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Scholars Communicate Meaning

*S* and the Power of Writing

*S* is a book about the power of writing. It is a book in which the words on the page transcend the familiar rows of jet-black, parallel lines. Every inch of the physical object is covered in writing, from the internal novel to the red, blue, green, yellow, and purple handwritten notes in the margins. The great mystery of *S* revolves around an enigmatic writer and a group of subversive authors. Within the pages of *S* there are many different stories, but in each story writing plays a vital role. In *Ship of Theseus*, the book within the book, the act of writing and books themselves are powerful recurring images. *Ship of Theseus* evokes a fascination and even a reverence for books. Books are stolen away and safely transported. Pages of books are placed in the pockets of murder victims. A mysterious book called *The Archer’s Tale* captivates the imagination of the protagonist. The eponymous ship carries a secret, ritualistic writing, writing that drains the writers but seems to be of the utmost importance, and perhaps even offers prophetic powers. The fictional author of *Ship of Theseus,* the mysterious V. M. Straka, is hunted down because of his writing. Straka’s companions are all writers, and, like Straka, are persecuted because of their writing. In this world, words have consequences and enormous power. Words have the power to instill fear in the hearts of corrupt tyrants. Words have the ability to inspire dangerous and subversive rebellion. Finally, the act of writing, for the dutiful readers of *Ship of Theseus,* creates love. The two readers, Jen and Eric, spend weeks communicating entirely through their handwritten notes in margins of the book. Their relationship grows around the written word; they come to know each other and love each other through their notes. Writing has enormous power for every character and in every dimension of *S.* Writing is an act that unites people, offers beauty and reflection, and creates order and hope in a chaotic world.

*S* operates on three levels. The first level is the novel *Ship of Theseus*, which follows the protagonist S. on a quest for identity and purpose. The second level is the mystery of V. M. Straka, the fictional author of *Ship of Theseus.* Straka is portrayed as a prolific, early 20th century writer, but his exact identify is unknown. The only information about Straka comes from the editor of *Ship of Theseus,* F. X. Caldeira’s footnotes and Jen and Eric’s margin notes. Jen and Eric inhabit the third level of *S.* Jen and Eric are the readers of *Ship of Theseus,* and their notes cover almost every single page of the novel. They discuss *Ship of Theseus,* Straka, and one another. In examining the power of writing in *S* it is crucial to analyze all three levels.

From the first chapter of *Ship of Theseus* it is clear that the symbol of the book will play a significant role in the novel. While wandering around alone in search of his memories, S stumbles into a tavern and notices a young woman reading a book. In the corner of the noisy tavern the woman is reading “a large volume, as thick as *Don Quixote”* (S. 16). The figure of the contemplative reader is an interesting juxtaposition to the chaos of the surrounding environment. The book seems to effectively remove the reader from the chaotic tavern scene.

Upon observing the woman S. feels as though he has found “a kindred spirit” (S. 17). S., who knows nothing about himself, feels such an immediate and strong connection to this unknown woman. Somehow he feels drawn to her, and at the center of this first encounter is a book. When S. sits down with the woman he notices that the book is called *The Archer’s Tales*, by Arquimedes de Sobreiro. It is a book that will reappear throughout the *Ship of Theseus* and obsess S., but in the beginning of the novel it helps to connect S. with the woman that he will later come to love.

When S. is taken to the city of El-H– he finds himself in an enormous building filled with books. “Books, folios, and loose pages,” are all being organized and kept safe. There are also scrolls and paintings, all being protected while the city above is under siege. When S. asks what the building is, his guide, Osfour, responds that it is “ a safe place for beautiful things” (S. 240). A hopeless war is destroying the city of El-H–, and the men and women in this building have taken it upon themselves to protect precious pieces of art and stories that would be recklessly destroyed otherwise. S., however, is skeptical, wondering why no one is getting ready to fight. Osfour simply tells him, “It’s not that kind of resistance” (S. 241). While physically fighting is one way to attempt to counter the oncoming invasion, Osfour and the rebels of El-H– present an alternate solution. They are not simply salvaging paintings and books for the sake of art; rather, these objects are seen as integral to the resistance. Books, paintings, and other storytelling objects seem to be offering power against oppressive, seemingly unbeatable forces.

When S. is leaving the city of El-H– he is attacked by a mysterious man. S. strikes back against his assailant with the only object in his possession: a pen. He stabs the man’s neck with the sharp pen, killing the man (S. 255). This is the first time in *Ship of Theseus* that S. has killed another person, and it is noteworthy that S. uses a pen as his weapon. This is a symbolic choice on the part of the author, as the pen, normally a passive object, becomes an instrument of death. A common implement of writing is given immense power, life-saving power in fact.

Later in *Ship of Theseus* S. continues to discover the power of writing. For much of the novel S. has been obsessed with the mysterious activity that occurs on the orlop deck of the ship. Sailors disappear into the orlop deck and emerge three hours later, somewhat drained and conveying “muted expressions of pain” (S. 57). S. eventually breaks into the orlop deck and discovers a table with paper, a pen, and ink (S. 295). The mystery of the orlop deck has finally been revealed. The sailors spend hours every day pouring their stories onto paper, perhaps even pouring pieces of themselves.

Upon discovering the truth of the orlop deck S. himself sits down and writes. He immediately feels that this writing is “a glorious thing” (S. 295). He is amazed by how easily his words are able to flow from his mind to the pen and finally onto the page. He loses track of time and space, enthralled by “the primeval pleasure of expression” (S. 296). Writing, or storytelling, offers S. the only bliss that he will ever achieve throughout the pages of *Ship of Theseus.*

Unfortunately, writing seems to come at a price on the strange ship, it has consequences. When the sailors find S. they restrain him and sew his lips shut. S. becomes like the other sailors, silently working on the ship and every now and then going down to the orlop to “open a vein of ink and spill himself into those pages” (S. 306). Writing is not a simple task of putting words onto paper; writing is an unforgiving opening of oneself, a transference of thought and feeling to the outside world. Not only does writing enable S. to communicate his feelings, but it allows him to connect to the stories and lives of others. He “chronicles the suffering he has seen and that of which he has only heard” (S. 309). S.’s task is not simply to write for himself, but to write for others, to give voices to the voiceless.

In many ways the character of S. can be seen as analogous to V. M. Straka, the enigmatic author of *Ship of Theseus.* Both grapple with their identity, both are hunted by oppressive forces, and both struggle to fit love into their conspiratorial lives. In addition, both are writers. While it is obvious that Straka is a writer, it is important to note this connection between him and S. Writing is a powerful weapon for both S. and Straka. In *Ship of Theseus* books are symbols of resistance and S.’s writing immortalizes stories and people that would otherwise be forgotten. Straka’s writing is art, but it is also intensely subversive.

When S. kills the man in El-H– with a pen, Eric writes in the margins, “Pen as weapon. Exactly what VMS would believe” (S. 255). Straka believed in the power of the pen. While a pen actually kills a man in *Ship of Theseus,* it also has immense symbolic value in Straka’s life. Straka is hunted down and pursued because of his subversive, radical writings. Many people and governments wanted Straka dead, including “Soviets, US gov’t, Nazi bitter-enders, some Balkan factions” (S. 60). Straka’s books and revolutionary ideas were enough to make him an enemy to some of the most powerful nations in the world.

Straka was not the only subversive writer who was hunted down because of his writing. Straka was part of a group called The S composed of other (fictional) writers like him. The group included writers Torsten Ekstrom, Tiago García Ferrara, Victor Martin Summersby and Amante Durand (S. viii-ix). The members were from around the globe, but each was a writer, and many were eventually killed because of their ideas. The S was a radical group, “a collective of writers thinking about how they could change the world” (S. 169).However, instead of using violence to achieve their goals, The S employed the power of writing. The S used their writing to fight against men like Hermès Bouchard, an armaments manufacturer with immense power. In S*hip of Theseus,* the character of Vévoda is clearly meant to resemble Bouchard. As the antagonist of the novel, Vévoda becomes rich and powerful by selling advanced weaponry to countries and groups, and has a legion of agents who assassinate his enemies and terrorize entire cities. In writing about the fictional Vévoda, Straka, the fictional writer, is in fact writing about Bouchard, perhaps in an attempt to reveal to the world the nefarious machinations of the “Bouchard Empire” (S. 90).

For Straka, for The S, and for S. writing is a weapon, a way to fight against seemingly unbeatable forces like Bouchard and Vévoda. Writing is not a passive act; writing drains S. and the other sailors, and writing makes Straka and The S international targets. Writing seems to be coupled with risk. Straka could not hope to combat Bouchard without endangering himself. Therefore, while writing can give great power, it also makes the writer immensely vulnerable. In using words as weapons the writer must be prepared to bare his or her soul on the page.

The third level of *S* exists in the notes written by Eric and Jen, the two readers of *Ship of Theseus.* Almost every single page of the novel is covered in (what are meant to look like) handwritten notes. The notes written in cursive are Jen’s and the ones in print are Eric’s. For weeks Eric and Jen get to know each other solely through their margin notes, and even after they finally meet they continue to communicate primarily through the book. Initially this is because Eric is afraid that his emails and phone calls are being traced, but eventually it becomes clear that this system of writing itself is incredibly important for both Jen and Eric.

Jen, an undergraduate literature major at Pollard State University, and Eric, a former graduate student, meet though the pages of *Ship of Theseus.* The moment Jen picks up Eric’s copy of the novel and writes her first note their relationship and their adventure begins. While Eric and Jen’s early annotations focus on deciphering Straka and his writing, Jen and Eric quickly begin to write about and reveal themselves. An important moment for Eric is when he tells Jen his real name (S. 10). Eric has been expunged from the school and is cautious about using his real identity. By telling Jen his real name Eric is starting to allow himself to be honest. As with S. and with Straka, writing makes Jen and Eric vulnerable.

In their writing to one another Jen and Eric communicate their emotions in ways that they have never done before. They learn about each other’s fears and dreams, about past traumas and current anxieties. Not long into the novel Eric declares in large print, “Jen: I like you” (S. 83). Jen is skeptical, arguing that they know very little about each other. Eric disagrees, writing, “I know the you who’s in the margins” (S. 83). For Eric, the written word is enough. He does not need to meet Jen to fall in love with her. Eric and Jen have opened themselves up to each other in the margins, and perhaps their writing allows them to be more honest than if they had been speaking to one another. As Eric writes to Jen, “I know you’ve tried harder to understand me than anyone has in a long time” (S. 83). Like S., Eric and Jen spill their souls on the page. Their understanding of one another is facilitated through the written word.

Writing in the margins of *Ship of Theseus* does more than just develop Eric and Jen’s relationship. Even when Eric leaves for Brazil, Jen continues to write in the book. When Eric first leaves Jen writes a note to tell him what she wants to work on while he is gone, before remembering that he won’t be able to read her notes until he gets back. She reflects on her own writing, noting, “guess I’ve gotten to the point where this is comforting, even if I’m just talking to myself” (S. 167). Writing has become a familiar ritual for Jen, just as it is for S. in the orlop deck. While most of Jen and Eric’s notes are clearly about Straka or *Ship of Theseus* or their own lives, their writing is more that just an exchange of information and ideas. Their writing is comforting, therapeutic, and honest.

Both Jen and Eric live in uncertainty. Eric was expunged from graduate school, does not have a job, and is racing against his old academic advisor while secretly working on the most controversial author of the 20th century. The money that Eric does have comes from an unknown organization simply known as Serin. Jen, meanwhile, is only months away from the end of her last semester. It is unclear whether she will pass her classes and graduate. Even if she does graduate she has no idea what she will do after college. In addition, Jen and Eric are dealing with unknown, sinister forces that seem to be attempting to hinder their work on Straka. In the midst of immense uncertainty and chaos, writing is the only constant. Even when Jen and Eric are physically together they continue to write notes to each other in the book. As Eric writes to Jen, “I can read your face and guess the tone of the note you’ve just written” (S. 454). The act of writing is the one thing that is consistent while their relationship and the world around them continue to evolve.

One way to examine the power of writing in *S.* is to analyze S., Straka, Jen, and Eric as writers. Many scholars have written about the purpose of writing, and many writers have written about why they write. George Orwell, for example, wrote about four possible motivations for writers. The first is “sheer egoism,” that some writers seek fame and recognition for their words. The second motivation is “aesthetic enthusiasm,” a love of words and the desire to communicate the beauty of the external world. The third is a “historical impulse,” a desire to record the truth of the world. The final motivation for writing that Orwell suggests is “political purpose,” some writers use words to influence the beliefs of the readers.

Orwell’s four motives for writing can be applied to the writers of *S.* Straka is an egotistical writer, one who wrote prolifically and gained great renown. Straka never wanted to be famous for his writing, however, and it makes more sense to describe Straka as a writer motivated by history. In his writing he sought to reveal societal corruption in the character of Vèvoda.Jen can certainly be seen as an aesthetic writer. She frequently makes note of words that she likes or finds beautiful or interesting, such as “skullduggery” (S. vi). Eric’s desire to publish his finding on Straka may be a bit egotistical, but he also cares deeply about the historical truth. S. is a chronicler of stories and lives, perhaps motivated by truth and history.

Writing in *S,* however,does not always serve a clear purpose. The characters’ motivations for writing are not always apparent, consistent, or purposeful. Often writing seems to be based more in primal emotion than premeditated reason. S.’s writing, for example, makes him experience memories and stories he has never felt before. The writing in the orlop deck brings him and the other sailors great pain. Straka writes because it is the only way he knows how to change the world. For Jen and Eric writing is deeply personal and emotional; it is the manifestation of their fears and their love on the page. The characters are intensely connected to their writing.

Joan Didion has a different definition of what it means to write. She describes a writer as “a person whose most absorbed and passionate hours are spent arranging words on pieces of paper.” This simpler formulation expands the power of writing beyond Orwell’s four motives. For Didion, writing is an expression of one’s passion, as seen in S.’s intense writing. S. pours himself onto the page when he writes, figuratively and literally using his blood as ink. His writing is not so much a choice as it is a visceral need and experience. Straka’s writing was also a passionate process; he wrote for himself and did not care what others thought of his writing, even though he was hunted down because of his words. Perhaps the most emotional writers are Jen and Eric, whose deep love for one another develops through the process of writing. Indeed, Jen and Eric spend hours rearranging handwritten words on the page to communicate their emotions to one another.

As Henri-Jean Martin wrote, “writing is nothing by itself” (Martin 507). Martin wrote a book as large as *S* entirely on the power of writing. Martin argues that historically writing was “a means for dominating space,” and, “a tool for accumulating information about past times and for storing knowledge” (Martin 507). Many historians view the invention of printing as the beginning of the modern period of Western history (Martin 283). Clearly, writing has had a significant influence on the world. Still, it is important to remember that writing is a reflection of human actors. Writing can be a weapon, a device for recording, or a revolutionary technology, but it exists for and because of human individuals. With rapidly increasing technological advances writing and especially handwriting may change drastically; however, “beyond technology and institutions…there are human beings” (Martin 506).

Humanity and writing are deeply linked in *S.* Jen and Eric, Straka, and S. all exist in worlds dominated by immense institutions and powers. Jen and Eric are at the whim of their university and must also deal with mysterious groups trying to hinder their work. Straka’s world is controlled by men like Bouchard, whose empire influences countries around the globe. Similarly, S. and the characters of *Ship of Theseus* are tangled in Vévoda’s web. Every level of *S.* deals with monstrous, dehumanizing groups or institutions. The only power that the characters have comes from their writing. Even if they cannot directly fight against the oppressive powers, the writers of *S.* use books and writing to express themselves and assert their humanity. Although S., Straka, Jen, and Eric are all targeted, their words cannot be taken away.

On the surface *S* appears to be about mystery and intrigue. Indeed, what makes the book so enthralling is the plethora of puzzles, codes, and literary layers. The book is unique in its medium; it is not a two-dimensional novel like most books but rather has actual objects falling out from between the pages. However, the unusual medium is not simply exciting. Rather it reflects one of the most important themes of the novel. The book is filled with writing, more so than most books are. The practice of writing is central to *S.* One way to better understand the book is to appreciate the four main characters as writers. S., Straka, Jen, and Eric all have uncertain identities, yet they all share a passion for writing. S. writes to record the lives of those who have suffered. He writes with a mystical passion, and seems to physically leave some part of himself on the page. Straka writes as a way to fight against oppressive forces, and his writing unites him with other similarly subversive people. Eric and Jen write to one another first out of necessity, and later out of comfort and love. The act of writing enables Eric and Jen to be honest with one another. For all of the writers of *S.,* writing is a passionate but vulnerable process. Writing creates hope, courage, connection, and love. Amidst the chaos and ambiguity inherent in *S,* the power of writing is the only certainty, and it is the only constant in the lives of the characters.

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