are you frightened?" Wolfe writes "'Yes,' she said. Then quickly, 'Oh, not of you'" (Wolfe 181). The pause indicates that Dorcas is expressing a fear of Severian, but she quickly realizes this "mistake" on her part and attempts to correct it, not wanting to reveal her true feelings. Shortly after this, Dorcas tells

Severian her view that “[a]ll of you are torturers” (Wolfe 182). The proximity of these lines point to the idea that unbeknownst to Severian, Dorcas is able to sense a desire to dominate and control in Severian’s expressions of his personality and his sexuality. Dorcas’ ability to sense the toxic aspects of his character also ties into Dorcas later on telling Severian that “[p]eople don’t want other people to be people” (Wolfe 345). While the line can be taken as Dorcas creating a moral argument against the existence of Severian’s guild, it can also be taken as Dorcas’ interpretation of Severian himself. Even if she does not necessarily mean to, she is accusing Severian of being someone who, in his efforts to control people like herself, views people as being less than human.

A reader rightly questions why she would proclaim a love for Severian if she has known him for such a short amount of time and knows so little about him. Severian, of course, is more than willing to assert his masculinity by taking on the role of lover and protector of Dorcas. Shortly after Dorcas tells Severian “[a]ll [men] are torturers,” Severian’s narration continues with “Justice is a high thing, and that night, when I lay beside Dorcas listening to the rain, I was young, so that I desired high things only. That, I think, was why I so desired that our guild regain the position and regard it had once possessed” (Wolfe 182). It is somewhat unclear what Severian means with the phrase “high things,” only citing “justice” as an example. The conflation of “justice” with the guild is ironic in that the guild has been shown as antithetical to justice in how it exists solely to administer mindless cruelty. With these lines, Wolfe also creates an association between Severian’s relationship with Dorcas and Severian’s view of “desire” as it relates to his guild (an organization that “desires” people in the sense that it seeks to assert control over them). At the same time, Wolfe connects the association with Severian’s youth, thus signifying that Severian’s thoughts are a sign of ignorance and immaturity. He views Dorcas as a

“high thing,” showing that he views his relationship with Dorcas in terms of his own status and power.

There are two major clues Wolfe plants that point to the idea that Severian’s relationship with Dorcas deserves to be questioned. Near the end of *Citadel*, a conversation Severian has with a man named Ouen implies that Ouen is Severian’s father while Dorcas is Severian’s grandmother (Wolfe 602-603). Severian, however, is unable to put these pieces together. By including this Oedipal moment, Wolfe seeks to instill the reader with a sense of disgust at the relationship between Severian and Dorcas. The way that the relationship is revealed to be corrupted in a biological sense parallels how the relationship is corrupt in the sense of the power dynamics and the intent of the two in pursuing the relationship. It is also important to note that Wolfe ends the relationship between Severian and Dorcas in *Citadel*. Dorcas eventually finds what seems to be her old home, now decaying and abandoned. Severian sees her but she does not see him, facing away from him and being too focused on the sight of her old house. Ultimately, Severian decides to leave Dorcas alone. Severian narrates, “All the time I had spent in journeying from Thrax to Lake Diuturna, and from the lake to the war, and all the time I had spent as a prisoner of Vodalus, and in sailing up Gyoll, she had spent in returning to her place” (Wolfe 559). Although Severian does not realize the biological relationship between the two of them, he does seem to accept the fact that Dorcas is better off being her own person with her own autonomy instead of someone who is controlled by him. This acceptance of Dorcas’ separation from him is shown by how the detailed way Severian describes his journey separates his story and Dorcas’ search for her past. He recognizes these as two separate quests, showing that he has come to understand Dorcas’ autonomy, seeing her more as her own person than as something that belongs to him. She is no longer portrayed as an accessory to his story. She is recognized as

having her own. The use of the phrase “returned to her place” has two meanings. Literally, it means that Dorcas has returned to what was once her home. However, it also means that Dorcas has come to where she is meant to be. She has completed her journey and Severian understands that her “place” is apart from him.

Part 7: Thecla

In his *Lexicon Urthus*, author Michael Andre-Driussi posits that Severian meeting Thecla and Dorcas is an important difference between “Severian Two” (the narrator throughout most of the series) and “Severian One” or “Severian the Cruel” (an even more immoral incarnation of Severian from a different timeline, not the Severian who narrates the events of the series) (Andre-Driussi 320). Indeed, throughout the series it can be seen that these two women are some of the central forces behind the moral growth of the protagonist. An important line spoken by Thecla early in *Shadow* reads, “Men are said to desire women, Severian. Why do they despise the women they obtain?” (Wolfe 70). As seen in the discussion of Severian’s sexual encounters, the idea of seeing women as something to be “desired” and “obtained” is a concept that appears frequently in Wolfe’s series. For example, the attitude that women are to be wanted by men and held by men in a way akin to property is displayed before Severian has sex with Dorcas in *Shadow*. The anxiety he expresses when Dorcas alludes to the fact that she is not a virgin points to the idea that Severian desires a sort of sexual domination over her where prior sexual encounters on her part mean that his dominion over her is not as complete as he would like it to be (Wolfe 181). Although this attitude on the part of Severian often does come forward, there are also moments that indicate his ideological progression, moving away from the dominant patriarchal ideology. For example, shortly after his aforementioned conversation with Thecla, Severian narrates, “Were I such a hero as we had read of together in old romances, I would have

released her that very evening” (Wolfe 80). This is an early moment wherein the protagonist contemplates allowing someone to be “released” from those who would “desire” them. Although he seems to harbor this fantasy of “saving” Thecla primarily out of his own desire for her, it brings to light the notion that keeping people in captivity or restricting their autonomy is often unjustified. This is followed up on when Severian allows Thecla to commit suicide rather than being tortured to death at the hands of the guild (Wolfe 83). At this moment, readers see Severian’s attempt to manifest his feelings, allowing for Thecla to be liberated from the clutches of his guild. These passages also see Wolfe warning readers not to see the plot in a way akin to a traditional romance. Severian pining for the chance to be a romantic hero represents the idea that the setting of this story is one where “heroism” and “romance” are often little more than fantasies, unable to be fulfilled. Wolfe is telling the audience that Severian is very much not a “hero,” and thus his views towards sex and romance deserve to be questioned, not embraced.

Severian’s connection with Thecla is ultimately what disconnects him from the Torturer’s Guild. In *Claw*, Severian starts to question the way his guild associates violence and masculinity. After fighting a mace-wielding beast, Severian compares the creature’s weapon to the “iron phallus” Master Gurloes once used in order to sexually assault one of the guild’s many “clients.” This had caused Severian to feel a “repugnance” towards his master, not because of the brutality of the act, but rather because of the “weakness” Gurloes displayed by having to use the instrument. Due to the “bulk and great strength” of Gurloes, Severian had previously assumed that his master would have been able to perform such an act solely with his body. However, Severian seems to realize the cruelty inherent in this attitude linking masculinity and “strength.” He states, “Master Gurloes was a coward then. Still, perhaps his cowardice was better than the courage I would have possessed in his position, for courage is not always a virtue” (Wolfe 253).

Although the protagonist links the inability to perform violence with weakness, he recognizes that not all actions representing the traditionally “masculine” value of “courage” are morally justifiable. In effect, he realizes the way in which a view of masculinity that prioritizes violence and power is immoral. Afterwards, Severian is about to kill Agia in an act of revenge. During this moment, he describes the sword he wields as “[his] own iron phallus.” Although he is at first ready to strike, he ultimately shows mercy and spares Agia’s life (Wolfe 256). The closeness of these moments in the narrative and the repetition of the language Wolfe utilizes imply that Severian’s thoughts concerning cruelty and courage, spurred on by the memory of Master Gurloes, are what lead to him deciding to put off his desire to kill. The idea that violence, both physical and sexual, is inherently linked to masculinity is dismissed as not only cruel but also cowardly. The comparison between Severian’s blade and Gurloes’ instrument, combined with the disgust Severian held towards his master in that moment suggests that Severian feels a sense of shame from his belief in myths pertaining to masculinity.

In a rare moment of self-awareness pertaining to his views of masculinity, he comes to understand how the sense of and need for power that he once viewed as representing his “manliness” leads only to cruelty. As he had viewed the tool used by Gurloes as a crutch signifying incompetence, he views his wish to dominate over others as an unnecessary and harmful manifestation of his need to adhere to a limited sense of self. It should be noted that there are many moments in the series after this where Severian seems to regress back into a blasé attitude towards violence and an inclination for wanting to control others, again discussed in the section concerning Severian’s expressions of sexuality. This speaks to the grip that the guild is able to have over him, even after his departure. Self-reflection and the critiquing of one’s own ideology are often stressful processes, meaning it is hard to maintain ideas about the self that are

difficult to confront. Thus, it is likely that this unusual moment of self-reflection is spurred on by the fact that Severian is operating with not only his own mind, but Thecla's as well.

In the middle of *Claw*, Severian's mind is joined with the mind of the now deceased Thecla in what Andre-Driussi describes as a "spiritual baptism" in *Book of the New Sun: A Chapter Guide* (Andre-Driussi 33). This event casts a shadow over the entirety of Severian's narration. He states, "at times I who remember am not Severian but Thecla" (Wolfe 281). On the one hand, in *Claw* Thecla is revealed to have possessed a penchant for cruelty not unlike Severian (Wolfe 322). However, as discussed earlier, Thecla is also shown to be capable of insights concerning the nature of power and desire to which Severian would otherwise be oblivious. The fact that Severian is able to acquire these insights pertaining to power and desire means that the "baptism" that occurs when the two minds are melded can be viewed not only in terms of spirituality but in terms of morality as well. It is because of Thecla that Severian begins to doubt his trust in the guild and its practices. By harboring feelings for a "client," he slowly but surely starts to realize the inhumanity of the organization he has entrusted himself to. The fusion of Severian and Thecla represents a continuation of this development. Whereas previously Severian was pushed away from the guild and its ideology due to his thoughts and feelings pertaining to Thecla, he eventually is pushed away further by his ability to see the world through Thecla's eyes. His connection to "masculine" cruelty withers because of a feminine force that resides within him. Although the event does not erase his flaws by any means, it allows him to view the world through a feminine lens, assisting in his ability to break through the violent "masculinity" previously taught to him by the Torturer's Guild. Another important element of Severian's development comes from Dorcas.

Part 8: Dorcas

Like Thecla, Dorcas also helps Severian move away from the toxic and power-obsessed ideology of the Torturers Guild to a more compassionate worldview. In *Gene Wolfe's Book of the New Sun: A Chapter Guide*, Michael Andre-Driussi describes Dorcas as Severian's "moral guide" (Andre-Driussi 19). There are two important moments in which Dorcas imparts Severian with her personal philosophy. Each of these are subtly referenced throughout the series (alongside lessons that Thecla gives Severian). Towards the end of *Shadow*, Dorcas says to Severian, "If we could have our way, no man would have to go roving or draw blood. But women did not make the world. All of you are torturers, one way or another" (Wolfe 182). Although the word "roving" may not at first seem particularly important, it says a lot about Severian's relationship to patriarchy. While Dorcas uses this word literally, it also applies in a psychological sense. When one is bestowed with power, that power inevitably becomes a part of who that person is. In a patriarchal society, men being granted power that they did not ask for means men are asked to embody an identity that is completely socially constructed. The identity is not truly their own. They are granted power and thus will be perceived by both others and themselves as a holder of that power. They are expected to embody a specific idea of what masculinity is (often this idea of manhood involves violence and domination over others). Mentally, men often end up as "wanderers," having to decide between acceptance of their culture's ideal of masculinity (and therefore acceptance by wider society) or rejection of the ideal (and therefore rejection by wider society). After being exiled from his guild, Severian ends up "roving" in a literal sense, traveling from location to location in an effort to accomplish various goals. However, after meeting Thecla and ultimately being exiled from his guild, Severian ends up in this same psychological dilemma, mentally wandering in order to find a sense of self. He

must decide between the identity bestowed upon him by the guild, and a comparatively mindful identity spurred on by women such as Thecla and Dorcas. Such an identity is one which seeks to subvert rather than embrace patriarchal power structures and gendered expectations. It is an identity that is more concerned with empathy and less concerned with power.

Dorcas' words symbolize how a patriarchal society forces men into positions of power over women, thus giving men a moral burden. Within such a culture, men interacting with women must be aware of how their words and actions can be utilized as a means to control the women they are interacting with, even when control is not the man's intention. This is what Dorcas means when she states that all men are "torturers." It is easier for someone in power to inflict pain on someone who is not in power compared to how easy it is for someone who is not in power to inflict pain on someone who is. A patriarchal culture is one where men by default are given power over women. Since men cannot help but hold this power over others, they are inflicting pain. To be a "torturer" is to be someone who exerts dominance over someone else in order to cause them harm. It is, of course, harmful for women to be stuck in a position where they are considered lesser compared to those of the other sex. Thus, according to Dorcas, men cannot control their own status as "torturers."

Dorcas also points to the idea that patriarchy is something that is fixed. The phrase "women did not make the world" implies that since the world's inception the disempowerment of women by men has been a fact of life. What this means is that both men and women cannot choose to somehow disconnect themselves from the oppressive structures that surround them. Both parties must learn to navigate a world shaped by rigid gender dynamics. The fact that people of all genders are forced to navigate this oppressive and inflexible system relates to how Severian gradually begins to disregard the philosophy imparted upon him by his guild, slowly

realizing that he must be aware of how patriarchy lessens his own autonomy and that of those around him.

For example, in the fifteenth chapter of *Claw* Severian shows a degree of acknowledgment pertaining to how patriarchy influences interactions between men and women. He states, “When [men] are rigid with desire, we are apt to pretend a great tenderness in the hopes of satisfying that desire; but at no other time are we in fact so liable to treat women brutally, and so unlikely to feel any deep emotion but one” (Wolfe 372). Since men hold power over women, it is easier for them to facilitate intimacy when they are displaying “tenderness,” a quality typically coded by the culture as being “feminine.” Thus, the man who displays this quality is showing vulnerability by choosing momentarily to deviate from personality traits typically thought of as being masculine. Patriarchal forces make it difficult for him to show this “tenderness” in a way that does not make himself vulnerable since this quality is often thought of as being antithetical to “masculine” nature. This is because masculinity is so often connected to control, both in terms of the self and in terms of others. Men are expected to not show vulnerability since that is seen as a lack of dominion over the self, and men are expected to show their power by physically or sexually exerting power over others (especially women). However, a woman who chooses to show vulnerability alongside the man puts herself in a position where it is easy for the man to mistreat her. Even though both parties are, in a sense, unguarded at this moment, masculine dominance within the culture means that the woman is expected to give into the desires of the man while the man is not necessarily expected to give into the desires of the woman. The man is still holding power, and thus acts of violence on his part can easily be justified and defended, both in the sense of the man’s inner dialogue and in the sense of how the man relays information pertaining to this situation to others. The man can justify violence to

himself with the idea that the women put herself into the situation and thus brought the violence upon herself, and he can convey this narrative to others, causing them to side with the perpetrator instead of the victim. When Severian talks about men not feeling “any deep emotion but one,” he references the idea that women engaging in intimate acts with men can never be completely sure about the man’s sincerity. Since the man is holding power, he gains the ability to use perceived unguardedness in order to use the woman, gaining pleasure from her and then discarding her, revealing that the tenderness was only a sham.

Dorcas also imparts unto Severian ideas pertaining to the dehumanization of others, again further removing him from worldview of the guild. In the twenty-second chapter of *Claw*, after Severian says, “I have no desire to leave my guild,” Dorcas responds, “But you could. Today. That’s the thing to remember. People don’t want other people to be people” (Wolfe 345). Although Severian does not seem immediately swayed by her argument that to be a member of the guild is to cancel both one’s own autonomy and the autonomy of others, it is an important moment due to how directly Dorcas describes the moral failings of an organization Severian once believed to be justified in its existence. While this quote likely refers to how the guild dehumanizes those in its clutches, it could also be read as referring to how the guild dehumanizes its own members. Once again, this ties into the idea that inherent power carries with it a specific identity. In Severian’s case, the power bestowed by the guild also means a loss of the self.

Wolfe portrays this symbolically via the rules of the guild and the attire worn by its members. Ironically, the identity encouraged by the guild is identified by an ostensible lack of identity. Throughout the series Severian mentions the outfit worn by torturers, a black mask alongside a cloak made of “fuligin,” a color described as “darker than black” (Wolfe 30). It is also important to note the rule that “nothing said by a client under questioning is heard by [the

torturer]” (Wolfe 23). When torturers are doing their jobs, they are turned into something inhuman, simply an unspeaking, faceless figure who exists to cause pain. While the individual being tortured is dehumanized in how they are held captive and forced to endure agony, the torturer themselves is ordered to act in an inhuman manner. This inhumanity is meant to show that the torturer is in control of the victim. By shedding their humanity, they shed their vulnerability. This shedding of humanity in order to gain a perceived sense of power (perceived by both the torturer and the tortured) ties into the idea that patriarchal societies encourage men to shed vulnerability in order to gain power. The inhumanity of the torturer creates an effect where the vulnerability of the victim is emphasized. Once again, this connects to the idea of men being forced to “wander.” How does one find a sense of self or a sense of humanity when throughout their life they have been taught that inhumanity is a virtue? In such a dilemma, the individual must actively work and search for their sense of humanity since they have previously been barred from obtaining it.

Part 9: Severian’s Growth

There are two important moments in *Urth* where Severian shows how he has been changed after having taken in the words of Thecla and Dorcas. At the beginning of the third chapter, after Severian sees a small creature, he fires at it with his pistol, citing “that vile instinct every man has to kill whatever may fear him” as his reason for doing so (Wolfe 14). Sexuality is often thought of as an “instinct,” thus a connection is drawn between Severian’s desire for sex and his desire to do violence. This makes sense because for someone who uses sexuality as a way to exert power, violence and sexuality are both destructive. By thinking of male violence as an “instinct” one creates a justification for patriarchal gender norms since the compulsion to hurt is thought of as natural instead of being thought of as a social construct. In addition, in both a

literal and direct sense, the concept that men have an inherent connection to violence calls back to Dorcas saying that “all men are torturers” in *Shadow* (Wolfe 182). However, the way he refers to this instinct as “vile” also acts as a reference to how Thecla helped draw Severian away from the torturers guild, both physically and ideologically. Although Severian does not directly associate this statement with the guild, it can be read as an admission of the guild’s cruelty. The way Severian refers to “every man” having an instinct to do violence calls to how the decidedly “masculine” guild tries to use violence in order to give members a sense of power. The irony of this reference to the masculinity of the torturers comes in how with this quote, Severian subverts that sense of power that members of the organization seek, turning it into weakness. By referring to the desire to do harm as a “vile instinct,” Severian portrays guild members not by their ability to exert power over others, but rather by an inability to exert power over themselves. They give in to their most harmful desires in an almost inhuman way. The word “instinct” in this context suggests that humans reveal their animalistic nature in displays of cruelty. Likewise, by portraying himself as acting inhumane in this instance, Severian portrays the guild as being inhumane as well. Both parties are unable to control their instincts, thus leading to violence. In addition, the use of the word “fear” also undermines the guild’s power. If one has an instinct to harm that which fears him, this implies that the aggressor harbors a sense of fear (or something akin to fear at the least) towards the supposedly “weaker” target of the violence. Thus, the torturers are associated with not only weakness but insecurity as well. The reader is meant to ask if the guild’s desire for violence stems from the weakness of others or the weakness of those within the guild.

In the fourteenth chapter of *Urth*, Severian again references the words of Dorcas and Thecla. While fighting a creature akin to a human crossed with a bear, he narrates, “Before I

could turn aside, my attention was caught by the humanity of his face” and soon afterwards states, “That all men are torturers was one of my earliest insights; here it was confirmed for me by the bear-man’s agony that I remained a torturer still” (Wolfe 84). Whereas the guild operated by dehumanizing those who were obviously human, Severian is able to recognize humanity in that which is not entirely human in appearance, again displaying how he has ideologically separated himself from this organization. On the other hand, Severian deeming himself a “torturer still” enforces the idea that he is still not completely apart from them. The fact that he still thinks of himself as being a torturer is in addition to how he insists that the idea of all men being torturers is his own insight when in actuality it was Dorcas who told him this. It is unknown whether Severian simply misremembers this or if it is a deliberate attempt to trick the reader into giving him credit where it isn’t due. Wolfe shows that although Severian has largely moved away from the ideology of the torturers, vestiges of that patriarchal ideology still remain within him. Not only does he still think of himself as a “torturer,” but his tendency to downplay the autonomy of the women in his life still remains.

Either way, Wolfe displays how despite Severian’s growth, he is not completely devoid of the distinctly patriarchal ideas he embodied earlier in the story. He tries to strip Dorcas’ voice away from her, taking her power and giving it to himself. Ironically, this provides an example of what Dorcas meant when she said that. Wolfe portrays patriarchal ideas as something that one cannot entirely escape. One can improve themselves by being aware of and making an attempt to avoid their own use of actions or words that strip power from others. In other words, one can avoid succumbing to their “instinct” by putting more thought into how they interact with others. However, what is not possible is to completely divorce oneself from the social tropes of their own culture or cultures. Even the “reformed” will often fall back into lines of thinking that

conform to what they have been taught previously since society makes such an effort (in both conscious and unconscious ways) to enforce what is “normal.” In this instance, Severian again thinks in a way that is “normal” for a man in a patriarchal culture.

Part 10: Apheta

The character of Apheta represents an inversion of Severian’s previous sexual tendencies, showing him a sexual encounter where the power dynamics are equalized. This contrasts with how earlier points in the series show Severian attempting to dominate over others within sexual encounters with unbalanced dynamics. Apheta is an alien being who Severian encounters in *Urth* while on the planet of Yesod. When Severian meets Apheta, he tells her, “I am my lady’s slave,” wanting to show his respect for her authority. She responds with a “bantering smile,” saying, “If you were truly my slave, I would have you carry me up this stair” (Wolfe 101). Within this exchange, both are involved in shaping the relationship between the two. At first Severian attempts to undermine himself with the word “slave.” In a sense, this shows development on his part. His words go beyond a cliché phrase like “I am at your service,” in how the word “slave” emphasizes his inferiority even further. Severian’s previous sexual encounters in the series show him (whether intentionally or not) using skewed power dynamics in his favor, forcing women into dangerous situations for the sake of his own pleasure. On the other hand, however, Severian’s words reveal a view of sexuality that holds that one must have power while the other must lack power. He does not attempt to equalize, instead trying to tip the scales in Apheta’s favor. That said, Apheta tries to balance the relationship out by teasing him, letting him know that he does not deserve such a lowly title.

Throughout *Book of the New Sun*, the reader cannot always know for sure whether Severian is purposefully abusing unbalanced dynamics in his favor. By writing a text where the

intentions of the narrator are often hard to parse out in this regard, the author comments on the power held by men within a patriarchal culture. Relationships between men and women do not begin neutrally. They begin with the presumption of some degree of male dominance. Men do not need to have ill intentions in order to immorally control women since this control is the default of society. Again, the concept of man's moral burden and women's burden of self-preservation is pointed at. The only way to make interactions or relationships close to equal is for men to be aware of their assumed authority, while women must constantly be aware of how men can attempt to abuse this.

Later Severian and Apheta have sex in an event that brings about the beginning of the revitalization of the planet's dying sun. Wolfe writes, "There was something born between Yesod and Briah when I met with Apheta upon that divan in that circling room, something tiny yet immense that burned like a coal conveyed to the tongue by tongs. That something was myself" (Wolfe 121). In a literal sense, these lines refer to the "white fountain," first referenced in the twenty-fifth chapter of *Urth*. In the *Lexicon Urthus*, Michael Andre-Driussi explains that the "white fountain" is a celestial body that brings about the creation of the New Sun by fusing with the "Old Sun" (Andre-Driussi 321). However, these lines also operate on a symbolic level. With the use of the word "born" and the line "[t]hat something was myself," this signals a symbolic rebirth for Severian. This connects to the concept of the "white fountain," the phallic imagery which represents the means by which new life is created during intercourse. This symbolic rebirth causes the event to resemble the fusion of Severian's mind with Thecla's mind, as well as the fusion of Severian and Thecla's minds with the minds contained within the Autarch, since both of those events signaled "rebirths" of the protagonist as well. The way Severian describes the sensation of "a coal conveyed to the tongue by tongs" shows a sense of

extreme pain on his part. This passage is metaphorical, not meant to convey a sense of physical pain but instead meant to convey a psychological pain. He is forced to part from his previous identity, discarding his supposedly powerful, masculine nature in order to help bring about the restoration of his planet. The world of Yesod can be seen as the “tongs” while Apheta herself can be seen as the “coal.” Severian describes this hot coal as being delivered to the mouth. The mouth is one’s primary means of communicating with others, as well as one’s main method of representing themselves. What Wolfe is portraying is a purification of Severian’s ability to narrate the story. He is no longer bound to masculinity, his self-expression having been cleansed by his acceptance of the “feminine.”

However, this scene between Severian and Apheta also brings to light a rather cynical view of gender dynamics. The only time Severian is able to have a sexual encounter that is not unbalanced in nature is when he is on a planet not his own, interacting with a woman who is not even truly human. Again Wolfe portrays a world in which patriarchy is fixed. The only way to escape from systems that oppress people based on gender is to escape the world itself and the people who inhabit that world. Severian can develop himself on his home planet, but this growth cannot be completed there because of the flawed nature of cultures built by human beings. It is only on Yesod that Severian can complete his development.

Part 11: Ushas

Although Wolfe uses Severian’s journey to point out problems relating to patriarchy and the dynamics of gendered interactions, he seems quite traditionalist in how he portrays ideal gender roles. As stated previously, there are points throughout the series where the author asserts that patriarchy is something that is fixed and inescapable within our world. However, by the end of *Urth*, the reader sees a new world come about wherein a sort of “equality” is glimpsed. In this

story, Severian finds himself in a dilemma. In bringing about the New Sun, he must also bring about an apocalyptic flood. The protagonist succeeds in ushering in the age of the New Sun, but millions are killed due to the ensuing disaster. However, in doing so, Severian prevents an even more catastrophic future wherein the planet freezes over, killing all humans rather than most. The arrival of the so-called “New Sun,” as well as the change of the planet’s name suggests that the destruction caused by the flood is a purifying force, facilitating a new beginning. The new beginning for the planet also initiates a change in how the people of Urth view gender and the fixed roles imposed by patriarchal structures. In the final chapter, Severian has a conversation with a priest-like figure who tells Severian about the pantheon of the people of “Ushas,” Urth’s new name after the arrival of the New Sun. The priest names two gods and two goddesses. The gods are “the Sleeper,” representing hunger and storms, and “Odilo,” representing education and morality (Wolfe 307). The goddesses are “Pega,” representing daylight and comfort and “Thais,” representing night and seduction. Severian recognizes that the Sleeper is modeled after himself. After hearing about these deities, Severian responds, “It seems you have two good gods and two evil gods, and that the evil gods are Thais and the Sleeper.” The priest responds, saying “Oh, no! All gods are very good, particularly the Sleeper! Without the Sleeper, so many would starve. The Sleeper is very, very great! And when Thais does not come, her place is taken by a demon” (Wolfe 308). The fact that the priest says “particularly the Sleeper” implies that this deity has a significance above the others. One can interpret the extra significance of the Sleeper in one of two ways. Firstly, it can be taken as an affirmation of gender equality. At this point in the story, Severian has taken in the minds of both Thecla and the previous rulers of Urth, both male and female. Although he appears male and identifies as a man, he carries the minds and personalities of both men and women. The Sleeper being considered a chief among the other gods and

goddesses subverts the patriarchal structure of many pagan religions where the primary god is decidedly male. Like Severian, the Speaker is thought of as male by those around him. However, being based on Severian, he symbolically embodies both masculine and feminine characteristics. However, it is unlikely that the people of Ushas know about Severian's past involving taking in the minds of others. To them, he is only masculine. The people of Ushas seeing Severian as only a man means that the idea of the Sleeper representing both masculinity and femininity is an idea that would lie solely with the reader rather than with the characters in the text. Either way, the position of the other deities, decidedly binary in gender, leads to the interpretation of gender roles in the culture of Ushas.

Thais seems to hold a unique role, based on how the priest mentions that "when Thais does not come, her place is taken by a demon" (Wolfe 308). This quote is a reference to how Thais is described as "[coming] to children" in order to "announce that they are to be children no longer." Due to Thais' role as representing "lovers and lovers' embraces," this seems to represent puberty and sexual development (Wolfe 308). The men and women of Ushas believe that sexual development is an innately feminine concept, even if the person undergoing the development is male. The idea that they view sexual development in this way is supported by how an evil entity is said to do what is assumedly a corrupted version of Thais' job (that being ushering children into adulthood) when she is not present. The fact that the most distinctly sexual deity is described as a female "seducer" both subverts and upholds classically patriarchal views of sexuality and gender roles. Throughout much of the series, Wolfe uses the character of Severian to criticize the concept of men being sexually entitled to women. The reader is meant to condemn how he frequently engages in sexual acts where the power dynamics are clearly unbalanced in his favor. On Ushas, the sexual power seems to have been put in the hands of women, judging by how a

female deity is most aligned with romance and sexuality compared to other beings within the pantheon. While this empowers women by granting them symbolic power, it also draws on sexist stereotypes of women being oversexualized compared to men. One must ask if the symbolic power granted to women by the role of this deity truly leads to increased autonomy. Gender dynamics are not equalized in that a specific identity is pushed on women, forcing them to be thought of as sexual in nature unlike the comparatively undersexualized males within the society of Ushas. As stated earlier, a specific identity being pushed on a group of people burdens them in how it demands that they keep their predetermined role in mind when dealing with gendered interactions. Subverting gender roles frequently causes discontent among those who strongly believe people should abide by them, leading to mistreatment and violence against those whose only “crime” is trying to be themselves.

In other ways, however, the society of Ushas is more egalitarian when it comes to how the people view gender. Severian at first infers a rather conservative view of what the pantheon represents, assuming that the hunger and destruction of the Sleeper, along with the seductive nature of Thais, both constitute “evil.” The priest argues against this, showing that these qualities on the part of the gods and goddesses should be interpreted not as “evil” but instead as helpful, representing guidance for how people should carry out their roles as men or women. The priest argues against the idea that certain gendered characteristics should be considered “better” or “worse” compared to other gendered characteristics. However, even though Wolfe portrays a society where no one gender is assigned power over the other, the roles assigned to the genders are distinct. The priest makes it clear that male religious figures perform specific rites for the sake of the Sleeper and Odilo while female religious figures perform rites for Pega and Thais, thus showing segregation in terms of gender roles. In addition, each of the four deities represents

very traditional views of gendered characteristics. The Sleeper can be seen as representing not only violence but also the act of “breadwinning” seeing as how he is associated with fishing. The fact that the male deity is the one most associated with bringing in food aligns with misogynistic cultural ideals where men are designated as the ones who are supposed to create resources for families and communities but women trying to carry out this role is looked down upon. The god Odilo can also be seen as a traditional father figure, representing both education and judgment. The priest states “Odilo taught men to speak, and women to write. He is the judge of gods and men” (Wolfe 307). Once again, the reader is shown how men and women are given separate roles in this culture. The act of speaking carries connotations of leadership. To speak to someone else is to be heard by them. Speaking is an exertion of power in that it forces a message to be conveyed, regardless of the activity or inactivity of those around the speaker. Writing, on the other hand, is often viewed as a more passive activity, often doing nothing more than supplementing or repeating the speaker. Written works are not “heard” unless one willingly partakes in them. Thus, to compose a written work is to ask for action to be taken, whereas speaking bypasses the need to ask for active participation. The only time this need for activity on the part of others is not in place is when the written words are spoken. On Ushas, men are associated with leadership and activity but women are associated with passivity. Both are able to convey messages, but the men are granted more power in how they convey their ideas. Wolfe argues that gendered characteristics are fixed, even in this fictional setting. A “proper” society is portrayed as one where people play specific roles determined by their gender. The end of *Urth* argues that the “solution” to the problem of patriarchy is equality, but only in a way that is disconnected from change in terms of how people see gender.

Part 12: Conclusion

Book of the New Sun is largely a series that centers around encouraging the reader to ask questions. Severian's relationship to gender and sexuality is one such question. By writing a story where the main character gradually moves away from toxic masculinity, the author asks the reader what exactly it means to embody masculinity as a concept. Perhaps there is a degree of hypocrisy in Wolfe's writing. In some ways the text argues that patriarchy is inescapable and that people must embody specific gender roles in order to become their "ideal" selves. At the same time, however, the author vehemently argues against unhealthy expectations concerning masculinity that exist across various cultures, thus creating a strange paradox wherein men must simultaneously battle patriarchy but embrace it at the same time. Severian's character development supports the idea that connecting oneself with the "feminine" is the ideal way to escape toxic masculinity, but by doing this the text creates a patriarchal notion of what it means to be "feminine," accepting that the "masculine" is violent and powerful while the "feminine" is peaceful and caring but also weak.

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