

## **Chapter Eight: Popular Formulas**

"It is written. Good shall always destroy evil"--Sirah the Yang<sup>i</sup>

After exploring myths, icons, stereotypes, and heroes, we ascend to the second, most visible floor of popular culture, and it is divided into two parts, popular formulas and popular rituals. It is important to understand how each room of the House of Popular Culture builds upon the other and no room can stand without the assistance of the other. Popular formulas combine the four previous rooms into a recognizable format for the audience to see. Formulas reaffirm cultural values established by the myths, icons, stereotypes, and heroes by "providing a means to demonstrate their important and utility within a fictional (or even non-fictional) framework."<sup>ii</sup> By using conventions, which are the basic ingredients of the formula, and inventions, which are considered the "spices" that make the formula different and more appealing to the audiences, the popular formula can be seen as a recipe that combines history with legend.<sup>iii</sup>

According to John Cawilti, the four functions of the formula are: 1) to provide a safe ground for the other parts of culture to flourish, 2) to help resolve tension, to provide an experience in the prohibited situation, and 3) to provide a comfortable way to dealing with ideological issues in society.<sup>iv</sup> All popular television shows rely heavily on the concept of formula because there is that need to appeal to the mass audiences with values, heroes, and themes that the audience will recognize. Through the use of the formula's

setting, cast of characters, and the action that takes place, television shows try to ensure that their stories fulfill the functions.

During the 1960's, Roddenberry wanted to break out of the conventional molds of the Western television series and give audiences a show to think about, not just to watch. "We have a perfect vehicle for adventure, satire, and social comment," Roddenberry said of the series.<sup>v</sup> He used a formula, plugged characters into it, gave it a setting, and set down rules for the action.

The formula of good versus evil was the main thrust of all the original series plots, from the over-the-top comedy of "The Trouble With Tribbles" to the excruciatingly painful silliness of "Spock's Brain." The underlying theme of good versus evil was mostly seen through two formulas, the testing of humanity and worlds that parallel Earth's history, and there was the need to assert the ideals of the New Frontier at almost every turn, rallying against the forces of the evil empires, and showing loyalty to the Federation.<sup>vi</sup>

To separate how far man had come from the 1960's to Kirk's era, stories often dealt with putting Kirk on trial and having him fight his way to freedom. In "Arena," Kirk is pitted against a Gorn, a lizard-like alien, in a fight to the death. Instigating and observing the duel between the two are the Metrons, who wish to learn more about humans and the Gorn. This trial of physical superiority and battle tactics ends with Kirk putting together a make-shift gun and defeating the Gorn. When Kirk refuses to kill the Gorn, the Metrons are confused at first and then commend Kirk for his humanity,

saying that there is hope for humans after all. "The Squire of Gothos" features Trelene, an alien being "who is equipped with a wide variety of powers that enable him to manipulate the world around him," and "he puts humanity on trial" when "Kirk disrupts his plans" of having the *Enterprise* crew as his entertainment.<sup>vii</sup>

The parallel world plot line became a familiar way for *Star Trek* to exercise social commentary within the guidelines of the 23rd century. In "The Return of the Archons," the planet inhabitants live in mock up of the late-19th century western United States, "A Piece of the Action" is set during the 1920's, "Patterns of Force" features Nazis, and "The Omega Glory" features a parallel between the United States, seen here as the Yangs, and the Soviet Union, the Kohms. Two episodes, "Bread and Circuses" and "Plato's Stepchildren," show worlds that reflect ancient Rome, and the ancient Greek god Apollo makes an appearance in "Who Mourns For Adonais?"

In most of these episodes a second formula employed to support the humanity on trial or parallel world story line. Kirk Houser sums up the character/setting/action plot in the original series:

While in [the original series] the big 5 [Kirk, Spock, McCoy, Chekov, and Scotty] plus a red shirt [security guard] would beam down, get captured, fight, plot, and Kirk-bargain their way out of trouble, sometime after the obligatory Captain Kirk emotional plea/monolog [sic] that showed that the native culture or its twisted leader was in basic contradiction to the laws of the civilized parts of the Galaxy and then the crew would beam back up to the *Enterprise*, smug with the knowledge that they did not have to nuke the planet from orbit because the seeds of rebellion that Kirk and Co. had planted undoubtably [sic] would do the trick; throw on a couple of mental jabs between Spock and McCoy and BINGO! another [episode] in the can!<sup>viii</sup>

If there were not 5 members to the landing party, Kirk was always there and usually accompanied by Spock and/or McCoy. Episodes that use this formula include "What Are Little Girls Made Of?," "Miri," "Dagger of the Mind," "Shore Leave," "Arena" (although Kirk is the only one down on the planet), "The

Return of the Archons," and "The Devil in the Dark," and all these episodes are from the first season alone. In many of these, Kirk rights the wrongs of an oppressed people and *Enterprise*. Catherine Moroney comments that "our contemporary knowledge of good and evil has indeed robbed us of our remaining innocence with a vengeance, imitating the biblical creation story on a cosmic scale."<sup>ix</sup>

Standard in the original series fare are the beautiful women of the week, ones that Rick Marin stereotypes as taking part in Kirk's "shameless bagging of alien babes in tinfoil bikinis."<sup>x</sup> Karin Blair labels these women, whether they are love interests of the captain or not, the "disposable female" who either dies (as in the case of Miramanee), disappears (Yeoman Janice Rand), or "remains on the planet of the week" (Shana).<sup>xi</sup> It is important to remember, however, that not all the female guest stars fell victim to Kirk's libido.

The original series, the movies, and *The Next Generation* rely heavily on the good versus evil, although *The Next Generation* has broken away from the more traditional views of that formula. Their treatment of it is less obvious than in the original series and is not to the extremes that the original series plays it up for.

By the time *The Next Generation* came about, Roddenberry had abandoned the themes of the 1960's and *The Next Generation* showed "little New Frontier-style meddling with cultures that worship computers" that the original series was famous for.<sup>xii</sup> The new show focused on "an 80's sobriety

and an ambivalence about the use of power."<sup>xiii</sup> Instead of the "Planet of Death" being encountered every week, the crew of *The Next Generation* encounter the glowing ball of the week, which usually attempts to take over the Enterprise.<sup>xiv</sup>

*The Next Generation* has a few plot staples which deal with an alien being: taking over the ship, putting the crew on trial or performing experiments upon them, and possessing or kidnapping one or more crew member(s). The first formula has created a popular misconception that the *Enterprise* is taken over every week by a glowing ball of light. During the first five seasons, however, the *Enterprise* was only confiscated 7 times out of 126 episodes: "Encounter at Farpoint" by Q, "Where No One Has Gone Before" by the Traveller, "11001001" by the Binars, "Home Soil" by microbrains, "Evolution" by the Nanites, "Brothers" by a reprogrammed Data, and "Conundrum" by "Keiran MacDuff" who poses as an officer but is really a Sartaaran. In "Where No One Has Gone Before," the Traveller's take over of the ship was accidental.

Putting the crew on trial and/or performing experiments on them is nothing new in the *Star Trek* universe. It was seen in the original series first pilot "The Cage" and its subsequent remake into "The Menagerie," and "The Empath" among others.<sup>xv</sup> Experiments by curious but malignant aliens are seen in "Where Silence Has Lease" and "Allegiance," second and third season episodes respectively. These two episodes are not the most well-received story lines because of the recycling of the basic plot.

In *The Next Generation*, it is an omnipotent being who usually puts the crew on trial as seen in "Encounter at Farpoint" and "The Last Outpost," both first season episodes. It is interesting to note that Picard wins the first case and Riker wins in the second episode, although Riker's victory can be seen as more triumphant. The Tkon "portal" accepts Riker's eloquent speech about the philosophies of the Federation and has not returned. On the other hand, Picard's defense of humanity only piqued Q's interest in "Encounter at Farpoint" and Q has made an appearance in every season except for the fourth.<sup>xvi</sup>

Another set of "trial episodes" deal more within the Federation. In "The Measure of the Man," Data fights for his rights as a sentient being and in "The Drumhead," Picard argues that his encounter with the Borg has not lessened his ability to command a starship nor has it

destroyed his loyalties to the Federation. In these second and fourth season episodes, the judges are Starfleet officers.

Possessing and/or kidnapping the main characters garnered over 22 story lines. Crew possession became most popular at the end of the first season and again at the end of the fourth season, and many of the stories were considered mediocre by Edward Gross and Mark Altman.<sup>xvii</sup> The most chilling possession story is during the first season with "Conspiracy." An alien race inhabits the bodies of key Starfleet officers in an attempt to rule the galaxy and attempt to take over Riker and Picard. Although the ending was very reminiscent of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, it is the most graphically violent episode, complete with exploding heads and melting bodies, that *The Next Generation* has done in the past five seasons.<sup>xviii</sup>

On the other end of the spectrum, fifth season's "The Inner Light" provided the most beneficial (if possession can be considered beneficial) and touching encounters that Picard has ever had. Unlike the graphic violation of Picard in "Best of Both Worlds I & II" by the Borg, the Kataan probe that attaches itself to Picard's psyche is not there to force him to destroy the Federation but to educate him about the people of Kataan, who had died out over one thousand years ago because their sun supernovaed. During "The Inner Light," Picard learns how to play the flute, a hobby that is brought back in sixth season's "A Fistful of Datas."

Both the original series and *The Next Generation* use the formula of putting humanity on trial, and it is usually the captains who make the



eloquent speeches to prove that the trial is wrong. While the action/adventure plot line that Kirk Houser outlines is overly used in the original series with only Kirk, Spock and McCoy, *The Next Generation* allows for the other characters besides the captain, first officer, and chief medical officer to participate in a variation of the formula where the security guard does not die. Again, the formulas are used to show allegories in contemporary society and also allow the audience to relate to the planet or alien of the week that is featured in each episode.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup>The original series episode "The Omega Glory."

<sup>ii</sup>Christopher Geist and Jack Nachbar, "Part Six: Popular Formulas," *The Popular Culture Reader* Third Ed. (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1983), p. 300.

<sup>iii</sup>Dr. Yasue Kuwahara, Class notes from Honors 305, Northern Kentucky University, Fall 1991.

<sup>iv</sup>Kuwahara.

<sup>v</sup>Edward Gross and Mark Altman, *Great Birds of the Galaxy* (New York: Image Publishing, 1992), p. 18.

<sup>vi</sup>Paul Morley, "Working Out in Space," *New Statesman and Society*, 28 Sept 1990, p. 30.

<sup>vii</sup>Edward Gross, *Trek Classic* (New York: Image Publishing, 1991), p. 57.

<sup>viii</sup>Kirk Houser, "TNG, Myths, and Episodes," *Spock's Adventure!* BBS Trek Talk Conference (Cincinnati: 10 Oct 1992), Message #562.

<sup>ix</sup>E. Catherine Moroney, "Themes of Hope in Popular Entertainment," *America*, 31 Dec 1983, p. 433.

<sup>x</sup>Rick Marin, "Kisses Great!/Less Killing! Comparing the captains: Kirk vs. Picard," *TV Guide*, 31 Aug 1991, p. 6.

<sup>xi</sup>Karin Blair, "Sex and *Star Trek*," *Science Fiction Studies*, Nov 1983, p. 293. Miramanee appeared in the episode "The Paradise Syndrome," where Kirk loses his memory and is proclaimed as a god. Kirk marries her, but both she and their unborn child are killed at the end of the episode. Yeoman Rand disappeared after the first season with no explanation of her whereabouts and Shana from "The Gamesters of Triskelion" opted to remain on the planet where Kirk, Chekov, and Uhura were sent to after being "spacenapped" (Edward Gross, *Trek Films* [New York: Image Publishing, 1991], p. 94.).

<sup>xii</sup>Bill Turque with Lynda Wright, "Still Klingon to a Dream," *Newsweek*, 22 Oct 1990, p. 82.

<sup>xiii</sup>Turque, p. 82.

<sup>xiv</sup>Marin, p. 5.

<sup>xv</sup>Larry Nemecek, *The Star Trek: The Next Generation Companion* (New York: Pocket Books, 1992), pp. 120-1.

<sup>xvi</sup>Q's resemblance to the Trelene of "The Squire of Gothos" has been commented upon several times. In fact, at one time it was theorized that Q was another squire, and it has never been established whether or not the Q Continuum and Trelene's race are related.

<sup>xvii</sup>Edward Gross and Mark A. Altman, *New Voyages: The Next Generation Guidebook* (New York: Image Publishing, 1991) and *New Voyages II: The Next Generation 5th Season Guidebook* (1992).

<sup>xviii</sup>Gross and Altman, *New Voyages*, p. 44.