

DIACHRONIC AND SYNCHRONIC APPROACHES TO FANTASY LITERATURE: A STRUCTURAL AND PRAGMALINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This article examines diachronic and synchronic approaches to fantasy literature, arguing that historical models lead to conceptual overextension, while structural analysis offers greater precision. Drawing on Tzvetan Todorov and pragmalinguistic theory, the study demonstrates how genre conventions shape interpretation and enable humor, particularly in Terry Pratchett's works, highlighting fantasy as a functional communicative system.

Keywords: Fantasy literature, genre theory, diachronic approach, synchronic approach, structuralism, pragmalinguistics, implicature, humor in literature, literary communication.

Introduction

The question of how to define fantasy literature continues to occupy a central position in contemporary literary theory, not only because of the genre's immense popularity but also due to its persistent resistance to stable categorization. Despite numerous attempts by scholars to establish clear boundaries, fantasy remains a concept characterized by theoretical ambiguity and methodological inconsistency. A major source of this difficulty lies in the coexistence of two fundamentally different analytical approaches – diachronic and synchronic – each of which offers a distinct framework for understanding literary genres. Originally formulated within the linguistic theory of Ferdinand de Saussure, these



approaches have been widely adopted in literary studies, where they inform debates about genre classification, interpretation, and function. The diachronic approach examines fantasy through its historical evolution, tracing its development across time, while the synchronic approach focuses on the structural and functional characteristics of the genre within a specific temporal context.

The tension between these approaches is particularly evident in the study of fantasy, where the absence of consensus regarding its definition has led to a proliferation of competing theories. As highlighted in the source text, scholars often disagree not only about what constitutes fantasy but also about whether it should be treated as a genre, a mode, or even a broader interpretive stance [1]. This lack of agreement reflects deeper methodological issues that affect the way fantasy is analyzed and understood. In many cases, diachronic approaches lead to excessive inclusivity, incorporating texts that differ significantly in structure and function, thereby undermining the analytical value of the genre itself. By contrast, synchronic approaches offer the possibility of greater precision by focusing on the relational structures that define fantasy at a given moment. This article aims to demonstrate that while diachronic analysis contributes to historical understanding, a synchronic and pragmalinguistically informed perspective provides a more coherent and analytically productive framework.

The diachronic approach to fantasy literature is grounded in the idea that genres evolve over time and that their meaning can be understood only through historical analysis. Scholars adopting this perspective often attempt to construct a continuous narrative that links ancient myths, medieval romances, Gothic fiction, and modern fantasy into a single developmental trajectory. This method emphasizes the persistence of certain thematic elements, such as supernatural phenomena, alternative realities, and symbolic narratives, suggesting that fantasy reflects a continuous human engagement with imagination and the non-real. However, as Kathryn Hume argues, fantasy should not simply be understood as a historical accumulation of texts but rather as a mode of responding to reality, which varies depending on cultural and contextual factors [8]. This observation already points to the limitations of a purely diachronic framework.

As the source text demonstrates, excessive reliance on diachronic inclusivity results in conceptual overextension, where texts that differ fundamentally in structure and purpose are grouped together under the same label [1]. When



fantasy is defined so broadly that it includes both canonical realist works and speculative narratives, it loses its analytical precision. This concern aligns with the structuralist critique advanced by Tzvetan Todorov, who argues that a classification system must maintain internal coherence in order to remain meaningful [2]. Similarly, Northrop Frye emphasizes that literary genres function as structured systems of conventions rather than loosely connected historical categories, and that their analytical value depends on recognizing these internal relationships [7]. From this perspective, the diachronic approach risks transforming fantasy into an undefined and overly elastic category.

This problem is further intensified by the divergence between theoretical and popular understandings of fantasy. Critics such as Rosemary Jackson and Lucie Armitt expand the category of fantasy to include texts that would not typically be recognized as fantasy by general readers, thereby creating a significant gap between academic discourse and reader expectations [1]. Such discrepancies raise important questions about the function of genre itself: if genre classifications do not correspond to reader experience, their usefulness as analytical tools becomes questionable. In this context, the diachronic approach appears insufficient for defining fantasy as a distinct and operational category.

In contrast, the synchronic approach offers a more systematic and theoretically grounded framework by examining fantasy as a structured system of conventions operating at a specific moment. Drawing on the linguistic model of Ferdinand de Saussure, this perspective conceptualizes genre as analogous to language, where an underlying system governs individual instances of use. Just as linguistic competence enables speakers to produce and interpret utterances, genre competence enables readers to recognize and interpret texts within a shared framework of expectations. According to Tzvetan Todorov, genres are abstract systems derived from textual analysis but not reducible to individual works, which reinforces the importance of synchronic analysis [2]. This idea is further developed in his later work, where he emphasizes that literary structures should be analyzed in terms of their internal organization rather than their historical evolution [9].

The synchronic approach allows scholars to identify key structural features of fantasy, such as the construction of secondary worlds, the presence of supernatural elements, and the internal coherence of fictional realities. These



features do not exist in isolation but function as part of a relational system that defines the genre. Moreover, this approach highlights the functional role of genre in literary communication. As the source text notes, genre labels shape reader expectations and influence interpretive strategies, determining how texts are understood and evaluated [1]. This insight aligns closely with pragmalinguistic theories of communication.

From a pragmalinguistic perspective, genre conventions can be seen as part of the inferential framework that guides interpretation. According to H. P. Grice, communication involves not only explicit meaning but also implied meaning, or implicature, which arises from the interaction between text and context [3]. In fantasy literature, genre expectations provide the context within which such implicatures are generated. When these expectations are violated, the reader is prompted to reinterpret the text, often resulting in humor or irony.

This mechanism is particularly evident in the works of Terry Pratchett, whose Discworld series exemplifies the interaction between genre conventions and pragmatic inference. Pratchett's narratives frequently subvert traditional fantasy tropes by presenting magical events in a mundane, bureaucratic, or ironic manner. For example, heroic quests may be treated as administrative procedures, and supernatural phenomena may be described in everyday language. These strategies rely on the reader's familiarity with conventional fantasy structures, which are then deliberately violated to produce a humorous effect. The resulting incongruity triggers a process of inferential interpretation, as described by Grice, where the reader seeks to reconcile the discrepancy between expectation and presentation.

From the perspective of Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, this process involves a balance between cognitive effort and contextual effect, where the reader invests interpretive effort in order to achieve a meaningful and rewarding understanding [4]. In this sense, humor in fantasy literature is not merely a stylistic feature but a communicative phenomenon that depends on the interaction between genre conventions and reader cognition. This reinforces the importance of a synchronic approach, as such effects can only be fully understood within the context of a shared system of expectations operating at a particular moment. Furthermore, the synchronic model allows for a more flexible understanding of genre as a dynamic system that evolves without losing its structural integrity.



While genres change over time, these changes can be understood as transformations within the system rather than as evidence of its dissolution. This perspective avoids the pitfalls of diachronic overgeneralization and provides a stable foundation for analyzing both continuity and variation within fantasy literature.

In conclusion, the distinction between diachronic and synchronic approaches represents a fundamental methodological divide in the study of fantasy literature. While the diachronic approach offers valuable insights into historical development, its tendency toward excessive inclusivity and conceptual ambiguity limits its effectiveness as a tool for defining the genre. By contrast, the synchronic approach provides a more precise and analytically robust framework, treating fantasy as a system of conventions that operates within a specific temporal context.

By integrating structuralist and pragmalinguistic perspectives, this article has demonstrated that the synchronic model not only clarifies the definition of fantasy but also explains its communicative functions, particularly in relation to humor and parody. The works of Terry Pratchett illustrate how genre conventions can be strategically manipulated to produce complex interpretive effects, highlighting the importance of reader expectations in meaning-making. Ultimately, a synchronic approach offers a more coherent and theoretically grounded understanding of fantasy literature, making it an essential framework for future research.

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