

Denial as a Literary Structure

The Whorl list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 20 Apr 2001

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/whorl/1380>

Exported from an unofficial mirror of a public mailing list. Copyright in each message remains with the person who wrote it. Email addresses are obscured as `user at host`, the form the original archive published. This file was rebuilt from parsed fields rather than retained headers, so it is faithful in content but not byte-exact.

Patrick O'Leary — 20 Apr 2001, 11:17

Adam wrote:

----- MESSAGE whorl.v012.n107.9 -----

From: Adam Stephanides <adamsteph at earthlink.net>

Subject: "Dangling" plot threads

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.>>

A stunning post, that may provide a clue to the various vaguely unsatisfied reactions that several here have expressed about RTTW : "muddled", "hurried," "Senile" "Sloppy." I think this may have something to do with its difficult and frustrating narrative structure.

While we shouldn't worship of the text, (Torah, Torah, Torah) I think we have to give Wolfe the benefit of a doubt. (In my considered opinion the man does not make aesthetic mistakes. He makes philosophical/ narrative choices which we may or may not agree with, may or may not like, may or may not be moved by. And, of course, he makes typos. Errors of a different order.)

I agree with Adam because what's most striking to me about RTTW (and a great deal of Wolfe) is what is missing. I muse at length about this defining literary tactic in my essay on Wolfe "If Ever A Wiz There Was" which appears in my latest book: OTHER VOICES, OTHER DOORS.

I think it may be important to ask: "What is missing from the text of the short sun books?"

Here are, to me, some provocative missing scenes. There must be more.

Silk/Horn's conversation with Chenille.

Silk/Horn's final confrontation with Sinew.

Silk/Horn's reunion talk with Nettle.

Most of Silk/Horn's adventures of Green.

Hyacinth's death.

As Adam said, each of these imply a level of psychic torment that cannot be borne by the narrator.

So we have a story founded on a search for Hero/Saint by a very human man, who becomes the Hero/Saint he sought.

The story is told after his transformation. He spends the bulk of the narrative

oddly, in denial and guilt. Haunted by his new identity and his old sins--His failure.

He is Horn denying his is Silk.

But, finally, we discover that he is Silk denying he is Silk.

What we take to be a story of a sinner who has reincarnated a Saint and cannot bear the contrast between his soul's knowledge of goodness and his failure to live up to that model--is actually a sleight of hand, a narrative trick , a portrait of denial.

The Short Sun books (it occurs to me that Horn is Silk's "Shorter Son") are actually the story of a Saint who is tormented by Sin, running from his mission, denying his vocation, fleeing his Sainthood, who finally accepts his sinful nature, who embraces his humanity.

Horn saves Silk.

Just some thoughts.

Patrick O'leary

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

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 20 Apr 2001, 10:14 · follows Patrick O'Leary

Patrick O'Leary wrote:

While we shouldn't worship of the text, (Torah, Torah, Torah) I think we have to give Wolfe the benefit of a doubt. (In my considered opinion the man does not make aesthetic mistakes. He makes philosophical/ narrative choices which we may or may not agree with, may or may not like, may or may not be moved by. And, of course, he makes typos. Errors of a different order.)

Thank you. This was pretty much my point a few days ago when I suggested that we need to live with SHORT a while (I said a year, others exaggerated it to 'years') before rushing to judge it as a failure.

If we've learned one thing about Mr Wolfe's books over the last twenty years or so, it's that they do not yield themselves to a single reading, or to quick analysis. We are still learning important things about 5HC, NEW, and (especially?) PEACE.

Given that, it seems to me that a book by Mr Wolfe which seems unsatisfactory on the first reading -- and, by the by, that was my reaction: I was disappointed by RttW -- should probably be shelved and read again some time later. (Certainly this has worked for me with CASTLEVIEW; I admit I can't answer all the questions some have asked about it, but I feel confident that they are in some sense answerable.)

Certain things have become much clearer to me about SHORT in the course of these discussions, most of which I've already stated in brief at one point or another. Thanks to this, I think I'll be ready to reread SHORT much sooner than I was ready to re-tackle PEACE or CASTLEVIEW.

(I'm still not quite ready to revisit PANDORA, though...)

--Dan'l

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