

Wolfe's Women (There Are Doors)

The Urth list — 5 messages, 3 voices, 30 Jun 1998

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Michael Straight — 30 Jun 1998, 13:53

I forward this post from rec.arts.sf.written with Mr. Gilbert's permission. I'd be interested to hear what others think of the way Wolfe writes about women and sex roles, but I don't have much myself to offer on the subject. Maybe this will stir something up.

----- Forwarded message -----

Date: 28 Jun 1998 23:41:21 -0400

From: Zvi Gilbert <zvi at interlog.com>

Newsgroups: rec.arts.sf.written

Subject: Re: There Are Doors (was Re: Gene Wolfe -- Reccomendations?)

There are spoilers for _There Are Doors_ in the later part of this post. People who have read some Wolfe but not TAD could read about halfway before stopping. There's spoiler space.

Michael Straight <straight at email.unc.edu> wrote:

On 23 Jun 1998, P Nielsen Hayden wrote:

In <6mojob\$692 at shell1.interlog.com> zvi at interlog.com (Zvi Gilbert) writes:

[..deleted...]

I entirely agree with you about how "there's something about the sexual themes and gender roles that I strongly disagree with, but that is carefully worked out and internally consistent." A fascinating and underrated book.

So can either of you articulate what that "something" is?

Okay, I'll take a stab at it. I just reread _There Are Doors_ over the past two days so it's fresh in my mind.

Samuel R. Delany writes in _The Straits of Messina_ (a book of critical pieces and discussions, mostly on his own work):

There's a prevailing theory that society, in some mysterious way, is and will always be a mirror of some mysteriously eternal sex act, i.e., standard missionary position. (p.39)

...(which somehow involves vast amounts of male aggression inchoately coupled with total female passivity), and read all fictional accounts of sex-and/or-society as accurate, relevant, and charged with value as they constitute themselves under the shadow of this model. (p.40)

(This discussion is part of a larger argument about _DHALGREN_ and its critical reception.)

Delany then goes on to list writers as diverse as Lawrence, Ellison, and Roth whose work falls under that rubric.

To that list I would add Wolfe. In all of the Wolfe that I've read, there is an absolute split between male and female roles, male and female sexuality, and male and female values that is as wide as anything I've ever seen in fiction.

For example, this is true of Severian/Thecla, /Dorcas, /etc. in *The Book of the New Sun*: men and women (or, more accurately, perhaps, male and female roles) are very different in that book, not to mention that from the perspective of Severian, all sorts of relations between men and women are coloured by the 'torturer-tortured' model that is established for us. Other clear examples in Wolfe's writing would include 'Forlesen', and *The Book of the Long Sun*, with its pantheon of Gods and Goddesses.

There Are Doors is another book of that sort, and, since sexuality and the relationship between men and women is one of the major themes of the book, the separation and tension between male and female experience and roles is foregrounded. (More below.)

[I don't believe in this male-female idealized sex act model myself -- and that's what (in part) I'm reacting to in the comment of mine that Patrick quotes above. In the same essay in *The Straits of Messina*, Delany goes on to discuss his own model of sexuality, where this internalized male/female idealization is nothing but a social model -- which, when internalized, does influence sexual behaviour -- but that vastly diminishes the spectrum of (possible or pleasurable) sex acts when all sex acts, whether between men and men, women and women, women and men, or those who are differently gendered, are seen through the lens of the ultimate Male-Female act.]

SPOILER SPACE FOLLOWS.

In *There Are Doors*, the protagonist (Green) starts on his search for Lara -- whom we later find out is (one manifestation of) the Goddess. Lara resides in a different world, reachable through the 'Doors' of the title, that Green calls 'There'.

'There', relationships with men and women are vastly different than our world (or are they?), because 'There', men die after having sex. The society of 'There' is different from ours, but in a subtle way, and one of the great delights of reading Wolfe is finding out just how different, and why, and putting the pieces together for oneself.

Because sexuality and the loneliness of a withdrawn, middle-aged man is the central theme of the book, attitudes towards sex in the book are foregrounded. (But this model of sex is found in all of Wolfe's fiction.)

The distortions of male-female relationships created by the fact that men die after sex 'There' distort relationships MORE strongly in the direction of male-female separation and difference, of course. However, as in all fantasy, the fantasy world can be read as a distortion of the 'real' world

-- or in this case, in a sophisticated Wolfeian way, the world that has only the authorial distortions of realism ('Cee-One', it's called in the novel).

There is internal support in (Green's perception of) 'Cee-One' for a similar if less absolute male/female split (and not just the various manifestations of the goddess in Green's life, either) in various comments: 'Men were looking for love, women were looking for husbands...' (can't remember the page, sorry) 'The bucktoothed woman frowned, putting her hands together fingertip to fingertip like a man. (p.5)' [like a man?]....

Because the male/female difference that Wolfe delineates both 'There' and in 'Cee-One' are so strong, so (IMHO) incorrect, but also so internally consistent, clear, and rich, that is the main source of my uncomfortableness and fascination with There Are Doors.

I'll stop there, but that's the gist of my argument.

Part of what keeps me reading and re-reading Wolfe's fiction is the fact that I do disagree with him so strongly about religious issues (including the Catholicism that informs his books), social issues, and societal issues -- but he makes quite a case in terms of the consistency of his views and the power of his writing.

--Zvi

zvi at interlog.com

Wesley Parsons — 30 Jun 1998, 15:31 · follows Michael Straight

One of Wolfe's points indeed seems to be that biology not culture determines sex roles. You change the biology, and you flip the sex roles. Male post-coital demise changes who is in charge (the President is female), who pursues whom (the women compete for attention and the men are choosy), and who is more emotional or spontaneous (men have to be very emotionally committed, or irresponsible, to have sex).

One way of looking at the difference Wolfe has created between the two worlds is this: In our world the burden of procreation falls mainly on women, who carry and nurse the child. In the other world, the burden falls even harder on men, who die. This burden is a cost that affects differentially the behavior of the two sexes.

Michael Straight <straight at email.unc.edu> 06/30/98 01:53pm >>>

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--Zvi

zvi at interlog.com

other works

Jim Jordan — 30 Jun 1998, 16:27 · follows Wesley Parsons

While I've been just plain too busy to participate lately, I do have some contributions to make regarding male and female in TAD.

While the modern view is that men and women are pretty much the same except for plumbing, the Christian view is that they are radically different and complementary. That's Wolfe's view, and it definitely informs everything he writes. Theologically, the difference between men and women ultimately reflects the difference between the Son and the Spirit, between the Creator and His creation, and between Christ and the Church-Bride. Wolfe has clearly put a great deal of thought into this, and it is in the background, occasionally the foreground, of his work.

While there are various Doors between our world and "There" in TAD, the most significant is the Italian Restaurant, which is of course the Roman Catholic Church. The Mama figure is the

Church Herself, and her black-dressed sober sons are priests. Wolfe's perspective is that Christianity is the fulfillment not only of the Hebrew revelation, but of all the best aspirations of all pre-Christian belief, and that the Church draws all of that into herself. Thus, Mama encourages Mr. Green to pursue Lara, an encouragement grounded in redemptive intent for both of them.

I strongly suspect that the reason men die after intercourse in "There" has something to do with Christ's death to bring life to His Bride. Wolfe brings out many societal implications of this feature of "There," of course, but I suspect many have more symbolic meanings than a first reading would disclose.

In Christianity, masculinity is protological and femininity is eschatological. Adam came first, but Eve comes last. Men initiate; women glorify and culminate. Christ comes to initiate the New Creation, which develops into a glorified Bride-Cosmos. Thus, as Paul insists in Ephesians, the man must lay down his life for his bride. Men die; women inherit.

These kinds of distinctions are REALLY offensive to modern sensibilities, of course, but you aren't going to understand Wolfe very well without them.

Since men and women are radically different -- different all the way down to the depth of the psyche, just as the Son and the Spirit are wholly different yet one in God -- so the sins of men and women tend to be different. Thus, in Wolfe there are bad men, and bad women, but they tend to be bad in different ways. Similarly with good men and good women.

Of course, since God is also One, there is a commonality as well as a radical difference between men and women, and Wolfe is not blind to that fact. But what makes him "strange" to many readers is that he plays off the differences between men and women, and in our society one is not supposed to do that. One result is that Wolfe is thought of as a misogynist by some.

Predictably, one aspect of being a bad man or woman is to usurp the role of the other sex. You cannot expect Wolfe to be sympathetic to homosexuality or lesbianism. While it has been a while since I read TAD, I believe part of the structure is that Green is too passive, and Lara too domineering.

Beyond this, possibly the whole world of "There" is in some ways the "modern world," where men are overly passive and women overly domineering. Perhaps one should read "There" as a social criticism of modern society. Men aren't fulfilling their roles, and women have taken them over. There is, after all, a lot of socio-political criticism in Wolfe, as in for instance *Operation Ares* and "Hour of Trust" (in which Gene himself makes an appearance!).

Well, these are just some thoughts, observations, and possibilities. Of course, readers who are appalled by these ideas can still enjoy the novel at other levels!

Just a point of interest: Mr. North is modelled on Gordon Liddy, but the name "North" comes from Ollie North, who Wolfe thought at the time he wrote it was a lot like Liddy. He later changed his view of Ollie North, but the book was already in print. (Information from a private conversation.)

Just stirring the pot, I am still:

Jim Jordan (formerly Nutria)

Michael Straight — 01 Jul 1998, 13:10 · follows Jim Jordan

On Tue, 30 Jun 1998, Jim Jordan wrote:

While the modern view is that men and women are pretty much the same except for plumbing, the Christian view is that they are radically different and complementary.

This is not the place for a big debate on this (I'd be happy to discuss it in private e-mail), but this needs some qualification. There are plenty of Christians who would not agree that the male/female differences you describe are "the Christian view"--including Christians committed to orthodoxy, not just the Bishop Spong types.

I don't deny that the worldview you describe is quite possibly similar to Wolfe's, however, which is really the only thing relevant to thread.

-Rostrum

Jim Jordan — 01 Jul 1998, 12:35 · follows Michael Straight

At 01:10 PM 7/1/98 -0400, you wrote:

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Point taken and granted, though I think the overall "tradition" is pretty close to what I set out, which outsetment of course was very brief and not nuanced. For instance: "Why women be CAN not (not may not) be clergy? Because the minister represents Christ to the Bride, so by design that is a male role. Women cannot do it any more than men can menstruate." Now, such argument is called in question today, by "conservative" people as well as "liberal" ones, but it IS the tradition. And all I was trying to do was give a thumbnail sketch of traditional thinking, since Wolfe is pretty traditional, and, as you say, that's what is relevant here. Not trying to preempt valid theological discussion, which is for another forum. So, your point is taken.

Nutria