

For Adam and James: Literary Devices, Authorship, and

The Whorl list — 4 messages, 2 voices, 06 Mar 2001

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Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 06 Mar 2001, 09:20

Adam done wrote:

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]

I don't immediately have a problem with the kids deliberately writing their sections of the "Book of Horn" in a way that features prominent elisions and elusions. The problem arises when I try to figure out how these reveal character: for they seem designed to reveal the character of (Pas)silkhorn rather than that of Hoof-Hide-Daisy-Vadsig; and that just doesn't make a great deal of sense. And granting their motives to be similar to those of Horn writing the Book of Silk -- to preserve to their whorl the memory of the best man they have ever known -- does not improve matters; it makes them worse. Horn may have excluded things that would have shown Silk as less than the paragon Horn wished to portray; what about the children?

Mr Wolfe is a writer obsessed with memory but painfully aware of its deceptive nature; one of the first questions to ask about a narrative falsification in a Wolfe narrative is whether it is deliberate or unconscious (each reveals character but in very different ways).

I think it's clear that the sections of SHORT by "the narrator" e[xc]l[u]de his Silkishness unconsciously, and that those by the children do so deliberately, and that the purposes are quite different. Further, I think the reasons for "the narrator" leaving the question of his identity out of the narrative (and still sometimes putting it in Freudianslipperishly) are luminous-numinous. But -- again -- what about the children?

In Mr Wolfe's universe, everybody writes like Wolfe. I do not mean that they all write with a monolithic "Wolfe style" (though there is some truth to that), but that everyone elides, eludes, conceals (and reveals), and makes mistakes in their narratives. What they conceal, and what they reveal by their concealing, is, in Mr Wolfe's universe, a (maybe _the_) indicator of character.

The exemplum prima inter pares would of course be Severian, whose elisions damn near _are_ THE BOOK OF THE NEW SUN; but it's true of every first-person narrator from Number 5 to Holly Hollander. By their falsifications and concealments shall ye know them.

And why do the children conceal the "narrator"'s identity?

One immediate possibility, which doesn't feel right to me: the children are (consciously or un-) e[xc]l[u]ding matters which would tend to make Silkhorn look more like Horn and less like Silk -- not because of some quasireligious desire to portray "Silk" as the perfect man but because the last thing they [H&H, that is] can admit to themselves is that they have in any way rejected

their actual father, sent him packing off back to the Whorl.

But the actual nature of their concealments seems to militate against this: they conceal for the wet-firecracker "final revelation" Silkhorn's discovery that he is in some real sense Silk (we can still disagree about just what that sense is). That doesn't directly bother me; Wolfe is just subtle enough to have them unconsciously reveal by concealing what they would actually like to conceal by revealing. Perhaps it is exactly at that level of subtlety, though, that my own ability to track sympathetically with Mr Wolfe's program falls to the ground: at any rate, it just doesn't work for me. So what do these concealments reveal about the narrators of these sections?

Can their brief interruptions in OBW, conspicuously absent from IGJ, contribute? Really, all they have to add is a few [Sic]s and one note that Nettle has read OBW.

-- But this fact, in and of itself, suggests that there is a significant gap of time between Silkhorn's implosion therapy at Remora's hands and the departure to return one more time to the

Whorl. OBW is a big book and not fast reading in print; it would take Nettle some significant time to read it in holograph, esp. under the circumstances prevalent on Lizard at the time. I should expect a minimum of a month or two: plenty of time for Silk(horn) to maunder to the children over "poor Pig" and so on.

Well, then. Given that time frame, let's take this as a hypothesis: the children's decision to (deliberately) continue the (unconscious) tactic of PSH's text and conceal the identity of PasSilkHorn, and the Tomato Surprise ending, constitute _their_ idea of a subtle literary device; which is why it is so clumsily handled. It's pretty damned obvious long before RttW begins that "the narrator of" OBW/IGJ is wandering around in Silk's body, neh?

Let's take it as given that they have not had the full benefit of a liberal education. Is this possible; more importantly, is it plausible? Would and could they have done this? "Would" is hard, and reverts to the question of character; as for "could" -- I can only refer you to the huge number of "primitive" narratives in the "real" world that use some startlingly sophisticated techniques.

Assuming that they _could_, and that _would_ defers us to the question of character, the immediate critical question is now reduced to this:

Does Mr Wolfe deliberately commit a narrative clumsiness because his narrators would do so? And if so, is this subtle or clumsy on Mr Wolfe's part?

This is your final essay for the semester; it is due in one week.
(I have some ideas about this but want to see some discussion before I spout any further in this direction.)

There are some fairly obvious objections to this model, which I shall attempt to disarm so that it can be discussed on its own merits...

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.)

A fair cop, to some extent. I found Hoof's personal chapters, in particular, almost painfully clumsy compared to the usual Wolfe manner; I don't think I _could_ read an entire book by Hoof.

So I see these possibilities:

1. Someone else (most likely "the Narrator") wrote the third-person chapters and the kids (for whatever reason) take credit for it.
2. The kids, in collaboration, are able to pastiche the style of "the Narrator" in a way that they individually cannot.
3. Writing these sections they deliberately pastiche "the Narrator"; writing in their own voices they don't.

There are two issues underlying this. First, are we to believe that they are capable of this level of pastiche; second, is there some good reason why they would claim to have written something they did not?

The second question, again, devolves into the question of character, and "what does this reveal?"

As to the first, I can give the half-hearted answer that Hide & Hoof are the children of a man whose most notable talent as a youth was verbal imitation, not only of Silk's voice but of his style. (Is there any reason to believe, by the by, that Silk is the only person he was able so to imitate? Gifted impressionists are very rarely limited to a single "victim," Elvis impersonators to the contrary.)

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.

(...assuming, of course, that the inferences made here have been the correct ones...)

Simple supposition, which slips nicely under Occam's rule: this is how PSH narrated it to the kids, and they, failing to make the correct inferences, repeated what they heard/remembered.

Add to these the absence of any discernible difference between "litSilkhorn" and "real Silkhorn" as seen in his own narration.

Again, plausible in terms of pastiche, if we may assume that these chapters are pastiche and not stolen.

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.

The only problem with this being that, as far as I can tell, Wolfe doesn't believe in objective narrative.

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).

Well, we've known since mid-OBW that SHORT is "edited" by the kids.

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

Adam Stephanides — 07 Mar 2001, 12:26 · follows Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

A very thought-provoking post. I have my doubts that you'll be able to naturalize the children's authorship of the third-person sections, but I've made some comments below.

on 3/6/01 11:20 AM, Dan'I Danehy-Oakes at ddanehy at siebel.com wrote:
they seem designed to reveal the
character of (Pas)silkhorn

No Pas! Pas bad!

rather than that of Hoof-Hide-Daisy-Vadsig;
and that just doesn't make a great deal of sense.

Indeed. Moreover, if they do reveal the characters of Hoof-Hide-Daisy-Vadsig, it's not clear why we should care. None of them are particularly interesting as characters, at least judging by what we see of them.

The exemplum prima inter pares would of course be Severian, whose elisions damn near _are_ THE BOOK OF THE NEW SUN; but it's true of every first-person narrator from Number 5 to Holly Hollander.

You'll have to elaborate on this sometime; this is the first suggestion I've seen that there is more to PANDORA than appears on the surface.

Can their brief interruptions in OBW, conspicuously absent from IGJ, contribute? Really, all they have to add is a few [Sic]s and one note that Nettle has read OBW.

-- But this fact, in and of itself, suggests that there is a significant gap of time between Silkhorn's implosion therapy at Remora's hands and the departure to return one more time to the _Whorl_. OBW is a big book and not fast reading in print; it would take Nettle some significant time to read it in holograph, esp. under the circumstances prevalent on Lizard at the time. I should expect a minimum of a month or two: plenty of time for Silk(horn) to maunder to the children over "poor Pig" and so on.

I may be missing something, but I don't get your point here. Is it stated that Nettle read the book while "Horn" was present? I don't have the book with me, but I doubt that it is. In any case, we are specifically told that none of the children except Daisy saw Silk after the meeting with Remora.

Well, then. Given that time frame, let's take this as a hypothesis: the children's decision to (deliberately) continue the (unconscious) tactic of PSH's text and conceal the identity of PasSilkHorn, and the Tomato Surprise ending, constitute _their_ idea of a subtle literary device; which is why it is so clumsily handled. It's pretty damned obvious long before RttW begins that "the narrator of" OBW/IGJ is wandering around in Silk's body, neh?

Yes, it's obvious that the narrator is in Silk's body. What is not obvious is that he is Silk. At least I don't recall anybody suggesting it on this list, although there was some speculation that "Horn" had acquired some of Silk's attributes along with his body.

Let's take it as given that they have not had the full benefit of a liberal education. Is this possible; more importantly, is it plausible? Would and could they have done this? "Would" is hard, and reverts to the question of character; as for "could" -- I can only refer you to the huge number of "primitive" narratives in the "real" world that use some startlingly sophisticated techniques.

I don't believe that the surprise is clumsy (what is clumsy is the way Wolfe/the children hammer us over the head with evidence that "Horn" is Silk every few pages). When you examine closely what Wolfe/the children do, it becomes clear how sophisticated it is. They certainly don't hide evidence that "Horn" is Silk. On two occasions characters come right out and say that he's Silk. And Chapter Four is even entitled "He Is Silk." But what they do is arrange it that the

unsuspecting reader (of whom I was one) discounts all this. Since the narrator of the first-person sections, and the point-of-view character of the third-person sections, always (except for a few slips) thinks of himself as Horn, we naturally believe him. What is more, we know what Horn knows and the other characters don't: the story of Horn's "spirit transference," which (we think) explains why everyone thinks that Horn is Silk. The "He Is Silk" chapter title, if we notice it (I didn't on first reading), we assume reflects the viewpoint of the other characters (this is the chapter in which Hound, Tansy and Pig discuss how he's Silk) and possibly also Horn's dream in which Pig turns out to be Silk. And with all "Horn" thinking of himself as Horn, and insisting that he is Horn, and with the third-person sections alternating with first-person sections, we never notice that the narrator of the third-person sections never refers to "Horn" as Horn. What they have done, in essence, is to leave the narrator's identity ambiguous, while hiding the fact that they have done so: "concealing by revealing," to use your phrase above. I would argue that this is not only quite sophisticated, but it is sophisticated in a very particular sense: one that demonstrates familiarity with the techniques of modern fiction, and assumes such familiarity in its readers. I'm sure you know more about the history of narrative techniques than me, but I suspect that neither an eighteenth-century novel nor a traditional epic poem, to take just two examples, would ever refer to the protagonist in a third-person narrative only as "he", or employ alternating first- and third-person narration without any explanation (at the time), let alone use these devices for the type of legerdemain described above.

In any case, I suspect that the sophisticated "primitive" narratives you refer to are either long-polished folk narratives, or told by specialized storytellers, neither of which applies here.

Assuming that they could, and that would defers us to the question of character, the immediate critical question is now reduced to this:

Does Mr Wolfe deliberately commit a narrative clumsiness because his narrators would do so? And if so, is this subtle or clumsy on Mr Wolfe's part?

My answers are:

1) No, because he doesn't commit a narrative clumsiness at all.

2) If he did intend the surprise to be deliberately clumsy, then it was clumsy, not subtle, on his part, both because the clumsiness of the surprise is not clear, and because he's inconsistent the third-person sections are elsewhere clearly quite sophisticated (reread the third-person sections of Chapter One). Even if these objections didn't apply, Wolfe's strategy would still be wrongheaded: he'd be sabotaging the structure of the book to make the trivial point that the children are clumsy narrators.

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.)

So I see these possibilities:

1. Someone else (most likely "the Narrator") wrote the third-person chapters and the kids (for whatever reason) take credit for it.

Silkhorn is the only plausible candidate; but there's no indication that he wrote these sections, or is even aware of their existence. And why would the children take credit for the third-person sections but not for the first-person sections?

2. The kids, in collaboration, are able to pastiche the style of "the Narrator" in a way that they individually cannot.

3. Writing these sections they deliberately pastiche "the Narrator"; writing in their own voices they don't.

I don't think that pastiche is an accurate description. While I'd have to reread the book to make sure, it's my impression that at its fanciest (e. g. the passage I quoted), the prose of the third-person segments is more complex than anything written by Silkhorn. In any case, why would the children want to pastiche Silkhorn's style, if they're going to acknowledge at the end that they wrote the third-person segments?

is there some
good reason why they would claim to have written something they did
not?

The second question, again, devolves into the question of character,
and "what does this reveal?"

And "who cares?"

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.

(...assuming, of course, that the inferences made here have been the correct ones...)

True, but I can't think of any other plausible ones, and in any case Wolfe undoubtedly wants us to infer something.

Simple supposition, which slips nicely under Occam's rule: this is how PSH narrated it to the kids, and they, failing to make the correct inferences, repeated what they heard/remembered.

Surely Hide or Hoof would have asked Silkhorn what was so special about Pig's ears, and there's no reason for Silkhorn not to have told them (and if there was, Silkhorn would have omitted Pig's words).

Add to these the absence of any discernible difference between "litSilkhorn" and "real Silkhorn" as seen in his own narration.

Again, plausible in terms of pastiche, if we may assume that these chapters are pastiche and not stolen.

Yes; I did not mean that this was inconsistent with the passages being written by the children, but that it was another instance of the lack of anything distinctive about the passages to suggest that they were written by the children.

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.

The only problem with this being that, as far as I can tell, Wolfe doesn't believe in objective narrative.

That's why I put the scare quotes. It wasn't a very good choice of words anyway, but I think you know what I meant.

--Adam

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

on 3/6/01 1:11 PM, James Jordan at jbjordan4 at home.com wrote:
I guess we can hypothesize that the Narrator lived among
them for a year or so before leaving for the Whorl, and that much of
"their" style is drawn from transcripts of "his" narrations.

No and no. On the night he arrives in New Viron, Silkhorn makes his final "astral journey." Hoof tells us that "After that, Hide and Vadsig came ... for the wedding" (397); we aren't told how long an interval this "after that" indicates, but since Hoof goes on to say that there is nothing in this interval to write about, it can't have been long. And Daisy tells us explicitly that her final meeting with Silk, the only time after the Remora interview that any of the children see him, took place "a few days" after the wedding. (410) And at this meeting Silk says that they are leaving that night. So the overall time from Silkhorn's arrival at New Viron to Silk's departure was almost certainly less than a month, and possibly a good deal shorter; and for some of this time Silk was not doing any reminiscing.

No transcripts either; if there had been, the editors, who are concerned to establish the accuracy of their account, would have said so. All they say is that Silkhorn "often" spoke of his time on the Whorl, and "we have recreated [it] to the best of our ability, based upon those conversations." (408) While this doesn't bear out mantis's description of the third-person sections as "fanfic," it does imply that minor details in the Whorl section, particularly individual lines of dialogue and what is said to be passing through Silkhorn's mind, cannot be trusted.

--Adam

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

Adam Stephanides — 07 Mar 2001, 23:41 · follows Adam Stephanides

on 3/7/01 6:20 PM, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes at ddanehy at siebel.com wrote:
I may be missing something, but I don't get your point here.
Is it stated that Nettle read the book while "Horn" was present?

Ummm... when else could she have read it? The only time
for her to read it (and for the children to know she has
read it and say so) is after "the Narrator" arrives but before
he departs -- because she departs with him. Ergo, he was in
New Viron long enough for her to read it.

Whoops--that little fact had completely slipped my mind. So your final sentence here is of course correct. I would still suggest, though, that this time period is not necessarily as long as you claimed in your original post ("a minimum of a month or two"). I finished RTTW in a few days, and Nettle would have had more motivation to read OBW quickly. As for the issue of handwriting, if the Narrator's handwriting is the same as Horn's she would have had a lot of practice reading it. Even if not, Silk's handwriting would presumably be of the same type as Horn's and hence fairly easy for her to read. And, given her presumed desire to find out who this guy is who claims to be her husband and has his memories, but doesn't look like him or talk much like him, she would probably not stop on a first reading to decipher every difficult word, which would make things go quicker.

--Adam

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