

What Happened? (re: "It's Mostly the Ending")

The Whorl list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 11 Apr 2001

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/whorl/1342>

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Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 11 Apr 2001, 08:27

Viz writes, viz:

There are two major areas where the book as a whole lets us down on, and we've beaten them both to death, but I'll say again:

a) we get the huge buildup on the secret of the inhum, and it turns out the secret doesn't meet the expectations that the narrative builds up for it. We were expecting something more than we guessed in the first volume, but that was it.

b) the fact that the narrator is Horn in Silk's body has been obvious since the first volume, so the climactic revelation that the narrator is Horn in Silk's body falls flat.

Some thoughts on this...

1. Mr Wolfe has been (dis?)informed over and again by reviewers both friendly and un that his texts are just too difficult for an sf audience; that nobody can reasonably eke out his intent from the cryptons and gnomions he spares out purloinedlettrishily, and perhaps in response he has underestimated his audience this go, transpiring the solutions so only a Piers Anthony fan could miss them.

2. Contrariwise perhaps this is a case of "Who killed the Comedian?"

-- for non-Watchmen-readers, that would be a special kind of red herring, where the writer putts puzzles with clear solutions in plain sight so as to obscure the real puzzles.

If so, Mr Wolfe's use of the technique is different from Mr Moore's: those who, like me, participated in the excited discussion of each issue of WATCHMEN as it came out will recall that, long before the conclusion, we realized the ethical and philosophical questions the story raised were far more interesting than the murder mystery (which, however, contributed its share to those questions); here, the readers are caught up in the red herrings and unwilling to recognize them as such.

Which is a shame. We've had some small discussion of what these novels are really about -- the nature of identity; the application or applicability of Christian soteriology to a people that have no chance of knowing (by natural knowledge) the Gospel; the possibility of salvation for "demons"; what Charles Williams called the "Web of Exchange"; etc., etc., etc. -- questions, btw, to which the questions of "who is the Narrator?" and "What is the Secret?" are quite relevant, but in an almost reversible manner; understand identity and know who the Narrator is, understand the Web of Exchange and know the Secret of the Inhum.

Granted these are more difficult to grapple with, especially after a single reading; granted, they don't appear at the raw plot/surface level the way the Comedian-problems do; granted, it will take years rather than weeks to tease them out of the texts at hand... still, aren't these really more interesting questions?

--Dan'I

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

Adam Stephanides — 12 Apr 2001, 22:34 · follows Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

on 4/11/01 10:27 AM, Dan'I Danehy-Oakes at ddanehy at siebel.com wrote:

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Unlike Vizcacha, I wasn't disappointed by the revelation of the narrator's identity; and I was, conversely, disappointed by a number of other things. But I don't think that Wolfe intended either the secret of the inhum or the narrator's identity to be a "red herring." The positions in which both revelations are placed, and the ways in which the revelations are presented, convince me that Wolfe intended us to view these revelations as a big deal.

And TBOTSS is a novel, not a philosophical treatise. While I can imagine a novel in which the protagonist's identity turns out to be a "red herring," TBOTSS ain't it. Nor is TBOTSS a novel in which the plot is just a pretext for discussing philosophical issues. And human-inhum relations, of which the secret is an integral part, are vital to the plot.

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No. To be specific:

Frankly, I don't believe Wolfe has anything particularly profound to say about "the nature of identity." In fact, this whole question is so obscure in RttW (Wolfe's intent that Horn's spirit departs Silk's body in between the next-to-last and last astral trips to Urth seems clear to me, but what exactly this entails I have no idea) that I doubt any coherent "position" on this can be extracted from the books.

I don't know "what Charles Williams called the 'Web of Exchange,'" but I don't see that Wolfe in RttW has any more to say on the subject of exchange than that if you're cruel to people, they will be cruel to you, and if you're nice, they'll be nice. An uplifting sentiment, but again hardly profound.

As for "the application or applicability of Christian soteriology to a people that have no chance of knowing (by natural knowledge) the Gospel; the possibility of salvation for 'demons,'" I have no interest in these questions, and no desire to use RttW as a springboard to discuss them.

For me, the bottom line is that Wolfe is a novelist, not a philosopher or theologian. I'm interested in his philosophy or theology only insofar as it helps me understand his novels. I'm not interested in discussing his novels in order to understand his philosophy or theology.

--Adam

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