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Typological Features And Cultural Functions Of The Fantasy Genre In World Literature

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ABSTRACT

The article explores the typological features and cultural functions of the fantasy genre in world literature, tracing its development from mythological and utopian traditions to contemporary narrative forms. It examines the philosophical and aesthetic dimensions of fantasy through the works of leading theorists such as Yuri Kagarlitsky, B. Manlove, and R. Jackson, emphasizing the genre's role as a system of artistic thinking that synthesizes myth, imagination, and cultural archetypes. Special attention is given to the interrelation between fantasy and science fiction, the transformation of mythological structures within literary contexts, and the expansion of fantasy beyond literature into visual and performative arts. By comparing Western and post-Soviet critical approaches, the study identifies the defining typological characteristics of fantasy as a dynamic and integrative cultural phenomenon reflecting universal human aspirations toward transcendence and renewal.

Keywords: Fantasy genre, typological features, cultural functions, mythological archetypes, world literature, intertextuality, literary typology, myth transformation, aesthetic consciousness, cultural integration, imaginative discourse, philosophical symbolism.

Introduction

Fantasy, as one of the most flexible and multifaceted domains of world literature, has undergone significant transformations throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, reflecting shifts in humanity's scientific, cultural, and philosophical worldview. From the early utopias of the nineteenth century to the postmodern fantasy of today, the genre remains relevant due to its ability to merge the rational and the irrational, the scientific and the mythological, the individual and the universal.

Yuri Kagarlitsky views the fantastic not merely as a set of artistic devices but as a system in which the fantastic image serves as the structural center of the work — a kind of “sun” within the artistic universe of the text. Unlike many scholars who reduce fantasy to elements of magic or

mysticism, Kagarlitsky emphasizes its independent aesthetic and philosophical nature.

The evolution of fantastic literature has led to the emergence of distinct branches, one of which is fantasy — a unique type of narrative that combines mythological consciousness, cultural archetypes, and an author's personal myth-making system. In the works of J. R. R. Tolkien, R. Howard, and their successors, fantasy has evolved into a cultural phenomenon extending beyond literature, influencing cinema, music, visual arts, and gaming culture.

This study focuses on the typological features and cultural functions of the fantasy genre in world literature. The aim is to identify the structural, semantic, and cultural

parameters of fantasy as a specific form of artistic thinking and to determine its place within the system of contemporary literary typology.

METHODOLOGY

Unlike such scholars as Yuri Mann, Georgy Nedoshivin, and Pyotr Askarov, Yuri Kagarlitsky interprets fantasy and its imagery not merely as independently significant artistic components but as system-forming elements of a literary work. Drawing on Balzac's metaphor of the "sun within a system," he views the fantastic image or idea as the semantic core around which the entire structure of the text is organized. All other components — the plot, details, and character representations, including those of human figures — are subordinated to the task of enhancing the internal plausibility of the fantastic world and reinforcing its artistic "authenticity."

Yuri Kagarlitsky interprets science fiction as an independent and original branch of literary creativity rather than a derivative of mysticism or magical narrative forms. This perspective naturally reflects the evolutionary transformations that fantastic literature underwent in the twentieth century. Although the origins of these changes can be traced back to the nineteenth century, and even earlier in certain instances, it was during the twentieth century that science fiction attained its full development as a distinct cultural phenomenon.

The establishment of science fiction as a separate literary genre was not an instantaneous process. By the 1920s, it had become evident that the genre maintained its expressive integrity and conceptual autonomy, refusing to merge with other artistic forms. While traditional literary movements such as realism, modernism, and naturalism continued to evolve alongside it, science fiction occupied its own unique position within the literary hierarchy, engaging with these traditions yet preserving its individual essence.

The American critic Basil Davenport characterized science fiction as "a unique phenomenon with its own language." Some American scholars have argued that this genre primarily serves a specific social audience. For instance, John Campbell, a renowned editor and promoter of science fiction, maintained that "science fiction is written by men of technology, about men of technology, and for the enjoyment of men of technology."

In the twentieth century, the development of science fiction shifted its focus from the inner world of the human being to the external — to the objects and phenomena that shape human surroundings. Writers concentrated primarily on technology, space exploration, and the nature of time and space. This led scholars to question whether the distinctive feature of science fiction lies precisely in its depiction of the material environment, including artificially created human-made objects. The writer Brian Aldiss even suggested reconsidering the name of the genre, referring to it as "literature portraying the environment" (environmental fiction).

B. Aldiss does not confine himself to a mere depiction of the external world; rather, he focuses on the transformative processes occurring within this environment and on how these transformations affect the human being, who is likewise subject to change. In academic and critical discourse, the term "environment" is often interpreted more broadly — as a synthesis of scientific discoveries and their impact on the individual, as well as the influence of scientific progress on the structural organization of society. As early as 1953, I. Asimov raised this issue, proposing to define the genre of science fiction as "social science fiction."

In the aforementioned statements, several key aspects can be identified: the science fiction genre is ascribed predictive and adaptive functions. The concept of modern science fiction as a form of prognostic art originates from the literary criticism of the 1920s, when it was viewed as a means of modeling the future—particularly in relation to the scientific and technological advancements of the era—seeking to anticipate potential directions of civilizational development.

Writer and publisher Hugo Gernsback was among the first to introduce the term "science fiction," defining it as "a literature of prophecy in the field of material progress." D. Livingston views the science fiction genre as an integral part of futurological studies. and the writer Lester del Rey emphasizes that the fundamental feature of science fiction lies in its potential to foresee and anticipate the future. . In this context, science fiction is understood as a genre aimed at modeling the future and envisioning its possible appearance.

Fantasy, in turn, represents a distinctive subgenre of speculative fiction — an inner circle within its broader domain. The transitional zone between these two circles is

the realm of imagination, which maintains a close connection with recognizable reality, whether it takes a mimetic or a conventionally “realistic” form of the fantastic. Within the broader realm of the fantastic, which encompasses depictions of phenomena and events impossible in contemporary reality, there exists a more specific domain — science fiction. According to the concept of the novum (from Latin novus, meaning “new” or “innovation”), understood as an element that distinguishes fiction from reality, it is possible to draw a clear boundary between science fiction and fantasy. In science fiction, the novum must be logically consistent and explicable within the framework of natural laws, whereas fantasy does not aim to rationalize its supernatural components. Examples of nova in science fiction include colonized planets, laser weaponry, and robotic or AI-based assistants. Thus, the novum functions as the intellectual nucleus of science fiction — a predictive and conceptual foundation that reflects potential scientific and technological advancements. It serves as the key structural and semantic element that differentiates science fiction from the imaginative world of fantasy.

In a generalized sense, mimetic fiction may be defined as “authentic,” whereas fantasy represents a “fictional” reality. Works of science fiction are also based on imagination, yet their structure is grounded in the principles of natural laws, which distinguishes them from fantasy, where supernatural and irrational elements prevail. From this perspective, fantasy can be regarded as a form of artistic imagination directed toward the impossible. It should be noted, however, that this definition is rather tentative and generalized. Within the framework of this study, it will be adopted as a working concept, since the issues of classification and delimitation of the fantasy genre remain subjects of debate both in Russian and international literary criticism.

Our perception of the world and our understanding of what is considered natural, possible, or attainable are shaped by cultural factors and the level of social development. This collective framework forms the so-called consensus reality, a shared world accepted by the majority. However, this reality is neither absolute nor immutable. In fact, the number of realities corresponds to the number of conscious individuals capable of perceiving them. Thus, a single literary text may evoke different interpretations: a reader who believes in astrology might perceive it as a work of science fiction, while an astrophysicist engaged in cosmic research may see nothing fantastical in it. Accordingly,

science fiction rests upon the conceptual and epistemological foundations of the scientific community of its era. This leads to a paradox: as humanity gradually comprehends the fundamental laws of existence, ideas once regarded as fantastic often become the commonplace realities of subsequent generations. In contrast to science fiction, the fantasy genre is not primarily concerned with prediction or prophecy. Instead, it constructs alternative worlds that encourage readers to reflect on change. Its purpose lies not in foreseeing the future but in preparing human consciousness for inevitable and often unpredictable transformations, thereby enhancing one’s capacity for adaptation.

In his study of J. R. R. Tolkien’s literary legacy, R. I. Kabakov refers to the term introduced by Tolkien himself to describe his works and similar narratives — “fairy tales”. Tolkien emphasized the threefold essence of such tales — healing, redemption, and consolation — tracing their origins to the core principles of Christian faith. Robert E. Howard is rightfully regarded as one of the pioneers of the fantasy genre. His creative legacy left a profound mark on world literature, while the image of Conan became a symbol of heroic fantasy, maintaining its popularity through numerous film adaptations and literary continuations by other talented authors. An equally significant contribution to the genre was made by J. R. R. Tolkien, whose epic *The Lord of the Rings* depicted the grand struggle between good and evil in the magical realm of Middle-earth. Today, this work may even surpass the legend of Conan the Cimmerian in worldwide recognition. In the modern era, fantasy has acquired a new dimension through the works of J. K. Rowling, whose stories about the young wizard Harry Potter have become a global cultural phenomenon and influenced Russian literature — notably through D. Yemets, who continues the tradition of magical storytelling in his own works. All these writers are united by the epic scale of their artistic vision and the complexity of their narrative worlds, though each demonstrates a distinctive stylistic and authorial individuality. The realm of fantasy extends far beyond literature, permeating various spheres of culture — including cinema, the gaming industry, visual arts, and music. In recent years, the influence of science fiction and fantasy on film, theatre, and visual art has become especially evident, a phenomenon explored in the works of several Uzbek literary scholars who study the interaction between literature and visual culture. .

RESULTS

The fantasy genre has given rise to a unique cultural phenomenon — role-playing games, which are built upon its narrative and aesthetic foundations. These games not only absorb elements from various forms of art but also serve as catalysts for their development, acting as a source of creative inspiration for artists, writers, and musicians. Musical and poetic manifestations of fantasy often trace their origins to role-playing practices, which provide them with a rich symbolic and narrative framework. Thus, fantasy represents a distinct and influential component of modern culture, integrating features of literary, visual, and performative arts. Unlike other genres, fantasy interacts dynamically with multiple cultural phenomena, making it particularly significant in the context of contemporary artistic evolution. It is difficult to imagine, for instance, a detective narrative transformed into lyrical poetry, or elements of realistic fiction expressed through music. Fantasy, however, possesses the flexibility to transcend such boundaries, which highlights its universality and depth. Scholars often note the blurred distinction between “fantasy” and “science fiction,” leading to the tendency to classify fantasy as a subgenre of the latter. Yet, given its multidimensional nature and thematic scope, fantasy deserves a more precise and independent classification. As stated in an academic encyclopedia:

“...The bulk of fantasy literature constitutes a special type of literary fairy tale that employs motifs of magic, enchantment, and chivalric epic in combination with techniques of realistic narration (A. Blackwood, M. Peake, H. Lovecraft, J. Tolkien)...1972.”. Based on the conducted analysis, it can be concluded that the fantasy genre belongs to the category of literary legends, combining elements of epic and fairy-tale narration. In the literary encyclopedia, fantasy is defined as a form of epic heroic narrative, exemplified by *The Lord of the Rings*, which represents a grand story of great deeds and heroic achievements. In the *Short Literary Encyclopedia*, the term “fantasy” is interpreted as a type of epic narrative.

In Western academic discourse, the issue of classifying and systematizing the fantasy genre has received more detailed and multifaceted attention, even though the very term “fantasy” encompasses a remarkably broad range of literary works. Within scholarly definitions, fantasy is described as follows: “Fantasy is a form of imaginative fiction that is not originally intended to provide a realistic representation of the surrounding world. It constitutes a category that includes several literary genres — such as dream vision, tall tale, fairy tale, novel, and science fiction

— depicting imaginary worlds where magical forces and other phenomena impossible in the real world are permissible. Contemporary theorists of fantasy seek to distinguish more precisely between the extraordinary and the psychologically motivated illusion of the supernatural, as well as to explain the interplay and fusion of these concepts within the structure of fantastic narrative.”

Within the scope of this analysis, the primary focus is placed on the observation that the fantasy genre possesses the capacity to integrate elements of various literary movements. Although fantasy exists as an independent artistic system, its literary structure may be regarded as a generalizing category that encompasses a wide range of aesthetic and stylistic traditions. Nevertheless, this conceptual approach does not provide an in-depth examination of the interrelations and interactions among different literary genres within the framework of fantasy, nor does it explain the motives underlying such a synthesis.

It is noteworthy that Western scholars, particularly those representing European and American academic traditions, seldom address the issue of genre intersections, concentrating instead on the structural and formal aspects of fantasy. For instance, Wolfe interprets the essence of fantasy as a form of escape from empirical reality, stating: “Writers of fantasy begin by deliberately violating the norms and facts that form the foundation of our conceptual perception of reality... Fantasy is a tale based upon and controlled by the violation of what we call the really possible, the existent.”. Nevertheless, such an interpretation appears overly simplistic, as virtually any form of activity may be regarded as deviating from conventional norms if it contains elements of surrealist perception. For instance, in Franz Kafka’s novel *The Trial*, the theme of estrangement from everyday reality is reflected both formally and semantically: the disruption of habitual foundations becomes the central philosophical motif of the work.

B.N. Manlove offers his own understanding of the fantasy genre which, despite certain divergences from Wolfe’s concept, still remains within a similar interpretative framework: “...the significance of fantasy lies not in the accuracy of realistic depiction or fidelity to facts, but in the creation of an individual perception that arranges things in a strange yet meaningful order, maintaining the independence inherent in the fantastic.” In another of his works, the author, in addition to exploring the concept of uniqueness, also addresses the notion of the supernatural.

He observes that “the fictional creation of a miracle and the presence of an essential and unchanging element of the supernatural become, for the mortal characters as well as for the readers, something familiar and intimate — a natural part of their reality.” Jackson proposes an innovative interpretation of the fantasy genre, examining it through the lens of cultural analysis. In his study, he defines fantasy as “the literature of the impossible” or “the literature of the non-existent.” The researcher then elaborates on his concept, emphasizing that fantasy, as a literary form, originates from ancient cultural traditions and can be viewed in the context of classical myths, legends, folklore, and the art of carnival culture. The present study focuses on the intricate interrelation between myth and fantasy, emphasizing their shared connection to the irrational. However, existing scholarly works lack a detailed description of the mechanisms through which mythological structures interact with the fantasy genre, as well as an analysis of the internal principles shaping its poetics. Although Western literary theorists have significantly contributed to the understanding of this issue, each approaches the phenomenon of fantasy from a distinct perspective: R. Jackson explores the cultural and historical roots of the genre, C. Wolf concentrates on its conceptual foundation, while B. Manlove seeks to define the essential features and structural principles of fantasy. Nevertheless, his works do not present a clearly established hierarchy of concepts, nor do they address the interdependence of these principles and their formative components.

DISCUSSION

Within literary studies, opinions regarding the nature and functions of fantasy vary so widely that any attempt at their classification and systematization proves challenging. M. F. Misnik emphasizes that the earliest cognitive foundations of the fantasy genre can be traced back to nineteenth-century literature, particularly within the realm of fairy-tale fantasy. However, the researcher stresses that it would be premature to regard fantasy as a distinct genre at that stage. Sharing S. N. Plotnikova’s view, M.F. Misnik asserts that the fundamental principles of fantasy had not yet been clearly defined in the nineteenth century. The earliest literary works based on these emerging conceptual ideas occupied an intermediate position between genres, existing, as the scholar notes, “between the boundaries of literary forms.” Examining the development of fantasy as an independent phenomenon, M.F. Misnik argues that it was in the twentieth century that the genre finally separated from others, with its cognitive structure being shaped by

the key genre-forming concept of the “anomalous artistic world.” . From a linguistic perspective, the fantasy genre reveals several distinctive features. First of all, it demonstrates unique linguistic traits of imaginary beings that have no real-world equivalents and exist solely as elements within a mythological system of signs — special linguistic instruments conveying the symbolism of myth. Furthermore, the perception of the fantastic realm, both by readers and by characters who transition from the ordinary world into the marvelous one, is grounded in an individual sense of wonder and strangeness. In addition, within this realm, artificial or invented languages often function as a means of communication among fictional creatures. According to I.V.Fomenko’s interpretation, the literary world is defined as “an original and autonomous artistic construct created by the author and embodied in his works.” . Within the realm of fantasy, a uniquely constructed artificial universe emerges — one that neither mirrors reality nor serves as a direct projection of the ordinary world familiar to us. The world depicted in fantasy literature does not represent a mirror reflection of everyday reality; rather, it creates an autonomous universe governed by its own existential and perceptual laws.

The term “fantasy” came into active use in the mid-twentieth century, following the emergence of works by two outstanding British authors — J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis. Their writings, characterized by profound philosophical depth and symbolic complexity, could not be classified as mere variations on the theme of fairy-tale magic typical of popular literature. Unlike Robert E. Howard’s “Conan the Barbarian”, whose narrative structure and motifs echoed those of traditional fairy tales, Tolkien’s and Lewis’s works constructed intricate artistic worlds with their own mythology and internal coherence.

A significant contribution to the Soviet study of fantasy as a literary phenomenon was made by S. L. Koshelev, one of the first Russian scholars to systematically approach this field. In 1983, he successfully defended his dissertation entitled “The Philosophical Orientation in Contemporary English Prose: An Analytical Review of the Novels of J. R. R. Tolkien, W. Golding, and C. Wilson Written in the 1950s–1960s.” In his subsequent research, Koshelev explored Tolkien’s poetics in depth, identifying “The Lord of the Rings” as “a novel combining the features of a fairy tale and a heroic epic,” thereby opening new perspectives for the philosophical and cultural interpretation of the fantasy genre.

In the course of his research, Koshelev gradually revises his initial assumptions and ultimately concludes that Tolkien's work should be classified as "a philosophical novel within the fantasy genre, incorporating elements of a fairy tale and a heroic epic." In 1989, R. I. Kabakov focused on the peculiarities of the genre structure of fantasy, presenting the results of his research in a dissertation devoted to the analysis of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and the issues of modern myth-making. In this scholarly work, the researcher asserts that "...the analysis of the plot and the genre nature of the work makes it possible to regard *The Lord of the Rings* as a modern heroic-mythological epic created within the traditions of Northern mythology...". In the study of literary works, it becomes evident that perspectives on the fantasy genre vary greatly, encompassing both broad and more narrowly defined aspects of its nature. E. Gevorkyan defines fantasy as a "fairy-tale phantasmagoria of imagined worlds." In contrast, N. Perumov, whose creative work is deeply rooted in this genre, presents an opposing view, describing fantasy as "a type of fantastic fairy tale," thereby emphasizing its connection to the tradition of magical storytelling. The literary scholar V. Gubaylovsky takes a more restrictive stance, asserting that the only work truly deserving the title of "fantasy" is *The Lord of the Rings*. Meanwhile, V. L. Gopman, in his *Brief Literary Encyclopedia of Terms and Concepts*, offers a distinctive interpretation of the genre, defining fantasy as "a type of speculative literature based on a narrative assumption of an irrational nature." He notes that this assumption lacks logical motivation within the text and implies the existence of phenomena that, unlike those in science fiction, cannot be explained through reason or scientific logic.

V. Hopman's conceptual framework is closely related to the theories of Wolf and B. Manlove, which emphasize those elements of fantasy that transcend ordinary experience and are imbued with the supernatural. Kaplan also addresses this issue in his scholarly analysis. In his work "Let's Look Beyond the Wall", he notes: "In the broadest sense, fantasy is a work in which the fantastic element is incompatible with the scientific worldview." It should be noted that within contemporary literary studies, the fantasy genre often transcends conventional boundaries, encompassing works with unconventional narrative structures that lack a traditional exposition and, at times, existing within the limits of a single literary text. In some academic discussions, fantasy is classified as a subgenre of science fiction; however, such identification is not always accurate.

A careful examination of scholarly perspectives allows us to distinguish three major approaches, each defining the nature of fantasy in a different way:

1. In academic publications and literary dictionaries, fantasy is frequently described as a refined form of the fairy tale.
2. Scholars focusing on philosophical and cultural dimensions of the genre tend to associate it with such notions as "the supernatural," "the irrational," and "the incomprehensible."
3. In a broader sense, fantasy can be understood as a complex hybrid genre that unites the features of "a fantastic philosophical novel, a magical fairy tale, and a heroic epic" or "a modern epic narrative form rooted in heroic and mythological motifs and derived from the traditions of Northern European mythology..."

CONCLUSION

The third group attracts particular attention due to its conceptual coherence and analytical depth. It is noteworthy that within the context of fantasy, we are dealing not with a single genre but with a broad spectrum of literary directions that exist in a state of dynamic interaction and mutual influence. Perhaps it is precisely this unique ability of fantasy — to integrate diverse artistic styles and narrative models — that makes it one of the central phenomena of modern literature.

Before delving into a detailed examination of the structural and poetic characteristics of the genre, it is essential to clarify its cultural significance. Understanding this aspect provides a solid foundation for a reasoned analysis and helps uncover the mechanisms by which fantasy affects the reader. The genre does not exist independently of cultural demand; rather, it responds to it, fulfilling both aesthetic and psychological functions.

Writers turn to fantasy driven by specific artistic purposes, while readers, in turn, seek in it particular meanings and emotional depth. Thus, the act of creating and perceiving fantasy literature is characterized by a mutual interdependence.

Popular literature in general fascinates readers through its ability to satisfy their natural need for emotional release and intellectual relaxation, creating a sense of "inner

harmony” often mentioned by book enthusiasts. Melodramas awaken sensuality and revive forgotten emotions, while detective stories engage the intellect, inviting readers to unravel mysteries. Each literary work carries its own mission, and it is through this mission that one can distinguish, for instance, romantic poetry from classical tragedy — even within the realm of everyday perception.

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