

[spoiler] Narrative technique in _Return_, and trilogy

The Whorl list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 07 Feb 2001

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/whorl/1106>

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Dan Rabin — 07 Feb 2001, 22:35

This third volume in the series adopts yet another distinct set of techniques for interleaving two narrative time frames.

In _Blue's_ we had the Gaon story interrupt the quest story, eventually dominating by the end of the volume.

In _Green's_ we're mostly in the Blanko story, with the continuation of the quest in flashbacks and the stories in the story-telling game.

In _Return_, we pretty much get a chapter-by-chapter alternation between the homeward-bound story and the _Whorl_ story, told in very different styles. Homecoming-protagonist pretty much continues his persona from _Green's_, but as Whorl-narrator he adopts a very mannered avoidance of identification with the Whorl-protagonist: he never names that person (always referred to via third-person pronouns or as "the man who..."). He keeps this up even when meeting his *father*. It's as if he wants to claim that that guy might or might not have been Silk, but it sure wasn't *me*.

As a bonus, we get chapters in Hoof and Daisy's own distinct voices, and an afterword in which Silk is once again separated from the now-current narrator. (I found Hoof's style to be rather charming.)

Oh, and the volumes are separated by interruptions in Horn/Rajan/Silk's supply of paper in the frame in which he is writing.

Reading this trilogy is like listening to Bach. There's a highly evolved formal structure available to enhance your enjoyment, but you'll still come out way ahead if you just go ahead and listen.

I note in this connection Wolfe's remarks in 1982 in the essay "The Rewards of Authorship" in _The Castle of the Otter_, reprinted in _Castle of Days_, on p. 280 of the hardcover edition:

Q: [the professor] also said that each volume in a trilogy should be a finished story in itself, the various parts being interconnected by a progression in time and overlapping characters. You don't do that in _The Book of the New Sun_. Shouldn't you have? It's sort of all one book, with breaks in between.

A: That's right. Did you enjoy the books?

Q: Yes, but it still seems wrong.

A: Because your professor said so. Did he enjoy them?

Q: I don't think he read them.

A: I don't think so either. Did you like _The Lord of the Rings_?

Q: I loved it!

A: That's "sort of all one book, with breaks in between" isn't it?

Q: I never thought of that. I wish I had mentioned it to my professor.

A: It wouldn't have done any good--he wouldn't have read that either. I just wanted to point out that Tolkien was a professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford.

It seems to me that _Short Sun_ is in some measure a further argument in Wolfe's dispute with that imaginary professor. One of our contributors who is in touch with Wolfe has reported Wolfe's glee at finally having written a trilogy...

-- Dan Rabin

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

Dan Schmidt — 08 Feb 2001, 10:16 · follows Dan Rabin

Dan Rabin <wolfe-lists at danrabin.com> writes:

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I particularly liked how each title referred both to the past and the present.

In ON BLUE'S WATERS, Horn's narrating his original adventures on Blue, and what's happening now that he's returned there.

In IN GREEN'S JUNGLES, he narrates his original adventures on Green, and visits there again via 'astral projection'.

In RETURN TO THE WHORL, he narrates his first return to the whorl, and then returns to the whorl again as the book closes.

<http://www.dfan.org>

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