

"Dangling" plot threads

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Adam Stephanides — 18 Apr 2001, 16:24

I've complained in the past about the several plot threads in TBOTSS that RttW leaves dangling. I now think, thought, that I may have missed the point.

It has been remarked before that Wolfe's books are about the way the story is told as much as the story itself. TBOTSS, I think, is largely about the relationship between the story and the way it's told. And the key to this relationship is the passage noted by Rostrum: "On Green I met a man who could not see the inhum. They were there, but his mind would not accept them...In just the same way, my own interior sight refuses to focus upon matters I find agonizing." (OBW, p. 74) This does not just apply to "Horn" unawareness that he is Silk, but is the governing principle of his narration. Thus he narrates his adventures on Green only in fragments or a summary, and his adventures on the Whorl not at all: the former because they were too horrific to dwell upon, and the latter because that was the scene of his "failure" (and also perhaps because it was there that he was most insistently reminded that he was Silk).

But the application is even more general than this. Though Horn's general sense of failure is clear, unlike Weer in PEACE he never itemizes his failures; he just natters on about other things. If we bear this in mind we can see that some of the plot threads that seem unresolved are in fact resolved. Horn's narrative doesn't make this explicit because they are resolved badly from his perspective.

This is clearest as regards his relationship to Seawrack. When you think about it, it is resolved in the only way it can be resolved. Horn will always long for Seawrack, but because he is fundamentally an honorable person, despite his penchant for situational adultery, he will never seek her out. His case is hopeless, and he knows it, though he doesn't say so explicitly.

Likewise with the human-inhum relationship. Horn has failed with Jahlee, the inhum closest to him: he has killed her, after she betrayed his trust. And his efforts to behave honorably towards the inhum by not revealing the Secret have resulted (he thinks) in bringing the inhum down upon Nettle. If this is the outcome with Horn, who is the human most sympathetic to inhum of any we see (aside from the renegades or slaves of Pajarocu and Green), then the chances of humanity in general living in peace with the inhum are slim. And if Horn ever did have any hopes of effecting a general reconciliation, he's given them up by the end of his narrative; otherwise, he would not manipulate Juganu as he does. [1]

With the case of Horn's relationship with Sinew, I'm on more speculative ground. This relates to one of the biggest enigmas of Horn's narrative. Near the end of IGJ, Horn, Hide and Jahlee make an astral visit to Sinew's village. Sinew is out hunting, but there is a female prisoner who knows Horn. At the end of the chapter, Horn asks to speak to this prisoner. Here the account of the astral visit breaks off without explanation and is never resumed. We never find out what happened, even in summary, though we know from later remarks of Jahlee that they did talk to the prisoner, who was Chenille. My hypothesis is that Sinew did return, and the encounter between him and Horn ended disastrously, so much so that Horn can't even talk about it.

The final words of Horn's manuscript--"I should have come back."--indicate his absolute despair. From here until the conversation with Remora, he's putting his affairs in order in preparation for death. In this hypothesis, the lack of emotion Kevin Maroney has complained about in RttW is in actuality a suppression of emotion.

So, if I'm correct, TBOTSS takes its place with PEACE as a radical experiment with narrative: in this case, a psychological drama which must be largely inferred from what the narrator leaves out. I don't think it's as successful as PEACE, though. First, in PEACE the material which Weer substitutes for what he can't say directly is itself fascinating. In TBOTSS it isn't. Second, unlike in PEACE, here Wolfe did want to convey directly to us some information he didn't want to have Horn narrate, and I don't think he found a fully satisfactory way of doing it.

--Adam

[1] If you're looking for un-Silk-like behavior on the part of Silkhorn, you could argue that to cold-bloodedly provoke somebody to the sin of murder is morally more offensive than to kill, in anger and without intending to, someone who has just tried to murder your wife.

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