

system of language

The Urth list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 30 Mar 2002

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/3107>

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maa32 — 30 Mar 2002, 00:26

I don't know if many people have thought about Horn's life story as a semiotic system that Silk uses to reconstruct himself, but if you want to make a case about the universal application of stories even if they aren't true, it could be a pretty good way to look at the linguistic system in the Short Sun Books. Let's assume for this case the minimal supernatural stuff has gone on: Silk is a shattered man who needs to heal his psyche somehow. He steals the language system of a convenient fellow, someone who has died but still has a home and family left to write back to. He assumes that man's identity, and then seeks to create a meaningful assertion of his identity using prepackaged language that does not belong to him: the story of the search for Silk turns into a method and a process through which Silk can find himself again- by telling the story. He attempts to defer death for Horn as long as he can (I am paralleling the drive for the end of plot with the Thanatos syndrome of Freud here). The plot exists for as long as he can stave back an account of death from the text. When Horn TRULY dies, he must face up to his own identity - and he needs the story as extended therapy.

In this case, interpretive relativism is completely irrelevant: whatever meaning Silk wants to ascribe to his own life, he can. Through the story of Horn. In other words, even if Horn's story had nothing to do with Silk, Silk could still meet himself in the system of language through constructing his own identity.

As a schema for how fantastic literature might apply to real life, I find this particular picture kind of interesting. It admits that language can be stolen from its original context, abused, and misinterpreted; it also allows a construction of self-identity through an assumed plot for anyone involved in that theft.

Perhaps the Book of the Short Sun illustrates how a closed system of language can still have a universal application even after it is (indeed, especially after it is) stolen from its original context (in this case, from the mouth of the real Horn).

In other words, the text presents a model for overcoming the particular constraints and limitations of a fantastic story in order to reapply it in a useful way for a reader/analyst. Which might be a nice way to justify the study of fantastic literature in school. Even though it's not real - it can still be real.

I thought I'd fool you all by changing up my theme temporarily on the Short Sun Books. Does anybody else like this "therapeutic" approach to looking at Silk's claim to be Horn?

Marc Aramini

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 30 Mar 2002, 00:30 · follows maa32

Marc,

This is amazing. I will definitely be looking at this when I reread "Short Sun." This may be the

most useful model of these books I've seen to date, and it seems to have tremendous explanatory power wrt the texts as I remember them.

Bravo. Bravissimo!

-----Original Message-----

From: maa32 [mailto:maa32 at dana.ucc.nau.edu]

Sent: Friday, March 29, 2002 4:27 PM

To: urth at urth.net

Subject: (urth) system of language

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Marc Aramini

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Jason Ingram — 30 Mar 2002, 14:41 · follows Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

I agree that examining the force of language in the Short Sun series would be extremely productive, but I would accentuate different elements. My predisposition is towards a rhetorical rather than a semiotic analysis; I would emphasize a movement from the text outward to readers. Before outlining what I mean by this, I want to go through parts of Marc's post to detail areas of agreement and disagreement.

Let's assume for this case the minimal supernatural stuff has gone on:

I don't think this assumption is helpful, as it dismisses most of the story. Retaining the semiotic analysis along with much of the plot seems more productive. If we become too suspicious of the text, we could end up reducing the whole narrative to a Freudian melodrama (he isn't really Silk, he just identifies with Silk as a 'transitional object'; he doesn't really encounter inhuman, he's just worried about his ego boundaries; he doesn't actually ever leave Urth (or earth), he's just dreaming about a messianic figure who defeats the evil tyrant Typhon (or his father, who he wants to become--thus the identification with pater silk)).

He assumes that man's identity, and then seeks to create a meaningful assertion of his identity using prepackaged language that does not belong to him:

This is an interesting way to look at Silk's gradual emergence from Horn's persona. I've been meaning to chart the gradual shifts in Silkhorn's conversational style as he becomes more and more like Silk. This is difficult, since our initial view of Silk is mediated through Horn's writing. Interesting irony, though: in TBOLS, we think we're reading Silk when we're really reading Horn's take on Silk; whereas in TBOSS we're reading what we think is Horn, but turns out to be Silk writing and speaking through Horn.

It seems like some sort of semiotic analysis is *necessary* to sort through the various personae, and the frame of a "language that is not one's own" would prove quite helpful to that end.

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I don't think Freud's theory of the death drive helps much to sort this out; it seems to be more of a struggle for recognition. Silk/Horn denies the recognition of others, continually maintaining his identity as Horn despite 'clear' evidence to the contrary. Horn dies--his physical death in the lander is conceded in the text, I believe, long before the narrator gives up on being Horn--and yet maintains that he is Horn for some time. Eventually, he recognizes himself and begins to mourn in earnest. This sequence does more to critique Freud than to support him (at least, the Freud of "Mourning and Melancholia" and perhaps even of _Civilization and its Discontents_).

Still, viewing the narrative as a process of therapy sheds valuable light on the story. It also could provide an interesting twist on theories involving the "death of the author"-- cf. Foucault (the 'Silk function').

[tangent: the projection of memories and habits from one body to another raises important questions about identity. SF is a privileged site for thinking about such issues, and the theme of possession woven throughout the short sun and long sun series has long intrigued me. For instance: why can't Pas or anyone else download their personality into more than one vessel at a time? If the 'soul/self' is singular in some way, then how could these personalities have been uploaded without expunging the soul/self from the original?]

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Language is always adapted and altered; struggles over proper representation and proper context create standards that, later, come to seem natural (perhaps akin to Bloom's "anxiety of influence"). Narratives certainly do help us to make sense of who we are, and shape the use and development of technology.

I think individual therapy is less salient than other themes in TBOSS, however:

the sense of wonder and mystery evoked by Wolfe's narrative form, silk as role model (the content of his message, the form he uses to convince people, and his dynamic balance of love, eloquence, and prowess in battle), the ethical relation to the Other evoked by the 'inhumi problem', property relations and representations of ineffective components of social orders, imagination (still quite muddled for me), and, perhaps most important (grin),

hybridity

These aspects of the books, I would argue, leave traces in attentive readers

Perhaps the Book of the Short Sun illustrates how a closed system of language can still have a universal application even after it is (indeed, especially after it is) stolen from its original context (in this case, from the mouth of the real Horn).

Quibbles: I'm not sure how language can be a 'closed system' or how any context or origin can be pure (e.g. who or what is the "real" Horn, and how can we tell without changing that representation of the real?).

(Well, perhaps a self-caused being could have a pure origin, but that isn't sufficient to allow a pure context for interpretative access)

In other words, the text presents a model for overcoming the particular constraints and limitations of a fantastic story in order to reapply it in a useful way for a reader/analyst. Which might be a nice way to justify the study of fantastic literature in school. Even though it's not real - it can still be real.

A good way of putting it, though I still favor the centrifugal approach over the centripetal. I balk at debunking Silk's eventual identity with Horn, but agree that an approach combining therapeutic, hermeneutic, and semiotic moments has considerable value.

Thanks for these insights, Marc

Sepia

P.S. I agree that speculative fiction can be quite useful in the classroom, but I also fear that assigning any book makes it far less enjoyable, and subverts much that is valuable about reading the fantastic ("What do we need to know about astral projection for the midterm?" "Will you grade us down if we argue in our paper that the protagonist isn't a tree?")