

BRIAN ATTEBERY'S CONCEPTS OF FORMULA, MODE, AND GENRE IN FANTASY LITERATURE

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*Abstract: Beginning with the second half of the twentieth century, fantasy literature has been analysed from various perspectives, from structuralism to psychoanalysis. Brian Attebery, an acclaimed American literary scholar, considers that the field of fantasy criticism is somewhat muddled and full of confusing definitions and delimitations. His 1992 study, *The Strategies of Fantasy*, can serve as a guidebook for the confused reader. In what is one of the most notable parts of his study, he deals with the question of whether fantasy should be defined as formula, as a mode of writing, or rather as a separate genre. He offers ample justifications and examples for all three approaches and makes suggestions for further reading. The purpose of this paper is to shed light on the differences between formula, mode, and genre, as it is inferred in Attebery's study, as well as to open the path for further research in the study of this literary field.*

Keywords: fantasy, formula, mode, genre, fuzzy set

When American critic and professor Brian Attebery published his book *The Strategies of Fantasy* in 1992, he was one of the first to accept that Tolkien's definition of fantasy is not only valid, but also applicable to contemporary postmodern fantasy. His book-length study postulates from the very beginning that fantasy literature has irreproachable value, despite what certain critics and readers might say. In his work, Attebery does not provide an evaluation of the genre, as it might be expected, but rather a description and an explanation of how fantasy achieves its goals. In this approach, he is similar to Tolkien, in the sense that he does not try to provide a clear-cut definition to an otherwise unclear genre, and he admits from the start that he is biased, just like Tolkien, because of his love for fantasy fiction. With these in mind, he sets two initial goals: "first, to demonstrate how [contemporary fantasy writers] are broadening the range of modern fantasy and, second, to find a theoretical base that can account for their ability to do so" (1992: xii). The arguments presented by Attebery throughout his work are pertinent when discussing fantasy as mode, formula, and genre both in the sense that he expands upon the thoughts of prior scholars, and also in the sense that he takes into account other works that may have inspired contemporary writers. He also provides guidelines to reading fantasy from various points of view, such as postmodernism, feminism, and science fantasy.

Attebery explores these various aspects of fantasy fiction with a special focus on J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* series, in an attempt to point out the limitations of older, traditional literary theories in dealing with fantasy and arguing that modernist and postmodernist theories are more suited for understanding fantasy, especially when considering certain narrative conventions such as story and character. Finally, he suggests that among the newly-emerged sub-genres of fantasy, the most promising one is something similar to magic realism, labelled by him as "indigenous fantasy." This sub-

genre usually involves striking oppositions, for instance a story which is set in our “real” world, yet strangely open to magical, supernatural beings or events.

Attebery constructs his arguments mainly based on examples from numerous fantasy works from the last few decades, with special care given to avoiding specific theoretical frameworks, approaching what we might call Tolkienian fantasy¹ as a receptive, open-minded reader. By doing so, he manages to convey his ideas in a manner available to anyone, not only to scholars specialised in literature. Moreover, by providing examples in such a great number, he encourages readers to further explore this vast genre.

Fantasy: formula, mode, genre

The main concern in *The Strategies of Fantasy* is how fantasy has developed in a threefold way: as a mode, as formulaic literature, and as a singular genre. Attebery begins his exploration of these manifestations by providing two strikingly different definitions of fantasy, both of which, he argues, are equally true and applicable:

1. Fantasy is a form of popular escapist literature that combines stock characters and devices – wizards, dragons, magic swords, and the like – into a predictable plot in which perennially understaffed forces of good triumph over a monolithic evil.
2. Fantasy is a sophisticated mode of storytelling characterized by stylistic playfulness, self-reflexiveness, and a subversive treatment of established orders of society and thought [...] and at the same time recaptures the vitality and freedom of nonmimetic traditional forms such as epic, folktale, romance, and myth (1992: 1).

The first definition is that of fantasy as formula, while the second one is that of fantasy as mode.

Formulaic fantasy is often criticised even by those who are generally in favour of fantasy literature, mainly due to its predictability. Authors often feel coerced into borrowing pre-set characters, settings, and plots from Tolkien or Disney, in order to make absolutely sure that they get the reader’s response. They are concerned that if the readers do not have elements that are somewhat familiar to them, they will simply dismiss the work of fantasy for being too closed within itself. This concern could be related to Tolkien’s theory that secondary worlds must be – at least in part – based on the Primary World, so that the readers can feel more familiar and more willing to suspend disbelief. Although, according to Attebery, this type of literature “is essentially a commercial product” and “its success depends on consistency and predictability” (2), formulaic fantasy, often called *swords-and-sorcery*, can be highly entertaining, clever and well-written. In a sense, writing formulaic stories is even more challenging than non-formulaic literature: the writer must try to make the stock elements seem unpredictable and unexpected². The success of the formula depends entirely on the skills of the author: a Tolkien or an Agatha Christie can make formulas seem fresh and new every single time,

¹ fantasy akin to Tolkien’s works and the author’s main focus in this work

² It must be noted that formulas are not restricted to fantasy only, but can be found in nearly all types of literature

even though the readers know exactly what type of stories to expect from them. However, formulaic literature can also be very poorly written, and only used as a quick shortcut to producing a commercial product. Formula fantasy, in its predictability, has been an inspiration for certain types of LARP (Live Action Role-Playing) and RPGs (Role-Playing-Games), such as Dungeons and Dragons, where players can construct their own fantasy worlds by using stock elements. Attebery provides a rather amusing “recipe” for formulaic games, movies, or books:

Take a vaguely medieval world. Add a problem, something more or less ecological, and a prophecy for solving it.

Introduce one villain with no particular characteristics except a nearly all-powerful badness. Give him or her a convenient blind spot.

Pour in enough mythological creatures and nonhuman races to fill out a number of secondary episodes: fighting a dragon, riding a winged horse, stopping overnight with the elves (who really should organize themselves into a bed-and-breakfast association).

To the above mixture add one naïve and ordinary hero who will prove to be a prophesied savior; give him a comic sidekick and a wise old advisor who can rescue him from time to time and explain the plot.

Keep stirring until the whole thing congeals. (10)

In his humorous and slightly ironic approach, Attebery does not seek to diminish the value of formula fantasy and goes on to argue that these narrative constraints can actually function as incentives in their creative act. All of these pre-set stock elements can be surprisingly original in a well-written formulaic fantasy work. I would even argue that these formulas are *crucial* elements in fantasy because they enable the readers not only to feel familiarity with a well-known type of story, but also give them a certain sense of security. Take for example the fairy stories that we all grew up reading or listening to. They all begin with “Once upon a time...” and end with “And they lived happily ever after.” There is always a prince or a princess and a problem to be solved. They all follow a certain pattern and the forces of good always defeat the forces of evil. Even as children, people know what to expect from a fairy-tale, they know they will get Tolkien’s Eucatastrophe. By reading fantasy as adults, we can feel the nostalgia of once-upon-a-time stories, hence the familiarity of fantasy; by knowing that everything will turn out for the better, we can sit back and enjoy the unfolding of the story, hence the feeling of security. Perhaps this is what appeals to a vast majority of readers of fantasy and perhaps this is one of the main reasons why fantasy can – and often does – act as a substitute for fairy-tales.

Attebery’s second definition is focused on fantasy-as-mode and it is a little less straightforward than fantasy-as-formula. According to the critic, “a mode is a way of doing something, in this case, of telling stories” (2). However simple this explanation may seem, storytelling is far more complicated. The writer tries to convey character traits, settings, physical actions, and dialogues by paying close attention to and interpreting behaviours, modes of thinking, socio-political milieus, and so on. He must

juggle many elements in order to convey his story, so a mode is not merely “a stance, a position on the world,” but also “a means of portraying it” (2). In order to further illustrate this concept, Attebery turns to Northrop Frye’s use of the term “mode” in his division of literature made in the famous *Anatomy of Criticism*. According to Frye, literature can be split into five modes: the mythic, the romantic, the high mimetic, the low mimetic, and the ironic. He discusses the two poles of the modal approach, by stating that on one end there is the mimetic, or “the tendency to verisimilitude and accuracy of description,” while on the other end we have something similar to Aristotle’s *mythos*, but not quite myths, “a tendency to tell a story which is in origin a story about characters who can do anything” (1957: 51). Attebery argues that his own approach to mode is more concerned with this polarity, rather than Frye’s five modes proper. The mimetic, or the mode of imitation, has been studied extensively and can be equated to realism in literature. Its aim is to depict the world around us and our experiences within it as faithfully as possible. On the other end of the scale is what Frye calls – rather reluctantly – the mythic, which is far less well-established and even lacks a proper name. Kathryn Hume calls this other end *fantasy* and the majority of contemporary critics agree to this proposition. According to her, “it is truer to literary practice to admit that fantasy is not a separate or indeed a separable strain, but rather an impulse as significant as the mimetic impulse, and to recognize that both are involved in the creation of most literature” (2014: xii). Therefore, while fantasy and mimesis are situated in the far ends of Frye’s scale, they are both key elements of literary creations. As Attebery explains, in fantasy characters can do unimaginable things, like flying or talking to animals, while in mimesis their possibilities are limited to our sensory world; “if the world were a simpler place and its rules less ambiguous, we might say that mimesis tells what is and fantasy tells what isn’t” (3).

Attebery continues his study by exploring the modal approach to fantasy literature, with its advantages and disadvantages. He claims that, since a given piece of writing contains both the fantastic and the mimetic, the modal approach can provide “a means of classifying” and “a basis for evaluation” (4). Here, however, he draws an alarm signal: from this viewpoint, some critics might be inclined to evaluate literature only from one point of view, i.e. if the writing is mimetic, it has value, which is the case of Erich Auerbach in his *Mimesis* (1953). On the other pole, there might be critics – admittedly even Attebery himself – who reverse the bias and claim that non-mimetic (or less-mimetic) literature is “only a sort of journalism, and not a real story at all. It has no fantasy” (5).

With these things in mind, Attebery identifies several strong points of the modal approach. First of all, the breadth of the fantastic mode offers the opportunity for numerous findings and extensive future research. Also, the mode being a basic narrative operation, the critic might find its defining characteristics with the help of theoretical speculation, which is easier and more precise than ad hoc interpretation. Lastly and most importantly, it is not bound to a particular school of literature and it covers a broad spectrum of activities. All in all, “it offers examples of unimpeachable literariness –

Shakespeare, Swift, Dickens, Coleridge – whereas genre and formula fantasy are noncanonical by traditional standards,” says Attebery (4).

However, an approach which enables both Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the *Lord of the Ring* series to be included under the same umbrella is far too vast; in this manner, one could include almost all literature into the fantastic, which is not only erroneous, but also lazy. Another disadvantage of fantasy-as-mode is that although it might offer a theoretical basis, critics cannot agree on what that theory should be. Modal fantasy – called by Attebery “the fantastic,” in order to distinguish it from genre fantasy, which he simply calls “fantasy” – could be a function of language, as suggested by Tolkien in “On Fairy-stories”. The writer can take two seemingly unrelated terms, the modifier *green* and the substantive *sun* and create the fantastic *green sun*. The fantastic could also be analysed from a psychological point of view, as a means of suppressing and disguising reality, or as a manifestation of the collective subconscious and an application of age-old archetypes. It can reflect economic views; it can be a game, or an abstract manifestation of the brain's physiological workings; some have even called it the endurance of myth in the rational era. All of the above theoretical approaches can be used as bases in the study of fantastic literature and indeed all of them have been used. They are all derived from fields outside of literature, therefore they are most useful and convincing when we accept and understand the various linguistic, psychological or socio-political premises they are based on. As Attebery claims, all of these theories can be practical on some level in the study of fantasy: “[s]ome fantasies are intimately connected with language; others are attempts to represent the processes of the psyche. [...] Sometimes fantasy is a form of play, while at other times, or even at the same time, it is utterly serious” (5).

Given the fact that fantasy-as-mode is simply too vast and ambiguous, while fantasy-as-formula is too restrictive, Attebery proposes to use the term “genre” as “a middle ground between mode and formula” (10). Historically, the evolution of the fantasy genre can be seen as the imposition of various restrictions on the mode of the fantastic. The beginnings of modern fantasy can be traced back to the late eighteenth century, when the brothers Grimm popularised German folktales, known as *Kunstmärchen*, thus imposing the first restriction: fantasy adopted the atmosphere and the setting of these folktales. Next, a specific type of hero was introduced by George MacDonald, as well as a distinctive stylistic approach by William Morris. Lord Dunsany began the fashion for naming characters and places and Tolkien set everything into a certain structure which proved to work well. All of these restrictions have led, paradoxically, not to poorer literary creations, but to an abundance of highly valuable texts. I would even go as far as to argue that the mode *needed* the limitations of the formula in order to become the genre we know today.

Although Attebery's division between formula and genre is “a somewhat artificial one” (11), “the genre category does seem to be a useful way of designating stories that are more alike than required by the mode, and yet less uniform than dictated by the formula” (11). However, not even this middle path is fully satisfactory. Critics have been disagreeing for decades whether to define genres descriptively or systematically, as

parts of historical development or as logical categories. This has led to debates on boundaries and definitions, as shown in the introduction of this thesis. Attebery explains the problems posed by genre criticism in an analogy:

We often think of genres, like other categories, as territories on a map, with definitional limits marking off hard-boiled from classic detective, or fantasy from science fiction. The critic looks the candidate over, consults his list of characteristics, and assigns the book to the Allied Zone of fantasy or the Soviet Zone of SF, ignoring its ties to cousins on the other side of the wall. (12)

Still, grouping texts together according to various criteria is absolutely mandatory in order to reveal how these creations have come to be, how they function, and what effects they have on the reader. How can this be done, if the classical approach to genre criticism is less than helpful? The answer to this conundrum lies in what logicians call *the fuzzy set theory*, which focuses not on boundaries, but on a given centre. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson explore this theory in *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), where they claim that “[c]ategories can be systematically extended in various ways for various purposes. There are modifiers [...] that pick out a prototype for a category and that define various kinds of relationships to it” (1980: 123). To illustrate this, the authors propose the following examples: in the category of birds, robins are considered birds par excellence (this is the prototype, or the centre); strictly speaking, penguins and ostriches are also birds, but they stray a little further from the centre of the category, or the prototype; for some purposes chickens, which are only loosely speaking birds, can be included into this category, while for other purposes, they can be counted as farmyard animals (123-124). It all depends on how strictly we view a certain grouping and on what our purposes are. The further away from the centre we go, the fuzzier the boundaries become and the harder it becomes to include something in a certain category.

The fuzzy set theory can clearly be applied to literary genres, but can we claim that fantasy is a fuzzy set? What is the centre that it radiates from and how far away from this centre can we go? To answer these questions, Attebery has conducted “an unscientific experiment” (13) within which thirteen of his scholar acquaintances were asked to rank various titles from “quintessentially fantasy” to “by no means fantasy.” According to Attebery’s results, *The Lord of the Rings* is the core from which the fuzzy set emanates, with Le Guin’s *Earthsea* series, *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Worm Ouroboros*, and *Dracula* moving further and further away from the core. Scientifically, Attebery’s experiment does not prove much, nor does it reflect the discussed works’ value. It does, however, show that “with the publication and popular acceptance of Tolkien’s version of the fantastic, a new coherence was given to the genre” (14). With Tolkienian fantasy as a “mental template” (14), one may be tempted to search for certain ingredients in all fantastical works: magical jewellery, the interpolation of songs and poems, invented languages, or Celtic and Scandinavian folk elements. None of the above are distinctively common in non-formulaic fantasy, therefore they are not the key to understanding the influence of Tolkienian fantasy. Attebery proposes that the works we consider fantasy

resemble *The Lord of the Rings* in other ways, namely content, structure, and reader response.

The essential content of fantasy is always the impossible, or, as Attebery himself calls it in his own *The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature*, “some violation of what the author clearly believes to be natural law” (1980: 17). Other critics have different names for the impossible: Kathryn Hume calls it “the departure from consensus reality” (8), while others mention magic, the supernatural, the improbable, and so on.

The second key element which unifies fantasy is structure. According to Attebery’s study, the primary structure of fantasy is comic, which means that the story begins with a problem which is always solved by the end. Of course, there are usually instances of despair, pain, loss, horror, or even death, but they always disappear before the end. With this, we go back to Tolkien’s *eucaastrophe* discussed in the previous chapter. Attebery warns us that we should take this notion with a pinch of salt, because, in fantasy, happy ending is not always truly happy. What matters more is that the initial problem be solved. In Le Guin’s *Earthsea* series, for instance, the protagonist Ged pays a high price throughout the books: he loses his pride, his self-reliance, his powers, and nearly his life. However, the initial problem is always solved, order is restored and the universe is once more balanced. Without this, says Attebery, “we would not have the structural completeness of fantasy, but the truncated story-forms of absurdism or horror” (1992: 15).

The third common element of fantasy is reader response, or the effect of fantasy on the reader. It is precisely Tolkien’s *eucaastrophe*, which Attebery prefers to call “wonder” (16). Manlove, in *Modern Fantasy*, makes this term a part of his definition of fantasy: “a fiction evoking wonder and containing a substantial or irreducible element of supernatural or impossible worlds, being or objects” (1975: 1). Furthermore, Attebery links the concept of “wonder” to the Marxist concept of “estrangement,” and suggests that Tolkienian wonder

“may best be described as an alternative formulation of the idea of estrangement... [where] through the formal manipulation of their linguistic representatives we are made to see familiar objects and experiences as strange, distant from ourselves. [...] In Schlovsky’s and Brecht’s Marxist view, the initial familiarity was an illusion produced by the mystifications of bourgeois ideology and hence must be replaced by estrangement as a preliminary step toward social revolution. (16)

While in the Todorovian/Marxist view, *estrangement* is disconcerting, Attebery embraces Tolkien’s *wonder*, a positive experience and the kind of reader response all good fantasy hopes to obtain, and makes use of this term in his study.

Whether seen as a homogenous unit (genre), as a collection of specific elements (formula), or as an all-encompassing umbrella-term (mode), fantasy has undeniably established its importance in the history of literature. Although its boundaries are unclear and its definition evasive, it has been a part of human life from its very beginning, in the form of myths, folktales, fairy tales or, more recently, fantasy novels.

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