

5HC and TBOTSS

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 02 Jun 2002

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Adam Stephanides — 02 Jun 2002, 14:10

on 5/30/02 12:40 PM, Michael Andre-Driussi at mantis at siriusfiction.com wrote:

iirc, when Gene Wolfe told me, in person, about his plan to do a trilogy called "The Book of the Short Sun," he said specifcily that it would be in the hard-on-the-reader style of 5HC.

[snip]

We see today arguments over 5HC, a work published decades ago. Many of the same negative things said about 5HC seem to be said about the much more recent/less digested TBOTSS as well. Readers who dislike one or the other or both feel that it is pointlessly complicated; that Wolfe is finally cheating; that things don't add up; that solid, non-fuzzy solutions cannot be sorted out; et cetera. It might be that in general the same root problems between these texts and their grumpy readers are the same.

Hmm, I don't actually recall people making these complaints about 5HC in the recent discussion. The most I remember is some people saying they didn't really see the connections between the three parts of 5HC, but I don't recall anyone disliking it to the extent that some of us dislike TBOTSS. (I should probably go back and reread all the posts, but as alga said, it's too much trouble.)

I can see clear similarities in narrative techniques between 5HC and TBOTSS. Both have several narrators, one of whom is not who he seems to be at first; both contain a section(s) which at first glance seems an objective third-person narrative, but upon inspection proves to be a reconstruction of uncertain evidential value. I think these aspects of TBOTSS succeed.

But apart from this (and from the obvious motifs they share), I don't see much likeness between the two works. 5HC is tightly constructed; and I would maintain that it actually gives us all, or almost all, the information we need (once we realize that incomprehension and misapprehension are major themes of the book, and that the abos as a presence in the minds of Marsch, Victor and the colonists are far more significant than the "truth" about the abos). Neither of these is true for TBOTSS. Nor does 5HC contain the long tedious stretches that TBOTSS does; or suffer from the failings in characterization that Allan Lloyd, alga and others have pointed out in TBOTSS; or suffer from Wolfe's failure to make the pulp-derived elements of TBOTSS plausible.

To be sure, it's always prudent to give Wolfe the benefit of the doubt, and I may be led to change my mind about TBOTSS later. But that doesn't alter my current opinion.

--Adam