

Bad Horn

The Whorl list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 19 Feb 2000

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Allan Lloyd — 19 Feb 2000, 10:43

Despite my reservations about the conclusion of the Short Sun trilogy, I want to talk about something which Wolfe does very well in the books, namely the transformation of sinful Horn into saintly Silk. No-one seems to have remarked upon what a totally unpleasant character Horn is at the start of OBW.

He is a serial adulterer, (even before the affair with Seawrack if I read the clues right) who sells the lives of Nettle and his sons to Krait to save his own life. He sneaks off on his mission without saying goodbye to his wife, tricks Seawrack and Babbie into missing the lander and deserts Evensong on the river even though he knows she can't go back to Goa or to her own people and is in serious danger. All of these actions are rationalised by a most persuasive narrator, one who constantly bemoans his lost wife. The more I read these passages, the more they sound like a drunken trucker in a bar telling all and sundry how much he loves his wife before going to the local whorehouse. (What is this thing Wolfe has with his heroes deserting their female companions by rivers or the sea, Sevarian does it with Dorcas, and I can think of few Wolfe characters who are married and faithful.)

Horn is not a terrific father either. I'm sure all of us with teenage kids can sympathise with a father getting annoyed with sulky adolescent sons, but Horn actively hates poor old Sinew, even after he follows him on the long and dangerous journey to Pajoruco. He takes pleasure in shocking his son by showing his relationship with Seawrack. He suspects Sinew of wanting to kill him, and considers killing Sinew himself. He only makes some reconciliation with his son after the fighting on the lander when he is forced to admit that his son has some good qualities.

Horn is a careless and violent man, blaming others for his own mistakes. He loses all of the supplies that he was given for his mission, and then violently beats the man who was supposed to be looking after the boat, although he had no proof that he was involved in the theft.

But worst of all is the savage and brutal rape of Seawrack. His excuse is that he was acting under enchantment from the Siren's song. (I don't see that standing up in a court of law: "Honest, Judge, she was asking for it. She sang at me.") I would argue that, even though Seawrack may have seduced him with her singing, the brutality of the attack comes from Horn's character. It must have been pretty bad if he is advising her not to go swimming afterwards because the bleeding may start again. It makes you wonder what his sex life with Nettle was like, and may explain why she was willing to go off with the new, improved Silk at the end of RTTW.

(As an aside, I know that Wolfe's attitude to women has been criticised before, but these books do seem to bring out the worst in him. Women seem to be inconvenient accessories, to be picked up or dumped at the hero's convenience. And I found Silk's chats to the teenage girls almost embarrassingly unreal)

So, I don't like Horn. This makes his transformation into Silk more noticable and dramatic, and

may explain why his character is almost completely erased by the end. I say almost, because the killing of Jahlee at the end of RTTW could have been the emergence of the violent nature of Horn, showing Silk that he was not fully redeemed and not quite the saint that he thought he was. An explanation for his refusal to stay on Blue and become their leader because the danger of the corruption of power was still in him?

On another note, I've just finished reading three amazing books which have given me as much pleasure as anything written by Wolfe.

Michael Moorcock's "King of the City" is his masterpiece, full of life and energy and drenched in the smell and feel of London. Not a trace of fantasy in it, but if you want an unreliable narrator try this, or his Colonel Pyat books.

Mary Gentle's "Ash; a secret history" is just unclassifiable. An historic novel that changes into an alternative history then into science fiction, packed with powerful male and female characters and an amazing knowledge of medieval warfare.

And Crowley's "Daemonomania". Words fail me. Is there any discussion of Crowley's work on the web? On a second reading, I've just started to realise how much of the historical part which I had assumed was fantasy is based on John Dee's actual life and works; and how much the realistic present day sections are mutating into fantasy as Crowley's world changes. I can't wait for the final novel in the sequence. Does anyone have any idea how long it is likely to be before he finishes it?

Happy Easter,

Allan (and it is Allan and not Adam {Alga!} or Mr Lloyd, please. I don't want to take a Wolfean nom-de-plume; if my wife discovered I was signing myself Wooly Mammoth or Bug she wouldn't stop laughing all week. These names are very psychologically revealing, you know.)

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