

Horn as antihero?

The Whorl list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 04 Jan 1980

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Adam Stephanides — 04 Jan 1980, 10:44

I just finished rereading OBW. It's quite impressive, but also puzzling. In particular, Horn's character remains an enigma to me, although the narrative is saturated with his personality. In particular, I want to ask about the moral dimension of this enigma.

When I started the book, Horn seemed a decent guy trying to do the right thing (despite his prejudice against Sinew)--not as saintly as Silk, but not nearly as twisted as Severian. But then I got to the part where Horn, in essence, sells his family to Krait to get out of the pit. Shortly afterwards, he brutally rapes Seawrack. And later, as Rajan, he digs up and revives inhumis to use against the Hannese troops, which could be seen as the Blue equivalent of biological warfare. At this point I was ready to say that Horn was worse than Severian.

When I read the book again, I realized that one could put forward mitigating circumstances in each case. Horn in the pit was psychologically weakened by his extreme thirst and fear, and vulnerable to Krait's manipulations. Besides, Krait had threatened to attack Horn's family if Horn didn't convince him to rescue him, so it could be argued that Horn was actually protecting his family (though Horn never makes this argument). Similarly, one could argue, as has been done on this list, that Horn was not responsible for his rape because of Seawrack's song, although Horn explicitly rejects this excuse (and that line of argument is unlikely to win Wolfe friends among feminists). And as for reviving the inhumis, Horn was fighting a war which he regarded as justified, and there would have been some inhumis around anyway.

So is Horn an antihero or a flawed but fundamentally decent man? My sense is that Wolfe is generally sympathetic to his flawed protagonists, but few if any of them have transgressed as seriously as Horn. The question isn't made easier by my doubts as to how trustworthy Horn's narrative is; at one point (the start of Ch. 12), Horn accuses himself of writing a "tissue of half-truths," without being very specific.

--Adam

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