

New Poster: Nettle theory

The Urth list — 4 messages, 4 voices, 13 May 2003

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/4003>

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Alan Lewis — 13 May 2003, 04:57

Hello one and all,

I have long been a fan of Gene Wolfe, but happened upon this list only recently when I decided to see what the net had to offer on the best living sf writer. As it happens, I've only recently completed the Short Sun Series, as I decided to wait until they were all written until I bought them. And then once I had them all I still hesitated, one of the reasons being the cover art which I found embarrassing (and having read them, it's doubly embarrassing to have them contain such stupid inaccuracies as well, but that's a whole other discussion). Now I have spent many many hours reading the archives of this list to "catch up" somewhat, and though I did not read all the postings or even half, I'm ready to jump in. First let me say congratulations on the friendly and fascinating exchange that takes place here -- as others have commented, I feel I know much about many of you.

I have a bunch I wish to discuss about Short Sun, but I want to start with a simple point, which I wonder if I will get anyone to agree with me on. Almost everyone has wondered why in the Outsider's name Nettle would go if into the Long Sunset with Silkhorn and Seawrack. My solution is simply this: she didn't.

Of course, part of why I believe this is I found it so hard to believe myself that she would go on this trip. But there's more. Here is the quotation from Whorl:

"They are in it, I hope, he and his eerie young woman, Nettle, the old sybyl, and their bird. . . ."

Now of course the standard reading of this line is that the commas separate the different items on a list, and thus Nettle is a passenger. However, when the Narrator has been writing this book he has been doing so in a certain style, for an audience of one much of the time, that being Nettle. It becomes a convention of style, like the Victorian always referring to Dear Reader. Many times in this series the Narrator will say something like: And then this happened, Nettle, and then that. Even though we may presume this particular section was written by Daisey, and even though none of the other 3rd person sections have this quality that I recall, I propose that at the end of the book the question of just who is speaking has become confused, like identity in so many other places in this series (and to me is the major theme of Short Sun, as I hope to elucidate at greater length later). Thus the style of the Narrator who addresses his words to Nettle has crept in. Under this theory the line is read as the equivalent of: "these are the people who went, Nettle." In other words, the line is addressed to Nettle, though she is not part of the list. In support of this is the fact that hers is the only name given, which otherwise seems odd.

This actually was the way I made sense of this line on my first reading of it, although I did re-read it a few times and see that Wolfe had been very mischevious and ambiguous -- qualities which he exhibits quite a bit, no?

As to possible objections to this theory (other than it calling for a non-standard reading of the line), one of the main ones occurs on the page before where Nettle SEEMS to be making her goodbyes to her family -- or is she? Here is the passage:

"We will sail tonight," he told me. "Would you be willing to make my farewells to Hoof and Hide? Nettle is making her own, and cannot be bothered with mine."

Now here is some room for ambiguity as well. The standard reading would probably be that Nettle is making her farewells to Hoof and Hide, so has no time (or inclination?) to pass on "his"

farewell. However, it could be that Nettle is "making" her farewell to this fellow, because she's not going with him, and has no time to pass on messages. And what might she be making? How about another copy of the Book of Silk, which we know she did in the past, and that Horn treasured mightily. And/or a copy of that portion of the Short Sun as the Narrator wrote it out. Just a thought.

Alan Lewis

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 13 May 2003, 16:05 · follows Alan Lewis

Alan Lewis wrote:

Hello one and all,

Greetings and hallucinations, welcome to the list.

once I had [all the SS books] I still hesitated, one of the reasons being the cover art which I found embarrassing

Am I the only person in the world who actually likes these covers? Oh well.

(and having read them, it's doubly embarrassing to have them contain such stupid inaccuracies as well, but that's a whole other discussion).

Well, that's for durn sure. Even LS has some problems (i.e., the infamous Marble/Mint confusion). Porfreeding at Tor books seems to have gone to hecky-darn in a handbasket.

Now I have spent many many hours reading the archives of this list to "catch up" somewhat, and though I did not read all the postings or even half, I'm ready to jump in.

Hey, read the FAQ. You are required to read the whole archives, and make sure you verify that nothing you post ever repeats anything that has ever been posted here before. We have no time for repetition, redundancy, excess, or sarcasm.

(Uh... 8*) for the humor-challenged.)

First let me say congratulations on the friendly and fascinating exchange that takes place here -- as others have commented, I feel I know much about many of you.

Good. Maybe you can tell us about ourselves some time. I'm sure I'd like to know who I am.

I have a bunch I wish to discuss about Short Sun, but I want to start with a simple point, which I wonder if I will get anyone to agree with me on.

Well, that's another point you should have picked up in the FAQ. Everyone is required to jump on all new theories, especially by new posters, and tear them to tiny shreds. We're totally opposed to novelty here.

See previous parenthesis.

Almost everyone has wondered why in the Outsider's name Nettle would go if into the Long Sunset with Silkhorn and Seawrack. My solution is simply this: she didn't.

I don't think this works, for a variety of reasons.

Of course, part of why I believe this is I found it so hard to believe myself that she would go on this trip. But there's more. Here is the quotation from Whorl:

"They are in it, I hope, he and his eerie young woman, Nettle, the old

sybyl, and their bird. . . ."

Now of course the standard reading of this line is that the commas separate the different items on a list, and thus Nettle is a passenger. However, when the Narrator has been writing this book he has been doing so in a certain style, for an audience of one much of the time, that being Nettle.

Absolutely correct.

However, this chapter (like all the "interstitial" chapters in WHORL, and certain inserted remarks in the earlier volumes - which in turn should lead us to question how heavily the Narrator's own words have been edited!), is NOT the Narrator writing; it is Daisy.

[...]

I propose that at the end of the book the question of just who is speaking has become confused, like identity in so many other places in this series (and to me is the major theme of Short Sun, as I hope to elucidate at greater length later).

The nature of identity is a major theme of all the Sun books, and indeed of most of Wolfe's major work. However, there is no real doubt about who is writing that final chapter, unless you have some mechanism to propose whereby the identities of Daisy and the Narrator might become confused..

Thus the style of the Narrator who addresses his words to Nettle has crept in. Under this theory the line is read as the equivalent of: "these are the people who went, Nettle." In other words, the line is addressed to Nettle, though she is not part of the list. In support of this is the fact that hers is the only name given, which otherwise seems odd.

I don't think this will work.

As you semi-note in a bit I deleted, there is NO sense in any of the previous "by the kids" material that they are addressing Nettle; in fact, in one of the inserted remarks, in (I believe) OBW, responding to the Narrator's wondering whether or not "you" will ever read the ms., the kids say that *she* has.

The kids do not even try to write in the Narrator's style; if they did, they would fake up a first-person narrative instead of the "he" they use in describing SilkHorn's Adventures On The Whorl.

This actually was the way I made sense of this line on my first reading of it, although I did re-read it a few times and see that Wolfe had been very mischevious and ambiguous -- qualities which he exhibits quite a bit, no?

Well, he seems to claim that he doesn't, but ...

[...] Nettle SEEMS to be making her goodbyes to her family -- or is she? Here is the passage:

"We will sail tonight," he told me. "Would you be willing to make my farewells to Hoof and Hide? Nettle is making her own, and cannot be bothered with mine."

Now here is some room for ambiguity as well. The standard reading would probably be that Nettle is making her farewells to Hoof and Hide, so has no time (or inclination?) to pass on "his" farewell. However, it could be that Nettle is "making" her farewell to this fellow, because she's not going with him, and has no time to pass on messages.

Ummm.

This is not merely a non-standard reading; it is, I think, a tortured reading. If Nettle were "making her farewells" to Silk(Horn?), she would be there with him. She isn't.

And what might she be making? How about another copy of the Book of Silk, which we know she did in the past, and that Horn treasured mightily. And/or a copy of that portion of the Short Sun as the Narrator wrote it out. Just a thought.

And an interesting one, but for "her own" in the cited passage NOT to refer to "goodbyes" would require a possible referent to be at least implied. There's nothing in the passage that even vaguely suggests that she's making "her own copy" of either Book.

Interesting stuff, and well worth putting forth, even if it doesn't work.

Chris — 13 May 2003, 16:30 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Dan'l wrote:
Absolutely correct.

However, this chapter (like all the "interstitial" chapters in WHORL, and certain inserted remarks in the earlier volumes - which in turn should lead us to question how heavily the Narrator's own words have been edited!), is NOT the Narrator writing; it is Daisy.

I have to say that I was perplexed by the ending myself, but this is exactly the point I was going to make. This chapter, aside from the narrator claiming to be Daisy from the beginning, is also written in a distinctly different style - as is the wedding chapter. I'd also like to throw in that even Silkhorn during the course of the chapters he wrote varies a bit depending on his emotional state. Sometimes he addresses Nettle specifically and passionately; others she fades from his mind. Horn is, perhaps, not the most devoted husband but I like to think these are just times when Silk is coming to the fore.

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Hmm now this is a place where the theory, even if incorrect, brings up more questions. This passage implied to me that Nettle is with them at the time they are adding their editorial notes - it's not explicit, but it seems clear enough to me. And if she did go, did she have time to read OBW and comment on it to Hoof and Hide? If she did, then Silkhorn was certainly there to see that for himself. Nonetheless (again, not explicitly) the editorial note seems to be directed to Horn, not to us.

"We will sail tonight," he told me. "Would you be willing to make my farewells to Hoof and Hide? Nettle is making her own, and cannot be bothered with mine."

I thought, initially, that she might be making farewells because Hoof and Hide were moving from their home - after the wedding, this would be somewhat natural. But that's a weak explanation.

If she did go back to the Whorl, the rationalization that sits best with me is that perhaps she simply doesn't trust Silkhorn's account or necessarily believe her husband is dead. She knows that Horn somehow reached Silk to send him back, and thus presumes that Horn made it to the Whorl somehow and may still be alive there.

There's also the possibility that for some complex political reason the ending has been deliberately obscured. I don't have a likely reason for that. But it certainly strikes me as muddled.

Chris

Michael Straight — 30 May 2003, 22:19 · follows Chris

On Tue, 13 May 2003, Alan Lewis wrote:

"They are in it, I hope, he and his eerie young woman, Nettle, the old sybyl, and their bird. . . ."

Welcome, Alan. I like your reading of that line -- very clever. Made me say, "Hey, waitaminute..." But I don't think I'm convinced, for the reasons others have mentioned. Also, the simplest reason the narrator would use Nettle's name is that she is the only one known to Daisy on a first-name basis.

And I never had a problem with Nettle going back with Silk. Her husband is dead (perhaps the last of him finally exorcised from Silk during that conversation with Remora, perhaps she, like many others, never really believed Horn was ever in there), her children grown and married. She followed Silk in her youth, and everybody wants to be around Silk. She quite plausibly might want to return in her old age to her hometown of Viron; Blue is no paradise, and once Passilk gets the Whorl fixed up, it will presumably be a nicer place to live than it was when Nettle was young. And maybe she did see a little bit of Horn in Silk and wants to cling to the only connection she has left.

I don't see her as part of an alleged Silk harem any more than Marble is.

The one I didn't understand was Seawrack -- why would she be interested in Silk (other than that everyone wants to follow Silk)? My reading is that before Horn faded, he was the driving force in Silkhorn's desire to seek her out, but that for Silk it's more a matter of rescuing her from being a tool of the Mother (not that there would be anything wrong with him taking up a romantic interest in Seawrack -- with his ubergenesis he might outlive her.) I'm guessing she knows she's been freed from whatever hold the Mother had over her and knows Silk is responsible.

-- Rostrum