levels and for very different and expressive purposes. The basis of this discussion is a treatment of three major hard-boiled writers, two of whom, Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, are considered significant artists by many persons and the third, Mickey Spillane, is usually viewed as the apotheosis of non-art. I offer the view that there is a kind of artfulness involved in Spillane's work, though it is certainly a different kind than that for which we value the stories of Hammett and Chandler.

When literary formulas last for a considerable period of time, they usually undergo considerable change as they adapt to the different needs and interests of changing generations. Chapter 8 is an analysis of this evolutionary process using the western as a case study. In this discussion which moves from James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking saga to the western films of the early 1970s, I attempt to show how the western formula has responded to changing American attitudes by a continual reinterpretation of its basic elements.

Since most of my examination of the various dimensions of formulaic literature has concerned itself with formulas embodying the archetypes of adventure and mystery, I have had little opportunity to consider with any intensity the great range of formulas that depend primarily on the archetypal patterns of romance, melodrama, and alien beings and states. While a full treatment of these areas would expand this study beyond reasonable limits, I feel that we must examine at least one aspect of this area of popular literature. Therefore I have chosen, in chapter 9, to explore one melodramatic formula, the best-selling "blockbuster" or social novel. In this chapter I have tried to indicate, in briefer form, how the various perspectives and methods of analysis developed in the preceding nine chapters might be applied to this complex formula. I consider the definition of the blockbuster formula, its character as art, its relation to its cultural background and audience, and some suggestions as to how we might begin to trace its evolution.

Chapter 9 can serve as a summary of the various problems explored in this book. The conclusion is reserved for my attempt to define the major inadequacies and limitations of this work, not so much to forestall my readers, who will certainly have their own sense of this book's shortcomings, but because, having lived with this inquiry for some years, I do have a peculiarly poignant vision of its strengths and weaknesses. I try to articulate this sense as clearly as I can in the conclusion, along with some suggestions for further inquiry.

**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 epistles—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
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One

The Study of Literary Formulas

Formulas, Genres, and Archetypes

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such conceptions clearly imply universal or transcultural conceptions of literary structure, they are examples of what I 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. (I offer some speculations about the psychology of this in chapter 2.) 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 street cleaners. 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
In most cases, a formulaic pattern will be in existence 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 potentials. 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.

These, then, are the major terms that I propose to employ in the study of formulaic literature. As I have indicated, I hold no special brief for this particular terminology, but I do believe that the implied distinctions between the descriptive and the aesthetic modes of generalization and between the cultural and universal conceptions of types of stories are crucial and must be understood in the way we use whatever terms we choose for this sort of analysis. In the remainder of this chapter I will deal with what can be said in a general way about the analysis of formulaic structures.

The Artistic Characteristics of Formula Literature

Formula literature, 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.

Robert Warshow in his essay on the gangster film effectively defined the special aesthetic imperatives of this sort of literary creation:

For such a type to be successful means that its conventions have imposed themselves upon the general consciousness and become the accepted vehicle of a particular set of attitudes and a particular aesthetic effect. One goes to any individual example of the type with very definite expectations; and originality is to be welcomed only in the degree that it intensifies the expected experience without fundamentally altering it. Moreover, the relationship between the conventions which go to make up such a type and the real experience of its audience or the real facts of whatever situation it pretends to describe is only of secondary importance and does not determine its aesthetic force. It is only in an ultimate sense that the type appeals
to its audience’s experience of reality; more immediately it appeals to previous experience of the type itself: it creates its own field of reference (italics mine).\footnote{3}

Since the pleasure and effectiveness of an individual formulaic work depends on its intensification of a familiar experience, the formula creates its own world with which we become familiar by repetition. We learn in this way how to experience this imaginary world without continually comparing it with our own experience. Thus, as we shall see in a few moments, formulaic literature is the most appropriate vehicle for the experiences of escape and relaxation. Let me first examine some of the artistic problems generated by the fundamental formulaic imperative of intensifying an expected experience.

In this type of literature, the relationship between individual work and formula is somewhat analogous to that of a variation to a theme, or of a performance to a text. To be a work of any quality or interest, the individual version of a formula must have some unique or special characteristics of its own, yet these characteristics must ultimately work toward the fulfillment of the conventional form. In somewhat the same way, when we see a new performance of a famous role like Hamlet, we are most impressed by it if it is a new but acceptable interpretation of the part. An actor who upsets all our previous conceptions of his role is usually less enjoyable than one who builds on the interpretations we have become accustomed to. But if he adds no special touches of his own to the part we will experience his performance as flat and uninteresting. The same thing is true of variations on a theme as in, for example, a jazz performance. The soloist who makes us completely lose our sense of the tune may create a new work of considerable interest, but it will lose the special pleasure that comes with our recognition of new emphasis and intensity given to a melody we already know. On the other hand, an improvisation that simply repeats the tune or “noodles” around it arouses very little excitement. This artistic principle of variations on a theme is clearly one of the fundamental modes of expression in popular culture, as can be seen from the tremendous importance of performance in almost all of the popular media. From this point of view a new detective story by, say, Agatha Christie, is comparable in many ways to a successful production of a familiar play by a gifted cast and a talented director.

It is not easy to put into words the rather subtle and even fleeting qualities that make one performance stand out over another. In a later chapter, I will discuss this problem in connection with the formula of the classical detective story. There the quality of the individual work depends on the author’s ability to invent some ingenious new type of mystification while still working within the conventional structure of rational detection. Each formula has its own set of limits that determine what kind of new and unique elements are possible without straining the formula to the breaking point. We can point to at least two special artistic skills that all good formulaic writers seem to possess to some degree: the ability to give new vitality to stereotypes and the capacity to invent new touches of plot or setting that are still within formulaic limits.

The power to employ stereotypical characters and situations in such a way as to breathe new life and interest into them is particularly crucial to the formulaic art of high quality since the creator of a western or detective story cannot risk departing very far from the typical characters and situations his audience has come to expect. In a western, for example, if the creator employs such stereotypical situations as the chase on horseback, the barroom brawl, and the shootout, and such conventional characters as the schoolmarm from the East, the dance-hall girl, the slick gambler, the crooked bank robber, the seedy doctor or lawyer, and the cowboy hero, he will have the advantage of heightening his audience’s immediate response through the recognition that comes from many previous encounters with these characters and situations. But the good writer must renew these stereotypes by adding new elements, by showing us some new and unexpected facet, or by relating them to other stereotypes in a particularly expressive fashion. The ultimate test of a truly vitalized stereotype is the degree to which it becomes an archetype, thereby transcending its particular cultural moment and maintaining an interest for later generations and other cultures. As structural stereotypes that have pleased audiences over a number of years, formulas themselves have much of this power. The western has been a successful formula for over a hundred years and is now a genre of worldwide popularity. Individual instances of a formula generally tend to be limited in their appeal either to a particular period or a particular culture. And yet, many individual formulaic works contain vitalized stereotypes that survive beyond their historical moment.

Two sorts of stereotype vitalization seem particularly effective. The first is the stereotypical character who also embodies qualities that seem contrary to the stereotypical traits. For example, Sherlock Holmes is the stereotype of the rational, scientific investigator, the supreme man of reason. Yet, at the same time, his character paradoxically incorporates basic qualities from a contrary stereotype, that of the dreamy romantic poet, for Holmes is also a man of intuition, a dreamer, and a drugtaker, who spends hours fiddling aimlessly on his violin. This combination of opposing stereotypical traits is one of the things that made Holmes such a striking literary character. A similarly paradoxical mixture marks the portraits of some of the great western stars. Gary Cooper, for example, is typically a man of violence, enormously skilled with guns and fists and faster on the draw than anyone else; yet he also plays a character of great shyness and gentleness. Because Cooper so effectively embodied these stereotypical opposites in his manner and physical presence, he became perhaps the greatest of the western stars, for this same mixture marks the hero of some of the most effective western stories—Max Brand’s Destroyer Again, Jack Schaefer’s Shame, Owen Wister’s The Virginian.

A second mode of stereotype vitalization is the addition of significant
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points in the history of the western, a new work has given rise to a new version of the formula. Just recently, for example, Thomas Berger's *Little Big Man* and the highly successful movie based on that novel have already been widely imitated in their handling of western conventions. Another current example of a work whose success probably marks the emergence of a new version of a traditional formula is *The Godfather*.

Another major characteristic of formula literature is the dominant influence of the goals of escape and entertainment. Because such formulaic types as mystery and adventure stories are used as a means of temporary escape from the frustrations of life, stories in these modes are commonly defined as subliterature (as opposed to literature), entertainment (as opposed to serious literature), popular art (as opposed to fine art), lowbrow culture (as opposed to highbrow), or in terms of some other pejorative opposition. The trouble with this sort of approach is that it tends to make us perceive and evaluate formula literature simply as an inferior or perverted form of something better, instead of seeing its "escapist" characteristics as aspects of an artistic type with its own purposes and justification. After all, while most of us would condemn escapism as a total way of life, our capacity to use our imaginations to construct alternative worlds into which we can temporarily retreat is certainly a central human characteristic and seems, on the whole, a valuable one.

In order to short-circuit such implicitly evaluative oppositions as low and high or popular and serious literature, I propose to proceed on the basis of a loose categorization of mimetic and formulaic literature, using the distinction suggested by Warnesh when he says, the relationship between the conventions which go to make up such a type and the real experience of its audience of the real facts of whatever situations it pretends to describe is only of secondary importance and does not determine its aesthetic force. It is only in an ultimate sense that the type appeals to its audience's experience of reality; much more immediately, it appeals to previous experience of the type itself; it creates its own field of reference.

The mimetic element in literature confronts us with the world as we know it, while the formulaic element reflects the construction of an ideal world. Without the disorder, the ambiguity, the uncertainty, and the limitations of the world of our experience. Of course, the mimetic and the formulaic represent two poles that prefer literary works lie somewhere between. Few novels, however dedicated to the representation of reality, do not have some element of the ideal. And most formulaic works have at least the surface texture of the real world, as Mickey Spillane's heroic detective stories are full of the grittiness and sordidness of the corrupt city. It is possible that in earlier periods the dominant literary forms so balanced mimetic and formulaic elements that a specialized literature of escape was unnecessary. But the formulaic con-
structions of the last century or so, with which we are primarily concerned in this study, do tend to have overall structures of a conventional character that differentiate them from contemporary mimetic works.

What, then, are the aspects of formulaic literature that constitute what we might call the artistry of escape? First of all, I think we can say that formulaic works necessarily stress intense and immediate kinds of excitement and gratification as opposed to the more complex and ambiguous analyses of character and motivation that characterize mimetic literature. It is almost a cliché that formulaic works stress action and plot, particularly of a violent and exciting sort, i.e., actions involving danger or sex or both. In order for us to temporarily forget about our own existence and enter fully into an imaginary world, we require the strongest kinds of interest and stimulus. In relation to this particular aspect of the escapist experience, the structure of pornographic literature might serve as an ideal type. Pornography is perhaps the most completely formulaic of literary structures in that all its various elements are oriented toward one purpose, the narration or presentation of scenes of sexual activity in such a way as to create in the audience a pleasurable state of sexual excitement so direct and immediate that it is physical as well as mental, i.e., a state of tumescence. The experience of pornography can be an extremely effective form of escape from the limitations of reality into a fantasy world of totally submissive females readily willing or forced to submit to sexual activity with lustful enthusiasm. While pornography is doubtless an effective escape formula for many people, however, it has too many limitations to be a fully effective formulaic art.

Aside from the fact that many people find the pornographic world immoral or distasteful and thus reject it from the outset, the escape experience offered by pornography is really too immediately physical to be sustained for any substantial period of time. In effect, the only possible consequences of a pornographic episode are orgasm or detumescence, both of which lead inevitably back to the world of reality. The creators of pornography have attempted to overcome this difficulty by developing a narrative and dramatic structure that seeks to sustain and intensify sexual excitement through a series of increasingly complex and perverse episodes of sexual activity. Many pornographic books or films begin with masturbation and proceed through normal heterosexual intercourse, followed by cunnilingus and anal intercourse to a grand climactic orgy involving several persons. Yet I would hazard the guess that the actual experience of pornography for most people consists of moments of pleasurable excitement interspersed with long stretches of boredom and frustration, rather than a sustained and completed experience that leaves one temporarily satisfied.

Thus while the experience of escape requires the sort of intense interest and excitement that can be briefly generated in a receptive audience by pornography, the weakness of pornography is that it arouses an excitement so intense and uncontrolled that it tends to force immediate gratification outside itself.

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Then frustration and boredom set in until nature takes its course and the physiological cycle begins anew. Clearly a more artful and ultimately satisfying form of escape is one that can sustain itself over a longer period of time and arrive at some sense of completion and fulfillment within itself. We might take as our model of this sort of experience a good thriller or detective story, where the interest and excitement, though perhaps not as physically intense as in the case of pornography, are sustained over a much longer cycle and resolved without the requirement of physical action outside the imaginary world. Despite the ready availability of pornography in recent years, the great majority of people clearly continue to prefer other kinds of formulaic structures such as thrillers and detective stories for most of their moments of relaxation and entertainment. If my speculations about the artistry of escape are correct, this will probably continue to be the case, even if pornography becomes still more widely acceptable on moral grounds.

Some people have argued that there is a pornography of violence as well as of sexuality and that many current films with their graphic portrayal of death should be considered as analogous to the pornographic representation of sexual activity. No doubt violence, like sex, plays an important role in formulaic structures because of its capacity to generate the kind of intense feelings that take us out of ourselves. But the effects of the representation of violence seem considerably more obscure and complicated that those of sex.

Seeing pictures or reading accounts of sexual activity will tend to arouse sexual excitement that in turn causes a desire for release through orgasm. At least this holds true for the majority of men, who are still the prime consumers of pornography. It is by no means certain that the representation of violence has any comparable effect. While some recent studies suggest that certain children seek physical release by aggressive behavior after seeing a representation of violence, there is certainly no clear-cut physiological cycle involved in such responses as there is in the case of sexuality. For some people violence is sexually exciting; others react to it with a feeling of intense disgust or horror. Perhaps the most we can say on this subject in our present state of understanding is that if there is a pornography of violence the same observations can be made about it that I have suggested in connection with sexual pornography. Because it arouses extreme feelings, the representation of violence is an effective means of generating the experience of escape. And yet a mere sequence of violent episodes is not likely to be fully effective in sustaining and completing the experience. I think that our fuller understanding of the art of literary escapist involves recognizing two rather different psychological needs, both of which play an important part in shaping the kind of imaginative experiences we pursue for relaxation and regeneration. First of all, we seek moments of intense excitement and interest to get away from the boredom and ennui that are particularly prevalent in the relatively secure, routine, and organized lives of the great majority of the contemporary American and western European
public. At the same time, we seek escape from our consciousness of the ultimate insecurities and ambiguities that affict 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!).

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 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 yet are permeated with the symbols of danger, uncertainty, violence, and sex. In reading or viewing 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 than 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 embedded 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 temporary sense of fear and uncertainty about the fate of a character we care about. It is a special kind of 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 innocent 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 Franz 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 murder. 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 irresolvable 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.

Because of its escapist thrust, formulaic literature creates a very different sort of identification between audience and protagonists. Its purpose is not to make me confront motives and experiences in myself that I might prefer to ignore but to take me out of myself by constructing an idealized self-image. Thus, the protagonists of formulaic literature are typically better or more fortunate in some ways than ourselves. They are heroes who have the strength and courage to overcome great dangers, lovers who find perfectly suited partners, inquirers of exceptional brilliance who discover hidden truths, or good, sympathetic people whose difficulties are resolved by some superior figure. The art of formulaic character creation requires the establishment of some direct bond between us and a superior figure while undercutting or eliminating any aspects of the story that threaten our ability to share

enjoyably in the triumphs or narrow escapes of the protagonist. Several means have developed for accomplishing this purpose. By giving narrative emphasis to a constant flow of action, the writer avoids the necessity of exploring character with any degree of complexity. Second, the use of stereotyped characters reflecting the audience's conventional views of life and society also aids the purpose of escapism. Formulaic literature is generally characterized by a simple and emotionally charged style that encourages immediate involvement in a character's actions without much sense of complex irony or psychological subtlety. As a model of the simplest and crudest form of immediate identification between protagonist and reader, I might cite the narrative methods of Mickey Spillane, which will be discussed in a later chapter.

While Mickey Spillane does represent a kind of narrative art that has been enormously successful with a certain kind of audience, I would guess that the formulaic writers of most lasting interest and consequently of greatest artistic importance are those who achieve the escapist form of identification in more complex and subtle ways that can withstand a certain degree of scrutiny. This can be accomplished through the creation of an imaginary world that is just sufficiently far from our ordinary reality to make us less inclined to apply our ordinary standards of plausibility and probability to it. If we become immersed in such a world, it is easier for us to escape from ourselves into identification with a story's protagonists. Many of the most successful and long-lasting formulas such as that of the western, or various other forms of historical adventure, involve the creation of just such an integral fantasy world, just as many of the best writers are very skillful in fleshing out the atmosphere of their imaginary universe. For example, many readers of Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories find renewed pleasure in rereading them because of Doyle's remarkable ability to evoke an imaginary vision of a whole bygone world. Something of the same sort can be said about the continued popularity of such works as Margaret Mitchell's Gone with the Wind, or Owen Wister's The Virginian. Despite the fact that these works are permeated with stereotypical characters, unlikely situations, and obsolete themes and values, they retain a hold on later generations because their fantasy world seems so complete and interesting in itself that it is still possible to enter into an effective escapist identification with the protagonists.

In general, the escapist aspect of formulaic art makes it analogous to certain kinds of games or play. In fact, if we look at television schedules, we find that they contain a predominance of spectator sports and formula stories. Like such games as football or baseball, formula stories are individual versions of a general pattern defined by a set of rules. While the rules remain the same, the highly varied ways in which they can be embodied in particular characters and actions produce a patterned experience of excitement, suspense, and release that, as in the case of the great games, can be perennially engaging no matter how often the game is repeated. In the formula world, engaging no matter how often the game is repeated. In the formula world,
tensions and frustrations temporarily transcended. Piaget’s general description of play applies completely to the escapist dimension of formulaic art:

Conflicts are foreign to play, or, if they do occur it is so that the ego may be freed from them by compensation or liquidation whereas serious activity has to grapple with conflicts which are insurmountable. The conflict between obedience and individual liberty is, for example, the affliction of childhood and in real life the only solutions to this conflict are submission, revolt, or cooperation which involves some measure of compromise. In play, however, the conflicts are transposed in such a way that the ego is revenged, either by suppression of the problem or by giving it an effective solution… it is because the ego dominates the whole universe in play that it is freed from conflict.¹

Thus there are a number of distinctive problems and techniques characteristic of formulaic art. In general, the most significant formulaic artists are those who effectively solve these problems in a way that balances the claims of escapism and the fulfillment of a conventional experience with the artistic interests of revitalized stereotypes, some degree of originality, and as much plausibility as the boundaries of the formula will permit.

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 novelist 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 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. (I attempt to do this for The Godfather in chapter 3.) 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 in part due to the way in which 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 Dashiel 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 1930s. 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 pri-
arily 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.

I. 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 the 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 was 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 of 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 the 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 understood 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 Marxist 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 Study of Literary Formulas

The determinist 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 determinist 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 psychoanalyti
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.

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 imaginable 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.
recent issue of American Quarterly. 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 in this study 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.

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 obscure matters. If the man is glorified in poem and song as Lincolnseque, we might speak of the author’s ‘myth’ or 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 a 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. 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 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 ways 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 Sax 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. Sax 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 racist 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 racist; he is only a
cynic, a devisor of tales for general consumption.¹

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 successful.
Or taken 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
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 spec-
tator, could have been written by the same writer. Both exploit the same
network of assumptions.⁹

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 presumably
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 by most people in areas of life other than fantasy.

Most of Kuklick's other criticisms of the myth-symbol approach come
down to a basic attack on the way in which myths and symbols have been defined
and interpreted. He argues that most myth-symbol interpreters have defined
the central myths of the American past in terms of concerns of the present
and argues that they have thereby committed the historical fallacy of
presentism. He also points out that they have based their analysis almost
entirely on printed literary materials that can be said to relate to only a
minority of the population. Indeed, some scholars have based their interpre-
tations on a small number of masterpieces which, despite the argument that
great writers have a unique capacity to articulate cultural-myth,
cannot really be said to reflect more than the interests and attitudes of the
elite audiences who read them. Whether or not these criticisms apply to the
myth-symbol interpreters, and I must confess that they do in a number of
instances, I think they are largely obviated by the method of formula
analysis. First of all, a formula is by definition a pattern characteristic of the
widest possible range of literature and other media. Therefore, it does not
involve drawing cultural inferences from a few select masterpieces in a
medium that does not cover the entire culture. The major formulas we will be
studying are basic structural patterns in mass media like the movies and
television as well as in printed literature. Therefore, they are understood and
enjoyed by the great majority of the population at one time or another. In addition, while the concept of a symbol or myth is vague enough that it can be interpreted in many different ways, the study of formulas has a built-in defense against “presentism” for it forces us not simply to explain the meaning of a single symbol or myth, but to account for the relationship between many different myths and symbols. In doing this, I feel we are inevitably forced to come closer to the original intention. While it may well be possible for us to treat the symbolic figure of Cooper’s Leatherstocking in such a way as to lose track of the original meaning he had for Cooper, I think that if we insist upon reading the Leatherstocking tales in the context of all the various characters and situations that Cooper places him in and then upon comparing all this with later embodiments of the western formula, we will certainly find it far more difficult to misread Leatherstocking’s original meaning for Cooper. The analysis of a formula always involves us in the exploration of a literary whole, while themes, symbols, or myths are usually only parts of larger patterns. To select a theme or symbol out of a larger whole invariably has an arbitrary aspect that the analysis of formulas avoids.

To understand more fully the relation between artistic and cultural interests involved in the creation of formulas, we need to know more about the range of cultural functions as well as the distinctive artistic qualities of formulaic literature. In an earlier section of this discussion, I suggested that the special artistic quality of formulaic literature was the result of striking a balance, appropriate to the intended audience, between the sense of reality or mimesis essential to art of any kind and the characteristics of escapist imaginative experience: an emphasis on game and play, on wish-fulfilling forms of identification, on the creation of an integral, slightly removed imaginative world, and on intense, but temporary emotional effects like suspense, surprise, and horror, always controlled by a certainty of resolution. Effective formulaic literature depends on a maximizing of this escapist dimension within a framework that the audience can still accept as having some connection with reality.

What, then, can be said of the cultural functions of formulaic literature? I think we can assume that formulaic texts are collective cultural products because they successfully articulate a pattern of fantasy that is at least acceptable to if not preferred by the cultural groups who enjoy them. Formulas enable the members of a group to share the same fantasies. Literary patterns that do not perform this function do not become formulas. When a group’s attitudes undergo some change, new formulas arise and existing formulas develop new themes and symbols, because formula stories are created and distributed almost entirely in terms of commercial exploitation. Therefore, allowing for a certain degree of inertia in the process, the production of formulas is largely dependent on audience response. Existing formulas commonly evolve in response to new audience interests. A good example of this process is the recent success with urban audiences of a new kind of black-oriented, action-adventure film. The great majority of these

new black films are simply versions of traditional formulas like the western, the hard-boiled detective story, and the gangster saga with an urban black setting and protagonists. These formulas enable the new black self-consciousness to find expression in conventional forms of fantasy not significantly different in their assumptions and value structures from the sort of adventure stories that have been enjoyed by American audiences for several decades. The new black cowboy or gangster or detective hero is the same basic hero type in the same kind of action. Thus, in this case, the evolution of formulas has simply assimilated black needs for some sort of distinctive artistic expression into the shapes of conventional fantasies. It would appear, then, that one basic cultural impetus of formulaic literature is toward the maintenance of conventional patterns of imaginative expression. Indeed, the very fact that a formula is an often repeated narrative or dramatic pattern implies the function of cultural stability. Formulaic evolution and change are one process by which new interests and values can be assimilated into conventional imaginative structures. This process is probably of particular importance in a discontinuous, pluralistic culture like those of modern industrial societies. Therefore, literary formulas tend to flourish in such a society.

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 the individual against 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 premiated by the function of the villain 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 mi-
tures as taboo, particularly between whites, Orientals, blacks, and Indians. 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. I have already given the example of the new black action films as an instance of this process. As I shall show in another chapter, 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.

This analysis of the major ways in which literary formulas relate to the processes of culture is necessarily speculative. And yet it does provide us with some explanatory hypotheses that can be tested both in the analysis of formulaic literature and in investigations of the ways in which creators and audiences relate to these formulas. Since this study is concerned with defining and analyzing some of the major formulas, I must leave the latter kind of inquiry largely in abeyance, though I hope that the preceding outline of a theory of the cultural function of literary formulas will be put to the test by social psychologists or mass communications researchers.

Notes toward a Typology of Literary Formulas

One of the important problems connected with the study of literary formulas is to arrive at some understanding of the general story types that underlie the diversity of formulaic constructions. I suggested in the first chapter that particular formulas clothe cultural images, myths, and themes in archetypal story forms that appear to be transcultural if not universal. Almost every commentator on the western has noted at one point or another the analogy between the heroic cowboy and the chivalrous knight. Though the specific images and themes of the knightly romance are quite different from those of the western, they are both forms of heroic adventure. Consequently the basic structures of action, the kinds of character relationships and situations they represent, have many things in common. There are several reasons why it is important to gain some clear definition of these archetypal structures. First, because they underlie so many different kinds of stories, these structures probably reflect basic psychological interests and needs and thus can give us insight into the workings of the psyche. Second, to define these underlying forms is a means of clarifying what the artistic boundaries and potentials are for different sorts of formulas. Such definitions can lead us to a better appreciation of the artistic problems involved in the creation of formula literature. Finally, by discovering these more universal story types, we will be better able to differentiate what is particularly characteristic of an individual culture or period from those aspects of formulas that reflect more universal psychological and artistic imperatives.

If we look at the enormous variety of literary formulas, certain general principles seem to emerge. Many types of stories center on heroic action, and these are quite different from stories where the chief interest lies in how a girl meets a boy and love is born. Still another kind of story focuses on the unraveling of some sort of mystery, and while it may well contain elements of both heroism and romance, these are clearly subordinate to the search for truth. Other types of stories derive their fascination from the imaginary encounter with some monster or situation of fantasy. And what do we make of such highly successful dramas as those typically found in soap operas or in many best-selling novels, where different individuals undergo many diverse forms of suffering and unhappiness? Is there any basis on which we can account for the emergence of these formal archetypes?
At first, one is tempted to see these different archetypes as instances of such traditional literary genres as tragedy, comedy, romance, and satire. Thus, a soap opera might be seen as a popular form of tragedy, while the western can certainly be treated as a contemporary form of the romance. Though this approach is doubtless valid in a general way, it does not take into account certain special characteristics of formulaic literature that tend to differentiate it from what we commonly refer to as "serious" or "high" literature. Formulas are more highly conventional and more clearly oriented toward some form of escapism, the creation of an imaginary world in which fictional characters who command the reader's interest and concern transcend the boundaries and frustrations that the reader ordinarily experiences. The hero successfully overcomes his enemies and surmounts great dangers; the lover has his or her desires fully met; the long-suffering saint is finally rewarded.

We might loosely distinguish between formula stories and their "serious" counterparts on the ground that the latter tend toward some kind of encounter with our sense of the limitations of reality, while formulas embody moral fantasies of a world more exciting, more fulfilling, or more beneficial than the one we inhabit. In these imaginary worlds we come temporarily nearer to our hearts' desires and escape from the limiting reality around us by imaginatively identifying with characters who have an unusually great ability to deal with the problems they face, or who are so favored by luck or providence that they eventually overcome their difficulties and "live happily ever after." At least until we need another story.

Not that formula literature is totally nonmimetic. A moral fantasy that is incredible to the point that it cannot generate some temporary suspension of disbelief will not serve the function of escape. This is one point where formulas are very closely tied to particular cultures and audiences, for it is the attitudes of particular groups that determine the rudimentary margin of credibility necessary even for the purposes of escape. Formula creators must produce different kinds of heroes for different audiences. Children can accept a Lone Ranger, but, for 'most adults, such a character is too pure and superhuman to serve the purposes of effective moral fantasy. For many nineteenth-century Americans it was plausible to ascribe certain events to providential action in a way that is totally unacceptable to contemporary audiences.

Moral fantasy can also be distinguished from the more mimetic form of physical or material fantasy in which the writer imagines a world materially different from ordinary reality, but in which the characters and the situations they confront are still governed by the general truths of human experience. Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, for example, takes place in a world where objects, time, and space are not governed by the ordinary laws of nature, yet the protagonist's behavior seems remarkably true to our understanding of the psyche of a young lady of her age, while many of the fantastic characters and episodes cast an ironic or satiric light on human nature as we know it. Alice is not, in any sense, a moral fantasy. A James Bond adventure, on the other hand, though it exists in a world that materially resembles our own at almost every point, presents a protagonist of extraordinary capacities in a set of circumstances that enable him to face the most insuperable obstacles and surmount them without lasting harm to himself, either morally or physically. This is clearly a special form of moral fantasy.

Mimesis and moral fantasy establish two poles between which there exists a rather complex continuum. Many major mimetic works contain elements of moral fantasy, just as many of the most effective escapist fictions mix a large proportion of human actuality with their fantasies of heroism and a more exciting, glamorous, and secure world. Nonetheless, even the most casual glance at a variety of the major formulaic types suggests that their basic structures involve some kind of moral fantasy. Therefore, it seems possible that an analysis of the moral fantasies underlying some of our major formulaic types might provide us with the basis for a typology of formulaic structures.

In making this analysis I have chosen, for the sake of simplicity, to eliminate from consideration the various forms of comedy. The reason for this selection is twofold. First of all, to add the whole range of comic formulas to what is already an extraordinarily broad and diverse mass of literary materials would make our task of classification and analysis infinitely more complicated than it already is. Second, comedy poses a special problem in connection with the discussion of moral fantasy since even the most mimetic comedies employ conventions that can be seen from certain points of view as examples of moral fantasy; the happy ending, the triumph of the fool, the defeat of the disproportionate. Indeed, if Eldridge Olson's analysis of the basic structure of comedy is correct and the comic effect is derived from our perception that a circumstance thought to be dangerous and threatening is not so in actuality, then comedy as a whole bears a different relation to escapist fantasies than the variety of noncomic structures. To avoid getting into these complex and difficult questions, I will confine my attention to the typology of such noncomic formulas as the detective story, the spy story, the western, and the gothic romance.

Looking at the whole range of story formulas, we can, it seems to me, discern five primary moral fantasies under which all the formulas I am familiar with can be subsumed. I will first list these fantasies and then try to define them more specifically: Adventure; Romance; Mystery; Melodrama; Alien Beings or States.

Adventures

The central fantasy of the adventure story is that of the hero—individual or group—overcoming obstacles and dangers and accomplishing some important and moral mission. Often, though not always, the hero's trials are
result of the machinations of a villain, and, in addition, the hero frequently receives, as a kind of side benefit, the favors of one or more attractive young ladies. The interplay with the villain and the erotic interests served by the attendant damsels are more in the nature of frosting on the cake. The true focus of interest in the adventure story is the character of the hero and the nature of the obstacles he has to overcome. This is the simplest and perhaps the oldest and widest in appeal of all story types. It can clearly be traced back to the myths and epics of earliest times and has been cultivated in some form or other by almost every human society. At least on the surface, the appeal of this form is obvious. It presents a character with whom the audience identifies, passing through the most frightening perils to achieve some triumph. Perhaps the basic moral fantasy implicit in this type of story is that of victory over death, though there are also all kinds of subsidiary triumphs available depending on the particular cultural materials employed: the triumph over injustice and the threat of lawlessness in the western; the saving of the nation in the spy story; the overcoming of fear and the defeat of the enemy in the combat story. While the specific characterization of the hero depends on the cultural motifs and themes that are embodied in any specific adventure formula, there are in general two primary ways in which the hero can be characterized: as a superhero with exceptional strength or ability or as “one of us,” a figure marked, at least at the beginning of the story, by flawed abilities and attitudes presumably shared by the audience. Both of these methods of characterization foster strong, but slightly different, ties of identification between hero and audience. In the case of the superhero, the principle of identification is like that between child and parent and involves the complex feelings of envious submission and ambiguous love characteristic of that relationship. This kind of treatment of the hero is most characteristic of the adventure stories constructed for children and young people. The superhero also frequently embodies the most blatant kind of sexual symbolism. More sophisticated adults generally prefer the “ordinary” hero figure who is dominant in the fictions of those who are usually considered the best writers of “grown-up” adventure stories such as H. Rider Haggard, Robert Louis Stevenson, or, to take a more recent example, Alistair MacLean. Some of the most popular writers of this type have managed to combine the superhero with a certain degree of sophistication as in the James Bond adventures of Ian Fleming.

Beyond the two general adventure patterns of the superhero and the ordinary hero, specific adventure formulas can be categorized in terms of the location and nature of the hero’s adventures. This seems to vary considerably from culture to culture, presumably in relation to those activities that different periods and cultures see as embodying a combination of danger, significance, and interest. New periods seem to generate new adventure formulas while to some extent still holding on to earlier modes. Adventure situations that seem too distant either in time or in space tend to drop out of

the current catalog of adventure formulas or to pass into another area of the culture. Thus, tales of knightly adventure, still widely popular in the nineteenth century, no longer play much of a role in adult adventure literature. More recent cultural situations—crime and its pursuit, war, the West, international espionage, sports—have largely usurped the battle with dragons and the quest for the grail.

Romance

The adventure story is perhaps the simplest fantasy archetype. Appearing at all levels of culture, it seems to appeal to all classes and types of person, though particularly to men. The feminine equivalent of the adventure story is the romance. This is not to say that women do not read adventure stories or that romances cannot be popular with men; there is probably no exclusive sexual property in these archetypes of fantasy. Nonetheless, the fact that most adventure formulas have male protagonists while most romances have female central characters does suggest a basic affinity between the different sexes and these two story types.

The crucial defining characteristic of romance is not that it stars a female but that its organizing action is the development of a love relationship, usually between a man and a woman. Because this is the central line of development, the romance differs from the adventure story and the mystery. Adventure stories, more often than not, contain a love interest, but one distinctly subsidiary to the hero’s triumph over dangers and obstacles. One might put it that in the adventure story the relation between hero and villain is really more important than the hero’s involvement with a woman. Romances often contain elements of adventure, but the dangers function as a means of challenging and then cementing the love relationship. For example, in a recent True Confessions story—“Raped—Then Thrown in the Drunk Tank to Die”—a young man tells the grim story of how on the eve of their wedding his sweetheart was raped and then underwent a series of further sufferings. But the significance of this episode lies in the way it brings the two lovers to a deeper and more secure love for each other—“For both of us, our wedding night was as perfect as any mortal man and woman could hope for—tender, passionate, wild, beautiful.”

The “gothic romances” or “contemporary gothic,” one of the most popular present-day formulas, makes extensive use of elements of adventure and mystery. Unlike a straight mystery formula such as the detective story where the solution of the mystery is the dominant line of action, the gothic romance uses mystery as an occasion for bringing two potential lovers together, for placing temporary obstacles in the path of their relationship, and ultimately for making its solution a means of clearing up the separation between the lovers.

The moral fantasy of the romance is that of love triumphant and
permanent overcoming all obstacles and difficulties. Though the usual outcome is a permanently happy marriage, more sophisticated types of love story sometimes end in the death of one or both of the lovers, but always in such a way as to suggest that the love relation has been of lasting and permanent impact. This characteristic differentiates the mimetic form of the romantic tragedy from the formulaic romance. In works like Romeo and Juliet, Tristan and Isolde, or Last Tango in Paris, the intensity of the lovers' passion is directly related to the extent to which their love is doomed. It simply cannot continue to exist in the fictional situation either for social or psychological reasons and consequently the passion itself brings about the death of one or both of the lovers. In a romance like Erich Segal's Love Story, the passion is perfect in itself and redeems the lovers. It is not the inability of love to triumph over obstacles that brings about the death of Jenny, but a biological accident. The result is sentimental rather than tragic; we feel sad that something so perfect cannot continue, but we do not confront the basic irreconcilability of love with other responsibilities and needs, which is the essential tension of romantic tragedy.

Since romance is a fantasy of the all-sufficiency of love, most romantic formulas center on the overcoming of some combination of social or psychological barriers. A favorite formulaic plot is that of the poor girl who falls in love with some rich or aristocratic man, which might be called the Cinderella formula. Or there is the Pamela formula, in which the heroine overcomes the threat of meaningless passion in order to establish a complete love relationship. Another more contemporary formula is that of the career girl who rejects love in favor of wealth or fame, only to discover that love alone is fully satisfying.

There seems little doubt that most modern romance formulas are essentially affirmations of the ideals of monogamous marriage and feminine domesticity. No doubt the coming age of women's liberation will invent significantly new formulas for romance, if it does not lead to a total rejection of the moral fantasy of love triumphant. Just as one can see the increasing significance of antiheroeic versions of such traditional adventure formulas as the Western and the spy story, so the recent success of antiromantic romances like John Fowles's The French Lieutenant's Woman may presage the development of an antiformulaic formula.

Mystery

The fundamental principle of the mystery story is the investigation and discovery of hidden secrets, the discovery usually leading to some benefit for the character(s) with whom the reader identifies. The discovery of secrets with bad consequences for the protagonist, as in the case of Oedipus, is indeed the result of a mystery structure, but a use of this structure outside the realm of moral fantasy. In mystery formulas, the problem always has a desirable and rational solution, for this is the underlying moral fantasy expressed in this formulaic archetype.

Unlike adventure and romance, which have spawned a great multiplicity of formulas, mystery has been far more important as a subsidiary principle in adventure stories, romances, and melodramas than as a dominant formulaic principle in its own right, with the single exception of one of the greatest and most fruitful of all formulas, that of the classical detective story. Most other formulas involving a good deal of mystery—such as the hard-boiled detective story, the secret agent story, the gothic romance, or the crime thriller—tend to shade over into adventure or romance, though mystery remains a basic interest and an important secondary principle of the form. The reason for this is probably quite simple. Pursued as an end in itself the search for hidden secrets is primarily an intellectual, reasoning activity. However much it may be the conscious expression of nonintellectual or unconscious interests, some psychoanalytical critics have suggested that our fascination with mysteries can ultimately be traced to our repressed feelings about the primal scene—the actual narrative of a mystery involves the isolation of clues, the making of deductions from these clues, and the attempt to place the various clues in their rational place in a complete scheme of cause and effect. Such an activity, and the underlying moral fantasy that all problems have a clear and rational solution, is necessarily of greatest interest to those individuals whose background and training have predisposed them to give special interest and valuation to the processes of thought. Others, perhaps the majority of people, will rather quickly lose interest in a structure that is predominantly rational and will prefer their mysteries served up as a sauce to heroic or erotic action. Used in this way, mystery can intensify and complicate a story of triumph over obstacles or of the successful development of love by increasing suspense and uncertainty and adding further interest to the final resolution.

Because of the basic intellectual demands it makes on its audience, the pure mystery has become one of the most sophisticated and explicitly artful of formulaic types. Yet its limitations are also great. While the classical detective story was a preeminent type of formulaic literature between the end of the nineteenth century and the time of World War II, and still remains an important formula, it has not shown the same capacity for change and development as the other major formulaic types. It is possible that the heyday of the pure mystery is past. And yet, as an important element in other formulaic types, mystery will undoubtedly continue to be a basic formulaic resource.

The mystery shares many characteristics with the story of imaginary beings or states and thus the term is often applied to ghost stories, to tales of demonic possession or of madness. But there is a fundamental difference that should be borne in mind. The mystery of the imaginary being or state is not resolved. Instead, the human protagonist adapts himself in some fashion to the alien creature, for example, by learning how to control him. Of course,
there are ghost stories in which the alien being turns out to be a trick or a deception with the mysterious manifestations being given a rational explanation. This is a mystery formula. In the true story of imaginary beings, the mystery of the alien is never solved, only somehow dealt with. In Bram Stoker’s Dracula, the alien being is dealt with by a more or less rationalistic-religious technology of vampire control, but the mystery cannot be explained away. The way is prepared for him to rise again and again. This sort of conclusion is the very antithesis of the mystery story where, once discovered and explained, a secret is no longer capable of disturbing or troubling us.

**Melodrama**

Though the term “melodrama” is sometimes applied to the dramatic productions of a certain period, it also often designates a certain kind of literary structure, and that is what I have in mind here. The structure in question is a somewhat problematic category because it does not appear to reflect a single overriding narrative or dramatic focus such as heroic adventure, the quest for love, the solution of mystery or alien beings and states. But there are formulaic narratives such as various types of best-selling novels, or many nineteenth-century plays commonly designated by the term, which seem to combine more than one of these different fantasies toward some other purpose. For example, if we take a novel like Peyton Place we can obviously subsume much of the narrative under the heading of romance, though it is clearly not a romance in the sense that it focuses on the story of a single protagonist or even a couple. The problem is even cloudier if we consider one of the large, messy, but enormously popular canvases of Harold Robbins, such as The Adventurers. There we have a great deal of romance, but also a whole structure of adventure, as well as elements that do not readily fit under any of the other categories such as the quasirealistic portrayal of different social structures in Europe and South America. Another kind of formula poses a related difficulty, the classic gangster film with its tale of the rise and fall of a gangster protagonist. In terms of its action content, this type of film might be subsumed under the category of adventure formulas, but there is a very important difference between this formula and the adventure pattern. The classic gangster tale is not a story of heroic triumph but of ultimate defeat. Though it deals with crime and involves police detection and pursuit of the criminals, it is not a mystery either, since no secrets are held from the audience and those who seek a solution of the crime are not protagonists but antagonists.

At first sight works as diverse as Peyton Place, The Adventurers, and Little Caesar do not seem to have much in common. I would like to put forward the argument that they do share one very fundamental pattern: they are all narratives of a complex of actions in a world that is purportedly full of the violence and tragedy we associate with the “real world” but that in this case seems to be governed by some benevolent moral principle. It is not a tragic or a naturalistic world because we can be confident that no matter how violent or meaningless it seems on the surface, the right things will ultimately happen. Melodrama, then, is the fantasy of a world that operates according to our heart’s desires in contrast to the other formula types that are fantasies of particular actions or states of being that counter some of our deepest fears or concentrate on particular wishes for victory or love or knowledge. Therefore, melodrama can contain all the other fantasies and often does. In fact, its chief characteristic is the combination of a number of actions and settings in order to build up the sense of a whole world bearing out the audience's traditional patterns of right and wrong, good and evil.

One thing possessed in common by these otherwise very different sorts of stories is the quality that has traditionally been understood as the hallmark of melodrama: the drama of intensified effects (i.e., music, “melos”) added to the play to increase its emotional power and intensify its hold on the audience. Therefore, the idea of melodrama has come to be associated with violence and sensationalism—“the plot revolves around malevolent intrigue and violent action, while credibility both of character and plot is sacrificed for violent effect and emotional opportunism.” This is undoubtedly one major characteristic of melodrama, but, as I noted in the first chapter, the quest for intensified narrative or dramatic effects is characteristic of the entire range of formulaic types. Particular formulas come into existence and flourish at least in part because they invent heightened narrative or dramatic patterns. In this sense all formulaic stories are melodramatic, and we might look at the various formulaic types—adventure, romance, and mystery—as simply specialized forms of melodrama. Indeed, many of the modern specialized formulas such as the classical detective story, the spy story, the hard-boiled detective story, and the gothic romance did evolve historically from the broader melodramatic forms of the early nineteenth century.

In addition to this basic aspect of melodrama, we can specify a characteristic purpose which differentiates a large class of works that can be called melodramatic from the other major formulaic types. This type has at its center the moral fantasy of showing forth the essential “rightness” of the world order. As the adventure story plays out the fantasy of heroic triumph over insuperable obstacles and the mystery presents the assertion of rational order over secrecy, chaos, and irrationality, the melodrama shows how the complex ambiguities and tragedies of the world ultimately reveal the operation of a benevolent, humanly oriented moral order. Because of this, melodramas are usually rather complicated in plot and character; instead of identifying with a single protagonist through his line of action, the melodrama typically makes us intersect imaginatively with many lives. Sub-plots multiply, and the point of view continually shifts in order to involve us in a complex of destinies. Through this complex of characters and plots we see not so much the working of individual fates but the underlying moral process...
Chapter Two

of the world. In this respect, melodrama sometimes comes close to tragedy. But there is a crucial difference: in tragedy, the protagonist’s catastrophe reveals the great gap between human desires and the limitations of the world; in melodrama this gap is bricked over. Melodramatic suffering and violence are means of testing and ultimately demonstrating the “rightness” of the world order. If the melodramatic hero meets a catastrophic end, it is either as a noble sacrifice to some good purpose or because he has become deserving of destruction. Within certain basic limits of plausibility and audience acceptance, the more realistic, tragic, and overpowering the evil plots, the more satisfying the ultimate triumph of the good.

Nothing seems quite so dated as a fifty-year-old melodrama because the moralistic assumptions on which its concept of “rightness” are founded are deeply tied up with culture-bound assumptions and beliefs. Therefore, what may seem the essence of “rightness” to one period becomes morally outrageous or even hilariously funny to another. Throughout most of the nineteenth century, for example, the “rightness” of the world order appears to have hinged on a sort of divine, providential economy that hinted at the direct and continual intervention of God in the affairs of men. Evil actions, defined largely as transgressions against the happiness and respectability of the middle-class family structure, inevitably led to terrible catastrophes for their perpetrators, while the innocent and the good were assured of their reward, if not in this life at least in the hereafter. In Uncle Tom’s Cabin, the most powerful and most popular of nineteenth-century melodramas, the world we live in is shown to us as full of tragedy and evil; yet it is somehow a benevolent and right world because even the suffering of the good shows the hand of God at work. The death of Little Eva and the martyrdom of Tom are transcended and our tears turn to joy when we are assured that the wracked and beaten body will rise in glory. Certainly much of Mrs. Stowe’s skill in organizing and narrating the multiple stories of the novel lies in the way her presentation of a slave society both condemns the transgressors and conveys to us certainty of redemption for the good. The history of Uncle Tom’s Cabin also reveals to us another aspect of the cultural significance of melodrama. Because it directly implicates a world-view with particular social actions and characters, melodrama has the capacity for enormous social impact. When a new set of social meanings are powerfully involved with traditional structures of value and feeling, as Mrs. Stowe effectively presented black characters in such powerful traditional melodramatic roles as the Christian martyr, the loving mother, and the self-reliant hero, the impact of the work can possibly bring about significant changes in public attitudes. It is hard to be certain that Uncle Tom’s Cabin had a causal relation to the Civil War, but it is clear that Southern apologists felt that it posed a basic threat to their moral vision of the world.

Of course, few melodramas involve this implication of traditional attitudes with new social meanings. More typical of the formulaic nineteenth-century melodrama is a work like Mrs. E. D. E. N. Southworth’s Ishmael, where the self-reliant Christian hero suffers a good deal in his early life from the imputation of bastardy before a providential series of circumstances finally reveals that he was born in wedlock and is the legitimate son of a first family of Virginia. Here, as in most melodramas, the universal moral order validates current social attitudes. One can see this principle operating in a contemporary melodramatist like Harold Robbins, even though the conception of providence is no longer part of the vision of the world order. In Robbins’s The Carpetbaggers, for example, the protagonist tastes extensively of all that enormous riches, power, and erotic delights can offer only to discover in the end that true fulfillment lies in a monogamous love, a simple home, and a family. Popular Freudianism has replaced providence as the primary means of articulating the universal moral order, but the result is essentially the demonstration of a connection between traditional middle-class domestic morality and the operative principles of the cosmos. On the other hand, a work like The Godfather may well involve some significant transformations of meaning in the relation between the moral order and received values, but I must deal with this at greater length in another place.

The specific formulas that depend on the basic moral fantasy of melodrama are many and various. Some of the more important contemporary examples are the best-selling panoramic social novel such as those written by Irving Wallace, Harold Robbins, and Jacqueline Susann, the historical spectacle such as Gone with the Wind, the soap opera, the gangster saga, the professional drama such as the doctor, lawyer, or teacher story, and many others. Though extremely various in the cultural materials they employ, all these formulas are shaped by the basic qualities of melodrama: the heightening of feeling and moral conflict and multiple lines of action that work together to create a sense of the rightness of the world order.

Alien Beings or States

One of the largest and certainly the strangest of all formulaic types consists of stories dealing with alien beings and states. The horror story, which usually portrays the depredations and ultimate destruction of some monster, is one of the most striking formulas of this type. On the face of it, horror is a most puzzling sort of entertainment, yet, judging from the immense popularity of the formula and the great enjoyment audiences derive from it, people take enormous delight in being scared out of their wits, at least in fantasy. There are a number of ideas that might help to explain this paradoxical feeling. First of all, the very intensity of the emotion of horror may be one reason for its success as an exception, for the more intense our response to a work is, the more it takes us out of ourselves. When audiences shriek and howl with fear as Dracula suddenly appears at the window, fangs dripping with blood, this may be for many people a profound experience of self-transcendence, a
complete forgetting of self in the intense and momentary involvement in an external fantasy. The fact that horror seems especially fascinating to the young and relatively unsophisticated parts of the public offers some substantiation for this view. Older, educated people probably learn more sophisticated modes of self-transcendence and become too detached and critical to be terrified by the more primitive modes of monstergedom. For such audiences, and for those to whom the horrific devices of the past have become too familiar, creators must develop new, more refined modes of terror such as madness; Hitchcock's *Psycho* was a brilliant example of the sophisticated refinement of terror that retained much of the primitive intensity of the classic horror story.

But pure intensity of emotion is clearly not the only answer, for the emotion has to occur in some context where it does not become a real threat to the audience. Thus we might make a differentiation between the fear or terror we may experience in connection with tragedies and the sense of horror we feel as we watch or read a monster story. There is something basically comfortable about horror, while horror shakes our whole view of the world. I remember the terror I experienced as a child when I saw the zombie lurch across the screen in Bob Hope's movie *The Ghost Breakers*. Ironically, this was a totally irrelevant response, since the portrayal was full of comic exaggeration, but I was too unfamiliar with this sort of formula to know that, and I was frightened for months. What really scared me was that I became half-convinced that the monster was real, not in the pleasurable sense of suspended disbelief, but in a terrible confusion of fantasy and reality that left me looking behind doors, fearing shadows, and even being afraid to go to movies. I felt suddenly and very palpably confronted with all the limitations of mortality. I think this was close to a tragic emotion, though it lacked the moral transcendence that derives from the feeling of pity for a defeated protagonist and the sense of acceptance of the limitations of man that tragedy usually creates.

Actually my reaction to that zombie was a direct result of my lack of experience with imaginary creatures of this sort. Therefore, I allowed my fear to turn something I was seeing into something unknown and unknowable, yet nonetheless real. This is what the finest nonformulaic stories of terror such as Henry James's *Turn of the Screw* or Poe's "Fall of the House of Usher" accomplish. They show us the incomprehensibility of the unknown and the limits of the knowable. We know that something terrible is happening around or between the governor and his charges or between Roderick and his sister, but we cannot and never will find out just what, despite the best efforts of generations of critics to find certain evidence as to whether there are or are not supernatural causes at work in those stories. Horror domesticates terror by objectifying it in the form of some clearly defined alien being or state. It is a commonplace that once a terrifying thing is actually seen or experienced, it loses much of its terror, and that is precisely what happens in the various formulas involving horror. For this reason I suggest that the key characteristic of the type is the representation of some alien being or state and the underlying moral fantasy is our dream that the unknowable can be known and related to in some meaningful fashion. The evoking of our fears becomes entertaining when we are assured that we will finally be able to understand and relate to them. Even if the alien creature or state is somehow finally victorious as in *Don Siegel's* superb film *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, we still feel the security of understanding what is happening. And the formulaic tendency, of course, is toward the ultimate defeat or at least temporary departure of the alien creature, just as Siegel was pressured to qualify his original blander ending to that film.

Viewed in this way, I think we can understand why it is that horror is sometimes so strangely close to comedy, and why the monsters of one generation have a tendency to become beloved quasi-comic heroes for later periods. To objectify a terror by giving it a specific form is closely related to the basic rhythm of comedy in which a situation presented as dangerous or disturbing turns out suddenly to be far less so than we thought. The more we come to know a creature like Dracula, the more domesticated he seems to our imaginations. Inevitably the earlier Dracula films now involve us in a sense of incongruity between how terrifying and unknowable the alien creature seems to the other characters in the film as compared to our comfortable knowledge about the technology of vampire control. This is the feeling that Polanski seized upon so brilliantly in *The Fearless Vampire Killers* by using explicit comedy as a means of re-creating the experience of horror. Other contemporary vampire-film makers have had to resort to a variety of devices to regenerate the sense of horror: updating the vampire figure, creating all manner of gory and bloody effects, inventing quasi-scientific rationales to replace the traditional Christian symbolism of the vampire story.

Horror is not the only mode for stories of alien beings or states. The fantasy of knowing the unknowable through objectification is also the basis of the broad range of stories loosely referred to as science fiction. Though most science fiction does not aim for the effect of horror in the fashion of ghost and monster stories, the close connection between these two different modes of using alien experiences is suggested by the role of science in a classic horror story like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and by the importance of various forms of transcendent, quasi-religious experience in works of science fiction like those of Arthur Clark and C. S. Lewis.

These notes toward a typology of literary formulas are set forth in a tentative and exploratory fashion. There may be other important archetypes of moral fantasy that I have not identified in this system of classification. But it seems to provide some general classes into which we can loosely differentiate the most common contemporary formulas. Unfortunately, even to treat with some complexity the most important particular formulas that embody the five archetypes would exceed reasonable limits. Therefore, I have
chosen to concentrate my attention in the main body of this book on certain
key formulas embodying mainly the archetypes of adventure and mystery:
the western, the hard-boiled detective story, the classical detective story,
and, to some extent, the gangster saga. Only in the ninth chapter will I
attempt a discussion of one kind of melodramatic formula, using the various
techniques of analysis developed in chapters 3 through 8. The whole complex
territory covered by the archetypes of romance and alien beings or states
must, alas, be left to later inquiries and to the work of other scholars.

Three

The Mythology of Crime and
Its Formulaic Embodiments

In the first chapter I argued that particular formulas are ways of embodying
certain archetypal fantasies in the materials of a specific culture. The second
chapter presented a tentative anatomy of these underlying archetypes. In this
chapter I will consider more fully the problem of cultural mythology by
examining the various formulas that have been generated by the mythology
of crime, a great imaginative obsession of the nineteenth- and twentieth-
century Englishmen and Americans. To give this rather complex discussion
some center, I will let it grow out of a consideration of a current best-seller
about crime, Mario Puzo’s *The Godfather*. In the course of the analysis I will
show how the major nineteenth- and twentieth-century crime formulas
compare with *The Godfather* and with each other and will offer some
hypotheses about the dialectic between the literature of crime and the
contemporary cultures that produce it so prolifically.

**The Godfather and the Literature of Crime**

The best-selling novel and film of the late 1960s and early 1970s was Mario
Puzo’s *The Godfather*. Its impact has been so great—millions of copies of the
book sold in little over three years, and many more millions of movie
admissions—that one does not need much prescience to predict that this
work will be a major turning point in the evolution of popular literature,
perhaps comparable to the significance of Conan Doyle’s *Sherlock Holmes*,
certainly as important as Ian Fleming’s *James Bond*. In the wake of *The
Godfather*'s enormous success, a film sequel has been produced, while a
number of other films about the Mafia such as *The Valachi Papers* have
coasted to considerable popularity on its coattails. Publishers have increased
their listings of crime fiction, taking advantage of the Godfather craze to
reissue in paperback any recent novels that have the slightest connection with
the subject of Puzo’s book. Everywhere newsstands and marquees are
plastered with such come-ons as “more action, sex, and violence than *The
Godfather* and *The French Connection* combined” or “The Big New Mafia
blockbuster in the searing tradition of *The Godfather*.” Though no TV
network has yet announced a series called “One Don’s Family,” I suspect that
scores of producers and writers are racking their brains to figure out a