

TBOTSS as fantasy

The Whorl list — 5 messages, 4 voices, 18 Feb 2001

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/whorl/1187>

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Adam Stephanides — 18 Feb 2001, 10:46

on 2/14/01 6:08 AM, William Ansley at wansley at warwick.net wrote:

I was also bothered by the impossibly large size of the (big) godling. Wolfe should make up his mind, is he writing science fiction or isn't he?

I think he isn't, actually. I think RTTW, and TBOTSS as a whole, are more fantasy than science fiction.

Allan Lloyd already pointed out other fantasy-like aspects of the books: the Neighbors, who are more like helpful elves than sfnal aliens, have unexplained powers, and can be called up by a magic ring; and the astral travel, which can be FTL. To which I would add the long-distance of Horn's spirit into Silk, without the rationalizations supplied in TBOTLS for possession via windows; and the inhumis's absorption of human's intelligence by drinking their blood.

More than this, the whole feel of the series, to me, is more like pre-Tolkien fantasy, where one fantastic episode followed another with no attempt at rationalization or systematization [1], than like science fiction.

In other words, having written two series which were science fiction with a fantasy-like veneer, Wolfe has followed them up with a third series of fantasy with a science fiction veneer.

--Adam

[1] This is just a generalization; I'm sure there are exceptions. And it's not mine, but I don't remember where I got it from.

*This is WHORL, for discussion of Gene Wolfe's Book of the Long Sun.

William Ansley — 19 Feb 2001, 00:23 · follows Adam Stephanides

At 10:46 AM -0600 2/18/01, Adam Stephanides wrote:

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[...]

In other words, having written two series which were science fiction with a fantasy-like veneer, Wolfe has followed them up with a third series of fantasy with a science fiction veneer.

But they're all the same series! I assume you mean that NS/UNS* and LS are the SF disguised as fantasy and SS is the fantasy disguised as SF.

No one forced Wolfe to write LS as a series loosely (and, before SS, uncertainly) linked to NS and UNS. Likewise, he did not have to write SS, as a direct continuation of LS and a series that also makes the link between LS/SS and NS/UNS all but certain. Wolfe choose to do so however. If he also choose to make the LS (and NS/UNS) SF and SS fantasy, I think he is being terribly unfair to his readers.

I am certainly not alone in reading SS as SF. All the arguments and discussions about the orbital mechanics of the Blue/Green system become meaningless if SS is fantasy. Robert Borski's reason's for saying he thinks the inhumis are lying when they say they can travel through space from Green to Blue and back are moot. The inhumis can fly through the vacuum just as easily as H. P. Lovecraft's beasties if SS is a fantasy.

Why does Wolfe bother to put in so many SFnal details, if we are supposed to read SS as a fantasy, To pick just one specific example, in OBW on pp. 52 - 53, Horn and Sinew are discussing weapons.

[Sinew:] In that book you and Mother wrote, you have one of the soldiers tell somebody his slugs are made of some stuff I never heard of.

[Horn:] Yes, depleted uranium.

Why does Wolfe bother with this passage, if all he wants to do is apply a veneer of SF to the book? Why wasn't the stuff Sinew never heard of pixie dust or duralloy or neutronium?

I can't say you are not right, because I don't know what was going on in Wolfe's mind, But, if you are right, I think Wolfe did a grave disservice to his readers and has made it impossible to seriously consider NS/UNS/LS/SS as a cohesive whole, which is surely what he wants; else why did he link the books so strongly?

William Ansley

* NS = TBotNS = The Book of the New Sun (series)
UNS = UotNS = Urth of the New Sun (novel)
LS = TBotLS = The Book of the Long Sun (series)
SS = TBotSS = The Book of the Short Sun (series)

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I don't think SS is fantasy. Or at least, I suspect it's not meant to be read that way.

The reason it is problematic is that the narrator makes use of abilities that are as strange as Severian's and we don't understand why he has them or what their implications are. In Severian's case, we (sort of, at least) grasp the mechanisms (the corridors of time, etc.). Also, it's easier to buy an almost apotheosis as SF with cosmic temporal metaphysics as underpinning than to understand what appears to be a curiously limited yet amazingly powerful ability granted by enigmatic people we learn a good deal less about than the hierodules.

Basically, SS looks like fantasy until we have further understanding of the role of the Neighbors. I'm willing to bet that if we can get that, it will be much easier to "buy" what Silkhorn does (as a use of the corridors of time, it makes considerable sense). But I, at least, don't think I understand much about the Neighbors at all.

The godling seemed vaguely unneeded, and I'm willing to believe that Wolfe used it as an impressive piece of stage setting (though I'd like to have some better justification), but the Neighbors are central to all three books, and I don't think they exist just "to be cool" or give Silk comic book powers to show us how necrotic Urth really was.

"And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." John 8:32

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<http://www.cs.cmu.edu/~agroce>

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Adam Stephanides — 20 Feb 2001, 22:13 · follows Alex David Groce

on 2/18/01 11:23 PM, William Ansley at wansley at warwick.net wrote:

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I am certainly not alone in reading SS as SF.

Certainly not; I read it that way myself until about a week ago. It was reading Allan Lloyd's letter that gave me the idea of seeing it as fantasy, and I saw that it could provide a rationale for several of the features of SS that had annoyed me. And I don't exactly mean to say that SS is not SF, or at least I don't now; see below.

All the arguments and discussions about the orbital mechanics of the Blue/Green system become meaningless if SS is fantasy.

I remember these discussions well because I participated in them. But they never came to a conclusion; and there's no indication of whether Wolfe ever worried about making the orbital mechanics seem plausible.

Robert Borski's reason's for saying he thinks the inhumi are lying when they say they can travel through space from Green to Blue and back are moot.

Right; and there's no suggestion in the books of any alternative means for them to travel from Green to Blue, which strongly suggests to me that they do fly, despite the scientific implausibility and lack of any rationalization thereof.

Why does Wolfe bother to put in so many SFnal details, if we are supposed to read SS as a fantasy,
[example snipped]

Why does Wolfe bother with this passage, if all he wants to do is apply a veneer of SF to the book? Why wasn't the stuff Sinew never heard of pixie dust or duralloy or neutronium?

"Veneer" may have been the wrong word to use. Certainly I didn't mean to deny that the books take place in the future of our Earth, and involve such SF tropes as a space colony seeded by a generation starship, self-aware artificial humans, and so on. A better way to put it might have been that the Short Sun books used the vocabulary of science fiction (for the most part), but arranged it according to the syntax of fantasy. Whether that makes them "really science fiction" or "really fantasy" is a matter of taste.

I can't say you are not right, because I don't know what was going on in Wolfe's mind. But, if you are right, I think Wolfe did a grave disservice to his readers and has made it impossible to seriously consider NS/UNS/LS/SS as a cohesive whole, which is surely what he wants; else why did he link the books so strongly?

I think it's difficult to consider the universe of the books as a cohesive whole, because of the implausibilities I and others (including you) have pointed out in the Short Sun books, which don't mesh well with the other books. But I'm not sure that you can't consider the books themselves, as works of literature, as a cohesive whole. After all, if I'm correct it wouldn't be the first time Wolfe has switched genres in the course of a series. I'm referring to the series of linked short stories that starts with "The Dark of the June" (iirc) and ends with "Thag." The first story is definitely science fiction, the last is definitely fantasy. What Wolfe's purpose in doing the same thing here would be, and whether he pulls it off, are things I would have to think more about.

Alex David Groce wrote:

I don't think SS is fantasy. Or at least, I suspect it's not meant to be read that way.

The reason it is problematic is that the narrator makes use of abilities that are as strange as Severian's and we don't understand why he has them or what their implications are.

That's one reason; I gave others in my original post.

Basically, SS looks like fantasy until we have further understanding of the role of the Neighbors. I'm willing to bet that if we can get that, it will be much easier to "buy" what Silkhorn does (as a use of the corridors of time, it makes considerable sense). But I, at least, don't think I understand much about the Neighbors at all.

This is a possibility, of course: that there will turn out to be an explanation for the Neighbors and their powers that makes them plausible as aliens. But I'm dubious; similar enigmas in earlier books have proved remarkably resistant to the best efforts of explicators, as this list shows.

The godling seemed vaguely unneeded, and I'm willing to believe that Wolfe used it as an impressive piece of stage setting (though I'd like to have some better justification), but the Neighbors are central to all three books, and I don't think they exist just "to be cool" or give Silk comic book powers to show us how necrotic Urth really was.

No, I certainly don't think that. But I also don't think that they play the same role as alien species in "real" sf.

In any case, I probably need to think this whole thing out further.

--Adam

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James Jordan — 21 Feb 2001, 08:56 · follows Adam Stephanides

This is not really a "fair" question. Wolfe is on record as saying he believe in ghosts, that he believes that gods (angels) ran the world before Christ came, etc. Thus, for him, the "fantasy" elements in his SF novels are just part of reality. He's sticking with reality, as he comprehends reality. It's not a case of Arthur Clarke's dictum that any highly advanced science will look like magic to the uninitiated, though that's surely part of it. It's also that Wolfe believe that some kinds of "magic" are real.

Patera Nutria

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