Character Names in John Green and J. K. Rowling: A Comparison of Contemporary Novelists

Faith Sutherlin

Historic and linguistic meaning is often used for symbolic importance behind names in writing. This article discusses the analysis between two contemporary novels and the onomastic techniques that their authors use in character creation. This analysis contains a compiling of character names including techniques used in name creation.

Introduction

Many authors use semantic play, cultural associations, etymo-logical sources, self-naming, and sound play to choose names for characters in their novels. Historical fiction author Chris Crowe remarked emphatically, "The names I give are not just deliberate choices, they are *very* deliberate choices." So why exactly do authors such as Crowe invest so much thought, time, and energy into the names of their characters? These names serve to further characterization, to enhance symbolism, and to deepen the plot of their stories.

Method

It is truly fascinating to consider the treasures that can be gleaned from a single character's name. The main objective of my research is to compare and contrast the onomastic patterns of contemporary authors John Green and J. K. Rowling in regards to character nam-ing. I read and analyzed John Green's *Paper Towns* and studied analyses of Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone.* I then employed interviews to demonstrate how the authors use names to gives their characters more personality, imbue them with symbolic meaning, and enhance the plot, showing that their intentions sup-port my case. Throughout my analysis, I compiled a spreadsheet of character names used in *Paper Towns* and *Harry Potter*, includ-ing techniques used in name creation. The main databases that I utilized for semantic and background information on *Harry Potter* were *The Harry Potter Lexicon* and *MuggleNet.* In order to unearth similar information about character names in *Paper Towns*, the databases that I found most accommodating for semantics and etymological origins were *Behind the Name: the Etymology and History of First Names* and *Behind the Name: the Etymology and History of Surnames.* Direct information about motivations, background, and thought processes in regards to name creations was provided by interviews of John Green which are posted on his website. I expect to find comparable naming patterns between

authors John Green and J. K. Rowling because they are popular contemporary novelists, they write in similar registers geared toward the same audience, and they focus mainly on teen characters. I have provided a summary of each novel below.

Synopsis

John Green's *Paper Towns* is the story of a boy named Quentin, or Q, who has always worshipped the beautiful and popular Margo Roth Spiegelman. When she shows up in the middle of the night to take him on an adventure of revenge, he plunges into her world and serves as her getaway driver. However, Quentin soon becomes worried when Margo is absent from school the following day and is deemed a runaway. Quentin discovers clues that Margo has left for him, and he decides that it is his responsibility to find her. He and three friends embark on a spontaneous road trip in order to save Margo from herself, racing against the clock to reach her in time and end up missing their own high school graduation. However, they discover when they arrive that Margo is angry that she has been found, and Quentin ultimately realizes that she is not the girl he had imagined after all.

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone is the story of a young boy who grows up in the ordinary world and discovers he is a wizard on his eleventh birthday. A half-giant comes to rescue the orphaned Harry Potter from his negligent aunt and uncle and takes him to his rightful place at the wizarding school of Hogwarts. The evil wizard Lord Voldemort orchestrated the murders of both of Harry's parents, and even tried to kill Harry as a baby. As a result, Harry carries a distinctive scar in the shape of a lightning bolt on his forehead and holds a position of fame in the magical world as "The Boy Who Lived." Although the malicious Draco Malfoy first tries to befriend Harry at Hogwarts, Harry uses his own judgment to find his best friends, Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger. The threesome works together in order to thwart the plan of Lord Voldemort and his servant, who seek to steal the Sorcerer's Stone to increase Voldemort's strength. As a result, Harry, Hermione, and Ron protect the entire magical world from Voldemort's evil plans.

Semantic Symbolism

Green and Rowling both use extensive semantic play in order to add depth to their character names and plot. For example, the name "Margo Roth Spiegelman" offers many semantic treasures that enhance the plot of the novel of *Paper Towns* and imbue her character with symbolic meaning. The name "Margo" is derived from the Latin "Margarita," which means "pearl" (Campbell). This could certainly refer to Margo's beauty or exquisite value in the biblical allusion to the pearl of great price found in Matthew 13:45–46: "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchant man, seeking goodly pearls: "Who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had, and bought it" (T*he Holy Bible, King James Version*). This comparison is clear, as Margo certainly seems to be of much worth to Quentin, if no one else. Of her middle name, Green says, "Roth once meant *red* in German, and I wanted to give Margo (in the subtlest way possible since I have a color name and I didn't want people connecting her to me) a color name, because so much of the imagery in the novel is either black (black Santas) or white (the great white wall of cow)." Although the readers are most likely unaware of the meaning of Margo's surname and the symbolism that it carries, Green enlightens us by revealing that "Her last name, Spiegelman, means 'mirror maker' in German…And Margo functions as a mirror to the other characters in the novel; what they see when they look at Margo ends up saying a lot more about them than it says about Margo herself."

The theme of mirrors, glass, and reflections appears throughout the novel as Quentin searches for the *true* Margo, who is apparently not the person that he thought she was. In one instance, Quentin reflects on the many perspectives by which Margo is seen; he ponders, "I thought about my Margo, and Lacey's Margo, and Mrs. Spiegelman's Margo, and all of us looking at her reflection in different fun house mirrors" (185). Quentin's father, who is a psychologist, says the following during dinner: "The longer I do my job . . . the more I realize that humans lack good mirrors. It's so hard for anyone to show us how we look, and so hard for us to show anyone how we feel" (198). Quentin's mother, who is also a psychologist, comments on the human tendency to view others as fundamentally different from themselves, saying, "We idealize them as gods or dismiss

them as animals" (198). As Quentin listened, he thought, " . . . I was hearing something about her and about . . .mirrors" and later, as the metaphor hits him full-force as he realizes that "Margo was not an adventure. She was not a fine and precious thing. She was a girl" (199). Green explicitly states, "I needed Q to be isolated because I needed him to see himself in Margo when she talked about her own feelings of social isolation. Instead of actually *hearing* her when she's talking, all he's seeing is himself reflected back," which shows the importance of the semantic play on "Spiegelman."

The semantic symbolism of Margo Roth Spiegelman serving as a mirror to other characters is continued throughout the novel, which enhances the overall meaning of the story. When Q, Ben, Lacey, and Radar discuss where they think Margo may have gone, they all have varying views about her mindset and personality; Q remarks that there is "A Margo for each of us—and each more mirror than window" (202).

In much the same way as Green, Rowling uses semantic play to further the characterization of her fictional witches, wizards, and muggles (non-magical characters) in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. Albus Dumbledore, the headmaster of the illustrious wizarding school, Hogwarts, has a name which means "white bumblebee" (Spartz). His first name, which is a Latin word meaning "white," may indicate that he is on the side of good, which is conventionally represented by the color white and light, while evil is represented by the color black and darkness. In addition, Rowling tells us that "Dumbledore is an old English dialect word for bumblebee, because he is a musical person. And I imagine him humming to himself all the time" (Ark). This enhances the characterization of Albus Dumbledore by connecting his name with a love and passion for music; at one point he even proclaims "Ah, music . . . A magic far beyond all we do here!'" (298).

A semantic analysis of the name of Draco Malfoy, Harry Potter's nemesis in school, reveals a great deal about the way Rowling intended to characterize him as well. "Draco" is a constellation of a snake, which has historically been a symbol for the devil. This association gives Draco an immediate sense of maleficence. In addition, the adjective "Draconian," which means "cruel" or "harsh" has been derived from the story of "a Greek ruler named Draco who developed a system of severe punishments for the

smallest of crimes" (Spartz). According to *MuggleNet*'s information on his surname, "'Mal foi' means 'bad faith, an act with bad intentions, or a malicious act' in French.'" Concerning his actions within the novel, Ark's *The Harry Potter Lexicon* tells us that upon his first meeting with Harry, "Draco confided to Harry that he was planning on bullying his parents into buying him things he wanted . . . [and] When Draco saw Hagrid through the window of the shop, Draco spoke disparagingly of him, calling him an oaf and a servant." This displays the reader's first intimations of the evil heart of Draco Malfoy in *Harry Potter*, agreeing with the semantic analysis of his name, which serves to characterize him as an antagonist. It also foreshadows Draco's maleficence and cruelty in later novels against Harry and his friends.

Onomastics

Both Rowling and Green use onomastics to create cultural associations with their character names; Rowling tends to make historical or legendary associations, while Green has a fondness for pop culture connections. These associations to their onomastic choices give layers of meaning to the character names, which allows further characterization and plot development.

For example, *Paper Towns*' Margo Roth Spiegelman has a surname that is shared by famous cartoonist Art Spiegelman. Both possess a proclivity for creative capitalization. Art Spiegelman puts his name in all lowercase letters on all of his creations. Margo similarly takes liberties, saying, "Yeah, I'm a big believer in random capitalization. The rules of capitalization are so unfair to words in the middle" (32). This pop culture association allows Green to characterize Margo more fully by giving her an eccentricity unique to Art Spiegelman.

Radar, one of Quentin's best friends, has a name with a pop cultural association that serves to characterize his physical appearance in the novel. Marcus is Radar's *real* name, but this is only mentioned once in the entire novel. In relation to his physical description, the narrator explains the association with pop culture directly, saying that he "looked like a little bespectacled guy called Radar on this old TV show M*A*S*H . . ." and as a result, he has carried the name throughout high school (12).

Similarly, Rowling characterizes Ron Weasley, Harry Potter's best friend at Hogwarts, by a legendary association. *MuggleNet* informs us that the first name "Ron" is significant when taken in conjunction with the idea of King Arthur's Court. Ron was the name of one of the King's trusted advisors in Arthurian legend, and Compagnone and Danesi concur that "Ron is in fact a tactician and strategist and thus is indeed a well-counseled ruler." It is also noted that from a characterization standpoint, "Comparisons can be made here between Ron being an advisor to Harry on all of his choices and adventures. Both Ron and Hermione listen to Harry's plan and then either agree with or tell them why they think his idea is not a good one" (Spartz).

In addition, *Harry Potter*'s Albus Dumbledore is also associated with the following historical account: "Albinus was Governor of Britain at the death of the Emperor Pertinax. . . . Albinus attempted to seize the throne but ended up in alliance with another imperial contender, Septimius Severus" (Spartz). This creates an interesting connection between the characters of Albus Dumbledore and Severus Snape, a teacher at Hogwarts. This contributes to the plot of further novels because an alliance is made between Albus and Severus that affects the outcome of the most important battle of the entire series.

Etymology

Green and Rowling use character names with a wide range of etymological origins, although most are centered in the European region. This is evident based on both of Campbell's *Behind the Name* databases. For brevity, I will focus primarily on the analysis of the names mentioned in these databases. Green uses names of English, German, French, Danish, Irish, Scottish, Dutch, and Latin origins. Green's wide scope of origins could be partially attributed to his desire to be true to real life, since names of contemporary Americans are quite diverse in origin. While the etymology of Green's names is slightly more varied, Rowling appears to be more methodical in her choices because the majority of her names are derived from Latin, Greek, and Roman origins. This preference is not surprising, especially when you consider the aforementioned historical and legendary associations that are created by her

onomastic patterns. Rowling uses names of Latin, Greek, Roman, French, Dutch, and English origins. It is also relevant to note that Rowling has a propensity for fashioning her own names; these have no specific origins, but rather they are products of imagination. Despite slightly different preferences, it is evident that both Green and Rowling share a scope of diversity in regards to the etymological origins of their character names.

Both *Paper Towns* and the Harry Potter series contain instances of character self-naming. This technique, which occurs primarily within the plot of the novel, enhances the characters sense of power. In *Harry Potter,* the mere orphan-boy Tom Marvolo Riddle creates a name for himself as he seeks to gain magical power and to dominate the wizarding world with his evil followers. Croft explains that "Voldemort is extremely sensitive to the nuances of name power. His essential act of self-naming is a defining point in his life, dividing it into Before—when he was simply, Tom Marvolo Riddle, the poor but brilliant orphaned half-blood—and After, when through the magic act of rearranging the letters of his name, he declares 'I AM LORD VOLDEMORT'" (Croft 158).

Similarly, although on a smaller scale, the minor character Jefferson Jefferson of *Paper Towns* chooses to confer upon himself a title that gives him greater social status. The novel reads, "He was just an orange juice salesman named Jefferson Jefferson. When he became rich and powerful, he went to court, made 'Jefferson' his middle name, and then changed his first name to 'Dr.'" (4). Green explains further in an interview, asking readers to imagine themselves in Dr. Jefferson's situation, ". . . are you a doctor? Of course you're not. But then you also are a doctor, because everyone calls you doctor and everyone assumes you're a doctor," seeming to imply that by imposing upon yourself a name, you may, in fact, *become* what you long to be. This is certainly the aim of Voldemort and Dr. Jefferson Jefferson when they choose their new names.

Both Lord Voldemort of *Harry Potter* and Dr. Jefferson Jefferson of *Paper Towns* have similar characteristics, which can be gleaned from their acts of self-naming. These characters are

both power-seeking, consumed with the thought of superiority and riches. They also feel the need to reject their old selves in favor of a new, grander version of themselves. It is remarkable how the examples of Voldemort and Dr. Jefferson Jefferson parallel one another in regards to character-self naming, which is a technique that allows both authors to display the power of names in regards to plot and characterization.

Sound Play

From a phonetic standpoint, both Green and Rowling use alliterative sound play in character names, which allows them to comment on certain figures in interesting ways. In *Paper Towns*, the name Myrna Mountweazel demonstrates an aspect of silliness because of its alliterative nature. Myrna is Margo's dog, and this sort of name, at least within John Green's real-life setting, could surely be used only for a pet. Quentin describes her as "aging-but-always-enthusiastic" and Margo says, "Myrna Mountweazel has a freaking aneurysm whenever she catches sight of me" (111, 25). Green notes that he picked "Myrna" simply because it sounded good with Mountweazel; however, this deliberate use of the repetitive /m/ sound characterizes Myrna by making her seem silly—but likeable—as she scurries across the floor and stares through windows, "barking like crazy" (25).

An alliterative example from *Harry Potter* is the name Severus Snape, which is held by the rather cruel potions professor of Hogwarts. His harshness is displayed by his first comments to the new students in his class, saying "I can teach you to bottle fame . . . if you aren't as big a bunch of dunderheads as I usually have to teach" (102). Alliteration is not always and only for comic effect. In the case of Severus Snape, the repetitive /s/ sound is associated with the hissing of snakes, which is often associated with evil. Because Snape has always wanted the position of Defense Against the Dark Arts professor, he is associated with such ideas of evil. The alliteration also serves to associate the professor with the founder of his house at Hogwarts: Salazar Slytherin, whose symbol was the snake. The repetitive use of /s/ in his name is very noticable as well.

Conclusion

Overall, contemporary authors J. K. Rowling and John Green both create a strong focus on semantic play, employ cultural associations, draw names from a wide range of etymological origins, use instances of character self-naming, and pen alliterative sound play to enhance characterization and the plot of their novels through character names. While both authors create an emphasis on semantics, it is interesting to note that Rowling seems to imbue her names with more direct meaning, while Green chooses more subtle semantic relationships.

Additionally, although cultural associations are used in both novels as a method of characterization, one dissimilarity is that Rowling tends to use historical or legendary associations to characterize her fictional witches and wizards, while Green has more of an inclination for pop culture references. The two authors both draw from a wide range of etymological origins, although the vast majority of Rowling's names have roots of Latin, Greek, or Roman. The way in which Green and Rowling use character self-naming is equivalent; each character who renames himself does it to gain power, riches, or prestige, although Rowling's Lord Voldemort wants *magical* power rather than *social* power like Green's Dr. Jefferson.

Lastly, the alliterative sound play employed by Green and Rowling is utilized in differing ways; in one instance, it creates a sentiment of silliness, and in the other, a feeling of malevolence. Although they utilize many of the same onomastic methods to characterize and enhance the plot, these contemporary authors have distinct naming styles that allow them to create two very separate worlds and stories with unique and interesting characters. While the underlying framework may be very similar, the subtle nuances of John Green and J. K. Rowling in their naming patterns create truly unique and sensational novels.

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