

The Great Pretender

Greg Michaelson

...the tall, proud volumes casting a golden shadow in a corner were not – as his vanity had dreamed – a mirror of the world, but rather one thing more added to the world.

Jorge Luis Borge¹

Self-doubt besets most writers. Is my writing good enough? Will anyone read it? Will anyone like it? Will anyone publish it? Perhaps the most insidious fear is that our writing isn't original. Maybe someone has already used this plot. Maybe I read it or heard it somewhere, but can't remember where. Maybe I'll be found out.

Well, it seems quite likely that someone has already used any given plot. People were telling each other stories for millennia before *The Epic of Gilgamesh* was written down, 4000 years ago, so what space is there for originality? How many different plots can there be?

In the 1920s, the influential Soviet folklorist Vladimir Propp² analysed over 100 Russian folk tales, and showed convincingly that they were made up of 7 character archetypes, involved in 31 core structural elements, in constrained combinations. The archetypes are heroes, false-heroes, villains, donors, helpers, dispatchers and princesses, and characters may take multiple roles. While there are too many structural elements to list here, they include: II. An interdiction is addressed to the hero; III. The interdiction is violated; XIV. The hero acquires the use of a magical agent. This sounds like a fine plot in the making. It also sounds like lots of plots we know already.

Propp reminds me of the longstanding cliché that every romance is of the simple form: boy meets girl; boy loses girl; boy finds girl³. This still leaves lots of space for creative plotting. We can play with the ages and genders and ethnicities and classes of the lovers, and where and when they meet. And we can play with how they meet, and how they part, and how they find each other, and whether or not they live happily ever after. So how do we get from the plot to the story? Is there some formula for writing akin to Propp's formulae for plots?

In Cyril Kornbluth's wry *MS. Found in a Chinese Fortune Cookie*⁴, a hapless author stumbles on what he calls the *The Answer*: the ultimate secret of writing success. After being warned off making *The Answer* public, by a shadowy society of best selling authors, fearful of losing their monopoly, he winds up confined to a psychiatric institution. He tries to smuggle *The Answer* out to a friend, on cigarette papers, hidden inside fortune cookies baked in the institution's kitchen. Inevitably, some go missing, and we never learn *The Answer*.

We could apply Propp's analysis to Kornbluth's story, which includes all the above elements of a cautionary folktale: a hero, who's made a transformative discovery, receives a warning from villains which he's likely to ignore. Nonetheless, knowing how the story is plotted doesn't detract in the slightest from it being a good read, just like most folktales.

¹ J. L. Borges, *A Yellow Rose*, *DREAMTIGERS*, University of Texas, 1993, p38.

² V. Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, University of Texas Press, 1968.

³ Pascal Tréguer, *THE CINEMATOGRAPHIC ORIGIN OF 'BOY MEETS GIRL'*, word histories, 2018

<https://wordhistories.net/2018/05/28/boy-meets-girl-origin/> inspected 5/9/20

⁴ C. M. Kornbluth, in *Fantasy and Science Fiction*, July, 1957.

<https://gutenberg.ca/ebooks/kornbluthcm-msfoundinfortunecookie/kornbluthcm-msfoundinfortunecookie-00-h.html> inspected 6/9/20

Propp also reminds me of the hoary old gag about a prison visitor, who hears the inmates laughing as they take it in turns to shout numbers to each other. The warden explains that the prisoners have heard all the prison jokes so often, that a number's enough for them to know which one has just been told. The visitor shouts out "42!" which is met with boos. "Don't they like number 42?" asked the visitor. "It's the way you told it," says the warden.

Of course we should be mindful of our influences. Of course we shouldn't use ideas from others without honestly acknowledging them. All the same, we need to focus on telling our stories well, even if their essences have already been told many times before.