

Narratives

The Urth list — 4 messages, 4 voices, 25 Oct 1999

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Daniel Fusch — 26 Oct 1999, 00:55

William Ansley:

snip:

"We have some data to consider the question. Severian repeats several stories not of his own invention. Do they show any of the same idiosyncrasies as Severian's narrative?"

William:

No, they don't. They have their own idiosyncrasies. Each is different from the others, in structure, narration, and form. (I'll talk more about this in a few paragraphs.)

When you say that we have no evidence that the storytelling of Severian's culture is significantly different from our own, I have to answer: Every culture has its own species of storytelling. Homeric storytelling is infinitely different from modern Euro-American storytelling (after all, the epic begins in the middle of the story, and works both backwards into the past and forwards into the future!). Native American storytelling is different from Euro-American storytelling. Consider modernism and metafiction as opposed to realist fiction. Also consider postmodern narratives from African nations. You could argue that Achebe's "Things Fall Apart" follows the structure of a Western narrative, but what about Ngugi's work?

So narratives differ in structure and form even in the present. In "The Sound and the Fury" there are four different narrators (five, counting the Appendix). The first is autistic; the second is in the last stages of suicidal psychosis; the third lies to everyone, including himself. The reader is invited--required--to interpret the narrators. The reader can not always take them at face value.

If Severian's time is far ahead in the future, with an entirely different culture and social order, it would almost certainly have different standards for storytelling. Its people would expect different things.

Indeed, in Severian's own time, there are different types of stories. There is the story told by Loyal to the Group of Seventeen, for example. There is Foila's story, which resembles a medieval romance. There is Melito's story, which is like a classical fable. There is also Hallvard's story, which is realism. Note that Severian never gets the chance to judge between these stories; nor does he tell the reader what judgement he might make. The implication is that all four are worthy. Consider that the Ascians invent a mode of storytelling to work around Correct Thought. They adapt their storytelling to fit their culture.

Also consider the stories in the brown book. The story of the student and his thesis, for example, which Severian relates in "The Claw of the Conciliator." This story starts out with one protagonist, then focuses on a second, then returns to the first--and ends with a theme--indeed, with a moralist statement--that seems disconnected from the rest of the work. This story may well be "unsatisfactory" by contemporary standards of Euro-American realist storytelling.

In the story of *The Little Boy Called Frog*, the plot bounces all over the place! What does the end of the story have to do with the beginning of it? Note, too, that the distance from the main character changes throughout--until in the fifth section of the story, the narrator relates future events in Frog's life very distantly, as if recounting a distant history.

Severian's world is filled with extremely different types of narratives, because it is filled with extremely different cultures. Remember, too, that Hallvard, who is a realist storyteller, is disdainful of Melito's storytelling, which is based on moral fables. Hallvard may well consider Melito's story to be an "unsatisfactory" narrative.

Anyway, my point is that Wolfe is examining--and indeed, playing around with--the structure and nature of storytelling. He presents us with Severian, an unconventional narrator who is in many ways a modernist storyteller, and Severian presents us with stories, tales, and fables that differ radically in narration and in narrator. In one sense, Wolfe is allowing us to survey the vast variety of storytelling methods. By not having Severian pass judgement on the four stories in Foila's contest--indeed, by removing the opportunity for Severian to judge them (the contestants all die)--Wolfe is saying that ALL types of narrators are satisfactory narrators, and that ALL styles of storytelling are satisfactory styles, because storytelling is unique to the culture and it is also unique to the individual. Storytellers with different backgrounds provide you with different stories. Because the story is the work of the storyteller, you will have as many different kinds of stories as you have different kinds of storytellers.

With all this in mind, I rejoice in the fact that Severian is unreliable! Severian's narrative puts my mind to work--and I, as a reader, have come to expect intellectual stimulation from a story (I suppose one's judgement of whether a narrative is "satisfactory" depends, in the end, on one's expectations as a reader).

I don't think Wolfe has failed with this narration; I think he has succeeded admirably.

That said, I hope to continue to examine Severian's unreliability and try to pin down exactly what sort of narrator Severian is--just as I might examine Jason Compson's or Quentin Compson's unreliability in Faulkner's *"The Sound and the Fury,"* in order to better understand the work and what the author is trying to say about the human condition. --And, of course, to increase my enjoyment of the work.

I hope this clears up my viewpoint a little,

Daniel Fusch

Alice Turner — 25 Oct 1999, 23:07 · follows Daniel Fusch

Daniel,

-*The Sound and the Fury*-, which I read in college, had long ago occurred to me as something that might have influenced Wolfe, but only wrt -*Fifth Head*- (and we have detected other influences there too, rather spectacularly that of Proust [first novella], certainly not a modernist in the same sense). I'm interested, but not convinced, at your bringing it up with NS. Will have to noodle that over.

The experimentation with different forms of storytelling is, of course, a huge attraction in the NS series. You bring up *"The Boy Called Frog,"* and I remind you that the principal godfather of that story was Kipling, who told Mowgli's story as "linked tales," not a novel--it too "bounces all over

the place" and I remember that, reading it as a child, I was bored and somewhat saddened by the "grown-up" parts. I'll bet all of us love (as much as I do) the recognizable (yet altered) folk-tale origins of the tales told at the Pelerine camp (well, 17's tale doesn't quite fit--well, yes, it does, actually, in its curious way). And the Theseus tale, "The Student and His Son," is a take on the original that could never have worked as a "real" short story in a magazine, but is unforgettable in place.

He abandons this altogether in LS, which trades off different narrations in an effective but conventional way (Wm. Gibson does this very well, usually using four different points of view in sequence; Wolfe is not so formal). At the end, we learn that an "author" attempting to give an overview is involved; this technique is quite common to historical novels where the author needs to be in several places at one time. And in SS, so far, we stick with Horn, and are likely to continue to do so unless, as in the Soldier books, someone else has to take over temporarily. So each series is differently told.

I miss those interspersed stories, now that I think of them. Though OBW is a terrific tale!

-alga

William H. Ansley — 26 Oct 1999, 00:09 · follows Alice Turner

"Daniel Fusch" <dfusch at hotmail.com> wrote:

William Ansley:

snip:

"We have some data to consider the question. Severian repeats several stories not of his own invention. Do they show any of the same idiosyncrasies as Severian's narrative?"

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Daniel,

Credit where credit is due. Michael Straight <straight at email.unc.edu> aka Rostrum wrote the paragraph you are attributing to me.

I haven't dared reply to you myself. You have overwhelmed me with your knowledge of literature <g>.

William Ansley

Tony Ellis — 26 Oct 1999, 09:32 · follows William H. Ansley

Rostrum wrote:

We have some data to consider the question. Severian repeats several stories not of his own invention. Do they show any of the same idiosyncrasies as Severian's narrative?

What would it matter if they did? They're stories. Severian is writing about something that actually happened. We can't expect his narrative to reflect the ideosyncrasies of storytelling in his age if he

doesn't think he's telling a story - any more than we could expect John Major's recently published memoir to use Magic Realism or Burroughs' cut-up technique. (If only it did!)