

1979

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Wolf, Jack C. (1979) "Naming as an Alienating Device in Popular Literature," *Literary Onomastics Studies*: Vol. 6 , Article 14.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/los/vol6/iss1/14>

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NAMING AS AN ALIENATING DEVICE IN POPULAR LITERATURE

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Although the material to be presented in the following pages was gathered from and based on a survey of what is generally termed "popular literature," I have elected to limit my discussion to the use of names as an alienating device in only science fiction in order to keep the paper within manageable limits. The material presented is, however, still applicable to the much more comprehensive field of popular literature generally.

A chronic problem in the writing of science fiction is one of so disrupting the identity-empathy response of the reader that he cannot relate the concepts, particularly of alien or extra-terrestrial beings, to familiar cognates in his own experience. There is an obvious limit, for the writers of science fiction are only human and can only conceptualize on the basis of human experience. Nonetheless, it is possible to defamiliarize beings and concepts to a remarkable degree, and that is the aim of

those writers who attempt to present situations and stories outside the customary confines of literature.

One of the most crucial points for initiating this disruption of the familiar in order to produce in the reader that necessary suspension of disbelief so vital to the acceptance of science fiction is in the names of characters and places. Because names of characters occur so much more frequently than place names, and because readers are more influenced by character names, I will focus my discussion on the naming of characters, human or otherwise.

Without going exhaustively into psychological studies relating to names and popular reactions to them, and for the moment ignoring the sociological, mythical, religious, superstitious and various other aspects of naming, let me suggest that it is extremely difficult for a science fiction writer to think of a name which does not, in some way or other, resonate with some aspect of one's total experience. From a psychiatrist's point of view, if one accepts the theories of Sigmund Freud, such creation of a name or even choice of a number is impossible.¹

But of course, there are many types of science fiction, and the need for alienation of the reader's responses varies according to the type of story. It will simplify my approach without detracting from its general validity if I adopt a system of classification of science fiction which has been put

forth by Isaac Asimov, that popularizer of science and prolific science fiction writer. His classification serves as an introduction to the structural function of alienating names and at the same time provides us with a basis for demonstrating how the type of science fiction story influences the naming process. This does not mean that Asimov's categories are the only ones or even that I personally agree with the categories as he delineates them, but they serve as a convenient tool for the purposes of this presentation.

Asimov's three divisions are 1) gadget science fiction, in which the technological invention is the focus of interest; 2) adventure science fiction, in which the action is everything and the characters are generally the familiar human stereotypes transplanted to exotic realms, the so-called "space opera"; and 3) social science fiction, in which the stress is on mankind's reaction to the impact of some sort of technological development.²

In the first two categories, gadget and adventure science fiction, the characters are not the main interest and have, in effect, little to do with the story. Their names are of little importance except that they must not interfere with simplistic stereotypes and thus, inadvertently, alienate the reader or viewer by drawing his attention from the gadget or adventure.

Odd or unusual names are therefore not given to such protagonists, though frequently an antagonist will be given some

such alienating name as that of the notorious Dr. No in Ian Fleming's novels or Sax Rohmer's Dr. Fu Manchu. Parenthetically it should also be noted that racism or other alienating devices are also common in this regard, for often, as during the 1930's, the antagonists reflected society's fears of Orientals and of such threats as the "Yellow Peril" of the turn of the century. In the main, however, these two types of science fiction base whatever alienation they wish to achieve on factors which appeal to the reader's possible emotional reactions, his prejudices, and are therefore not using alienation in the same sense that I am at this time. These names, in fact, tend to urge a kind of reader identity or empathy because they force the reader to reconsider his own responses to such matters as ethnic relationships. The protagonists in these stories are given such common names as Steve Austin, the Six Million Dollar Man, and Clark Kent, Superman. Even Wonder Woman's name Diana is probably a gratuitous choice and not intended as a mythological signifier for the television audience. In short, both gadget and adventure science fiction try to remain as bland and innocuous as the proverbial "boy-or-girl-next-door."

To some degree this is also true of the social science fiction category because stories dealing with the impact of technology on humans must present identifiable humans in order

to create a sense of immediacy and identity. This is especially true in the type of social science fiction which treats of admonitory themes such as the fear of dominance by computers or the threats inherent in genetic engineering. In fact, all three of Asimov's categories subsume a commonality among human humankind and the other components in science fiction stories, a humanistic commonality in which, to hearken back to Heraclitus, man is the measure of all things.

It is at this point that naming as an alienating device begins to assume its true importance. Many science fiction writers, particularly the "hard core" writers such as Robert Heinlein, Frederik Pohl and Harlan Ellison, have attempted to disrupt this empathetic humanistic relationship by creating extraterrestrial or other beings so alien in name and nature that they cannot be instinctively typed or pigeonholed on the basis of human emotion and/or indoctrination. Their actions, attributes, intentions and motivations, the writers hope, must be accessible to the reader/viewer only through the intellect. To this end, the writers try to create an ambiance beyond the possible experiential complex of any potential reader. Any possibility of significant reader empathy or identification is undesirable.

The difficulty of creating such names can be better appreciated by a brief consideration of some of the points raised by Noah Jacobs' Naming Day in Eden.³ Jacobs enumerates the characteristics

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on which Adam, who had never seen the animals before the naming process, based his choice of names. He separated the hoofed from the clawed, dividing the former into cloven and non-cloven, and considered gender, place of origin, size, feeding habits, characteristic sounds, shape, method of locomotion, color, odor, facial expression, mode of scratching, mode of excretion and all combinations thereof.

Much the same process is still used in naming, particularly on more informal levels, and tribal and totemistic names as well as Western society's own family names reflect this and serve to emphasize how deep and pervasive is the connection between our matrix of experience and our response to names.

Eloise Lambert and Mario Pei in Our Names⁴ suggest still other sources of names such as terms of beauty or derision, racial characteristics, mythology, adaptations from the classical past, Biblical and religious names, terms of endearment, personal oddities or idiosyncrasies and demonstrate the further complexities of naming by examining the geneological formation of family names.

How then, one might well ask, is it possible at all for a science fiction writer to create names which are so alien to man's commonality of experience that they will not somehow, wittingly or unwittingly, evoke responses which create that undesirable identification response? The answer is that it is

probably impossible. However, in practice the writer is not forced to deal in absolutes but only in variable degrees of alienation.

The degrees of alienation in science fiction naming are determined in the main by the three broad approaches to naming as dictated by the type of science fiction story in which they are found. Science fiction is generally considered to be a type of fantasy which somehow or other induces reader acceptance by, as Sam Moskowitz has expressed it, "utilizing an atmosphere of scientific credibility."⁵ It follows as a necessary corollary that the degree of scientific credibility achieved depends on the ignorance of the reader with respect to scientific matters. That is, the more the fantasy is in terms familiar to the reader, the less credulous will he be in accepting the fantasy because the greater will be his means for evaluating the scientific atmosphere. The more outré or bizarre the effect intended by the author in his story, the more alien the ambiance must be for the reader. Therefore the more alien the names must be.

Of the three levels of alienation via naming available to the writer, the first and second are usually found together in greater or lesser amount. These are generally present in the first two categories of science fiction writing, i.e. in adventure or gadget science fiction, where some names are intended to have a strange, alien sound or appearance but not so much as to

impede the reading enjoyment of the reader.

In gadget science fiction, only the gadget or the mad professor who invented it will have a peculiar name because the other characters in the story are to be taken as normal "people-next-door" types. In adventure science fiction the alienation function is carried somewhat further, and characters, places, seasons and all sorts of ambient concepts will have alien labels. Some of these may be borrowed from alternate cultures as in Poul Anderson's "Eutopia" where the protagonist in lying about his name says, "I hight Xipec, a trader from Meyaco." This use of archaic English and terms derived from the Mayan gives the statement a strongly alienating flavor, yet it is by no means really foreign to a moderately well educated reader. In other instances the names may be condensations into "portmanteau" words, as Lewis Carrol referred to his vocabulary in "Jabberwocky." of which Chewbacca in Star Wars is a current example. In other instances, such as in H.P. Lovecraft's supernatural tales, the names may be transformations of less commonly used words, such as "chthonian" (meaning under the earth) into "Cthulhu." Other, less successful, attempts to create horror through alienation involve such labels as "The Thing," "The Blob," and "The Incredible Hulk." These are unimaginative attempts and are seldom successful because they are too amorphous to arouse any sort of reaction or response in even the most juvenile of

readers or viewers.

Beyond this first approach which is concerned with merely unfamiliar names based on recognizable antecedents lies the second category which utilizes symbolic or allegorical names, often in combination with a common name. Most of the stories utilizing this naming technique are stories which Asimov would categorize as "social science fiction," and the alienation is not so much intended to dehumanize the situation as it is to suggest a different point of view. Vonda McIntyre's names such as Snake, Mist, Grass and Sand are in this category as are Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.'s Billy Pilgrim and Harlan Ellison's Ticktockman. All serve their purpose of forcing the reader out of his comfortable patterns of reaction and acceptance, yet as alienation devices they remain well within the realm of relatable names.

It is on the third level of approach that the most dehumanized and alienating names are attempted, and these are frequently combinations of letters and numbers. These are hardly names in the accepted sense of the term in Western culture, but again there is a wide spectrum of such labels allowing an equally wide spectrum of responses, both instinctive or visceral and intellectual. It is in this category that alienation through naming has its greatest effect and disrupts the reader's potential for identification with the characters and places.

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John Brunner in his short story "Judas" presents a god, known to his subjects as "The Immaculate Manufacture," who is in reality Android A-26. The two robots, Artoo Detoo (R2D2) and See Threepio (C3PO), in George Lucas' Star Wars are also good examples of this level of alienation. Artoo Detoo and See Threepio are typical alienating names arousing no expectations on the part of the reader or viewer. Until he actually sees the robots on the screen or reads more about them in the book, the spectator cannot even conceive of what they might be. Their treatment in Star Wars is sympathetic and fans, now accustomed to a highly technological society, have taken the robots to their hearts, no doubt in part at least precisely because they can not associate the robots with anything in human prejudice or experience and so have had to learn about them one step at a time.

Actually Star Wars presents us with a much larger spectrum of names as alienating devices and cuts across all three levels discussed. Kenobi, the name of the patriarch and keeper of the faith, strikes a Biblical or religious resonance entirely in keeping with the character. Chewbacca the Wookie, whose name is an obvious condensation of "Chew tobacco" or "chewing tobacco," is a good example of the use of portmanteau formation of names, and the linkage with the imaginary tribe of Wookies produces a name which, though neutral in expectation arousal, has a ring of childhood silliness about it. Leia Organa, in what seems to

be a combination of symbol (rather explicit) and sexual pun, presents the second level of naming.

The protagonist, Luke Skywalker, is named more in accord with classic comic book style in the manner of Captain Marvel and Superman or Wonder Woman, and his name is intended to induce instant recognition, classification and empathy. After all, with the evangelical name Luke linked to the descriptive cognomen Skywalker, what could he be other than a heroic figure?

But it is with the name of the antagonist, the Dark Lord of the Sith, that Lucas provides the reader with a complex bit of alienation worthy of a far more complex book than Star Wars. Darth Vader's name combines elements which reach to the very wellsprings of human emotion, for if I am not mistaken, Darth is a portmanteau or condensation of the words "dark," "earth," and "death," Its resonance with the word "dearth" is also notable. As for "Vader," that seems simply to be a truncation of "invader," Putting the two together, we have connotations of "dark death, the invader of earth," a reading which is entirely consonant with his title Dark Lord of the Sith. And with the overall theme of the book, also, for Star Wars is a rather puerile rehash of the eternal problem of the human condition.

Be that as it may, Star Wars is typical of an increasing trend in science fiction to utilize naming as a part of the

structural complex and as a means of controlling the degree of alienation of reader response.

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NOTES

¹Sigmund Freud, The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud, ed. and trans. Dr. A.A. Brill (New York: The Modern Library, 1938), p. 151.

²Isaac Asimov, "Social Science Fiction," Science Fiction: The Future, ed. Dick Allen (New York; Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), pp. 272-73.

³Noah Jonathan Jacobs, Naming-Day in Eden (New York: Macmillan, 1958).

⁴Eloise Lambert and Mario Pei, Our Names: Where They Came From and What They Mean (New York: Lothrop, Lee and Shepard, 1960).

⁵Sam Moskowitz, Explorers of the Infinite: Shapers of Science Fiction (Westport, Connecticut: Hyperion Press, 1963), p. 11.