

Extended Meditation on Rorschach Novels (was RE: (urth))

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 27 Aug 2002

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Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 27 Aug 2002, 19:02

Jack stays in the barn haunted by the banshee three nights.

...as does the coldhouse prank victim (Friday, Saturday, Sunday nights).

That's wonderful. It's either a remarkable coincidence, or something very clever on the part of Wolfe.

Or (given the partial content of the interview you pointed out -- thank you!) something very clever on the part of Wolfe's unconscious or subconscious or whatever it is that does stuff that he doesn't "see consciously."

Q: To what extent is a Gene Wolfe text a Rorschach blot?

That is, how much of what we get out of the text is put there by Gene Wolfe; how much is what we put into it?

LACUNAE OF THE LONG SUN

I'm inclined more than a little to the theory of reading as not just decoding, but creating -- so that writing is a game of giving just the right details so that the reader fills in the lacunae between them, and so creates a vivid picture in her cortical theatre. SF, famously, uses a rhetoric that suggests far more than it says, from Heinlein's "The door dilated" to Delany's "The red sun was high, the blue low" -- sentences that the experienced SF reader not only "decodes" but uses as raw material from which to extrapolate huge amounts of information about the fictive world.

Heinlein's sentence implies a social and economic and technological landscape where people want and have doors that dilate; Delany's a physical vista that includes not only the two suns but a planet's surface, strangely mingled shadows of different colors, the hints of the alien life that might inhabit it ... But the writer does not put those things there. Heinlein, explicitly, did not write a treatise about the socio-economic-technology behind dilating doors; Delany does not describe the shadows, or even mention the planet on whose surface the narrator is (we presume) standing. The reader creates these things for herself.

THE DEVIL IN A DETAIL

Reading, and especially reading SF, is to a very large extent a process of filling in these lacunae, these gaps between the words. The writer can choose his details to suggest content for these lacunae -- to, as it were, select data points that suggest a most obvious or most efficient way of extrapolating between the data points -- but the writer can't control the reader's process of extrapolation.

If my imagination tends that way, I can imagine Heinlein's dilating door as he _probably_ intended, it, like a hugely blown-up iris from an old-fashioned box camera. But I might have been reading a bunch of anatomy right before I pick up BEYOND THIS HORIZON, and when I come to that sentence, my cortex might throw up an image more like a heart valve -- and then the social, economic, technological texts hiding behind that door will be radically different. In a more conservative mode: when you imagine that door, do you imagine it as metallic, wood, plastic? Is its mechanism electromechanical, magnetic?

Do you even bother to imagine those details at all? (I don't always -- but then I am, in some ways, an intolerably lazy reader). The point is, though, that _whether_ you imagine them, and _what_ you imagine -- and all of us do fill in at least some of the gaps, or we couldn't read SF at all -- greatly affects the experience of reading.

I think that we can agree that Wolfe, in a lot of ways, leaves larger lacunae, and leaves lacunae of a different _kind_, than most SF writers. The question that I asked above then breaks down, in this terminology, into three separate but deeply interrelated questions, as follows: (1) For a given lacuna, or a given _type_ of lacuna, can we reasonably assume that Wolfe himself had some specific content in mind? (2) If so, can we reasonably assume that he expected his readers to extrapolate something similar to what he imagined? And if not, was he even aware of the lacuna when he wrote?

THE WORDS AND THE LECTOR

These questions are nontrivial, and probably ultimately not answerable with any real certainty. I think we can agree that Wolfe, like (almost) any competent writer, imagines (most of) what he describes in far more detail than appears on the page.

The writer's process is one of selection and omission; the reader's process of extrapolation is not a simple converse. A very precise writer and a very precise reader, with very similar cultural and educational backgrounds, _might_ wind up with very similar "movies" in their heads ... but I wouldn't bet on it. Ditto two very precise readers with similar etc. My Silk is not your Silk and neither of these is Wolfe's Silk.

Yet, somehow, we wind up with Silks, Latros, Severians, and Narrahornsilkpasthingies similar enough that we can at least talk meaningfully about them ... which is (in my opinion) something of a miracle; we look at black marks on paper, each of us creates a movie in our heads, and, somehow, the movies are alike enough that we can talk meaningfully about them, argue, agree on what we're arguing about, and even, sometimes, reach a conclusion.

(Suddenly, DNA doesn't seem all that amazing; suddenly, the possibility of encoding a human personality into a computer doesn't seem all that improbable. Is LONG SUN -- in part, to be sure -- about the thermodynamic miracle of writing and reading?)

THE SUM OF THE OLD BOOKS

I looked a post about the coldhouse prank and the Banshee story, and saw a correspondence I'd never seen before -- that, to the best of my knowledge, nobody had ever seen before. Did Wolfe put it there? Consciously or unconsciously? How could we even know? Wolfe wrote the book thirty years ago; chances are he doesn't know at this point.

And if he did, if he intended this correspondence as a great big sign pointing the way to understanding these anecdotes -- does this noticing "invalidate" (partially or completely) all

previous readings of these anecdotes? Of the whole novel?

Obviously not. Ultimately, reading is a collaborative effort. Any competent reading is valid ... which begs the question of what constitutes a "competent" reading, but that is, I think, a question that must be begged; or, rather, treated as open. A reading of PEACE as "the story of how Ahab chased a whale" is clearly not a competent reading; but cases can and have been made for wildly different readings of PEACE, and of (quite a few) other Lupine texts.

Nor is it to say that all "competent" (and therefore "valid") readings are "correct"; indeed, I think it calls into question whether there can be a "correct" reading of a text with the number and kind of lacunae Wolfe typically offers.

There are different kinds of puzzles. Some, like jigsaw puzzles and crossword puzzles, have unique, "correct" solutions; if you put all the pieces in the right places, you solve the puzzle correctly. If you don't, then not.

But there are other kinds of puzzles -- those maddening puzzles from the '70s, for example, that had three dozen weirdly-shaped plastic pieces and big letters on the box telling you that there were thousands of solutions, different ways to make all the plastic pieces fit back into the frame once you'd gotten them out. Any one of them would be "right." (Though somehow, I was never able to find even one...)

PIECE

In the end, then, I suppose that this meditation turns out to be an argument for wide interpretive tolerance.

For example: maybe most of us don't see the trees-are-the- inhumani "solution" to Short Sun; but that doesn't mean that the people who do are wrong. They are reading the text in good faith, their solutions -- even if they seem torturous to some of us -- seem to fit the facts. But if their solution isn't "wrong," there's no good cause for them to propound it as "the right answer," either.

Because I think texts do bear a certain resemblance to Rorschach blots. There isn't a "right" interpretation, but there are right interpretations, and there are clearly "wrong" ones -- interpretations that ignore the ink that's actually there to interpret.