TO SLAY OR NOT TO SLAY: WHY WE WRITE 'GET-EM' STORIES -- & LOVE 'EM!

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One of the most common genre of fan-written STAR TREK fiction is the "get-em" story (or "bonking" story, as it is known in Great Britain). The focus of a typical "get-em" is the mental and/or physical ordeal(s) suffered by the hero(s). Many fans who've read such stories have expressed concern that writing or reading a "get-em" -- and enjoying it -- could indicate a deeply-rooted psychological maladjustment. To investigate this issue, we have solicited opinions, read noted works in the ST genre, and perused psychological and literary sources on related themes.

Writers of Treklit seem to use violence in their fiction for the same psychological reasons that readers enjoy reading those works. Amateur TREK writers show a great deal of psychological visibility in their writing. Most of them have neither the training nor experience to be able (or perhaps willing) to disguise their inner motivations or to cloak them in symbolic sublety.

Violence, like sex, appears to be one of humanity's basic drives. Outward aggression and violence are marks of our lingering animal origin and the writer is a product of human evolution. However, we now consider outselves civilized. Rather than display such dangerous, vestigial urges openly (and revealing one's lurking "bestiality", as it were), most people sublimate these drives. The urges are usually channeled into other outlets and satisfied. One route is through violent fantasies, which seem to serve as a catharsis to decrease aggressive feelings in normal people.

Klinger, in Structure and Function of Fantasy, says

> . . .Like sexual activity, aggression is subject to heavy social control which restricts and channels its expression. Aggression has major emotional components and can be employed instrumentally in the service of other objectives. When aroused, it activates the incentive value of attack." (1)

"Get" tales are a type of release valve for one's inner frustrations. Anger and frustration often lead to the desire to hurt someone or something. Rather than striking back outwardly -- incurring guilt and possibly punishment -- one might torment imaginary but well-loved characters. We "hurt" Spock or Kirk or whoever, because they replace/represent the person(s) we really want to get back at, even though we may care about the person who has injured us. (Conversely, we may punish ourselves by proxy for things about which we may feel guilty, by identifying with the character being traumatized; their suffering purges us.)

Is indulgence in this kind of writing (or reading, for that matter) psychologically dangerous?

The findings in psychological research literature on the effects of violence in fantasy

are ambiguous. Some surveys and experiments support the hypothesis that reading or viewing violent fictional events have adverse, socially-disruptive results. Other studies refute this.

The psychological effects of violence in stories and tv dramas seemingly depend on the already existing states-of-mind of viewers and readers. Experiments indicate that

> . . .Violence [in fiction] does not stimulate aggression under relaxed emotional conditions; witnessing aggression has a cathartic effect only when the reader's own aggression has previously or simultaneously been aroused. (2)

Another study cautions that

> . . .For some viewers, fantasy may increase rather than decrease their aggressive impulses. Some people who normally express their hostility in overt behavior and who have not learned to use fantasy as a means of discharging their aggression would become even more hostile. (3)

A Pittsburgh psychiatrist, interviewed on the subject, said

> "Violence in written fantasy, where the violence is an obsessional theme in the writing, is an indication of misplaced aggressions which have little to do with art or literature, but with neurotic impulses." (4)

On the other hand, Phillips, in a book entitled Art and Psychoanalysis, states

> . . .Any total approach to art that sees the creative gift or process as a form of neurosis is bound to produce a lopsided and absurd theory. (5)

The general concensus seems to be that for "normal" people, vicarious aggression fantasies do not result in overt aggression.

But what is "normal"?

Entire books have been written in an unsuccessful attempt to define Normality; and psychologists will be hotly debating this question for the next century. Or two.

A touch of morbidity, and even sadism, appears to inhabit every person. One TREK fan, Jeanne Power, made several pertinent observations:

> "Sadism -- I'm referring to the traits in all of us which (as children) may prompt us to pull a cat's tail. . . Although these traits are suppressed as we grow up, and taught to classify them as 'unacceptable behavior', they still crop up in various forms. . .[including] morbidity. . . horrified fascination -- which is to me the desire of people to be shocked. . ."

Morbidity is the tendency to dwell upon gruesome or gloomy matters. The colloquial definition of sadism is "an abnormal delight in cruelity," while the clinical definition is "a sexual perversion in which gratification is got by torturing the loved one." (6) Traces of these qualities appear in everyone, but it seems they become psychologically dangerous only when they are an obsession.

On first reading, several well-known, fan-written ST stories appear to be abnormally morbid or sadistic.

In Paula Smith's novel, The Logical Conclusion, Spock is mind-raped by a misguided Vulcan cult-figure, Sidil, who convinces Spock that Spock's death is desirable and necessary. He generously shows the Science Officer several efficient ways of doing away with himself:

> . . .The water on his eye surface was beginning to freeze over; mucus, saliva and blood bubbled from his mouth and nostrils, chilling his face as they instantly evaporated in the vacuum. . . He felt himself be hoisted from the box, felt the barbs sink farther and deeper into his chest. . . His blood was hot as it flowed out the torn flesh, running thickly down the iron to pool in the dirt. . . The dark man shuddered. . . He stared at the broken, bleeding -- but still alive -- man strangling in the harness. He saw the splinters of bone protrude from the fresh gashes, the blotchy brown-green patches grow moist and form droplets, but above it all, the patient, patient eyes. . . . (7)

The first part of Paula's novel originally intended to parody the "get-em" genre by simple excess. The rest of the novel deals with the consequences of the mind-rape and Spock's eventual reintegration of his personality, and justifies the excesses, for they are no longer gore for gore's sake. The changes within the main character leave no one untouched.

Diane Steiner's Spock Enslaved is one of the most popular examples of a "get-em". Spock, accused traitor, is punished accordingly by Cardson, errant Enterprise crewman. The flogging scene

is described thusly:

> . . .Cardson covered every inch of flesh the whip could reach. . . Droplets became trickles, then streams, and finally bright, miniature green ponds on the thirsty earth around the post. And still, the only sound was the unnerving crack of leather on bare flesh. . . . (8)

This portion of Spock Enslaved seems to be on the borderline between serious drama and gratuitous violence. The violence was justified because it convinced the reader of the severity of Spock's injuries and his subsequent vulnerability to Deeja, the girl who nurses him and becomes his mistress; it also reveals the true character of Cardson, who later betrays plans made by Spock and Kirk. The violence, at the same time, could be considered gratuitous because the descriptions of it exceed the requirements of the plot.

Jennifer Guttridge's Tower of Terror graphically describes tortures inflicted on Spock by an alien in order to find "the measure of a man:"

> . . .[The creatures] started to bite. He felt the needle-sharp teeth piercing his clothing and his skin. Pain spread out from the wounds. The creatures were attaching themselves to him, clinging with sharp hooked claws as they sucked his blood. . . Beneath his feet the ledge cracked and crumbled. He felt himself falling. . . and caught the broken edge of the ledge. . . The flesh of his hands tore, his body stretched out, opening the wounds in his shoulders and impaling his lung on the point of the broken rib. He cried out, a sharp agonized scream that was wrenched out of him. . . . (9)

This type of story sets up an artificial situation in which the protagonist is forced to explore his or her inner self. Tower of Terror dwells at great length and in exhaustive detail on the physical traumas, yet in the end it fails to "find the man", for it is obsessed with the suffering and neglects to examine the inner Spock or to allow him to question his own motivations. In fact, the only motivation we are given for Spock's enduring this abuse is his need to "rescue" Kirk, who may not even be in danger. The reader is left with gratuitous violence, but a lack of insight into either Spock or the being "testing" him, who appears to be a flagrant sadist. Ms. Guttridge writes a powerful superficial scene, but as psychological drama, Tower of Terror is a failure. A pity.

Another psychological reason that writers deal with gloom & doom in their stories is to examine and test values and behaviors under stress. This is one way of investigating what life is about, for all human beings must deal with physical and mental suffering in the course of their lives.

However, writers may not necessarily investigate their personal values. Paula Smith's The Logical Conclusion, for instance, questions several aspects of Vulcan philosophy. It uncovers both contradictions and truths.

In Becca Oroukin's A Captain, Klingons take Kirk and his First Officer prisoner. To "persuade" the Captain to impart military information, which he has stubbornly refused to do, Spock is hung on a hook to die:

> . . .An iron hook, thrust deep. . .deeper
> A spear of cold flame encircling his ribs.
> Green life spilled from his torn body.
> Left to die -- slowly. . .
> Choking as blood clogged his throat. . . .
>
> Couldn't talk -- couldn't help.
> Didn't help.
> Silence now -- and death. (10)

The vivid description of Spock's suffering convinces the reader of the difficulty of Kirk's decision: which allegiance is stronger, to his duty or to his friend? Kirk, choosing his duty, must now live with his choice.

Mental torture figures prominently in Shirley Maiewski's Mind Sifter. Kirk, after capture by Klingons and subsequent mind-sifting, is left in Earth's past, circa 1950. His incoherency and terror are so great that he must be committed to a mental hospital.

> . . ."I'm Captain James T. Kirk of the. . ." he stopped. An expression of absolute and total horror came over his face. . . he was reacting to a form of post-hypnotic suggestion implanted in his mind. . . The full force of the agony caused by the Klingon Mind-sifter struck him again. . . visions of unspeakable horrors and fears that no mind could withstand, along with impressions of excruciating pain. . . . (11)

Yet Mind Sifter (which subsequently was published in Bantam's STAR TREK: The New Voyages, somewhat altered) is essentially a love story. While Kirk is most obviously affected, the love, compassion and concern that other people have for him is the real theme of the story: how much is love worth, and to what lengths should people go for someone they care about?

Some stories are proxies for real-life crises, in that the writer tries to imagine how he or she would like to handle the unpleasant inevitabilities of life, by putting the ST characters into such circumstances.

De Profundis, by Connie Faddis, focuses on a shattering aftermath: Spock in the unusual position of having to comfort Kirk, after Kirk refused to trade a defector back to the Romulans, and McCoy and Garrovick were executed in retaliation. This story shows us how two men deal with the death of a close friend, one attempting to comfort the other, and ultimately finding comfort in each other:

> The merciless technology of subspace radio caught and reproduced the minutest detail: the throat-torn, mindless screams; the shuddering breaths sucked in between each scream; the gradual decanting of screams into blood-clogged gurgles. . . It had taken McCoy a full forty minutes to die. . . . Uncertainly, he [Spock] touched Jim's clenched fingers and Kirk grasped his hands tensely, holding on to him, weeping harder. A scene touched Spock's memory. . . .Without thinking, he pulled Jim to him, sliding into a tight mutual embrace. . . . (12)

Dr. Michael Amsden concurs on this particular aspect of "get-em's":

> ". . .It is to suffer vicariously what we cannot otherwise experience. I think that such stories help one understand others when tragedy strikes. I personally have lived and enjoyed the Kirk/Spock/McCoy closeness because my real world has never (probably never will) contain anything as wonderful. . . Certainly reading some of the painful, terrifying adventures of our friends makes our own problems smaller by comparison."

The so-called "hurt/comfort" syndrome is a major theme in many ST stories. Human beings often don't get enough love -- or the right kind -- in their real lives, so in fiction, we may set up situations where one character must prove his/her love for another by coming to his aid. In Scripts People Live, the attractions of aiding someone, or being aided, are described:

> . . .People are by nature cooperative and have a deep-felt need to work together and help each other. Situations where one person is in need of help and another person is capable of offering it are common in social groupings, and when one person helps another it can be a joyful, profoundly satisfying, cooperative effort. (13)

An interesting facet of the hurt/comfort syndrome is that it is actually anti-violent. Unlike many violent escapist stories, such as the Ian Fleming novels, these tales tend to examine the unpleasant consequences of violence in some detail. They portray violence realistically and dramatize its full consequences. In these stories, the main character is hurt purely as a deus ex machina to permit the "comfort" portion of the story to take place. Emphasis is placed on the love lavished by the comforter on the friend/lover who's been hurt.

The hurt/comfort syndrome is attractive in another way, especially in heroic ST fiction. It deals with the dicotomy between strength and vulnerability, two sides of the same coin. Each of the ST characters are unusually strong people, yet they are flesh and blood beings, and vulnerable to suffering.

De Profundis, mentioned earlier, is a prime example of the h/c syndrome. Mind Sifter utilizes the theme extensively. In Spock Enslaved, Kirk is subjected to such abuse that Spock, unable to comfort him by normal means, must resort to editing and rearranging the Captain's memories of his horrible experience.

One can be an ersatz hero in a "get-em" story. There are few opportunities for personal heroism in our own century. Therefore the qualities we'd like to exhibit -- courage, loyalty, integrity, intelligence -- are personified by McCoy, Kirk, Spock and cohorts. The reader, vicariously sharing their adventures and perils, also feels heroic. In this way, we can gain the self-esteem and fulfillment of heroism without taking personal risks or facing actual danger. This is escape in one of its simplest forms.

Gayle Feyrer expressed the idea succinctly:

> ". . .Within the worlds of fantasy and fiction, you can experience (often incredibly deeply) anything and everything and yet you are always protected."

Many "get-em" stories have elements of such heroism, but perhaps the most satisfying one is The Logical Conclusion. Spock's eventual triumph over his terrible mental disintegration, as well as Kirk's successful adaptation to a life without the Enterprise, exemplify a quieter but equally admirable side of heroism.

Creators of "get-em" tales sometimes equate themselves subconsciously with God. The STAR TREK characters are ours to mold or mangle. We direct their fates. We exercise control over the lives of our fictional heroes as an expression of our wish to exert greater control over our own lives and the lives of those we love.

As Jeanne Power put it:

> ". . .'Get' stories enable the author to play God with other lives. . . it is more a release than ego trip. . ."

Intimately tied with the psychological motivations for writing "get-em's" are the literary reasons. These deal more directly with the art of the writing than with the nature of the writer, and are based on tried and proven literary precedents. The use of mental or physical suffering in fiction is a device for involving the reader in the story, because it establishes human realities. Everyone has had or will have to face physical pain, anguish, and grief.

Beverley Clark commented:

> "I have to admit that I enjoy reading 'get' stories. I look forward to the peculiar twist of the heart that comes at the most melodramatic and/or sentimental moments . . . The final scene in AMOK TIME is an example of the sentimentality of these stories -- it's a 'Get-Spock' story, the originator of the genre. . . "

Starfleet duty is hazardous (especially to crewpersons wearing red shirts going planetside!) and it would be unreasonable to expect the heroes to come through every experience unscathed. If writers are to deal with the characters as though they were real persons, this danger must be acknowledged.

Whether the actual ending of a story is upbeat or sad, whenever an incident of physical or mental suffering occurs, the potential for tragedy exists. Tragedy, as a literary form, dates back to the first recorded plays.

Marty Siegrist reports:

> ". . .Greeks used horrors and tragedies on the stage as a sort of purification ritual -- the bad things that went on on the stage purged them, made them feel better about their lives, better able to cope with the fates or whatever. Freud calls it [tragedy in literature] a healthy release, both for artist/writer and viewer/reader."

Phillips, in Art and Psychoanalysis, defines tragedy thusly:

> . . .A work of art is tragic if it substantiates the following situation: a protagonist who commands our earnest good will is impelled in a given world by a purpose or undertakes an action of a certain seriousness and magnitude; and by the very purpose or action, subject to that same given command, necessarily and inevitably meets with grave spiritual or physical suffering. . . . Tragedy in its purest idea shows us a mortal will engaged in an unequal struggle with destiny, whether that destiny be represented by the forces within or without the mind. . ." (14)

A vital aspect of a well written tragedy (or near-tragedy) is the in-depth scrutiny of the characters and what motivates them.

James DiCostanzo and Leslie Fish were on almost the same wavelength. The former states:

> ". . .The true person, without mask, is revealed. Not only are masks dropped, but the characteristics of the person are magnified, brought to the fore, so that they can be examined and dealt with in an analytic fashion. . . ."

while the latter, Leslie, says:

> ". . .Why do people write 'get' stories? To reveal the true character of the 'got'. . . In order to live comfortably with one another, people have to wear polite masks on their personalities. . . A real crisis is guaranteed to peel masks off and show the true personality. . . it's not enough to be told that the Captain and crew of the ENTERPRISE are good people that we can safely love -- we want the assurance of seeing it shown. . ."

The Price of a Handful of Snowflakes, by Steve Barnes, reveals unusual -- and unexpected-- insights into the character of Christine Chapel. In it, Spock defeats the Gorgon, a creator of raging madness and delusions. As a result, however, the Vulcan is left a mental and physical vegetable, and Chapel nurses him. Chapel narrates:

> . . .A dozen times I saw him check for neural responses. There were none. It was as if he had died, all of him, that marvelous brain along with that powerful body. . . The quickly administered shot made him mine. It was as simple as that. They would never know how under the useless body his brain was still alive. . . he knew beyond a doubt what I was doing to him. How desperate he must have felt knowing I was the only one who could save him and how little it suddenly mattered to me. . . . (15)

There are two victims -- and two winners -- in this story: both Spock and Chapel. Spock is the victim of his physical condition, but Chapel of her own weak personality. When Chapel ultimately frees Spock, she frees herself from her overwhelming guilt, but at a price to both of them.

The character of Spock, in an interesting permutation, is subjected to extraordinary physical pain, as well as degradation, in D.T. Steiner's Summer's End:

> . . .Spock tried to think clearly through the darkening haze of pain. . . It shouldn't hurt like this. . . There had to be something insidious about Kortran's training crop. . . .
> . . .[He] slammed the crop into Spock's midsection and Spock went down to his knees. He stayed there as Kortran began to run the crop up and down Spock's arm, sending an unpleasant pins and needles sensation through him. . . . (16)

The aim of the torture is to test the limits of Spock's endurance, and to determine how deeply engrained his values are. It is a powerful study of a strong being under unbearable stress.

The poem, Lament for the Unsung Dead, by Jane Peyton, was told from Christine Chapel's viewpoint. It describes Spock's loneliness and inability to adjust after Kirk's death on a warlike planet:

> . . .At first, Spock had reacted to the Captain's death
> in typically Vulcan manner;
> He seemed completely untouched.
> But after the family funeral
> where he did not fit in,
> And after the medal
> which he would not accept,
> He grew increasingly lost. . . .

[8] Spock Enslaved, copyright August, 1974 by Diane T. Steiner (LoveChild Press).

[9] "Tower of Terror", by Jennifer Guttridge. Appeared in TRICORDER READINGS, copyright 1971 by Regina Marvinny.

[10] "A Captain", by Becca Oroukin. Appeared in BABEL 4, (first printing), copyright 1973 by Laura & Margaret Basta (Ll-Ll & Igor Publication).

[11] "Mind Sifter", by Shirley Maiewski. Originally appeared in SHOWCASE 2, copyright 1975 by Sharon Emily. [May not appear in future printings of SHOWCASE 2]

[12] "De Profundis", by C.R. Faddis. Appeared in CONTACT 1, copyright December 1975 by Nancy Kippax & Beverly Volker.

[13] Steiner, Claude M. Scripts People Live: Transactional Analysis of Life Scripts, 1974. p. 175.

[14] Philipps, pp. 20-21.

[15] A Handful of Snowflakes and other Star Trek Tales, by Steve Barnes. Copyright 1976.

[16] "Summer's End", Part I, by D.T. Steiner. Appeared in METAMORPHOSIS I, copyright 1973 by D.T. Steiner (LoveChild Press).

[17] "Lament for the Unsung Dead", by Jane Peyton. Appeared in SPOCKANALIA 3, copyright 1968, 1973 by Devra Langsam & Sherna Burley.

[18] "For Sale, Must Sacrifice," by Paula Smith. Appeared in WARPED SPACE 15, copyright 1976 by Lori Chapek & Paula Smith.

Carefully I told him:
"I have lost friends before,
some of them very dear to me,
But the emptiness passes.
It becomes filled with life,
and living,
And with other people."
"Not when there are no others," he replied. . . . (17)

Where the suffering used in a story leaves the character's inner self untouched and unchanged by the experience, the attempt to produce serious literature fails. Fortunately, few such stories have been published in ST fanzines.

Much successful tragedy attempts to examine and test the "world view" of the character, a culture, or the writer herself. For instance, how does one explain the continued existence of violence in a pacifistic world view? In part, this is the dilemma Spock must resolve in The Logical Conclusion. In Shirley Maiewski's Mind Sifter, the loyalties of McCoy and Spock toward their Captain, though seemingly pointless after Kirk's disappearance and apparent death, nevertheless prevail. This confirms the world-view of the author, which implies that you can always depend on those who love you. In contrast, The Price of a Handful of Snowflakes suggests a less idealistic world view -- that everyone has a price.

The changing world view of an entire culture is examined through the near-tragedy of Paula Smith's For Sale, Must Sacrifice. Paula shows us a simple tribal culture, suffering hunger and other privations. The necessary solution: an Impossible Sacrifice to their God. Unfortunately, Spock becomes an innocent victim in an innocent tribal ritual.

. . .Tusa dropped from the branch right onto the impossible thing. . .
Two, five times he hit it with the rock in his hand. . . it lay still
on the ground. . . Tusa stared at the thing he straddled, the rock. . .
More impossibility. The blood was green. . . .
. . .The odd thing bound in its red robes awoke. It struggled at
first as Lorga and holy Lell cut away at its various joints. . . He
brought the stone blade to the thing's clavicle and slit apart the
sternum. The thing jerked its head up to stare at the green blood
that welled and spread across its breast. . . Hurda reached into the
hot verdant gore, probing for the heart -- which wasn't there. (18)

Ultimately, good tragedy and drama are not usually concerned with the suffering itself, but with the dignity with which it is endured, or the strength with which it is conquered. Through suffering, one can reach reflective self-consciousness and an awareness of human limitations.

This article has tried to examine the Whats and Whys of "get-em" stories. Perhaps we can now examine and reaffirm our inner compulsions to create such tales. . . and accept these motivations for what they are.

[This article is dedicated to the memory of Joyce Yasner]

FOOTNOTES

1 Klinger, J.L. Structure and Functions of Fantasy, 1965. p. 257.

2 Feshbach, S. "The stimulating versus cathartic effects of a vicarious aggression activity", Journal of Abnormal & Social Psychology, Vol. 63 (2), 1961, pp. 381-385.

3 Feshbach, S. "The drive-reducing function of fantasy behavior", Journal of Abnormal & Social Psychology, Vol. 50 (1), 1955, pp. 3-11.

4 Pittsburgh psychiatrist who preferred to remain anonymous.

5 Phillips, K. Art and Psychoanalysis, 1961. pp. xvi - x.

6 Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, 1972.

7 The Logical Conclusion, copyright 1975 by Paula Smith (boojums press). Appeared in MENAGERIE 7-8, 1975.