

# Severian's reticence

The Urth list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 16 Jun 1998

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adam louis stephanides — 16 Jun 1998, 15:07

One of Severian's quirks as a narrator, and one which makes it quite difficult to get a grasp of his character, is his sometimes withholding an important fact about a situation until long after he has seemingly finished narrating that situation. The most prominent example is his not revealing that he and Thecla had been lovers until long after Thecla has breathed her last. (I am ashamed to say that I completely missed this in my earlier reading of BotNS.) There are a couple of other important examples, also concerned with Severian's love life.

1) In *Sword*, ch. 25, very near the beginning, Severian discloses that Dorcas had had strong feelings for Jolenta and had been very depressed at her death, that he believes that Dorcas and Jolenta had engaged in "sexual play" at some time, and that he had been jealous of Dorcas's feeling for Jolenta, though not, he claims, sexually. I don't think that any of this had been mentioned at the time it happened: certainly not Dorcas's depression at Jolenta's death, and to my recollection no hint of any relationship between Dorcas and Jolenta beyond Dorcas's natural goodness and compassion on the one side and Jolenta's contempt on the other.

2) My other example I'm less sure of. In *Citadel*, ch. 2, Severian loses himself in his memories, and "Dorcas's voice whispered in my ears: 'Sitting in a window ... trays and a rood. What will you do, summon up some Erinyes to destroy me?'" The first of these sentences is close to what are almost the first words Dorcas speaks in the text (though not identical; another can of worms). The second I was unable to find. Severian's thoughts immediately following suggest that this sentence was spoken to Severian, and its juxtaposition with the first sentence suggests that it may have come near the end of their last conversation, in which case their parting was stormier than Severian let on at the time. Or it may have had something to do with Severian's jealousy, discussed above.

Having noted this recurring pattern, I have some questions:

1) Are there any other examples I've missed? (One may be his disclosure late in the book of the very high mortality rate among the apprentices, but I don't remember if Severian had mentioned this at the time.)

2) What does this quirk tell us about Severian? Other quirks in his narration have been explained by his allegedly perfect memory, but I don't see how that would account for this.

3) What explains, in particular, his suppression of the sexual relationship between himself and Thecla? (Severian's motives for the other two omissions are more obvious.) I can think of two, not necessarily exclusive, possibilities. Severian, as we know, has a rather unhealthy attitude towards women. He may not have wanted to contaminate the "purity" of his relationship with Thecla by admitting it had a sexual component. Or: Severian was ashamed enough of having "betrayed his guild" by giving Thecla a knife, but he had to narrate it because it was crucial to his story. He may have wanted to keep quiet about his earlier "betrayal" in having sex with Thecla against Master Gurloes' strict orders.

--Adam

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Peter Stephenson — 17 Jun 1998, 12:47 · follows adam louis stephanides

adam louis stephanides wrote:

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This is certainly a fascinating question. I would hazard that in the cases of Dorcas and Thecla it shows Severian has a mental quirk of pigeonholing people, and particularly women. So, as you say, he likes to think of his relationship with Thecla as entirely pure, and that with Dorcas as entirely loving, and writes the narrative in this fashion. (Maybe the Chekhov's Gun principle would say, if a character has a perfect memory you expect them to abuse it by the end of volume IV.)

Where he admits to feeling strong sexual desire (Agia, the undine on the sandbar) it sometimes causes associated negative feelings, though I can't remember well enough to say how Jolenta fits into this. There's probably a lot of pop psychology to get out of all this --- blah blah repressed childhood blah blah substitute mother figures blah blah need for understanding blah blah vell, severian's just zis guy, you know? --- but before I fall into the deep end I'll just point out the connection with Silk, his feelings towards sex described on the airship and his selective view of (damn, I can't remember her name now and the book's across town, but you know who I mean, the one with the catachrest), as described, rather startingly, by Horn at the end of Exodus. (So, you ignore her bad points, do you? Vell, zis is certainly very interesting behaviour for a Calde.)

pws

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Neal Smith — 17 Jun 1998, 14:24 · follows Peter Stephenson

I think that in spite of Severian's continuing assurance that he has perfect recall, that he might as well not have it.

He intentionally omits enough information in the account

that it is almost as if a nearly identical character who does not have perfect recall has been substituted, and occasionally remembers and adds details at a later time. (Perhaps Severian does not have perfect memory - but has forgotten that fact. No, just joking.)

Anyway, I can see on the part of the author the need to do this to maintain suspense, and a few mysteries, but why would Severian leave these things out in general? A few of the instances probably have unique reasons: for instance, Adam's comment about Severian hiding his tryst with Thecla to avoid admitting another betrayal of his guild is dead on. In general, though, I think that it is simply a matter of style: Severian tends to include details only when they directly affected the \*actions\* that he saw, or took, and leaves out his emotions, what he considers trivia, and side issues, no matter how interested we readers may be in some of these other details. For example, the conversation with Dorcas that Adam mentioned: in the first part, he narrates enough to show how she left one way, he another, and enough reasons. Later, he adds the rest, when it is relevant to what he is doing at the time - being lost in his memory.

Neal Smith