

THE TYPOLOGY OF FANTASY GENRES IN MODERN LITERATURE

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Abstract

Fantasy literature represents one of the most dynamic and diversified literary systems in modern literary studies. This article provides a comprehensive theoretical and typological analysis of major fantasy genres, examining their historical evolution, structural characteristics, aesthetic principles, narrative strategies, and ideological functions. The study systematizes high fantasy, low fantasy, portal fantasy, urban fantasy, dark fantasy, magical realism, science fantasy, heroic fantasy, children's fantasy, and absurdist fantasy as interconnected yet distinct subgenres. Particular attention is devoted to world-building models, mythopoetic structures, narrative voice, symbolic systems, genre hybridity, and sociocultural context. The research demonstrates that fantasy is not a homogeneous genre but a complex literary field reflecting philosophical, psychological, and historical transformations.

Key words

fantasy genre, genre typology, high fantasy, urban fantasy, magical realism, dark fantasy, mythopoetics, world-building, narratology, genre hybridity.

Fantasy literature has evolved from mythological narrative structures into one of the most theoretically complex and commercially influential genres of modern literature. Although its origins lie in folklore, epic tradition, and medieval romance, contemporary fantasy demonstrates remarkable diversity.

The attempt to classify fantasy genres reveals both structural stability and fluid transformation.

Rather than a fixed taxonomy, fantasy operates as a dynamic system of subgenres shaped by historical conditions, aesthetic experimentation, and ideological negotiation.

High fantasy, often described as epic fantasy, is defined primarily by the construction of a fully autonomous secondary world. This world is ontologically separate from empirical reality and governed by internally coherent laws. The principle of secondary belief depends upon narrative consistency, mythological depth, and historical layering. High fantasy frequently includes invented languages, genealogies, cosmologies, and complex geopolitical systems. Its narrative structure typically centers on macro-conflicts between opposing ethical forces. Modern high fantasy increasingly destabilizes simplistic moral binaries, presenting ethically ambiguous characters and morally complex societies.

Low fantasy differs in ontological positioning. Rather than constructing a fully separate world, it introduces magical phenomena into the primary world.

Ambiguity becomes central, allowing exploration of existential anxiety and identity instability. The supernatural may remain unexplained, reinforcing interpretive openness.

Portal fantasy is structured around transition. A protagonist crosses from ordinary reality into a magical realm through a liminal device.

This crossing symbolizes maturation and ethical testing. The dual-world model dramatizes psychological development and narrative transformation.

Urban fantasy integrates supernatural elements into contemporary metropolitan settings. Magic coexists with technology, bureaucracy, and multicultural urban life. The genre reflects globalization and social complexity, portraying hidden realities within everyday environments.

Dark fantasy combines fantasy and horror aesthetics. It foregrounds moral ambiguity, psychological tension, and existential dread.

The supernatural may represent internal corruption rather than external monstrosity. Redemptive closure is frequently destabilized.

Magical realism dissolves boundaries between the natural and supernatural without narrative astonishment. Extraordinary events occur within realistic settings and are treated as ordinary. This strategy often addresses historical trauma, cultural hybridity, and collective memory.

Science fantasy merges speculative science fiction with mythic or magical motifs. Technological futurism coexists with prophecy and mystical agency, suggesting continuity between rational inquiry and symbolic myth.

Heroic fantasy focuses on individual adventurers and personal courage. Although world-building may be less elaborate than epic fantasy, archetypal structures remain central.

Children's fantasy emphasizes developmental growth, imagination, and symbolic externalization of psychological conflict. It validates imaginative cognition as essential to identity formation.

Absurdist fantasy destabilizes logical coherence through paradox and linguistic play. It frequently operates as satire, critiquing rigid rational systems.

Across subgenres, world-building strategies provide key classificatory criteria. High fantasy constructs macrocosmic systems; urban fantasy reveals hidden microcosms; magical realism minimizes ontological division; absurdist fantasy disrupts structural expectation. Recurring themes include power, identity, morality, transformation, and community. Their articulation varies according to subgenre, reflecting diverse ideological orientations.

Genre hybridity defines contemporary fantasy production. Digital media, transmedia storytelling, and global exchange contribute to ongoing transformation. Fantasy remains adaptable, capable of integrating new cultural anxieties and aspirations. Ultimately, the multiplicity of fantasy genres reflects literary vitality rather than fragmentation. Fantasy continues to reimagine reality, offering symbolic frameworks through which readers negotiate ethical dilemmas and existential uncertainty.

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