

Memory, Identity, Spirit, Blood (beware of the spoilers?)

The Whorl list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 21 Feb 2001

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Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 21 Feb 2001, 13:23

0. Okay, I've just finished RttW & have 200+ messages sitting here waiting for me to read them (which will probably take me damnear as long as reading the book did). But some first impressions and ponderings, untaint by others' comments, before I begin reading...

1. My first reaction is, of all things, disappointment.

1.1 I admit, right up front, that it is quite possibly the best thing Mr Wolfe has written to date. Yet somehow... I just didn't like it as much as I did the previous volumes.

1.1.2 Perhaps I was expecting the Sun, Moon, and Stars, with the contents of Schrafft's candy store and/or Sak's Fifth Ave. thrown in for good measure; perhaps my expectations were so high that nothing would have made me happy.

1.2 But there it is. Mr Wolfe keeps getting better, but somehow he missed me on this one. (I will still reread it in future; I'm sure there's much I missed, and perhaps in rereading I'll get more "pure reading satisfaction." I certainly found that to be the case with Long Sun.)

2. At this point, it appears that one of Wolfe's "great themes" is the relation of memory and identity.

2.1 I reread the whole eleven volumes prior, beginning around Christmas time, and came parlously close to the Big Secret of RttW in IGJ -- you may recall, Mucor shows up for the first time and says, "Hello, Silk. Hello, Horn." Okay, says I, there's something important here.

2.2 Then, in RttW, Pig sees Mucor and it all comes together: Mucor -- in her "astral" form -- sees, and is seen, with eyes of the spirit (which is, perhaps, why some people see her more clearly than others. So it's clear that, in some spiritual sense, "the narrator" is both Horn and Silk -- Silkhorn?

2.2.1 The blattidaean brain chunked on that awhile, and came to comparison with Maytera Marble (who was also Maytera Rose), and her trouble "integrating the software" of the two personae. Calling Seawrack Hyacinth now makes a great deal of sense, n'est-ce pas?

2.2.2 Much in the earlier volumes also comes clear as narrative irony, beginning with the Rajan's comment early on that "I am the only person in Gaon who does not know where Silk is."

2.3 But I have wandered from my point. Memory and identity. What is their relation, in Wolfe's

projected worldview?

2.3.1 It is tempting to suggest that memory == identity, so that when memories get blended (as they do with Marble-Rose and with Horn-Silk and, apparently, with Passilk), the result is effectively a new person. But that causes as much trouble as it would solve: does Latro have an identity at all? (Come to think of it, is that one of the themes of SOLDIER OF X)? Does Severian have an absolute kind of identity the rest of us do not? Are the identities of ordinary persons, who do forget stuff, fluid?

2.3.2 And if so, is identity a separate concept from spirit? Is Horn's spirit present in Silkhorn? His memories clearly are. Mucor seems to see both Horn and Silk. A tentative "yes, Horn's spirit is present" would seem apropos. Then what about Silk's spirit? Again, Mucor seems to see Silk, not just Horn.

2.4 A plausible reconciling point: Comparison with the phenomenon of possession as it occurs in the Whorl. Both persons seem to be present -- Chenille and Kypris, Chenille and Scylla, Auk and Tartaros, Oreb and Scylla. In none of these cases do the personalities completely blend, but (as Chenille points out) the god, leaving, takes a part of the person with, and leaves a part of him/her-self behind. Some blending takes place. If the possession were to go on long enough, would it become complete?

2.4.1 But Scylla's possession of Oreb is certainly long enough. Perhaps the "software" of a scanned human is incompatible with that of a bird? But if so, you would think she couldn't "download" into him at all.

2.5 Into this mix, then, we can throw the inhumis, and their bizarre ability to gain some kind of human identity, and some kind of human spirit, by drinking the blood of humans. (By the way, am I the only one who kept thinking of "Attack of the Giant Leeches?" -- yeah, probably...) It's not at all clear to me that they actually pick up memories from their victims -- but they seem to gain personality traits.

2.5.1 Or do they gain memories this way? How do (did) the inhumis learn to speak Common? And are these memories heritable? (Lamarckian tennis, anyone?)

3. From memory and identity to blood. The symbolism of bread and wine in these books is so thick only an inhumis could miss it, especially in the extraordinarily powerful scenes in which Silkhorn twice sacrifices the two elements (for Olivine and at the Neighbors' altar).

3.1 The blood symbolism outside these two scenes is so extensive as to require very little comment; but perhaps I should observe that (as noted in Exodus and returned to popular mythology by Dwight Frye in, of all movies, Dracula) "The blood is the life."

3.1.1 That being the case, the inhumis gaining human spirits through their sanguinary appetites becomes a little more comprehensible. After all, we (at least those of us who belong to the Catholic and other

churches of a strongly "sacramental" nature: which, of course, is a category that emphatically includes Mr Wolfe) drink the blood of our Host in the hope of gaining some of His nature. The blood is the life.

3.1.2 Is the life, then the spirit? Horn's spirit-life, carried across the abyss to where Silk's spirit-life is dying, entering his body, possessing him(?), returns life to the body that would die because its life has died? But Silkhorn expatiates for a while on the idea that the spirit is not the life; that it is forced to vacate its "house" when the life is gone.

3.2 But about bread.

3.2.1 Horn sets out to find three things: Silk, corn, and eyes. Corn, grain, bread: the dying and returning god, a pattern that fits both Horn and Silk in different ways, and both Passilk and Silkhorn astonishingly well. (One wonders whether there may be a further scanning, and Silkhorn may join Passilk in Mainframe. Certainly he cannot intend to return to Viron?)

3.2.2 His death is the necessary step that makes it possible for Horn to bring corn back to the starving people of New Viron -- the Wasteland, where he, now lame, might almost rule as the Wounded King (but won't).

3.2.3 His death is the necessary step that makes it possible for Silk to bring justice to the peoples of Gaon and Soldo.

4. In the end, Silkhorn gives an eye so he can return to Blue and bring Marble the eye Olivine has given him... an eye for an eye, as charity instead of vengeance.

Enough. On, now, to read the far more insightful comments of others.

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