icles of the mean streets seem as true as, say, Dickens's murky portraits of London or Fitzgerald's and Hemingway's pictures of a decadent and corrupting society. And the private detective, a "man of honor in all things," seems as appropriate to his fiction as Natty Bumppo or the Arthurian knight. The hard-boiled detective novel, the romance thriller, clearly demonstrates a significant and meaningful relationship with some of the most important American literature; at its best, moreover, it possesses the thoughtfulness and artfulness of serious literary work. A valuable and interesting form, it presents a worthy alternative to the thriller of manners, and indicates the potency and durability of the national cultural vision, the American Dream, as it constantly metamorphoses into nightmare.

The Study of Literary Formulas

by John G. Cawelti

Formulas, Genres, and Archetypes

In general, a literary formula is a structure of narrative or dramatic conventions employed in a great number of individual works. There are two common usages of the term *formula* closely related to the conception I wish to set forth. In fact, if we put these two conceptions together, I think we will have an adequate definition of literary formulas. The first usage simply denotes a conventional way of treating some specific thing or person. Homer's epithets—swift-footed Achilles, cloud-gathering Zeus—are commonly referred to as formulas as are a number of his standard similes and metaphors—"his head fell speaking into the dust"—which are assumed to be conventional bardic formulas for filling a dactylic hexameter line. By extension, any form of cultural stereotype commonly found in literature—red-headed, hot-tempered Irishmen, brilliantly analytical and eccentric detectives, virginal blondes, and sexy brunettes—is frequently referred to as formulaic. The important thing to note about this usage is that it refers to patterns of convention which are usually quite specific to a particular culture and period and do not mean the same outside this specific context. Thus the nineteenth-century formulaic relation between blondness and sexual purity gave way in the twentieth century to a very different formula for blondes. The formula of the Irishman's hot temper was particularly characteristic of English and American culture at periods where the Irish were perceived as lower-class social intruders.

The second common literary usage of the term formula refers to larger plot types. This is the conception of formula commonly found in those manuals for aspiring writers that give the recipes for twenty-one sure-fire plots—boy meets girl, boy and girl have a misunderstanding, boy gets girl. These general plot patterns are not necessarily limited to a specific culture

or period. ==Instead, they seem to represent story types that, if not universal in their appeal, have certainly been popular in many different cultures at many different times. In fact, they are examples of what some scholars have called archetypes or patterns that appeal in many different cultures.==

Actually, if we look at a popular story type such as the western, the detective story, or the spy adventure, we find that it combines these two sorts of literary phenomenon. These popular story patterns are embodiments of archetypal story forms in terms of specific cultural materials. To create a western involves not only some understanding of how to construct an exciting adventure story, but also how to use certain nineteenth- and twentieth-century images and symbols such as cowboys, pioneers, outlaws, frontier towns, and saloons along with appropriate cultural themes or myths—such as nature vs. civilization, the code of the West, or law and order vs. outlawry—to support and give significance to the action. Thus formulas are ways in which specific cultural themes and stereotypes become embodied in more universal story archetypes.

==The reason why formulas are constructed in this way is, I think, fairly straightforward. Certain story archetypes particularly fulfill man's needs for enjoyment and escape.== ... But in order for these patterns to work, they must be embodied in figures, settings, and situations that have appropriate meanings for the culture which produces them. One cannot write a successful adventure story about a social character type that the culture cannot conceive in heroic terms; this is why we have so few adventure stories about plumbers, janitors, or streetsweepers. It is, however, certainly not inconceivable that a culture might emerge which placed a different sort of valuation or interpretation on these tasks, in which case we might expect to see the evolution of adventure story formulas about them. Certainly one can see signs of such developments in the popular literature of Soviet Russia and Maoist China.

==A formula is a combination or synthesis of a number of specific cultural conventions with a more universal story form or archetype.== It is also similar in many ways to the traditional literary conception of a genre. There is bound to be a good deal of confusion about the terms "formula" and "genre" since they are occasionally used to designate the same thing. For example, many film scholars and critics use the term "popular genre" to denote literary types like the western or the detective story that are clearly the same as what I call formulas. On the other hand, the term is often used to describe the broadest sort of literary type such as drama, prose fiction, lyric poetry. This is clearly a very different sort of classification than that of western, detective story, spy story. Still another usage of genre involves concepts like tragedy, comedy, romance, and satire. Insofar as such concepts of genre imply particular sorts of story patterns and effects, they do bear some resemblance to the kind of classification involved in the definition of popular genres. Since such conceptions clearly imply universal or transcultural

conceptions of literary structure, they are examples of what I have called archetypes. I don't think it makes a great deal of difference whether we refer to something as a formula or as a popular genre, if we are clear just what we are talking about and why. In the interests of such clarification let me offer one distinction I have found useful.

In defining literary classes, it seems to me that we commonly have two related but distinguishable purposes. First of all, we may be primarily interested in constructing effective generalizations about large groups of literary works for the purpose of tracing historical trends or relating literary production to other cultural patterns. In such cases we are not primarily interested in the artistic qualities of individual works but in the degree to which particular works share common characteristics that may be indicative of important cultural tendencies. On the other hand, we use literary classes as a means of defining and evaluating the unique qualities of individual works. In such instances we tend to think of genres not simply as generalized descriptions of a number of individual works but as a set of artistic limitations and potentials. With such a conception in mind, we can evaluate individual works in at least two different ways: (a) by the way in which they fulfill or fail to fulfill the ideal potentials inherent in the genre and thereby achieve or fail to achieve the full artistic effect of that particular type of construction. These are the terms in which Aristotle treats tragedy; (b) by the way in which the individual work deviates from the flat standard of the genre to accomplish some unique individual expression or effect. Popular genres are often treated in this fashion, as when a critic shows that a particular western transcends the limitations of the genre or how a film director achieves a distinctive individual statement. This is the approach implicit in much *"auteur"* criticism of the movies, where the personal qualities of individual directors are measured against some conception of the standard characteristics of popular genres.

==The concept of a formula as I have defined it is a means of generalizing the characteristics of large groups of individual works from certain combinations of cultural materials and archetypal story patterns. It is useful primarily as a means of making historical and cultural inferences about the collective fantasies shared by large groups of people and of identifying differences in these fantasies from one culture or period to another.== When we turn from the cultural or historical use of the concept of formula to a consideration of the artistic limitations and possibilities of particular formulaic patterns, we are treating these formulas as a basis for aesthetic judgments of various sorts. In these cases, we might say that our generalized definition of a formula has become a conception of a genre. Formula and genre might be best understood not as denoting two different things, but as reflecting two phases or aspects of a complex process of literary analysis. This way of looking at the relation between formula and genre reflects the way in which popular genres develop. In most cases, a formulaic pattern will be in exis-

tence for a considerable period of time before it is conceived of by its creators and audience as a genre. For example, the western formula was already clearly defined in the nineteenth century, yet it was not until the twentieth century that the western was consciously conceived of as a distinctive literary and cinematic genre. Similarly, though Poe created the formula for the detective story in the 1840s and many stories and novels made some use of this pattern throughout the later nineteenth century, it was probably not until after Conan Doyle that the detective story became widely understood as a specific genre with its own special limitations and potentialities. If we conceive of a genre as a literary class that views certain typical patterns in relation to their artistic limitations and potentials, it will help us in making a further useful clarification. Because the conception of genre involves an aesthetic approach to literary structures, it can be conceived either in terms of the specific formulas of a particular culture or in relation to larger, more universal literary archetypes: there are times when we might wish to evaluate a particular western in relation to other westerns. In this case we would be using a conception of a formula-genre, or what is sometimes more vaguely called a popular genre. We might also wish to relate this same western to some more universal generic conception such as tragedy or romance. Here we would be employing an archetype-genre. ...

The Artistic Characteristics of Formula Literature

Formula literature is, first of all, a kind of literary art. Therefore, it can be analyzed and evaluated like any other kind of literature. Two central aspects of formulaic structures have been generally condemned in the serious artistic thought of the last hundred years: their essential standardization and their primary relation to the needs of escape and relaxation. In order to consider formula literature in its own terms and not simply to condemn it out of hand, we must explore some of the aesthetic implications of these two basic characteristics.

While standardization is not highly valued in modern artistic ideologies, it is, in important ways, the essence of all literature. Standard conventions establish a common ground between writers and audiences. Without at least some form of standardization, artistic communication would not be possible. But well-established conventional structures are particularly essential to the creation of formula literature and reflect the interests of audiences, creators, and distributors.

Audiences find satisfaction and a basic emotional security in a familiar form; in addition, the audience's past experience with a formula gives it a sense of what to expect in new individual examples, thereby increasing its capacity for understanding and enjoying the details of a work. For creators, the formula provides a means for the rapid and efficient production of new

works. Once familiar with the outlines of the formula, the writer who devotes himself to this sort of creation does not have to make as many difficult artistic decisions as a novelist working without a formula. Thus, formulaic creators tend to be extremely prolific. Georges Simenon has turned out an extraordinary number of first-rate detective novels, in addition to his less formulaic fiction. Others have an even more spectacular record of quantity production: Frederick Faust and John Creasey each turned out over five hundred novels under a variety of pseudonyms. For publishers or film studios, the production of formulaic works is a highly rationalized operation with a guaranteed minimal return as well as the possibility of large profits for particularly popular individual versions. I have been told, for instance, that any paperback western novel is almost certain to sell enough copies to cover expenses and make a small profit. Many serious novels, on the other hand, fail to make expenses and some represent substantial losses. There is an inevitable tendency toward standardization implicit in the economy of modern publishing and film-making, if only because one successful work will inspire a number of imitations by producers hoping to share in the profits.

If the production of formulas were only a matter of economics, we might well turn the whole topic over to market researchers. Even if economic considerations were the sole motive behind the production of formulas— and I have already suggested that there are other important motives as well —we would still need to explore the kind and level of artistic creation possible within the boundaries of a formula....[We] seek escape from our consciousness of the ultimate insecurities and ambiguities that afflict even the most secure sort of life: death, the failure of love, our inability to accomplish all we had hoped for, the threat of atomic holocaust. Harry Berger nicely described these two conflicting impulses in a recent essay:

> Man has two primal needs. First is a need for order, peace, and security, for protection against the terror or confusion of life, for a familiar and predictable world, and for a life which is happily more of the same. ... But the second primal impulse is contrary to the first: man positively needs anxiety and uncertainty, thrives on confusion and risk, wants trouble, tension, jeopardy, novelty, mystery, would be lost without enemies, is sometimes happiest when most miserable. Human spontaneity is eaten away by sameness: man is the animal most expert at being bored.[1]

In the ordinary course of experience, these two impulses or needs are inevitably in conflict. If we seek order and security, the result is likely to be boredom and sameness. But rejecting order for the sake of change and novelty brings danger and uncertainty. As Berger suggests in his essay, many central aspects of the history of culture can be interpreted as a dynamic

[1]Harry Berger, Jr., "Naive Consciousness and Culture Change: An Essay in Historical Structuralism," *Bulletin of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, VI, no. 1 (Spring, 1973), 35.

tension between these two basic impulses, a tension that Berger believes has increased in modern cultures with their greater novelty and change. In such cultures, men are continually and uncomfortably torn between the quest for order and the flight from ennui. The essence of the experience of escape and the source of its ability to relax and please us is, I believe, that it temporarily synthesizes these two needs and resolves this tension. This may account for the curious paradox that characterizes most literary formulas, the fact that they are at once highly ordered and conventional and yet are permeated with the symbols of danger, uncertainty, violence, and sex. In reading or reviewing a formulaic work, we confront the ultimate excitements of love and death, but in such a way that our basic sense of security and order is intensified rather than disrupted, because, first of all, we know that this is an imaginary rather that a real experience, and, second, because the excitement and uncertainty are ultimately controlled and limited by the familiar world of the formulaic structure.

As we have seen, the world of a formula can be described as an archetypal story pattern embodied in the images, symbols, themes, and myths of a particular culture. As shaped by the imperatives of the experience of escape, these formulaic worlds are constructions that can be described as moral fantasies constituting an imaginary world in which the audience can encounter a maximum of excitement without being confronted with an overpowering sense of the insecurity and danger that accompany such forms of excitement in reality. Much of the artistry of formulaic literature involves the creator's ability to plunge us into a believable kind of excitement while, at the same time, confirming our confidence that in the formulaic world things always work out as we want them to. Three of the literary devices most often used by formulaic writers of all kinds can serve as an illustration of this sort of artistic skill: suspense, identification, and the creating of a slightly removed, imaginary world. Suspense is essentially the writer's ability to evoke in us a temporaty sense of fear and uncertainty that is always pointed toward a possible resolution. The simplest model of suspense is the cliff-hanger in which the protagonist's life is immediately threatened while the machinery of salvation is temporarily withheld from us. We know, however, that the hero or heroine will be saved in some way, because he always is. In its crudest form the cliff-hanger presents the combination of extreme excitement within a framework of certainty and security that characterizes formulaic literature. Of course, the cruder forms of suspense—however effective with the young and the unsophisticated—soon lose much of their power to excite more sophisticated audiences. Though there are degrees of skill in producing even the simpler forms of suspense, the better formulaic artists devise means of protracting and complicating suspense into larger, more believable structures. Good detective story writers are able to maintain a complex intellectual suspense centering on the possibility that a dangerous criminal might remain at large or that in-

nocent people might be convicted of the crime. They sustain uncertainty until the final revelation, yet at the same time assure us that the detective has the qualities which will eventually enable him to reach the solution. Alfred Hitchcock is, at his best, the master of a still more complex form of suspense that works at the very edge of escapist fantasy. In a Hitchcock film like *Frenzy*, reassurance is kept to a minimum and our anxiety is increased to the point that we seriously begin to wonder whether we have been betrayed, whether evil will triumph and the innocent will suffer. After we have been toyed with in this way, it is a powerful experience when the hero is finally plucked from the abyss.

Complex as it is, the suspense in a work like Hitchcock's *Frenzy* is different from the kind of uncertainty characteristic of mimetic literature. The uncertainty in a mimetic work derives from the way in which it continually challenges our easy assumptions and presuppositions about life. This tends to reduce the intensity of suspense effects since, if we perceive the world of the story as an imitation of the ambiguous, uncertain, and limited world of reality we are emotionally prepared for difficulties to remain unresolved or for resolutions to be themselves the source of further uncertainties. But if we are encouraged to perceive the story world in terms of a well-known formula, the suspense effect will be more emotionally powerful because we are so sure that it must work out. One of the major sources of Hitchcock's effects is the way in which he not only creates suspense around particular episodes, but suggests from time to time that he may depart from the basic conventions of the formulaic narrative world. Of course, we don't really think he's going to, but the tension between our hope that things will be properly resolved and our suspicion that Hitchcock might suddenly dump us out of the moral fantasy in which mysteries are always solved and the guilty finally identified and captured can be a terrifying and complex experience of considerable artistic power. At the climactic moment of *Frenzy* the protagonist escapes from the prison to which he has been wrongfully condemned and sets out to murder the man who is truly guilty, but finds himself beating an already murdered victim in such a way that circumstantial evidence will certainly condemn him as the murderer. This is an extraordinary suspense effect because, in the few moments before the final appropriate resolution, we are suspended over the abyss of reality. Such a moment would be less powerful if we were not ultimately expecting and anticipating the formulaic resolution.

The pattern of expectations with which we approach an individual version of a formula results both from our previous experience of the type and from certain internal qualities that formulaic structures tend to have. One of the most important such characteristics is the kind of identification we are encouraged to have with the protagonists. All stories involve some kind of identification, for, unless we are able to relate our feelings and experiences to those of the characters in fiction, much of the emotional effect

will be lost. In mimetic literature, identification is a complex phenomenon. Because mimetic fictions aim at the representation of actions that will confront us with reality, it is necessary for writers to make us recognize our involvement in characters whose fates reveal the uncertainties, limitations, and unresolvable mysteries of the real world. We must learn to recognize and accept our relationship to characters, motives, and situations we would not ordinarily choose to imagine ourselves as involved in or threatened by. "There but for the grace of God go I." Ordinarily I would prefer not to think of myself as a murderer, as a suicide, or as a middle-aged failure cuckolded by his wife. Yet in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment,* Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury,* and Joyce's *Ulysses* I am forced to recognize and come to terms with my participation in the fate of Raskolnikov, of Quentin Compson, and of Leopold Bloom. The process of identification in a mimetic fiction involves both my recognition of the differences between myself and the characters and my often reluctant but rather total involvement in their actions. I have at once a detached view and a disturbingly full sympathy and understanding. ...

Formulas and Culture

Formulas are cultural products and in turn presumably have some sort of influence on culture because they become conventional ways of representing and relating certain images, symbols, themes, and myths. The process through which formulas develop, change, and give way to other formulas is a kind of cultural evolution with survival through audience selection.

Many different sorts of stories are written about a great diversity of subjects, but only a few become clearly established as formulas. For instance, out of the vast number of potential story possibilities associated with the rise of urban industrialism in the nineteenth century, relatively few major formulaic structures have developed, such as the detective story, the gangster saga, the doctor drama, and various science-fiction formulas. Other story types have been repeated often enough to become partly formulaic, such as the story of the newspaper reporter and the scoop, or the story of the failure of success as represented in the figure of the great tycoon. But these two types have never had the sustained and widespread appeal of the western, the detective story, or the gangster saga. Still other potential story topics have never become popular at all. There is no formula for the story of the union leader—despite the best efforts of "proletarian" critics and novelists in the 1930s. There are no formulas with politicians or businessmen as protagonists, though they are social figures of major

importance. Farmers, engineers, architects, teachers, have all been treated in a number of individual novels but have never become formulaic heroes.

What is the basis on which this process of cultural selection of formulas takes place? Why do some sorts of stories become widely popular formulas while others do not? How do we account for the pattern of change within formulas, or for the way one formula supersedes another in popularity? What does popularity itself mean? Can we infer from the popularity of a work that it reflects public attitudes and motives, or is it impossible to go beyond the circular observation that a story is successful with the public because the public finds it a good story?

First of all, we can distinguish, I think, between the problem of the popularity of an individual work and the popularity of a formula. Determining why a particular novel or film becomes a best-seller is problematic because it is difficult to be sure what elements or combination of elements the public is responding to. For example, in the case of the enormously successful novel *The Godfather,* is it the topic of crime and the portrayal of violence that made the book popular? Probably not, since there are many other novels dealing with crime in a violent way that have not been equally successful. Thus it must be something about the way in which crime and violence are treated. Only if we can find other books or films that treat the topic of crime in a similar way and also gain a considerable measure of popularity can we feel some confidence that we have come closer to isolating the aspects of *The Godfather* that are responsible for its public success. ... Clearly, we can only explain the success of individual works by means of analogy and comparison with other successful works, through the process of defining those elements or patterns that are common to a number of best-sellers.

A formula is one such pattern. When we have successfully defined a formula we have isolated at least one basis for the popularity of a large number of works. Of course, some formulaic writers are more successful than others, and their unique popularity remains a problem that must be explored in its own right. During his heyday, Mickey Spillane's hard-boiled detective stories sold far better than those of any other writer in the formula, and Spillane's success was certainly one main reason why other writers continued to create this type of story. Yet quite apart from Spillane's own personal popularity, the hard-boiled detective formula, in the hands of writers as diverse as Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Carter Brown, Shell Scott, Brett Halliday, and many others, in hard-boiled detective films by directors like Howard Hawks, John Huston, Roman Polanski, and in TV series like "Cannon," "Mannix," and "Barnaby Jones," has been continually successful with the public since the late 1920s. When it becomes such a widely successful formula, a story pattern clearly has some special appeal and significance to many people in the culture. It becomes a matter

of cultural behavior that calls for explanation along with other cultural patterns.

Unfortunately, to construct such an explanation requires us to have some notion of the relation between literature and other aspects of culture, an area which remains rather impenetrable. Are literary works to be treated primarily as causes or symptoms of other modes of behavior? Or is literature an integral and autonomous area of human experience without significant effects on political, economic, or other forms of social behavior? Do some works of literature become popular primarily because they contain a good story artistically told or because they embody values and attitudes that their audience wishes to see affirmed? Or does popularity imply some kind of psychological wish-fulfillment, the most popular works being those which most effectively help people to identify imaginatively with actions they would like to perform but cannot in the ordinary course of events? We certainly do not know at present which, if any, of these assumptions is correct. Persuasive arguments can be made for each one. Before attempting to develop a tentative method for exploring the cultural meaning of literary formulas, let us look briefly at what can be said for and against the principal methods that have been used to explore the relation between literature and other aspects of human behavior.

Three main approaches have been widely applied to explain the cultural functions or significance of literature. These may be loosely characterized as (1) impact or effect theories; (2) deterministic theories; and (3) symbolic or reflective theories.

1. Impact theories are the oldest, simplest, and most widespread way in which men have defined the cultural significance of literature. Such theories assume basically that literary forms and/ or contents have some direct influence on human behavior. Naturally, the tendency of this approach is to treat literature as a moral or political problem and to seek to determine which literary patterns have desirable effects on human conduct and which have bad effects, in order to support the former and suppress or censor the latter. Socrates suggested in *The Republic* that it might be necessary to escort the poet to the gates of the city since his works stimulate weakening and corrupting emotions in his audience. Over the centuries, men of varying religious and political commitments have followed this advice by seeking to censor literary expression on the ground that it would corrupt the people's morals or subvert the state. Today, many psychologists study what effects the representation of violence has on the behavior of children. Presumably if they are able to demonstrate some connection between represented violence and aggressive behavior, the widespread clamor against film and television violence will increase and laws will be passed regulating the content of these media.

The impact approach also dominated mass communications research in

its earlier years, when sociologists were primarily interested in propaganda and its effects. Propaganda research sought to show just how and in what ways a literary message could have an effect on attitudes and behavior. This research discovered, for the most part, that insofar as any effect could be isolated, propaganda simply caused people to believe and act in ways they were already predisposed toward. It became evident to most researchers in this area that their original quest for a direct link between communication and behavior oversimplified a more complex social process. Much of the more interesting recent research has tended to focus on the process of communication rather than its impact, showing the ways in which mass communications are mediated by the social groups to which the recipient belongs, or by the different uses to which communications are put. But the more complex our view of the process of communication becomes, the less meaningful it is to speak of it in terms of cause and effect.

Another basic weakness of impact theories is that they tend to treat literary or artistic experience like any other kind of experience. Since most of our experience does have an immediate and direct effect on our behavior, however trivial, the impact theorists assume that the same must be true of literature. The difficulty with this view is that our experience of literature is not like any other form of behavior since it concerns events and characters that are imagined. Reading about something is obviously not the same thing as doing it. Nor are the very strong emotions generated in us by stories identical with those emotions in real life. A story about a monster can arouse fear and horror in me, but this is certainly a different emotion than the one I feel when confronted by some actual danger or threat, because I know that the monster exists only in the world of the story and cannot actually harm me. This does not mean that my emotion will necessarily be less strong than it would be in reality. Paradoxically, feelings experienced through literature may sometimes be stronger and deeper than those aroused by analogous life situations. For instance, I am inclined to believe that the fear and pity evoked by literature is more intense for many people than that generated in real-life experiences. That literature can give us such intensified emotions may be one of the reasons we need stories. Yet no matter how strong the feeling aroused by a work of literature, we do not generally confuse it with reality and therefore it does not affect us as such. There are probably some important exceptions to this generalization. Unsophisticated or disturbed people do apparently sometimes confuse art and reality. The same is apparently true of many younger children. There are many instances where people treat characters in a soap opera as if they were real people, sending them gifts on their birthdays, grieving when they are in difficulties, asking their advice and help. Some of this behavior is probably an unsophisticated way of expressing one's great pleasure and interest in a story, but some of it may well indicate that a person does not

make our ordinary differentiation between imagination and reality. For such people literature may well have a direct and immediate behavioral impact. I suspect that this is particularly the case among relatively disturbed children. Not surprisingly, it is here that recent studies may indicate a causal connection between represented violence and violent behavior. Nonetheless, for most people in most situations, the impact approach assumes much too simple a relationship between literature and other behavior to provide a satisfactory basis for interpreting the cultural significance of any literary phenomenon.

If such reflections lead us to question the idea that literature has a direct causal effect on behavior, this does not mean that we must take the position that literature causes nothing and is only a reflection of reality without further consequence than the evocation of some temporary state of feeling. Such a view seems just as implausible as the notion that art directly and immediately changes attitudes and behavior. One of my colleagues has often remarked that all of us carry a collection of story plots around in our heads and that we tend to see and shape life according to these plots. Something like this seems to me to be the basic kernel of truth in the impact theory. Our artistic experiences over a period of time work on the structure of our imaginations and feelings and thereby have long-term effects on the way in which we understand and respond to reality. Unfortunately, no one has ever managed to demonstrate the existence of such long-term effects in a convincing way, in part because we have never been able to define with any precision just what are the most common and widespread patterns of literary experience. The analysis of formulas may be a promising method of beginning to study long-term effects, for formulas do shape the greater part of the literary experiences of a culture. If we can clearly define all the major formulas of a particular culture, we will at least know what patterns are being widely experienced. It may then be possible to construct empirical studies in the relation between these formulas and the attitudes and values that individuals and groups show in other forms of behavior. David McClelland and his associates managed to isolate a particular pattern of action in stories that they correlated with a basic cultural motive for achievement. In cross-cultural studies reported in *The Achieving Society*, McClelland suggests that the presence of this pattern of action in stories of a particular culture or period is correlated with a definite emphasis on achievement in that culture or in a succeeding period. Some of the cases McClelland cites could be instances where the stories heard most often by children did have a long-term impact on their behavior as adults; it is, of course, difficult to determine the extent to which these story patterns were causes or symptoms, but this, I feel, is a problem that can never be solved. If we can establish correlations between literary patterns and other forms of behavior, we will have done all we can expect to do by way of establishing the long-term impact of literature. The reason for this can be best under-

stood by turning to the second major approach that has been employed to explain the cultural significance of literature: the various theories of social or psychological determinism.

2. These deterministic theories—the most striking being various applications of Marxian or Freudian ideas to the explanation of literature—assume that art is essentially a contingent and dependent form of behavior that is generated and shaped by some underlying social or psychological dynamic. In effect, literature becomes a kind of stratagem to cope with the needs of a social group or of the psyche. These needs become the determinants of literary expression and the process of explanation consists in showing how literary forms and contents are derived from these other processes.

The deterministic approach has been widely applied to the interpretation of all sorts of literature with interesting if controversial results ranging from the Oedipal interpretation of *Hamlet* to interpretations of the novel as a literary reflection of the bourgeois world view. When used in conjunction with individual masterpieces, the deterministic approach has been widely rejected and criticized by literary scholars and historians for its tendencies toward oversimplification and reductionism. And yet the method has gained much wider acceptance as a means of dealing with formulaic structures like the western, the detective story, and the formula romance. Some scholars see the whole range of formulaic literature as an opiate for the masses, a ruling-class stratagem for keeping the majority of the people content with a daily ration of pleasant distractions. Others have interpreted particular formulas in deterministic terms: the detective story as a dramatization of the ideology of bourgeois rationalism or as an expression of the psychological need to resolve in fantasy the repressed childhood memories of the primal scene.

All such explanations have two fundamental weaknesses. (*a*) They depend on the a priori assumption that a particular social or psychological dynamic is the basic cause of human behavior. If it is the case that, for example, unresolved childhood sexual conflicts generate most adult behavior, then it does not really explain anything to show that the reading of detective stories is an instance of such behavior. The interpretation does not go beyond the original assumption, except to show how the form of the detective story can be interpreted in this way. But the only means of proving that the detective story *should* be interpreted in this way is through the original assumption. Because of this circular relationship between assumption and interpretation, neither can provide proof for the other, unless the assumption can be demonstrated by other means. Even then there remains the problem of showing that the experience of literature is the same as other kinds of human activity. (*b*) The second weakness of most deterministic approaches is their tendency to reduce literary experience to other forms of behavior. For example, most Freudian interpretations treat literary experience as if it could be analogized with free association or dream. Even if

we grant that psychoanalysis has proved to be a successful approach to the explanation of dream symbolism, it does not follow that literature is the same or even analogous. Indeed, there seems to me to be as much reason to believe that the making and enjoying of art works is an autonomous mode of experience as to assume it is dependent, contingent, or a mere reflection of other more basic social or psychological processes. Certainly many people act as if watching television, going to the movies, or reading a book were one of the prime ends of life rather than a means to something else. There are even statistics that might suggest that people spend far more time telling and enjoying stories than they do in sexual activity. Of course, the psychological determinist would claim that listening to a story is in fact a form of sexual behavior, though stated in this way, the claim seems extreme.

Though there are many problems connected with the psychoanalytic interpretation of literature, it is difficult to dismiss the compelling idea that in literature as in dreams unconscious or latent impulses find some disguised form of expression. Formula stories may well be one important way in which the individuals in a culture act out unconscious or repressed needs, or express latent motives that they must give expression to but cannot face openly. Possibly one important difference between the mimetic and escapist impulses in literature is that mimetic literature tends toward the bringing of latent or hidden motives into the light of consciousness while escapist literature tends to construct new disguises or to confirm existing defenses against the confrontation of latent desires. Such a view might be substantiated by the contrast between Sophocles' play *Oedipus the King* and a detective story. In the play detection leads to a revelation of hidden guilts in the life of the protagonist, while in the detective story the inquirer-protagonist and the hidden guilt are conveniently split into two separate characters—the detective and the criminal—thereby enabling us to imagine terrible crimes without also having to recognize our own impulses toward them. It is easy to generate a great deal of pseudopsychoanalytic theorizing of this sort without being able to substantiate it convincingly. Nevertheless, I think we cannot ignore the possibility that this is one important factor that underlies the appeal of literary formulas.

Thus, though we may feel that most contemporary deterministic approaches oversimplify the significance of literary works by explaining them in terms of other modes of experience, I think we cannot deny that stories, like other forms of behavior, are determined in some fashion. Though artistic experience may have an autonomy that present theories of social and psychological determinism are not sufficiently complex to allow for, I presume that, as human behavior in general is more fully understood, we will also be better able to generalize about how social and psychological factors play a role in the process by which stories and other imaginative

forms are created and enjoyed. In the present state of our knowledge, it seems more reasonable to treat social and psychological factors not as single determinant causes of literary expression but as elements in a complex process that limits in various ways the complete autonomy of art. In making cultural interpretations of literary patterns, we should consider them not as simple reflections of social ideologies or psychological needs but as instances of a relatively autonomous mode of behavior that is involved in a complex dialectic with other aspects of human life. It is reasonable to see collective attitudes entering into the artistic works created and enjoyed by a particular group as a limit on what is likely to be represented in a story and how it is likely to be treated. What we must avoid is an automatic reading into a story of what we take to be the prevailing cultural attitudes or psychological needs. This has been too often the path taken by the deterministic approach and in its circularity it tells us nothing about either the literary work or the culture.

3. A third approach to the cultural explanation of literary experience—symbolic or reflective theories—rejects the more extreme forms of reductive determinism by granting a special kind of autonomy to artistic expression. According to this approach, the work of art consists of a complex of symbols or myths that are imaginative orderings of experience. These symbols or myths are defined as images or patterns of images charged with a complex of feeling and meaning and they become, therefore, modes of perception as well as simple reflections of reality. According to this approach, symbols and myths are means by which a culture expresses the complex of feelings, values, and ideas it attaches to a thing or idea. Because of their power of ordering feelings and attitudes, symbols and myths shape the perceptions and motivations of those who share them. The flag is a relatively simple example of a symbol. Though nothing but a piece of cloth made in a certain pattern of colors and shapes, the flag has come to imply an attitude of love and dedication to the service of one's country that has even, in many instances, motivated individuals to die in an attempt to protect that piece of cloth from desecration. In recent years this symbol has in turn become a counter-symbol for some groups of an unreasoning and destructive patriotism, and this implication has motivated other individuals to risk danger and even imprisonment to desecrate the same piece of cloth. The first usage of the flag illustrates a class of symbolism that poses relatively few problems of analysis and interpretation since the meaning of the symbol is more or less established by some specific enactment, in this case laws designating a specific design as the national emblem. In this sense the flag has an official status with a designated set of meanings, as indicated by the fact that it is against the law to treat the flag in certain ways. But the second usage of the flag as counter-symbol of regressive or false patriotism is of a different sort altogether. This symbolism was not created by specific enactment and has

no official status. It emerged as one means of focusing and representing the rejection by certain groups of actions and attitudes taken in the name of the country and defended by traditional claims of patriotism. I don't know whether it is possible to determine who first conceived of using the flag as a symbol of this sort, but it is clear that throughout the 1960s, particularly in connection with the agitation against the Vietnam war, this new symbolism of the flag became a powerful force, generating strong feelings and even violent actions both in support of and in opposition to this new form of symbolism.

These two types of symbolism indicate the great significance that symbols have for culture and psychology. In fact, the concept of symbolism seems to resolve some of the problems we have noted in connection with the impact and deterministic approaches to explaining the cultural significance of literary experience. The symbolism of the flag suggests how it is possible for an image both to reflect culture and to have some role in shaping it. Not surprisingly, some of the most influential studies of American culture in the past two decades have been analyses of symbols and myths primarily as these are expressed in various forms of literature. And yet there remain a number of problems about this approach, many of which have been effectively articulated in a critique of the myth-symbol approach by Bruce Kuklick. ... Kuklick defines two kinds of objection: the first concerns certain confusions in the theoretical formulations of the leading myth-symbol interpreters, while the second involves a number of problems of definition and method. Since the formula approach that I am using...is essentially a variation of the myth-symbol method of interpretation, I feel we must examine the most important of Kuklick's objections to it.

Essentially, Kuklick argues that certain theoretical confusions in the myth-symbol approach prevent it from being a meaningful way of connecting literary expression with other forms of behavior. He points out that the myth-symbol critics assume the existence of a collective mind (in which the images, myths, and symbols exist) that is separated from an external reality (of which the images and symbols are some form of mental transmutation). This separation is necessary, he suggests, in order for the interpreter to determine which images are real and which are fantastic or distortions or value-laden. Unfortunately, this separation of internal mind from external reality leads the method right into the philosophical trap of the mind-body problem, as exemplified in what Kuklick calls crude Cartesianism. The result is as follows:

> A crude Cartesian has two options. First, he can maintain his dualism but then must give up any talk about the external world. How can he know that any image refers to the external world? Once he stipulates that they are on different planes, it is impossible to bring them into any meaningful relation; in fact, it is not even clear what a relationship could conceivably be

> like. Descartes resorted to the pineal gland as the source and agent of mind-body interaction, but this does not appear to be an out for the [myth-symbol interpreters] . Second, the Cartesian can assimilate what we normally take to be facts about the external world—for example, my seeing the man on the corner—to entities like images, symbols and myths. ... Facts and images both become states of consciousness. If the Cartesian does this, he is committed to a form of idealism. Of course, this maneuver will never be open to...Marxists, but it also provides problems for the [myth-symbol interpreters] : they have no immediate way of determining which states of consciousness are "imaginative" or "fantastic" or "distorted" or even "value-laden" for there is no standard to which the varying states of consciousness may be referred. On either of these two options some resort to platonism is not strange. A world of suprapersonal ideas which we all share and which we may use to order our experiences is a reasonable supposition under the circumstances. But this position, although by no means absurd, is not one to which we wish to be driven if we are setting out a straightforward theory to explain past American behavior.[2]

According to Kuklick, the only solution to this dilemma is to give up using symbols and myths to explain all kinds of behavior. Instead, he says, we should postulate mental constructs like images and symbols only as a means of describing a disposition to write in a certain way. In other words, a symbol or a myth is simply a generalizing concept for summarizing certain recurrent patterns in writing and other forms of expression. Insofar as it explains anything, the myth-symbol approach simply indicates that a group of persons has a tendency to express itself in certain patterns:

> Suppose we define an idea not as some entity existing "In the mind" but as a disposition to behave in a certain way under appropriate circumstances. Similarly, to say that an author has a particular image of the man on the corner (or uses the man on the corner as a symbol) is to say that in appropriate parts of his work, he writes of a man on the corner in a certain way. When he simply writes of the man to refer to him, let's say, as the chap wearing the blue coat, we can speak of the image of the man, although the use of "image" seems to obfuscate matters. If the man is glorified in poem and song as Lincolnesque, we might speak of the author as using the man as a symbol, and here the word "symbol" seems entirely appropriate. For images and symbols to become collective is simply for certain kinds of writing (or painting) to occur with relative frequency in the work of many authors.[3]

I think we must accept Kuklick's contention that insofar as the myth-symbol approach assumes a direct connection between literary symbols and other forms of behavior such as specific political or social actions, it is highly questionable. To explain the American course of action in Vietnam

[2]Bruce Kuklick, "Myth and Symbol in American Studies," *American Quarterly*, XXIV, no. 4 (October, 1972), 438.
[3]*Ibid.*, p. 440.

as the effect of the American western myth is to indulge in speculations about causal connections that can never be demonstrated or substantiated and that probably assume an oversimplified view of the relations between art and other kinds of experience. Yet, to take the further step of insisting that the myths and symbols found in written (and other forms of expressive) behavior can only be understood as a generalization about that specific kind of behavior seems contradictory to experience, for we can all think of many ways in which our lives have been shaped by the symbolic or mythical patterns we have encountered in various forms of literature. The problem is to arrive at some better and more complex understanding of the way in which literature interacts with other aspects of life, for I think we can grant that imaginative symbols do not have a direct and immediate causal effect on other forms of behavior. Otherwise the impact approach to interpreting the cultural significance of literature would long since have proved more fruitful.

The resolution of the problems posed by these criticisms of the myth-symbol approach lies, I think, in replacing the inevitably vague and ambiguous notion of myth with a conception of literary structures that can be more precisely defined and are consequently less dependent on such implicit metaphysical assumptions as that of a realm of superpersonal ideas, which Kuklick rightly objects to. One such conception is that of the conventional story pattern or formula. This notion has, in my view, two great advantages over the notion of myth. First of all, the concept of formula requires us to attend to the whole of a story rather than to any given element that is arbitrarily selected.[4] A myth can be almost anything—a particular type of character, one among many ideas, a certain kind of action—but a formula is essentially a set of generalizations about the way in which all the elements of a story have been put together. Thus it calls our attention to the whole experience of the story rather than to whatever parts may be germane to the myths we are pursuing. This feature of the concept leads to its second advantage: to connect a mythical pattern with the rest of human behavior requires tenuous and debatable assumptions, while the relation between formulas and other aspects of life can be explored more directly and empirically as a question of why certain groups of people enjoy certain stories. While the psychology of literary response is certainly not without its mysteries, it seems safe to assume that people choose to read certain stories because they enjoy them. This at least gives us a straightforward if not simple psychological connection between literature and the rest of life.

Beginning with the phenomenon of enjoyment, we can sketch out a tentative theory for the explanation of the emergence and evolution of literary

[4][See especially Robert Champigny, *What Will Have Happened: A Philosophical and Technical Essay on Mystery Stories* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1977) and Hanna Charney, *"This Mortal Coil": The Detective Novel of Manners* (forthcoming from Fairleigh Dickinson University Press), both of which use Roland Barthes to good advantage. Editor's note.]

formulas. The basic assumption of this theory is that conventional story patterns work because they bring into an effective conventional order a large variety of existing cultural and artistic interests and concerns. This approach is different from traditional forms of social or psychological determinism in that it rejects the concept of a single fundamental social or psychological dynamic in favor of viewing the appeal of a conventional literary pattern as the result of a variety of cultural, artistic, and psychological interests. Successful story patterns like the western persist, according to this view, not because they embody some particular ideology or psychological dynamic, but because they maximize a great many such dynamics. Thus, in analyzing the cultural significance of such a pattern, we cannot expect to arrive at a single key interpretation. Instead, we must show how a large number of interests and concerns are brought into an effective order or unity. One important way of looking at this process is through the dialectic of cultural and artistic interests. In order to create an effective story, certain archetypal patterns are essential, the nature of which can be determined by looking at many different sorts of stories. These story patterns must be embodied in specific images, themes, and symbols that are current in particular cultures and periods. To explain the way in which cultural imagery and conventional story patterns are fitted together constitutes a partial interpretation of the cultural significance of these formulaic combinations. This process of interpretation reveals both certain basic concerns that dominate a particular culture and also something about the way in which that culture is predisposed to order or deal with those concerns. We must remember, however, that since artistic experience has a certain degree of autonomy from other forms of behavior, we must always distinguish between the way symbols are ordered in stories and the way they may be ordered in other forms of behavior. To this extent, I think Kuklick is correct in suggesting that the existence of symbols and myths in art cannot be taken as a demonstration that these symbols are somehow directly related to other forms of behavior and belief. Yet there are certainly cultural limits on the way in which symbols can be manipulated for artistic purposes. Thus our examination of the dialectic between artistic forms and cultural materials should reveal something about the way in which people in a given culture are predisposed to think about their lives.

As an example of the complex relationship between literary symbols and attitudes and beliefs that motivate other forms of behavior, we might look at the role of political and social ideologies in the spy story. Because of its setting, the spy story almost inevitably brings political or social attitudes into play since conflicting political forces are an indispensable background for the antagonism between the spy-hero and his enemy. Thus, in the espionage adventures written by John Buchan and other popular writers of the period between World Wars I and II—"Sapper," Dornford Yates,

E. Phillips Oppenheim, and Saxe [sic] Rohmer, for instance—one dominant theme is that of the threat of racial subversion. The British Empire and its white, Christian civilization are constantly in danger of subversion by villains who represent other races or racial mixtures. Saxe Rohmer's Fu Manchu and his hordes of little yellow and brown conspirators against the safety and purity of English society are only an extreme example of the pervasive racial symbolism of this period. It is tempting to interpret these stories as reflections of a virulent racism on the part of the British and American public. There is no doubt some truth in this hypothesis, especially since we can find all kinds of other evidence revealing the power of racist assumptions in the political attitudes and actions of this public. Yet few readers who enjoyed the works of Buchan and Rohmer were actually motivated to embark on racist crusades, for it was in Germany rather than England and America that racism became a dominant political dogma. Even in Buchan's case, many of the attitudes expressed in his novels are far more extreme than those we find in his nonfiction and autobiographical works, or in his public life and statements. It is a little difficult to know just what to make of this. Was Buchan concealing his more extreme racist views behind the moderate stance of a politician? Or is the racial symbolism in his novels less a reflection of his actual views than a means of intensifying and dramatizing conflicts? Umberto Eco in a brilliant essay on the narrative structure of the James Bond novels suggests that something like this may well be the case with Ian Fleming's "racism."

> Fleming intends, with the cynicism of the disillusioned, to build an effective narrative apparatus. To do so he decides to rely upon the most secure and universal principles, and puts into play archetypal elements which are precisely those that have proved successful in traditional tales. ... [Therefore] Fleming is a racialist in the sense that any artist is one, if, to represent the devil, he depicts him with oblique eyes; in the sense that a nurse is one who, wishing to frighten children with the bogey-man, suggests that he is black. ... Fleming seeks elementary opposition: to personify primitive and universal forces he has recourse to popular opinion. ... A man who chooses to write in this way is neither Fascist nor racialist; he is only a cynic, a deviser of tales for general consumption.[5]

As in the case of Fleming, many apparently ideological expressions in Buchan may arise more from dramatic than propagandistic aims. Therefore we must exercise some caution in our inferences about the social and political views that the author and audience of such stories actually believe in. Most audiences would appear to be capable of temporarily tolerating a wide range of political and social ideologies for the sake of enjoying a good yarn. As Raymond Durgnat has suggested, recent spy films with ideological implications ranging from reactionary to liberal have been highly success-

[5] Umberto Eco, ed., *The Bond Affair* (London: Macdonald, 1966), pp. 59-60.

ful. Or to take a different example of the same sort of phenomenon, a number of recent black detective films and westerns, which portray whites as predominantly evil, corrupt, or helpless, have been quite successful with substantial segments of the white as well as the black public.

But even if we grant that the melodramatic imperatives of formula stories tend to call forth more extreme expressions of political and moral values than either author or audience fully accept, there still remains a need for author and audience to share certain basic feelings about the world. If this sharing does not occur at some fundamental level, the audience's enjoyment of the story will be impeded by its inability to accept the structure of probability, to feel the appropriate emotional responses, and to be fascinated by the primary interests on which the author depends. An audience can enjoy two different stories that imply quite different political and social ideologies, so long as certain fundamental attitudes are invoked. Durgnat puts the point rather well in explaining why the same public might enjoy *Our Man Flint*, a spy film with very conservative political overtones, and *The Silencers*, which is far more liberal in its ideology:

> The political overtones of the movies appear only if you extrapolate from the personal sphere to the political, which most audiences don't. The distinct moral patterns would be more likely to become conscious, although neither film pushed itself to a crunch. In other words, the two moral patterns can coexist; both films can be enjoyed by the same spectator, could have been written by the same writer. Both exploit the same network of assumptions.[6]

This "network of assumptions" is probably an expression, first, of the basic values of a culture, and on another level, of the dominant moods and concerns of a particular era, or of a particular subculture. That Buchan is still enjoyed with pleasure by some contemporary readers indicates that there are enough continuities between British culture at the time of World War I and the present day to make it possible for some persons to accept Buchan's system of probabilities and values at least temporarily for the sake of the story. That Buchan is no longer widely popular, however, is presumably an indication that much of the network of assumptions on which his stories rest is no longer shared.

These considerations suggest the importance of differentiating literary imperatives from the expression of cultural attitudes. In order to define the basic network of assumptions that reflect cultural values we cannot simply take individual symbols and myths at their face value but must uncover those basic patterns that recur in many different individual works and even in many different formulas. If we can isolate those patterns of symbol and theme that appear in a number of different formulas popular in a certain period, we will be on firmer ground in making a cultural interpretation, since those patterns characteristic of a number of different formulas pre-

[6] Raymond Durgnat, "Spies and Ideologies," *Cinema* (March, 1969), p. 8.

sumably reflect basic concerns and valuations that influence the way people of a particular period prefer to fantasize. In addition, the concept of the formula as a synthesis of cultural symbols, themes, and myths with more universal story archetypes should help us to see where a literary pattern has been shaped by the needs of a particular archetypal story form and to differentiate this from those elements that are expressions of the network of assumptions of a particular culture. Thus the spy story as a formula that depends on the archetype of heroic adventure requires a basic antagonism between hero and villain. The specific symbols or ideological themes used to dramatize this antagonism reflect the network of assumptions of a particular culture at a particular time. The creation of a truly intense antagonism may well involve pushing some of these cultural assumptions to extremes that would not be accepted b most people in areas of life other than fantasy....

I would like to suggest four interrelated hypotheses about the dialectic between formulaic literature and the culture that produces and enjoys it:

1. Formula stories affirm existing interests and attitudes by presenting an imaginary world that is aligned with these interests and attitudes. Thus westerns and hard-boiled detective stories affirm the view that true justice depends on the individual rather than the law by showing the helplessness and inefficiency of the machinery of the law when confronted with evil and lawless men. By confirming existing definitions of the world, literary formulas help to maintain a culture's ongoing consensus about the nature of reality and morality. We assume, therefore, that one aspect of the structure of a formula is this process of confirming some strongly held conventional view.

2. Formulas resolve tensions and ambiguities resulting from the conflicting interests of different groups within the culture or from ambiguous attitudes toward particular values. The action of a formula story will tend to move from an expression of tension of this sort to a harmonization of these conflicts. To use the example of the western again, the action of legitimated violence not only affirms the ideology of individualism but also resolves tensions between the anarchy of individualistic impulses and the communal ideals of law and order by making the individual's violent action an ultimate defense of the community against the threat of anarchy.

3. Formulas enable the audience to explore in fantasy the boundary between the permitted and the forbidden and to experience in a carefully controlled way the possibility of stepping across this boundary. This seems to be preeminently the function of villains in formulaic structures: to express, explore, and finally to reject those actions which are forbidden, but which, because of certain other cultural patterns, are strongly tempting. For example, nineteenth-century American culture generally treated racial mixtures as taboo, particularly between whites, Orientals, blacks, and In-

dians. There were even deep feelings against intermarriage between certain white groups. Yet, at the same time, there were many things that made such mixtures strongly tempting, not least the universal pleasure of forbidden fruit. We find a number of formulaic structures in which the villain embodies explicitly or implicitly the threat of racial mixture. Another favorite kind of villain, the grasping tycoon, suggests the temptation actually acceded to by many Americans to take forbidden and illicit routes to wealth. Certainly the twentieth-century American interest in the gangster suggests a similar temptation. Formula stories permit the individual to indulge his curiosity about these actions without endangering the cultural patterns that reject them.

4. Finally, literary formulas assist in the process of assimilating changes in values to traditional imaginative constructs. ... [The] western has undergone almost a reversal in values over the past fifty years with respect to the representation of Indians and pioneers, but much of the basic structure of the formula and its imaginative vision of the meaning of the West has remained substantially unchanged. By their capacity to assimilate new meanings like this, literary formulas ease the transition between old and new ways of expressing things and thus contribute to cultural continuity....