

An IGJ question

The Urth list — 5 messages, 3 voices, 12 Feb 2002

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Tom Foster — 12 Feb 2002, 09:03

I've just finished reading IN GREEN'S JUNGLES and am puzzled by quite a few things. One of the main things that I can't really get my head around is the way in which Oreb appears when transported to Green or the Red Sun Whorl through Incanto's strange 'magic'. Incanto describes him several times as a "dwarfish man in feathers" and "a miniature airship" and he can apparently use his wingtip feathers as fingers in these scenes, yet he can still fly. Why does he look like this? I think that I vaguely understand why the inhuma become real people when transported through Incanto (though I'm not sure I could put it into words), but I really don't understand this business with Oreb.

Speaking of Oreb, what do people make of the point in the book when Incanto says that he seriously considered sacrificing Oreb? Surely he couldn't possibly think of doing this after all that the two/three of them have been through together (I haven't read RTTW yet, so I'm not sure exactly when Oreb is reunited with Silk/Horn). Besides, Oreb's not *just* a night chough is he? (Though once again I'm not sure I could accurately say exactly what he is - a kind of oracle for the gods?)

Thanks in advance for any insights people can offer - I'm sure that when I finish RTTW I'll have a lot more questions!

Tom

Michael Straight — 12 Feb 2002, 14:28 · follows Tom Foster

I realized after I wrote this that I'm including a few spoilers from Return to the Whorl. So read at your own risk.

On Tue, 12 Feb 2002, Tom Foster wrote:

One of the main things that I can't really get my head around is the way in which Oreb appears when transported to Green or the Red Sun Whorl through Incanto's strange 'magic'.

The inhumi become human when they are transported because they have human souls, or at least because they want to be human. Jahlee says that the forms they have on Green are their real selves, but it's possible that's just her wishful thinking.

The narrator looks more like Horn when transported, which is another point in favor of the idea that it's some sort of spirit travel in which one sees the traveller's true spirit or soul.

Like Oreb, Babbie becomes more human-looking when transported, and Seawrack had told Horn that, though he didn't recognize it, Babbie was a person. Moreover, Babbie's personhood was derivative, because he was (spending time with? loved by?) Horn, and might fade away if he went back to living in the wild.

So it seems Oreb might be transformed into a part-human creature because he is a person.

And, like Babbie, that personhood may be derivative, because he is tamed, or loved, by Silk/Horn. (I think that Oreb vocabulary increases, that he uses a few words on Green that he doesn't use elsewhere - names of food at Sinew's house, I think.)

I am reminded of a passage of in C.S. Lewis's book *The Problem of Pain*. He has a chapter at the end about animal pain and he speculates that if animals go to heaven, it may be because the animal, in being close to a human being has attained its true selfhood in relationship to that human being. A Google search found this quote: Certain animals "may therefore have an immortality, not in themselves, but in the immortality of their masters.... In other words, the man will know his dog: the dog will know its master and, in knowing him, will **be** itself."

Whether or not Wolfe had Lewis's ideas in mind, the idea of derivative personhood seems to be a theme of the series, in the inhumis, in Babbie, and presumably even in the chems. The chems seem to be true persons, and to be able to mix souls the way Horn and Silk do. Surely they are persons because humans have programmed them to be like humans (and note the similarity between Fr. Incus making Hammerstone his friend and the gods possessing human beings).

The other thing to consider is that Oreb has been possessed by Scylla, so it's possible that Oreb's personhood is in some way caused by that possession. (Do we know when Oreb was first possessed?) Similarly, it seems obvious that Babbie was first tamed by Mucor possessing him, so perhaps his continued personhood is a result of having been possessed. (Is there any evidence that Mucor's possessions have lingering effects on people the way possession by a god does?)

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One of the odd things in the Short Sun books, is that the narrator always talks as if he thinks Oreb is far less remarkable than he is. Could Scylla be purposely giving him some kind of blind spot so that he doesn't notice that she's in there? (But then, eventually it seems she's been trying to make contact with him, to enlist his help in rescuing her.)

It reminds me of how Horn seems unwilling to recognize Babbie's personhood. In addition to Seawrack's comments on the subject, there's the passage on the floating islands where Horn has the odd feeling that there's another person with him, but then "realizes" that it's only Babbie. Maybe this is just Wolfe characterizing Horn as in some way blind to the way things are (similar to how Horn doesn't see that Sinew really loves him).

Even so, it's hard to imagine Incanto sacrificing his beloved pet, even if he only thinks of him as an animal. I think the other thing going on here probably has something to do with the Eucharistic imagery. Incanto has an encounter with the Outsider and has an overwhelming urge to offer sacrifice. (How much of this urge comes from his upbringing in the Vironese faith, how much from the nature of the Outsider, we don't know.) Instead of an animal, he offers bread and wine, which in Catholic theology literally become the body and blood of Christ, the sacrifice which supercedes all other sacrifices. The fact that Incanto ponders sacrificing Oreb underlines the idea that Incanto sees the sharing of bread and wine as a form of sacrifice rather than just some kind of ritual meal.

-Rostrum

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This is why I think Marc is on to something with his animal-plant hybrid theory. Christianity moves sacrifice from human/animal to bread/wine. Consuming sacramental bread and wine, we become new persons. Thus, it makes sense at a symbolic level to have "plant-humans" as eschatological human beings.

To put it another way, God provided grace and union with Himself via animal sacrifices in the Old Creation, but in the New Creation He uses plants.

When Jesus healed the blind man, his first response was "I see men as trees walking." Wolfe could definitely be playing with this symbolism.

Nutria

Tom Foster — 13 Feb 2002, 09:08 · follows James Jordan

Thanks Rostrum for an extremely informative and helpful post.

Here's one of the other main things that's been puzzling me: why does the narrator of OBW/IGJ not need to eat very much? This crops up fairly frequently, particularly in the latter parts of IGJ but is never explained, at least as far as I noticed. One example of this that really stood out to me occurs in the chapter 'Why are the inhumis like us?' On pp344 the narrator tells Hide that one way of identifying an inhumis is to be wary "of anyone who appears not to eat, or to eat very little". Only a few pages earlier Hide had said to the narrator, "You don't eat much. While I've been with you, you've hardly eaten at all". The narrator replies "I eat far too much. I try constantly - perhaps I should say I try to try constantly - to keep it in check". There are many examples of the narrator saying similar things in both books and it seems very odd. If Hide were to follow his father's advice then he should be wary of his father surely! Is the narrator fasting, is it something to do with the Silk/Horn transmigration, or is this something that is explained in RTTW?

I also thought that the meeting on Green with Chenille and Auk (and later Sinew?) could have been described in a bit more detail to say the least. I know Wolfe likes to be obtuse (and I love him for it), but I had been waiting throughout the first two books for a meeting with these two characters, and next to nothing is explained.

The more I think about the New/Long/Short Sun books, the more I think of things that puzzle me! That's certainly one of the best things about Wolfe, but it would be nice if I came away from them feeling that I had understood even a fraction of what he is getting at! I'm starting to feel that when I finish RTTW I'll have to go back and read the New Sun books for the forth time...

Tom

Michael Straight — 13 Feb 2002, 16:11 · follows Tom Foster

On Wed, 13 Feb 2002, Tom Foster wrote:

Here's one of the other main things that's been puzzling me: why does the narrator of OBW/IGJ not need to eat very much?

Silk's body may not used to eating much. Remember in Nightside where couple fried tomatoes, and apple, and a crust of bread are a mouth-watering feast? That was when he was a poor priest, but it's possible he continued to eat lightly and fast regularly even when he was Calde and later when he lived with Hyacinth. Eat that way for years and then suddenly start trying to eat like Horn was accustomed, and you'll get pretty sick.

Also note we only start hearing about the food in IGJ, not OBW (not sure if it's mentioned in the Whorl scenes of RTW, which I'm just starting to re-read now). Which to me indicates it might also be evidence of parts of Silk's personality slowly re-asserting themselves. "What have I been thinking eating like this?"

I agree that Incanto's words, "beware those who don't eat much," seem like they must be connected. But no inhum could hold a pen and write in neat tiny letters as Incanto does, so that can't be it. Perhaps the connection is that, like the inhum, Incanto is not who he seems to be. Except, he is.

-Rostrum