Names and Roles of Characters in Science Fiction

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THIS STUDY AIMS at the double goal of finding out more about science fiction and of testing the heuristic value of the onomatologic method in the process. Many elements of vagueness which are unavoidably inherent in the subject militate against undertaking a rigorous study right now — a deficiency that can only be converted into a virtue by attempting to make this report as light and appetizing as a proper hors d'œuvre. It is hoped that this will not be found inappropriate for a first survey of an area that so far has been scientifically rather fallow but may yet produce intellectual nourishment.

The literary genre to which we usually apply the term *science fiction* is primarily a recent American phenomenon. Though historically old, it grew vigorously into a mass medium only in recent decades and did not attract much public attention before World War II. Its development abroad has not matched its boom here. Especially in continental Western Europe science fiction is largely dominated by translations and imitations of American material. Our own writers have often delighted in being bizarre — the general reader in America expects to be introduced to a two-headed Martian answering to some name like Nrxi 257 — but, particularly since the sputniks arose, science fiction has acquired a certain respectability.

Magazines, rather than books, are the strength of science fiction. Critics have often graded these magazines along a continuum ranging from "highbrow" (such as *Analog* or *Galaxy*) to "lowbrow" (such as sundry short-lived magazines that have words like *super* or *fantastic* in their titles). Hardly different from the "lowbrow" in format and appearance, though to some extent in price, the "highbrow" magazines aim more at educated (particularly scientifically educated) readers; their ambition is to publish literature on a level with the best and most respected fiction.

The "lowbrow" magazines tend to use juvenile and "popular" reading material, and refrain from making high intellectual demands of their readers; they rather parallel the more flashy and sensational general magazines on the news stands. There seems to be a correlation between what we might call "brow rating" and staying power: the more highbrow a science fiction magazine is, the longer it tends to survive.

For a starting point, we may formulate the following hypotheses, leaving our specialized acquaintance with this field of literature aside for the moment and basing our formulation merely on general knowledge:

1. Characters playing different roles have different types of names. We are more likely, for instance, to encounter a hero with an English name and a villain who bears a Slavic name than vice-versa.

2. Changes in name fashion reflect changes in prevailing political and ideological outlook; for example, we may find increased frequency of names that are in harmony with such current trends as the decline of Isolationism or the "religious revival."

3. Less bizarre names are found in highbrow magazines than in lowbrow magazines, which cater to a different, less polished taste and may be more inclined to savor the exotic flavor of names like Baululaulu.

4. By the same token, as science fiction matures, names will become more conventional in the course of time. The difference in the naming of characters between science fiction and "mainstream literature" will be de-emphasized.

It is simple to test these hypotheses and accumulate information which also sheds some light on other peculiarities of science fiction.

Four magazine issues were selected to represent different "brow ratings" and points in time: *Astounding Science Fiction* (now also called *Analog*; in science fiction circles referred to as *ASF* and respected as the epitome of highbrowism), the issues of June 1959 and May 1949; *Super-Science Fiction* of August 1959; and *Startling Stories* of January 1949 — the latter two to represent the lowbrow.

These four magazine issues contain among them 22 stories and a total of 112 named characters. "Stories" is here defined so as to exclude "novels," i.e., fiction of considerable length, especially

serials. "Characters" is defined to include any human or "humanoid" figure (not, e.g., pet dogs) appearing in any of these stories, not including real or fictitious historical persons (e.g., in such statements as "after the theory of relativity was proposed by Einstein in the 20th century and developed by Shogomuchi in the 21st . . .").

The names clearly and naturally fall into three categories which for the sake of convenience can be labeled as follows:

I. AS ("Anglo-Saxon") names.

II. Foreign names.

III. "Out-of-the-world names," i.e., names formed so as to give the reader the impression that they are not derived from any existing language.

The distinction is sarcastically illustrated by Nabokov who also presents a shrewd hypothesis on the assignment of certain names to characters having certain roles:

> Invaders of Denebola and Spica, Virgo's finest, bear names beginning with Mac; cold scientists are usually found under names like Stein; some share with the super-galactic gals such abstract labels as Biola and Vala.[1]

It is true that a few names are on the borderlines between our three categories. The fact that some characters are presented under nicknames or aliases further complicates the situation. It is, nevertheless, possible to classify into these categories all names occurring in these four issues, with a degree of certainty which suffices for our purpose.

The characters in the stories can equally clearly and naturally be grouped into several categories according to their roles:

a) Heroes (and heroines).

b) Villains (villainesses should be added for the sake of symmetry but hardly any occur in these stories).

c) Friends — helpers, subordinates, assistants, etc., of the hero (here again, a parallel category of villains' retainers is obviated by the fact that there are so few).

d) "Guardians" and their helpers — the term "guardian" being taken from T. S. Eliot's *Cocktail Party*, one of the most remarkable

[1] V. Nabokov, "Lance," *Stories from the New Yorker 1950 to 1960*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1960, p. 9.

pieces of modern literature outside science fiction in which this category appears. A "guardian" is a character endowed with higher knowledge, wisdom, or power than the hero possesses, who, unbeknown to the hero (at least at first) guides the latter's adventures towards a lofty aim, usually to the hero's benefit.

e) Episodic figures, i.e., named characters whose role in the story is not significant enough to allow further categorization (e.g., the owner of a tavern where other characters meet; port personnel; or discovered natives).

The characters can of course also be classified by age, sex, occupation, race, and species (we must not forget that we are not always dealing with specimens of *homo sapiens*).

The essential findings of this study are tabulated below. In addition to our three types of names, the table contains a column labeled "unnamed," comprising these characters whose roles in the story are important but whose names are not given.

This table permits several observations:

A. Contrary to the expectation which an uninitiated reader may harbor, AS names are by far the largest category. Their frequency has increased, but there is no indication that this trend was pioneered by highbrow magazines. Unnamed characters seem to be a specialty of *Super-Science-Fiction*; their use by authors is virtually limited to villains and guardians.

B. Out-of-the-world names and unnamed characters are characteristic of lowbrow journals, while the frequent use of AS and foreign names is characteristic of highbrow magazines which are in this sense more conventional than the former.

C. Probably the most striking observation is that heroes have typically AS names (so, to a but slightly lesser degree, do the hero's helpers; the same is also true of episodic figures). However, the names of villains fall into all four categories with about the same frequency; and guardians mostly have foreign names, those with AS names being rare.

In general, the findings shown in our table support our original hypotheses. The special configurations noted in "C" above will require further consideration.

Type of Name

Role	AS	Foreign	Out-of-the-world	Total	Unnamed	Grand Total
Heroes	17	3	1	21	—	21
Villains	6	6	5	17	4	21
Friends	22	7	2	31	2	33
Guardians and helpers	2	10	4	16	4	20
Episodic	23	2	2	27	2	29
Total	70	28	14	112	12	124
ASF, 6/59	15	4	3	22	1	23
Super-S F, 8/59	28	8	1	37	10	47
ASF, 5/49	10	13	1	24	—	24
Startling Stories, 1/49	17	3	9	29	1	30
Total "old"	27	16	10	53	1	54
Total "new"	43	12	4	59	11	70
Total "highbrow"	25	17	4	46	1	47
Total "lowbrow"	45	11	10	66	11	77

The most conspicuous feature concerning sex is the paucity of female characters. *ASF* of May 1949 has none; with the three other magazine issues, the proportion of female characters to male characters ranges from 1:6 to 1:9. None of the ten female characters in our material has an out-of-the-world name. None of them is episodic, and none is a guardian, though two are guardians' helpers. The tendency of science fiction to underplay female roles is by no means limited to our sample but has been commented upon by writers such as Bernabeu,[2] who used different material. This prac-

[2] E. P. Bernabeu, "Science Fiction: A New Mythos," *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, Vol. 26 (1957), 4, 527–535.

tice parallels the fact that, in contrast to other fields of fiction, almost all science fiction writers are men.[3]

Our material on male versus female roles and names is therefore too limited for tabulation. As to age, occupation, race, and species, too few characters are presented in sufficient detail in these 22 stories to permit definite conclusions. Nevertheless, as one might expect, the heroes in these stories are generally young, the villains and to some extent the guardians old; and races are distributed roughly as their names would indicate.

The science fiction authors' evident preference for AS names for their heroes (with the complementary findings about villains) is plausible. To the parochial mind it would seem most natural that "we" are the "good guys" while "they," the "bad guys," are foreigners and carry foreign or out-of-the-world names, or none at all. Since these writers range over all the galaxies and thus purport to be far removed from parochialism, it is surprising to catch them in parochial thinking right here; but such, we might as well admit, is the weakness of the human flesh.

This onomastic phenomenon has been noted outside science fiction. The German writer Gustav Landauer, who was killed by proto-Nazis in 1919, left a book[4] in which he comments on the strangeness of the name *Shylock*. The name has been traced to Hebrew roots;[5] but in the form that Shakespeare gave it, it sounds neither Italian nor Hebrew — either would have been expected — but rather English, and with unpleasant connotations: the emotional tone of both words, "shy" and "lock," is such that the combination conveys the impression of creepy alienness which is characteristic of Shylock. As Landauer pointed out, this English sound in the midst of euphonious Italian names — ending in -o for men and -a for women — is in effect a foreign name.

There is a good reason, of course, why the device has been little used since Shakespeare: realistic writers are obliged to select names for their characters which conform to their stations in life and the historic probability of the appearance of such a name. In the im-

[3] K. Amis, *New Maps of Hell: A Survey of Science Fiction*, New York: Harcourt Brace, 1960, p. 60.

[4] G. Landauer, *Shakespeare*, Frankfurt a.M.: Rütten & Loening, 1922.

[5] The Arden Edition of Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice* (seventh edition, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1955), p. 3.

aginary worlds of science fiction, however, there is no need for a writer to consider a preexisting milieu. The science fiction writer enjoys a degree of onomastic and other freedoms that the realistic writer does not have; in fact, it is this very quality which makes science fiction such a telling materialization of fantasies that in other writings must often be suppressed.[6]

It is interesting to compare the distribution of "goodness" and "badness" among "us" and "them" in American and Russian science fiction. Our own production is not free of national and racial bias: an unpublished study has shown, for instance, that non-white heroes are extremely rare, and non-white villains not quite so rare; the difference is highly statistically significant.[7] Quite a few characters, however, represent an imaginary future blend of different human stocks — they are usually described as bronzed and handsome — and we single out no nation or group as the breeding ground of villains.

Russian science fiction, quite in contrast to ours, is directly and without subtlety integrated into the official propaganda effort, and the prevailing plot — at least in the Stalin Era — has involved the Russian hero and the American villain. Names conform with this practice, sometimes to the point of crudity — the arch — villain of one novel, an American politician, is called *Mr. Cheap*.[8] Ironically, the authors of these works, written ten and more years ago, have a monotonous preference for casting Americans in the role of capitalistic spies who are likely to obtain information about the "fatherland of all the toilers" through the use of new technical devices.

There is a popular belief that science fiction writers have a peculiar gift of prophecy: that *Jules Verne*, for instance, was somehow able to predict inventions which were made after his time. There is hardly any real basis for such an assumption, either in Russian stories of American spies, or — for that matter — elsewhere. Serious students of science fiction, however, have explored the relationship between phenomena appearing both in science fiction at one time

[6] R. Plank, "The Reproduction of Psychosis in Science Fiction," *International Record of Medicine*, Vol. 167 (1954), 7, 407–421.

[7] W. Hirsch, personal communication dated July 8, 1960.

[8] P. Yershov, *Science Fiction and Utopian Fantasy in Soviet Literature*, New York: Research Program on the U.S.S.R., 1954.

and in reality at a later time. They have found that science fiction, though unable to prophesy, may possess the even more valuable power of preparing the mental soil for future growth. The explanation of the surprising observation that science fiction predictions so often come true would thus be akin to the "self-fulfilling prophecy": e.g., the fictitious description of an invention that has not yet been made may inspire a technician to make it; or, less crudely, science fiction may develop an interest and an enthusiasm in its readers, or capitalize on an interest already present though in a dormant state, with the result that this inspiration later leads to practical delving into the problem. These ideas have been conceptualized by the use of such terms as prolepsis[9] and anticipation.[10]

A case for these concepts can be made: Russian stories, written long before there was a U-2 plane, may have helped to prepare an emotional climate in that country in which a later incident could assume an importance out of all proportion to its real significance. The verification of such hunches is because of its very difficulty a valuable challenge to research in the behavioral sciences.

As far as the peculiar distribution of the names of guardians in American science fiction is concerned, yet another force is at work: where the clash of different cultures is a main motive in the story — and this is true of many science fiction stories and especially of those where guardians occur — two patterns are most likely to be followed: the guardian may belong to our culture (or a culture akin to ours) and the hero to an alien culture, or vice versa. A story in which human space travelers discover natives on another planet and bring them the blessings of civilization belongs to the former type: one in which the pilot of a flying saucer descends to rescue us from atomic war belongs to the latter type. Obviously, the first is a manifestation of Victorian buoyancy while the second expresses a yearning to be saved. The relative frequency of the two types is thus a measure of the anxiety rampant in our culture. The virtual absence of AS names among guardians and their helpers shows that the pressure of anxiety is rather high.

Although the scope of this study was modest, the amount of information it produced was gratifying. True, quite similar results

[9] K. Amis, *op.cit.*

[10] "Par delà la science-fiction: La pensée anticipatrice," *Arguments* 2 (1958).

could be obtained through the method of content analysis which Hirsch[11] applied to science fiction. However, the onomatologic method has specific advantages — simplicity, and the ease with which the material can be classified with little ambiguity. It can give us new insight into science fiction, and through it, as through a window, a clearer view of man's predicament in our civilization.

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[11] W. Hirsch, "The Image of the Scientist in Science Fiction: A Content Analysis," *The American Journal of Sociology,* Vol. 63 (1958), 5, 506–512.