

# all digression weekly 27

Written by Milton F. Stevens, 3989 Beverly Glen Blvd., Sherman Oaks, Calif. for the 47th distribution of Apa L at LASFS Meeting #1465. Mimeoed on the Labyrinth Mimeotaur.

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As an academic area, folklore is mid-way between literature and anthropology. Since they can not exert a critical influence on their subject matter, folklorists have had to develop different techniques for dealing with oral literature than would be used by a conventional literary critic. One folk tale might very well exist in several hundred minor variations, so it was necessary to deal with general subject matter rather than with details of presentation. In order to do this, Stith Thompson compiled his Motif Index of Folk Literature. In this case, a motif is the smallest divisible narrative unit.

In the index, motifs are organized in a numerical system much like a library organization of subject matter. If this system were applied to science fiction, the number 149 might be, "Heroine menaced by mad scientist." The preceding number might be, "Heroine menaced by dirty Un-American aliens." Sub-categories of both numbers would include how and why the heroine was being menaced. After establishing such an index, it is a fairly easy matter to express any plot in the folklore field as a numerical series. But it does require a considerable amount of study to do it, since the index is six volumes long.

A new story involves the rearrangement of motifs rather than the creation of new motifs. All of the major motifs were probably developed long before humans began to write and the sub-categories have been added because of technological and social changes rather than because of any literary discoveries. In a field such as science fiction which strives to find new material, I would estimate that about one new how or why sub-category is developed per hundred published stories.

Motifs are interesting little animals and quite pertinent to some forms of literature, however science fiction isn't one of them. Since characterization is a minor aspect of most science fiction stories, it is often presumed that added emphasis is placed on the plot. In some cases this is true, but in general characterization and plot merely form a vehicle for interesting scenery, weird cultures and cute gadgets. When I try to remember a science fiction story at a distance of several years, I find that I can often recall the background detail long after I have forgotten the plot and characters entirely. I tend to remember historical novels in the same way, whereas I generally remember either the plot or the characters of a standard novel.

The motif index is an accurate shorthand way of representing folk literature, but if someone wanted to construct a similar index for the science fiction field he would have to account for background material. This wouldn't be as difficult as it might seem, because most science fiction writers have projected elements of life on Earth and have not dealt with anything that is really alien. Some people maintain that if science fiction writers did develop situations that were truly alien that the readers would be unable to identify with the story. This is undoubtedly true, if the writer were to develop a completely alien environment. Alien elements would always have to be integrated with something that the reader could more readily understand.

There are only a relatively small number of alien planetary environments that have been used in science fiction. This number probably couldn't be expanded much, since there are only a limited number of environments that are likely to exist in the universe. With the exception of various forms of energy creatures, most of the alien life forms simply rearrange Terran zoological patterns. Since electricity and light both move, the idea of an energy creature is an easily accepted one. Science fiction writers have done some interesting things with symbiotic life forms, but this area is still so small that

it would present no problem to any would-be index maker.

Future and alien cultures are areas in which science fiction writers have really missed a bet. Not only haven't they cooked up any interesting new ones, they haven't even projected most of the weird cultures that have existed on Earth. It's amazing that writers haven't become bored with extra-terrestrial Romans, Egyptians and Nazis. There was one very interesting story that dealt with a humanoid culture which was similar to that of the Dobu. The Dobu are about the only example of a truly paranoid culture and it's rather doubtful that such a culture could ever reach the stage of space travel, but it was an interesting story anyway.

It has always bothered me that science fiction writers seem to presume that the cultural values of Western Civilization are the ultimate values to which all rational creatures would ascribe. They ignore the fact that if a person grows up in a particular culture that he will take on the values of that culture. Aldous Huxley was much more sophisticated in this respect when he brought in an outsider to criticize the culture of the brave new world. Most writers make their characters rebels within a society and have them deliver a criticism of their society's value system. This seldom happens. A person may criticize all sorts of things about his way of life but not the basic cultural values. Americans nearly never wonder whether they should kill their parents when their teeth fall out, yet there is a culture where it would be immoral to do otherwise. Whatever Americans find objectionable or contemptible is probably considered in a favorable light by some culture somewhere in the world. It might be interesting to construct a story about two cultures, both of which were alien to Western Civilization and alien to each other. Who needs reader identification anyway?

Technological background would present a greater problem than either cultural or environmental background in respect to indexing. Science fiction uses a lot of standard machinery (space ships, matter transmitters, time machines, blasters, super computers, etc.), but this machinery is subject to almost infinite variations. My first reaction would be to disregard these minor variations, but since many stories revolve around the solution of minor technical problems this can't be done with impunity. It's problems like this that make me glad that I generally don't go around indexing things. Any decision on this point would be somewhat arbitrary.

Even though it would be possible to create narrative and background motifs for the science fiction field, I doubt that anyone will construct such an index in the near future and if they did I can't think of any particular use for it. It might stimulate a little more originality or it might set permanent limits on the field. It's often interesting to look at a piece of writing from as many angles as possible and expansion and contraction are two ways of doing this. Even so, reducing a novel or a short story to a line of numbers may be carrying the idea too far.

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Comments on the 46th distribution.

Creath Thorne; Campbell has a less talented group of writers now than he did in the late forties, but the material he uses has always been fairly close to your definition of science fiction. I find that I can take only a limited amount of Analog/Astounding fiction before I start wanting something more out of a story. The thing I want more of is variety. Campbell has always maintained a high quality of writing, but his mind works like a machine and he tends to choose material from a limited part of the spectrum. Although Campbell probably has the most admirable record of any editor in the field, I think that H.L. Gold was a better editor because he could appreciate a wider variety of material. The Star anthologies showed that Frederick Pohl has this same ability, but it is not very apparent in the current issues of Galaxy or If.

It's good that I wrote something this week, because I really didn't have many mailing comments to make.