

PEACE Birkhead and inventions

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 26 Oct 2000

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Adam Stephanides — 26 Oct 2000, 17:42

Roy C. Lackey wrote:

What is it with Miss Birkhead?

Indeed, there is weirdness going on around Miss Birkhead. On the second page of part five (236 in the Harper 1975 edition) she is in the office (so she makes two appearances, not one, though the second is only one sentence). In the time it takes for Weer to read the letter from Charles Turner, she has become sick, and a fill-in has already been assigned (242). And later that same afternoon, she is dead, and a notice has already been posted on the bulletin board (261). This could have happened, but it's not very likely, nor is it plausible that neither Weer or Miss Hadow would have commented on her essentially dropping dead in an afternoon.

That's not the only strange thing going on in part five. In another post, Roy points out how Weer's "present" infiltrates his "past," but this phenomenon is much more blatant in part five than elsewhere. His office alternates between being his real office and his memory office, as shown by the letters nailed to the desk (243-44, 264; that mail is nailed to the desk in the memory office is given on p. 145). On p. 244, Weer has his present memories. And on p. 250, Dan tells Weer: "'your secretary...said she could always tell when you were tired, because you started to drag one leg.'" Apparently Weer's present is not only affecting his past interlocutors' perceptions of him, but their memories of him as well.

Another odd thing is that, unlike Weer's other recollections/relivings, there's no narrative break from the doctor's office. Weer just leaves Van Ness's office and returns to the plant. Combined with the other anomalies, this makes me suspect that part five is not a genuine recollection, even a distorted one. Rather, it is an invention of Weer's, continuing the invented visit to Van Ness, which enables him to round off his narrative by depicting himself as president and the state of Cassionsville. The "events" of that afternoon may never have happened, or may have happened but not all on the same day. I make this suggestion with some trepidation, since it adds a further layer of uncertainty; but I don't think part five's anomalies can be swept under the carpet. At any event, Weer is demonstrably unreliable in part five, to a greater extent than in the rest of the book (setting aside his being dead).

So it isn't until the book is
almost over before we learn that she is in fact not a Miss, but Mrs. Helen
Birkhead Tyler, with two children and a husband, Ben. Why did Wolfe wait
that late to drop that little detail? Why not leave her Miss Birkhead?

It could be that Weer's feelings for Miss Birkhead were stronger than he admits, and that Weer waits until the end to reveal yet another missed opportunity. If my guess about the invented character of part five is correct, then Weer's putting Miss Birkhead's death in that day ties in. It also ties in with Weer's rudeness when Miss Hadow tells him Miss Birkhead was proud of being his secretary (261)--is he just annoyed by Miss Hadow's blatant flattery, or has she inadvertently struck a nerve?

--Adam