

Bad Horn and Rape

The Whorl list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 16 Apr 2001

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James Jordan — 16 Apr 2001, 16:35

At 09:37 AM 4/16/2001 -0400, Allan Lloyd wrote:>

(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.

For some reason I did not get the original of this post, and this is from Alga's reply to it. I think you've made a good case for seeing Horn as Bad Horn, and this adds a lot to reading the trilogy in terms of progressive transformation of the character. At the same time, the harsh treatment of the inhumani at the end seems (emphasis on seems) to be by the emerging Silk, as I pointed out the other day.

Women to be picked up and dumped at will. Well, we all know that the Odyssey is partly behind this narrative, and Odysseus was hardly a model of faithfulness to his wife. What is of note, though I don't know how much Wolfe has thought about this, is that pre-Christian heroes like Odysseus don't really undergo the kind of moral transformation we have come to expect in literature of the Christian (and "post-Christian") era. Odysseus does not change as a result of his descent into Hades; no "death and moral resurrection" here; and he's about as vicious at the end as he has been all along. But both Horn and Severian are becoming better people, though not very dramatically. They make a little progress, not great progress. In the case of Horn, it's Silk's influence, in various ways.

Rape? Hey, what else are women for? Sure, MY WIFE is to be protected (and maybe yours also, if you're my equal), but the rest are fair game, to be used at will. That's the "ancient heroic" attitude, pretty much. (Though Homer was not totally blind to the problem, as the first book of the Iliad shows.)

Shellac mentioned rape in Wolfe. Well, rape is about as common as oxygen in most of the world in most of history. Our sensibilities about equal treatment have been formed by the Bible, gradually, over centuries of its influence -- whether we personally accept the Bible or not. "Democracy" in Greece means male citizens only, not women and not the many slaves. The Hebrew scriptures required slaves be freed after a few years, required masters be punished if they abused their bondservants, and punished rape with death. Israelites were forbidden to have sex when the Ark of the covenant was in the field, i.e., in the context of battle; thus, no rape of the enemy women. (Setting the special provision to wipe out all the Canaanites; I'm speaking of "normal war," not "holy war.") St. Paul says men and women have different roles, but are fundamentally equal before God and in Christ. Parts of the Bible were written by women (Songs of Deborah, Hannah, Mary). 1500 years of this stuff being read, studied, preached, in churches all over Europe had a effect on culture -- though the effect has not been as great as it should be, IMO. In a broad way, femin-ISM is as much as anything else a "Christian heresy." Wolfe, I'm sure, is quite sympathetic to some of the concerns of feminism. Men have very often treated women very badly, historically, and Wolfe wants us to think about this fact.

Rape and also the sexual abuse of children is pretty damn common, and he's trying to deal with it. It's clear that HE does not approve of it. Where traditional epics like the Odyssey might find Odysseus' adulteries "good stuff," and the Kalevala presents Lemmenkainen's fornications as

humorous, it's pretty clear that Horn's and Severian's follies are not held up for our amusement. Even in Jack Vance, though Cugel gets his comeuppance, his dalliances are presented as light humor. I don't think Wolfe ever presents adultery or fornication that way. Wolfe's "realism" is designed to make us uncomfortable, but I don't think his own moral perspective is hard to discern.

Nutria

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