

Volume
1
Number
5

SCIENCE FICTION *Quarterly*

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132 PAGES OF NEW STORIES — NO REPRINTS!

★ ★ *Feature Novel* ★ ★
THE SHINING CITY Rena M. Vale 10

Thor wonders if his loyalty to the city isn't a worse betrayal than his son's treason. But must there be war of extermination between the city and others?



Two Unusual Novelets

- WHEN IN DOUBT, MUTATE! E. Hoffmann Price 54
Oscar isn't born human; he's made human. And he doesn't like it!
- EXTRA-SECRET AGENT H. B. Fyfe 78
Laril doesn't know his mission, but there's another agent operating with him who is even more secret!

Short Stories

- THE LUCKIEST MAN ALIVE! William Morrison 96
—obviously, will be the one who's chosen "Mister Earth"!
- WE, THE PEOPLE... Ward Moore 101
Any resemblances in this fable shouldn't be too surprising.

Departments And Features

- IT SAYS HERE (*Editorial comment and Letters*) 6
- SCIENCE IN SCIENCE FICTION No. 4 James Blish 49
Wherein we look into "The psychological story".
- READIN' AND WRITHIN' (*Book Review Dept.*) Robert W. Lowndes 77
- THE BLACK MAGIC OF YESTERDAY (*Article*) Eugene W. Nelson 106
- THE RECKONING and READERS' PREFERENCE COUPON 130

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ROBERT W. LOWNDES, Editor

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SCIENCE IN SCIENCE FICTION

A Series Of Special Features
By James Blish

4

The Psychological Story

WHILE IT is true that psychology is not a science, in the exact sense, but rather a sort of exceptionally confused branch of medicine, it is a field which has fascinated writers of all stripes ever since the discoveries of Freud, and it was natural that it should appear in science-fiction stories sooner or later.

In the earliest days of science-fiction, no real interest in psychology was possible, simply because psychology is the study of the personality, the character, the mind, the emotions—and in early science-fiction tales, the people in the stories had none of these things. They were stereotypes. They looked alike, they thought alike, they acted alike; the villain was villainous, the heroine was pure and stupid, the hero was brave and stupid. (The heroine was often a Scientist's Daughter, but the Scientist was usually stupid, too.)



Psychology comes in when an author considers why his characters behave as they do.

No writer begins to take an interest in psychology until he begins to take an interest in his characters as people—as unique individuals with quirks which are theirs alone. It is only at that point that he begins to ask himself the deeper question of *why* people act the way they do, and then begins to analyze why the person he has created in his story has to act the way he does. The explanations he offers may vary widely; but as soon as he begins to offer such an explanation he is trespassing on the marches of psychology.

To take a very vivid and beautiful example, look at L. Ron Hubbard's novel, *Fear*—an extremely interesting story, not only on its own merits (which are considerable) but because many of the attitudes toward psychology which it contains foreshadow Hubbard's later theories. We won't talk about Dianetics here, however; instead, let's look at the story—not as a fantasy, but as a psychological horror-story.

A college professor, named Jim Lowry, has murdered his wife and his best friend because he suspects them of infidelity towards him. The shock overcomes him so greatly that his mind cannot bear to acknowledge what it is that he has done; instead, it sets up a series of fantasies which, terribly though they frighten Lowry, are not quite as horrifying as the real truth would be to him.

This is an old and sound psychological theorem from the Freudian analysis of the function of dreams; it comes from Freud's notion that the mind contains a censor which automatically shields us from thoughts which might otherwise hurt us. In Lowry's case, he has been made easy pickings for a series of demonological fantasies by the fact that (1) he has been thinking a lot about demons, in order to write an article about them, and (2) he doesn't believe in demons, so that his fantasies are less dangerous to him than his murders, which he

knows *are* real, and therefore really dangerous to him. He has been discharged from his college post for the article, so that gives him a reason for suspecting that demons really have done him some small damage, in an indirect way—and that's all the excuse his mind needs to begin substituting phony demons for real dead people.

But his mind cannot stop there. Demons aren't a satisfying enough substitute. If he is to be made to believe that his wife and her supposed lover are not dead, then his fantasies must include both these people, *alive*. Yet, at the same time these people really are dead, so a whole series of subordinate fantasies have to be invented to explain why their deadness doesn't matter. To give a single example:

Since Lowry's wife is dead, she can neither cook nor serve dinner for him; yet he must imagine that she has. Imaginary food will not sustain him; he must have real food; he has to eat, actually *and* in the fantasy, at a diner. Therefore he invents a subordinate fantasy: when he sits down to eat at home, his plate moves. This upsets him so he has to go to the diner. An illusion within an illusion.

There are a whole series of these subordinate illusions in Hubbard's story; all bearing a precise one-to-one relationship to the actual facts of the double murder. The bodies are in Lowry's cellar, so there is a long flight of stairs, bats, and cobwebs in the fantasy. There's a demented cat in the cellar that scrabbles at the coal under which the bodies are hidden; so in the fantasy there's a gigantic cat which nearly kills Lowry. Lowry has murdered, so there's a hangman in the fantasy. Lowry and his wife were childless, so there's a child-who-is-not-a-child in the fantasy. Lowry suspects that his friend was perhaps not really his wife's lover, after all, so this suspect cavalier is represented in the fantasy by a hollow suit of armor (for-

midable, but without real substance). Lowry knows that everyone in the world is potentially a danger to his fantasy, so his fantasy terminates in a sequence where he is the only person really alive in the world.

And so on. It is all quite fascinating, whether or not you happen to agree with Hubbard that the fantasies of insane people dovetail quite so neatly with events in the real world, or so literally; as a story, *Fear* is an intellectual achievement of the first magnitude, and perhaps the most intensively, basically psychological story in the entire literature of fantasy.

It is also interesting, of course, because it is based on a theory of the operation of the mind which is personal to Hubbard. Most science-fiction writers who have taken an interest in psychology have taken the more expectable path; that is, they have adopted one or another of the theories which are common coin among psychiatrists and other members of the psychological professions.

HENRY KUTTNER, for instance, is quite close to a pure Freudian. Almost all of his later work contains considerable character-analysis from the point of view of classical Freudianism, only slightly modified by the views of later workers in the field. You will remember Ridgway, the cour-

ier in *The Fairy Chessman*, who, when driven into the last corner, curls up in the foetal position and will never stir from it again; this introduction of the foetal position is in part simple observation—certain kinds of insane people do assume the foetal position—but it is based in a consistent Freudian analysis of *why* Ridgway should adopt *that* kind of insanity instead of some other. There are literally hundreds of similar examples in other Kuttner stories; some analysis of psychological situations is now standard in his work.

This preoccupation is rather characteristic of the born writer, but not at all characteristic of the born engineer. When the latter turns writer, you may expect good characterization—if the engineer is also gifted as a writer—but you won't find much psychological theorizing. In the stories of Robert A. Heinlein, for instance, the motivations are significantly adult. There is never the slightest suggestion that a given character's peculiarities might have been formed when he was an infant or a very small child—a theory which is a feature of almost all systems of psychology. Heinlein's characters are dumb adults or bright adults, but they never revert to childhood basics; Heinlein seems to be unaware that people ever do this—probably because of his engineer's bias towards all-pervasive rationality, re-

ardless of the level on which that rationality may be operating.

In the stories of Ray Bradbury, on the other hand, the characters consistently behave like small children, apparently without Bradbury's being aware of it; and all of them display a powerful death-drive—which is one of the most striking, and most debatable, features of Freudian theory.* I introduce Bradbury here mainly because his work is all psychological at bottom, containing no trace of any knowledge of any other science. But he is a doubtful case because, since I have no personal acquaintance with him, I don't know whether his Freudianism is deliberate or accidental. If it is accidental, however, it certainly presents a most powerful argument for the Freudian point of view; I have never seen any writer embody it more consistently, nor limit himself to it more thoroughly.

One can no longer discuss the use of psychology in science fiction without noting the borderline realm of parapsychology—the realm in which such forces as telepathy, clairvoyance, telekinesis and other puzzling powers lie. Since Dr. Rhine of Duke University established that such forces do exist and have certain definite laws of operation, many science-fiction stories have been written using them: a recent example is Jack Williamson's *The Humanoids*, or my own *Jack of Eagles* (plug).

One of the most interesting things about science-fiction writers' handling of these forces is that the writers all seemed determined to reduce the psi powers to *physical* forces, or to explain them away in terms of physical analogues. The demonstration that psi forces do not in any way behave like physical forces is an important part of Dr. Rhine's work, but it is the part that is most often ignored. We live in a physics-oriented society,

and not even the flexible imagination of the science-fiction writer is comfortable in the presence of the non-physical.

Cybernetics, too, is a branch of psychology—though an extremely simple one—and since Norbert Wiener first appeared on the horizon there have been a number of stories dealing with human thinking in terms of analog computers. Raymond F. Jones has written a number of typical samples. Dianetics, which took the cybernetic view of human thinking from the realm of speculation into (in my opinion) the realm of religion, naturally entered into many stories after the publication of Hubbard's book. There is Jones' *I Tell You Three Times* and other, more slavish examples. Some of Theodore Sturgeon's recent work has shown a profound dianetic impress; I've been guilty of using it briefly in one of my own, and at length in another story.

This was quite inevitable. Writers, who at their best are people interested in human behaviour, are almost helpless before any apparently-reasonable, picturesque psychological theory, and become bitter partisans upon the instant. One can work up a better, more furious, and more bitter argument between opposing psychological schools among a group of writers than you can ever start among a group of psychologists. And if you tell a science-fiction writer firmly enough that some particular school of psychology is really a science, you are likely to have a convert on the instant.

ACTUALLY, no branch of psychology is a science—or anything like one—as yet. Kuttner's practice of sticking closely to the oldest and the most respectable psychological theory—that of Freud—is sane procedure for a writer who cannot be specialist enough to make his own value judgments among the competing schools. Even better is that of van Vogt—at least the van Vogt of the pre-dianetic

* Freud himself regarded the "death-instinct" merely as a speculation. —RWL

period: up to recently, van Vogt tried to analyse each of his characters in terms of the character alone, handling the character as a perfectly unique individual without anything in his background which might be shared by all men. Where van Vogt sought to ascribe behaviour patterns to more general basics, he abandoned men entirely and invented monsters, or robots, which he did not have to picture as humans; the behaviour he assigned them grew out of the rigid and authentic science of experimental physiology. He never assigned a mechanical motivation to a human being, to the best of my knowledge; humans he continued to write about as unique situations, as his interest in General Semantics had taught him to do. It was a sound and scientific way of approaching the writing problem, and I, for one, am sorry that he has now found a psychological system to which he can subscribe. He made much bet-

ter sense under the old attitude.

Nevertheless, any writer has every right to attach himself to the psychological theory which attracts him most --which he thinks the most tenable-- and to use it for all it's worth in his stories. He can't be forbidden it; it's part of the writer's duty to present real characters, who are understandable, to the utmost of his ability. If some specific theory helps to make the character come clearer, then the theory is useful and valid.

We will be seeing many such theories expounded in science-fiction stories in the future. The fact that most of them will be rather silly will not invalidate them *for the purposes of the story*. If they get in the way of the story, they will be liabilities; if they help the story, they will be assets.

We have no other way of judging them now, for the simple reason that there is as yet no "science of psychology" at all.

