

Pig's eye and astral needles

The Whorl list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 23 Apr 2001

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Yves Meynard — 23 Apr 2001, 23:00

I suppose you have to place me amongst those who were somewhat disappointed by the Short Sun books, though I am still willing to be convinced otherwise.

Given Wolfe's skill and deviousness, I am quite ready to believe that most of what appears to be mistakes or negligence is in fact intended and pregnant with meaning. But SS seems to me to have crossed a line, in that a superficial reading of the books does not work. This is unlike NS, where one does not have to understand every detail to nevertheless "get it" -- or at least to come up with a satisfying understanding of the work. The same can be said of LS, which was intelligible at first reading, and which I enjoyed more upon rereading it.

But reading the latest archive of these posts all at once (as an aside, Ranjit, would it be possible to break them up into smaller pieces? That > 1MB monster kept bringing my browser to its knees) made it painfully clear that the true story of the SS books is probably quite different from its surface. I don't mind the blurring of the Narrator's identity. One does not have to realize it's really Silk denying his own identity to understand that there is a merging of the two; a full understanding "simply" deepens the poignancy of the situation. I didn't mind not realizing Pig's nature until having it spelled out here; Wolfe did plant clear clues, so it's cool.

What is disturbing to me is that there is so much divine possession implicit in the story that one cannot reliably know who is who. Some of the theories put forth here seem way over the top, but it's hard to refute them conclusively. Given also the Narrator's refusal to deal with the crucial events of Horn's life, the unreliability of the narration reaches such a pitch that I sometimes feel the contract with the reader has been broken.

Setting aside the generalized spleen, I have two specific questions I hope someone can answer. First, why is the Narrator so far away from Pig (a league and a half, p.334) when his eye is transplanted? How long before was it taken out? Enough time to allow the Narrator to heal and get back on his feet -- but that could be hours as well as days. Why weren't they together on adjacent operating tables?

Second question: on p.190, when the Narrator finds himself on Green and fights off a horde of inhumis, he shapes a needler out of thin air and shoots them down. This initially made me cringe, but then the inhumis are described as reacting in different ways. Some "tumble out of the air and [fall] to their deaths". Others are in fact completely immune to the "astral" needles and the Narrator has to club them.

This clearly implies that the needles are not tangible: that the inhumis' belief that they have been wounded is what kills them. Since the Narrator can pass through walls as well, I would be tempted to assume that he is not tangible at all himself. But he does interact with his physical surroundings at other times -- or does he? Can someone provide an unambiguous quote to dispel the doubt? Because if we have no clear evidence of interaction with physical objects other than people, then we might theorize that it is the observer's belief in the physicality of

astral projections that gives them "substance" to the extent that the _observer_ can be affected. This would certainly make the astral travel episodes feel less contrived/arbitrary. William Ansley's observation that the destination might not be a real place after all is provocative, but I'm not sure we can hope for that. The Neighbors bilocate: this is presumably how they can still be on Blue or Green and at the same time have left the planets behind. Those whom Horn encounters in OBW must therefore have been astrally present in the real world.

Yves Meynard

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

Jason Ingram — 23 Apr 2001, 22:11 · follows Yves Meynard

Yves raises some interesting issues:

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This questioning of identity was one of the more powerful aspects of the series, in my mind. I suppose that each reader negotiates her own contract, though.

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This is a tempting line of analysis; the argument I would be tempted to make is that bilocation only affects those who "go under," and that those visited are merely epiphenomenal. However, Severian seems to contradict this theory: the narrator and others appear to a real (?) character, so bilocation does not seem limited to shared visions with psychosomatic effects on those participating. Also, Horn's translation into Silk seems quite similar to bilocation.

The question of tangibility is distinct. I'm not sure how to delimit "physical" in this case. The ability of the inhumis to pass as human is in part related to a sort of psychic camouflage; the Neighbors have passed on some powers to Horn which followed his psyche to Silk; so it may be worth playing with the unique powers afforded by that interaction--as others have done.

Related issues:

regarding plausibility: if Mucor's powers were acceptable to readers, I'm not sure why this variant (bilocation with groups, but without possession) should seem substantially less reasonable.

regarding The Secret: it seems clear that blood passes on intelligence to offspring. This makes me curious about Patera Quetzal . . . did one of his parents encounter humans prior to the Whorl's visit? (otherwise, how could the first have made it to the Loganstone in order to return to raise a brood?) Did Quetzal have other-than-human intelligence? Am I missing something?

Jason

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Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 24 Apr 2001, 08:46 · follows Jason Ingram

Quoth Jason Ingram:

The question of tangibility is distinct. I'm not sure how to delimit "physical" in this case.

Key point. I've said before & I'll say again: it is not science fantasy; it is science fiction that makes some relatively unusual (for SF) assumptions about the nature of Universe. In particular, here, Mr Wolfe assumes (if only for the purpose of the novel) that "spirit" is quite real and is (or can be) in some sense "tangible."

(As a possible point of comparison, note the treatment of "souls" in the tv series Babylon-5, which I don't recall anyone ever trying to call "science fantasy." Souls, in B5, prove to be (1) demonstrably real, (2) sentient apart from bodies and (3) apparently-immortal.)

Now, "spirit" is (as noted before) related to "breath" which is, anciently, synonymous with "life." When you stop breathing, you're dead -- a pretty simple and obvious equation for a pre-EEG society. But "the blood is the life," and if "life=breath=spirit," then to steal the blood is to steal the spirit. Thus, the inhum, stealing the blood of humans, steal their spirit also; and hence, quite aside from any weird theories of inheritance, their acquisition of intelligence.

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That's clearly true at least on one level (Krait's statement that humans see what they expect seems, to me at least, disingenuous). Also I would guess that there is a certain amount of "they look human because they have human spirit." We also know (from Fava) that the personality and physiognomy of an inhum[u|a] is at least partially conditioned by who-or-what s/he has most recently dined on, whether this be "psychic" or what.

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Not necessarily -- we aren't very clear on how long ago (the last) Neighbors left, but there are some implications that it wasn't _that_ long ago; and we know that the Neighbors visited the _Whorl_ and brought inhum with them. Suppose, then, that Quetzal originally has intelligence, not from humans, but from Neighbors. Then Quetzal, arriving with the Neighborly "expedition," meets & drinks of at least one human, and so gains some amount of human personality & appearance.

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