

Third-person sections in RttW

The Whorl list — 8 messages, 5 voices, 01 Apr 2001

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/whorl/1312>

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Adam Stephanides — 01 Apr 2001, 22:01

I've been trying to approach the problem of the third-person sections from a different angle, by asking why they are there at all. When you think about it, their presence is strange. After all, the editors' primary aim is to publish "the protagonist's" memoir. I can't think of any real-life examples in which the editors of a memoir have supplemented it with a novelistic reconstruction of episodes missing from the memoir (although I'm sure that now that I've said this, somebody will come up with one). If the editors simply wanted to fill in the gaps in Horn's story, a straightforward account the length of Horn's chapter summarizing his career on Green would have sufficed. Why compose an extended "re-creat[ion]" from Horn's perspective, many of the details of which must be invented? Especially since, by failing to specify what is invention and what isn't, the editors cast doubt upon everything in their re-creation.

The only clue to the editors' motives I'm aware of is their statement in the Afterword: "What is most certain is the point most frequently doubted by those who have read earlier drafts of the present volume: that he abandoned his search for Silk in order that his chance-met friend's vision might be restored." And they continue to argue this for ten more lines. This suggests to me that the editors wrote the third-person sections precisely in order to "prove" this claim, a proof that a factual account presumably would not have supplied and that their earlier drafts did not.

But what, precisely, was the doubt the editors were trying to refute? Was it the view held by many on this list that the protagonist gave up his eye so he could download Silk-in-Pig, and hence was continuing, not sacrificing his quest? Perhaps, but I don't know why the editors would go to such lengths to refute this view. It seems more likely to me that they were refuting claims that the protagonist had not sacrificed his eye at all: that he had just lost his eye somehow, later abandoned his quest, and invented the story of the bargain with Hari Mau and sacrificed eye to excuse his abandonment. The continuation of the paragraph, with its insistence that Horn acted only from the most honorable motives, and may not have been abandoning the quest after all, makes more sense if directed against such a claim.

But this is where my reasoning stops. Lacking any independent account of the protagonist on Whorl, and lacking the earlier drafts, we don't know what incidents, if any, were invented or altered by the editors to make the protagonist's sacrifice more convincing. Nor do I see how this hypothesis would explain the anomalous features of the third-person sections I and others have pointed out. Perhaps someone else can carry this line of attack forward.

About those anomalous features, incidentally: Rostrum wrote:
Folks have complained that Horn's children wouldn't write that way, that it is implausible that they would write a narrative that deliberately hides the protagonist's identity until the "gotcha" moment at the very end where they write, "Silk nodded."

I think this is a misunderstanding. I think Horn's kids faced the same problem that drives us to write about "Hornsilk" or "Silkhorn," that they believed that this man was somehow both Silk and Horn and that rather than

use some awkward amalgam name like Passilk, they just didn't call him anything until the point in the story where he had changed and it then seemed appropriate just to call him Silk.

But there are ways of indicating that the protagonist is both Horn and Silk without using amalgams like "Silkhorn." And while the editors' suppression of any name but "he" leaves the protagonist's identity ambiguous in retrospect, it doesn't read that way at the time. Since "Horn" protests that he is Horn throughout, and since the third-person sections give us (we think) access to "Horn's" mind which seemingly bears out his claim, we accept his claim at face value (at least I did). So the failure to identify the protagonist is deceptive in effect. And I have a hard time believing the editors wouldn't have recognized that and taken steps to correct it.

--Adam

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

Michael Straight — 02 Apr 2001, 09:36 · follows Adam Stephanides

On Sun, 1 Apr 2001, Adam Stephanides wrote:

If the editors

simply wanted to fill in the gaps in Horn's story, a straightforward account the length of Horn's chapter summarizing his career on Green would have sufficed.

The simplest explanation seems to me that Nettle was interested in the Whorl, so Horn talked a lot about what happened in the Whorl amongst his family but very little about the events of OBW and IGJ. So much that the kids had lots of material, much more than a chapter, and decided to incorporate all of it into the book.

They must have decided to model the third book on the first one, which switches back and forth from present to past. Book two has some flashbacks, but book three, as the Narrator wrote it, has almost none. So they may have written the Whorl stuff the way they did to make book three better match the other two.

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Every single person Hornsilk meets in the Whorl recognizes him as Silk and treats him like Silk. Oreb identifies him on almost every page. Short of adding editorial comentary (e.g. "'My name is Horn,' said the hybrid person, not realizing that it was Horn's spirit inhabiting Silk's body."), I don't know what more the editors could have done. And I'm not sure they were confident enough in what had happened to supply that kind of statement even if they had wanted to write that way.

-Rostrum

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Adam Stephanides — 02 Apr 2001, 20:04 · follows Michael Straight

on 4/2/01 8:36 AM, Michael Straight at straight at email.unc.edu wrote:
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family but very little about the events of OBW and IGJ. So much that the
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incorporate all of it into the book.

Then why not include Horn's conversations on his time on Whorl as conversations, like the
Hoof-penned chapters?

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flashbacks, but book three, as the Narrator wrote it, has almost none. So
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This would make perfect sense if the editors were writing a novel. But, at the risk of becoming
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treats him like Silk. Oreb identifies him on almost every page.

All that showed was that Horn was in Silk's body, which was already clear. It fails to convey that
the protagonist is, in spirit, as much Silk as Horn. (Of course, some people on this list don't
believe that this was true until after Pig gets his eye; but there are third-person sections taking
place after that event, and they refer to the protagonist in the same way.)

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adding editorial comentary (e.g. "'My name is Horn,' said the hybrid
person, not realizing that it was Horn's spirit inhabiting Silk's body."),
I don't know what more the editors could have done.

And why shouldn't they add editorial commentary? They're editors, after all. And they do add
editorial commentary; they just wait until after Wolfe has sprung his surprise.

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were confident enough in what had happened to supply that kind of
statement even if they had wanted to write that way.

They could have said that, too, in that case.

--Adam

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Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 03 Apr 2001, 07:49 · follows Adam Stephanides

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This would make perfect sense if the editors were writing a novel. But, at the risk of becoming tedious, they're not.

Also, at the risk of being obvious, the structure of Book Three does not significantly match that of Book One -- in RttW, the flashbacks are separated from the "present" narrative by chapter breaks; in OBW, they are integrated and occasionally difficult to separate from them.

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James Jordan — 09 Apr 2001, 20:32 · follows Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

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--Adam

though this has been discussed to death, you do bring another slant to it. Wolfe is more than capable of tricking us and reversing our expectations at the end of this trilogy. But are the editors of the 3d person sections? Why would they do this? As you note, such tricking makes little sense. I persist in suspecting that the Narrator is really mainly Horn, though in Silk's body, and that this is who he continues to be. But at this point, I'm reduced to little more than a suspicion, because of the effective way everyone here has beaten me up over this. And I'll bring this up again, since nobody commented on in when I brought it up the first time. I cannot find the place, but at one point the Narrator, having been accused of being Silk for the nth time, looks for a scar he expects to find on Silk's body, and claims not to find it, thereby reassuring himself that he is not Silk. Of course, it is pretty clear that he is in Silk's body, and is partly Silk; but he himself thinks he has reasons to dismiss the views of everyone around him.

Nutria the Nut

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

William Ansley — 10 Apr 2001, 23:59 · follows James Jordan

At 8:32 PM -0500 4/9/01, James Jordan wrote:

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I don't think you are going to get much help from this memory, which is inexact, if I have found the passage you are thinking of. I believe the passage you refer to is the one on page 188 of RttW:

... I actually pushed back my sleeve to look for the scars his beak had left on Silk's arm. Needless to say, they were not there--it was Silk, not I, who fought the white-headed one ...

This seems promising, but this scene takes place during an astral journey to Green, when Silk|Horn* is searching for Jahlee. I don't think we can base any firm conclusions about identity based on whether Silk|Horn's astral body has scars or not. And I don't think Silk|Horn rationally could either.

By the way, no matter how much anyone reading this appreciates and admires the BotSS, I don't think anyone will deny that the elaborate structure Wolfe uses in these books makes finding a specific passage a royal pain in the ... neck.

William Ansley

*This is my new invention. The vertical bar stands for "or" in many math and computer-science related notations.

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Michael Straight — 11 Apr 2001, 08:23 · follows William Ansley

On Tue, 10 Apr 2001, William Ansley wrote:

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The worst novel I've ever read in that respect is Cryptonomicon by Neil Stephenson. It jumps back and forth between two timelines and the the two timelines jump around from various perspectives and are very episodic, so even after you've just read it, when you're looking for a specific passage it's almost impossible to figure out if it is before or after the passage you've opened the book to. One of the few books I absolutely needed a bookmark for when I was reading it.

-Rostrum

(I found Cryptonomicon hilarious and highly entertaining, btw. The story's not much, but the writing is so much fun I didn't care--forget the story, give me more digressions on organ-pipe computers or mathematical models for divvying up inheritance!)

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James Jordan — 11 Apr 2001, 13:48 · follows Michael Straight

At 11:59 PM 4/10/2001 -0400, you wrote:

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William Ansley

Good point. That was the passage I remembered, and as part of an astral journey, it clearly does not count for what I thought it might. I stand correctified.

Nutria

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