

Authorship of RTTW third-person sections (spoilers)

The Whorl list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 06 Mar 2001

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Adam Stephanides — 06 Mar 2001, 00:08

on 3/1/01 8:21 PM, Michael Andre-Driussi at mantis at sirius.com wrote:

Adam wrote:

Unlike Wolfe's narrative games in other works, I can't see that the children's authorship of the third-person sections is anything more than a device to increase Wolfe's mystification of "Horn"'s identity.

What I meant by this comment was not that the children's authorship should not affect our interpretation of RTTW. Rather, I meant that I don't find it believable that the children wrote these sections, although I am compelled to accept it as "true". [1]

As I said in an earlier post, the children are from a poor colony, and three of them are from not-well-off families, while one is a servant. It is quite unlikely that they would have received an education which would develop in them sophisticated literary tastes, or skills; nor is there any indication that any of them have such interests, iirc. I find it hard to believe, therefore, that they would write prose like "from time to time ... some motion of Pig's evoked the soft speech of foliage. A faint and liquid music succeeded it, waking his tongue and lips to thirst." (50) (Compare this with the sections written by Hoof and Daisy individually.)

Moreover, as Nutria pointed out in the post that started all this, the children employ narrative strategies which are typical of Wolfe. The concealment of "Horn"'s identity I have already discussed. Another example is the "'Seen me h'ears'" passage. We are given these words of Pig's but no description of his ears, and left to make the correct inferences ourselves. This is quite typical of Wolfe; why the children should be playing coy in this manner I have no idea.

Add to these the absence of any discernible difference between "litSilkhorn" and "real Silkhorn" as seen in his own narration. All in all, to me the third-person passages read as if Wolfe had originally written them as "objective" third-person narrative, and only after the fact decided to attribute them to Hoof, Hide, Vadsig and Daisy. (I have no way of knowing whether he really did this or not, of course, and in fact I doubt that he did. But there's nothing in the experience of reading the passages to disprove this that I can see.)

The kick of all the Whorl stuff being written by people who have never actually been on the Whorl, and never are going to be on the Whorl . . . well. It is somewhat like having the fictional framing of "'A Story' by John V. Marsch" (an anthropological reconstruction/romance) eroded and put through the pretzel machine in the course of "V.R.T.," only much moreso. Because we read those Whorl chapters as being "true," "from the Narrator named Horn by his mother," "based upon firsthand experience," etc. Just as OBW and IGJ had been.

The poignancy of N meeting Horn's father; the intensity of the dark; the sacrifice of the eye; visits by "ghosts" from the beginning (Remora) to the end (Crane); N's sense of what any of it means; all vppppt! Gone into a different plane.

I'm afraid that I personally did not get a "kick" from the revelation of the children's authorship (both in the sense of enjoyment, and of a jolt). I've read a few books, not by Wolfe, in which large portions of narrative, which we have accepted as true, are suddenly revealed to be fictional. I did get a jolt from these. The difference with RTTW, I think, is that there is no alternative account of the events on the Whorl; on the contrary, the children tell us that the account is as accurate as they could make it, and we have no reason to disbelieve them. Nor does the revelation of the children's authorship lead us to reevaluate the characters of either Silkhorn or the children. [2]

This particular fanfic angle might also lead to some of the more tricky ("potentially destabilizing of a given reading") questions inspired by John Crowley's *ENGINE SUMMER*, since the same can be said of it in its entirety. To the same sort of reader disappointment/thwarting, etc.

(Spoilers for *ENGINE SUMMER*)

Presumably by "potentially destabilizing" you mean the revelation at the end that Rush's story is not only being narrated by an artificial copy of Rush's mind (which we've guessed), but by this mind projected into a living person, and that different "projectees" tell Rush's story in different ways; and by "thwarting" you're referring to the fact that we never find out what happened to Rush after he was copied. There is indeed a formal similarity, which I hadn't noticed. I can't be sure, without rereading the book, why my reaction to *ENGINE SUMMER* was so different. But at a guess, and without a copy at hand, I would say that the revelation in *ES* serves to fulfill a major theme of the book, so that when it comes it has a resonance that the revelation in *RTTW* doesn't. Similarly, because of its thematic role, we recognize that it is an appropriate "completion" of Rush's story, nice as it would be to know what happened to the flesh-and-blood Rush; while I have a more difficult time accepting the conclusion of *RTTW* as a satisfactory conclusion of *BOTSS* (and it's even harder if you believe, as I don't, that Horn's spirit is still present at the end). But, as you say, either you like it or you don't.

--Adam

1) To repeat, just so there's no misunderstanding: I am not arguing for an interpretation of the book in which the children are lying about their authorship of these sections.

2) With one exception: although I hate to admit it, one could make a case that the children have, consciously or unconsciously, planted evidence that Silk's spirit was in "Horn" from his "arrival" on the Whorl and that his giving an eye to Pig had nothing to do with collecting Silk-in-Pig. But I still don't think this reading improves the book.

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

James Jordan — 06 Mar 2001, 08:55 · follows Adam Stephanides

As long as we're on this topic, I personally found the revelation that Horn had written the *LS* books, and that the children had written the 3rd person parts of *RTW*, annoying. Wolfe has done this kind of "switchback" (or whatever you call it) in many short stories, so that at the end we learn that things are not what they have seemed and are impelled to re-read the story (if we want to). Well, that's okay for a short story, but IMHO not for a 1000+ page narrative. It feels to me like a stunt, and little more; and to me it diminishes the narrative. It's not as if we have any "Real Silk" to measure "Horn's Silk" by. Re-reading the narrative is not going to get us any more than we already have, unless we get some kind of kick out of trying to figure out how Horn and Nettle came by each bit of information. And, as Adam and I have both pointed out, the children's parts of *RTW* just read like plain old Wolfe, and that is not credible. Well, Wolfe has always done this kind of thing. It's clever in short pieces, but I find it very

annoying and rather pretentious in these long narratives. But to each her/his own, I guess.

Patera Nutria

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