

Wolfe in the Mist

This paper will investigate the idea of history as collective memory. It will use Gene Wolfe's novel *Soldier of the Mist* as the primary lens by which to do this, as the novel establishes situations clearly analogous to the problems presented by historical writing and its relevance to the current generation of readers. We are concerned not so much with how Gene Wolfe presents the world of ancient Greece, but more with how the setting and events help us to understand what history is, what problems it presents, how we should use and understand history, and why we should care.

Latro, the main character of the novel wakes beneath a windblown tent, to the sound of foreign voices and harsh words shouted above the drumming of marching feet. Dust cloys at his tongue and throat and an ache pounds at his head, which he soon learns is a terrible wound that he has suffered during a great battle fought between the forces of the Great King and the Greeks. A doctor reveals to him that his wound has caused him not just physical harm but has also impaired his memory; Latro can remember only the most recent twenty-four hours of his life. The doctor gives him a scroll and a lead pencil and instructs him to write down at the end of every day everything that has happened to him. In this way, by reading his scroll every morning, Latro will be able to circumvent his impaired memory.

Of course, numerous, and often insurmountable problems immediately arise: what if Latro cannot read his scroll every morning, or if he is unable (or unwilling) to write down everything that has occurred during the past twenty-four hours? How does Latro know that he has not lied or invented things when reading what he wrote of his past "life"? One of the twists of the novel is that Latro encounters supernatural creatures, including gods and goddesses who

seem to view him as a pawn in their power games. Are these visions real or is Latro's wound causing him to hallucinate?

At this point the connections may be becoming obvious: Latro is the present generation, able to know and understand only what it has lived through and remembers (the past 24 hours), and his scroll is the historical writings that have been passed down to that present generation. The problems that Latro faces in reading, producing, and using his scroll are the same problems that readers of history must confront. And it is this that the paper intends to investigate more fully. By using Wolfe's novel as a basis for our study, we will be grounded in a concrete and understandable framework – that of an individual – and then apply that framework onto the collective experience and understanding of history.

The goal of this paper is not to solve these issues, but instead to examine them from a different perspective that may be more personable and human than the theoretical groundwork that is often applied to such questions. It is my hope that this paper will be both entertaining and enlightening, and that it will stimulate new discourse by its unique perspective and its lively engagement with a fascinating and complex novel.

Works Cited

Wolfe, Gene. *Soldier of the Mist*. New York, N.Y.: T. Doherty Associates, 1986.