

To alga: Complaining too early

The Whorl list — 4 messages, 3 voices, 08 Apr 2001

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/whorl/1325>

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Nicholas Gevers — 08 Apr 2001, 00:56

I think part of the difficulty list members like alga and William Ansley have had in accepting RTW stems from the fact that they haven't had sufficient time to digest the Short Sun series yet. The implications of a Wolfe text take a while to emerge fully, if they ever do; give TBSS time. Meanings will emerge. Just reread, and ponder...

To a few specifics:

William Ansley's querying of the "brother and sister" section: TBSS is a political novel, with a strong but qualified utopian subtext. Please note, generally, that the final fivefold "Good fishing!" utterance at the end of RTW is almost certainly an homage to the ending of Kim Stanley Robinson's markedly utopian MARS trilogy ("...on Mars, on Mars, on Mars, on Mars, on Mars"). The Secret of the Inhumu is a political secret, an impetus to a juster social order; brother and sister represent Natural Man, or the Noble Savage, an essential component of general utopian discourse.

Horn's status as inhumu-suspect, and the ring in RTW: Horn is not an inhumu, but he is inhumu-like, in that he is one individual masquerading as another (either Horn as Silk or Silk as Horn). Thus the repeated hints of Horn being an inhumu, which misled John Clute among others: the hints are thematic, pointers to Horn's inner and outer ambiguity. The ring Oreb retrieves for Horn in RTW changes form as a further pointer in the direction of shifting or uncertain identity: it is protean, like Horn, like the inhumu, like the Neighbors.

The death of Jahlee, and the massacre of the inhumu: Alga, I think this took you aback because you were anticipating Wolfe's intentions, a dangerous course as you once warned me. You had a utopian/feminist agenda in your reading; while repeating that TBSS is a political and even utopian novel, I have to say that its utopianism is cautious, indeed conservative, as is only natural for GW. Silk/Horn is concerned to protect

humanity; the inhumani are predators upon humanity; the political settlement required to defeat the inhumani is universal human solidarity, this 1) to deny the inhumani human blood and 2) to ensure that such human blood as they do acquire is that of benign utopians. (Note that Sinew's village late in IGJ is an emerging utopia along these lines; but Silk/Horn is pessimistic about general prospects on Blue.) In the immediate term, cruder methods are needed to fend off the inhumani, such as the killing of Jahlee; the inhumani need to be warned to rein in their arrogance; and in any case, Jahlee had ample warning of the possibility of the murder, as in Horn's shooting of her "friend" on Green; and her attempt to kill Nettle was hardly benign. Wolfe in TBSS, as in all his major works, is being brutally frank about the nasty realities of existence; Jahlee's death fits perfectly into this scheme, like it or not.

Or so it seems to me.

--Nick Gevers.

--- William Ansley <wansley at warwick.net> wrote:

What do I mean by "loose ends"? Well, if I had the time and energy (which I currently do not and almost certainly will not) I believe I could make up an impressively lengthy list. To take just one example, the "brother and sister" section toward the end of OBW. Is there anyone here who understands it? Is there anyone here who feels that the book/trilogy is a better work because this passage is in it?

Adam Stephanides — 08 Apr 2001, 20:35 · follows Nicholas Gevers

on 4/8/01 2:56 AM, Nicholas Gevers at vermoulian at yahoo.com wrote: William Ansley's querying of the "brother and sister" section: TBSS is a political novel, with a strong but qualified utopian subtext. Please note, generally, that the final fivefold "Good fishing!" utterance at the end of RTW is almost certainly an homage to the ending of Kim Stanley Robinson's markedly utopian MARS trilogy ("..on Mars, on Mars, on Mars, on Mars, on Mars"). The Secret of the Inhumani is a political secret, an impetus to a juster social order; brother and sister represent Natural Man, or the Noble Savage, an essential component of general utopian discourse.

My immediate reaction is that I don't believe Wolfe is a utopian, even a "conservative" one; I don't believe Wolfe advocates "Natural Man" or the "Noble Savage"; and while the parallel with the ending of the MARS trilogy is interesting, I doubt that it means Wolfe is borrowing Robinson's politics (unless, reversing the usual course of events, he's become radical in his old

age).

Silk/Horn is concerned to protect humanity; the inhumani are predators upon humanity; the political settlement required to defeat the inhumani is universal human solidarity, this 1) to deny the inhumani human blood and 2) to ensure that such human blood as they do acquire is that of benign utopians.

The more I think about it, the less I understand how the inhumani's secret, or "loving one another," is supposed to render the inhumani harmless. I don't see what the colonists could do if they all loved each other that they can't do now, which would keep the inhumani from getting any human blood. As for 2), for the inhumani to voluntarily stop preying on humans, they'd have to be not just benign. They'd have to be self-sacrificing enough to give up their intelligence rather than attack humans (which, in moderation, apparently does humans no long-term harm). But if the colonists became so altruistic that the inhumani would absorb that much altruism, then they would be altruistic enough to allow the inhumani to prey on them rather than lose their intelligence. In any case, as someone once pointed out, can the inhumani really believe the colonists as a group capable of such altruism?

In the immediate term, cruder methods are needed to fend off the inhumani, such as the killing of Jahlee; the inhumani need to be warned to rein in their arrogance

But Horn doesn't kill Jahlee as a deterrent to other inhumani; he kicks her to death in anger, and is deeply ashamed of it afterwards. (And if it had been a deterrent, then it didn't work, since it was followed shortly afterwards by the mass attack.)

I agree, though, that Jahlee's death is a plausible development, though not inevitable. My complaint was not at the failure of the inhumani subplot to resolve in a utopian fashion, but at its failure to resolve at all (except as far as Jahlee is concerned). The Secret was a big letdown (I don't buy the theory that Horn has concealed the real secret from us, for reasons I've stated before, and if I did it wouldn't make me happier), and the victory over the massed inhumani at the wedding solves nothing.

The more I think about that wedding attack, though, the fishier it sounds. Such a mass attack (at least six hundred inhumani) seems to be unprecedented. It must be very rare, at least, or Blue would have to be far more militarized and regimented than it is. Would Juganu really be able to get hundreds of inhumani deviate from their usual habits and join him in his private revenge? And would these inhumani continue the attack once they saw that the wedding party was armed, contrary to expectations?

--Adam

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

Michael Straight — 09 Apr 2001, 08:29 · follows Adam Stephanides

On Sun, 8 Apr 2001, Adam Stephanides wrote:

I agree, though, that Jahlee's death is a plausible development, though not inevitable. My complaint was not at the failure of the inhumani subplot to resolve in a utopian fashion, but at its failure to resolve at all (except as far as Jahlee is concerned). The Secret was a big letdown (I don't buy the theory that Horn has concealed the real secret from us, for reasons I've stated before, and if I did it wouldn't make me happier), and the victory over the massed inhumani at the wedding solves nothing.

No takers for my theory that the Secret is simply that inhum intelligence is derivative from humans and that they fear the Secret because they are insecure, longing to be human (failing that to at least be mistaken for human), and they can't bear for humans in general to know what they really are?

-Rostrum

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

Adam Stephanides — 09 Apr 2001, 09:53 · follows Michael Straight

on 4/9/01 7:29 AM, Michael Straight at straight at email.unc.edu wrote:

No takers for my theory that the Secret is simply that inhum intelligence is derivative from humans and that they fear the Secret because they are insecure, longing to be human (failing that to at least be mistaken for human), and they can't bear for humans in general to know what they really are?

'Fraid not; your theory won't jibe with Horn's statement that the Secret "is a weapon too heavy for our hands," and that the Neighbors knew it, but could not wield it (IGJ, 125). The humans on Blue are perfectly capable of saying to the inhum "nyah, nyah, you aren't really human," and the Neighbors presumably could have done the same.

--Adam

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