

**STYLE AND NARRATION IN EPIC FANTASY: TRADITION AND SUBVERSION**

*У статті простежено динаміку розвитку епічного фентезі у світовій літературі. Проаналізовано стилістичні та наративні особливості жанру, їх становлення і трансформації у XX і XXI ст.*

**Ключові слова:** *фентезі, жанр, стилістичні засоби, наратив.*

*В статье прослеживается динамика развития эпического фэнтези в мировой литературе. Проанализированы стилистические и повествовательные особенности жанра, их становление и трансформации в XX и XXI вв.*

**Ключевые слова:** *фэнтези, жанр, стилистические средства, нарратив.*

*The article examines the dynamics of the development of epic fantasy in world literature. The stylistic and narrative features of the genre, their formation and transformations in the XX and XXI centuries are analyzed.*

**Key words:** *fantasy, genre, language and style, narrative.*

Fantasy has always been distinguished from other forms of literature by its style, i.e., the author's deliberate choice of lexical units, sentence structure, figurative language, and sentence arrangement which all work together to establish mood, images, and meaning in the text. The result of the choices the writer makes in syntactical structures, diction, and figures of thought determines how the events, objects, and ideas of a literary text are depicted and how readers interpret the facts that are presented.

Epic, or high fantasy is a broad subgenre of fantasy that nowadays covers a variety of fiction. However, the traditional indicators of high fantasy include primarily the setting of a fictional world and the use of specific inner rules and logic [10]. Some typical characteristics of high fantasy include fantastic characters, magic or sorcery, invented languages, quests, coming-of-age themes, and multi-volume narratives [4]. Elaborately depicted high fantasy worlds may be more or less closely based on the real world setting or on legends (e.g., *The Arthurian Legendarium*), invented or parallel worlds which shade into alternate history [1, p.254].

The fantasy world requires, like any genre, appropriate language. For example, the established tradition is to render the villain's speech vulgar [2]. In Tolkien's world, men of Gondor and Rohan converse in archaic and high-flown language, hobbits talk standard English, while the orcs substandard [2]. According to A. Austin, this tendency simplifies identification of the Good and the Evil, the Great and the Small, but high fantasy allows such simplification [4].

Tolkien's wide use of archaic words and historicisms, Old English roots as names and toponyms was taken as a pattern by a number of authors [12]. However, in her seminal essay *From Elfland to Poughkeepsie* Ursula Le Guin criticized the use of a formal, "olden-day" style for writing high fantasy [8, p.17]. While she admired the archaic style for its ability to distance prose into a fantasy world rather than appear as a modern world in disguise, when it was used by masters such as Lord Dunsany, E.R. Eddison and J.R.R. Tolkien, she also noted that it was a dangerous trap for fantasy writers because it was ridiculous when done wrong

[8, p.18]. Michael Moorcock observed that many writers would use archaic language for its sonority and to lend colour to a lifeless story [9, p.113].

The non-linear narration is another important aspect. It is quite common for epic to interlace numerous events simultaneously and in parallel [13, p.92]. Quite often, the characters begin to act together, than they are separated and cast adrift, for example, the breaking of the Fellowship of the Ring into three companies. Thus, the reader follows a number of stories, eventually woven in a single knot [13, p.94]. In the traditional epic fantasy, most storylines are told from the viewpoint of one main hero [4]. There is also often a knowing, mystical teacher, associated with the Jungian archetype of a wise old man [4], a theme which can be traced back to *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485).

The magnitude of depicted events is usually expressed in all respects – geographically (the action embraces a country, a continent, the whole world or several worlds), chronologically (the adventures last for months, years, centuries), quantitatively (the characters do not merely kill one dragon or demon – it is a matter of tens and hundreds) and situationally (the gigantic armies clash in fierce battles, the universal Evil regains its power, etc.) [4]. Some authors attach numerous additional materials – maps, glossaries, appendixes, others spread a number of minute details throughout the plot, which equally provides the flavour of authenticity [10].

Another essential feature is the idea of fundamental opposition between the Good and the Evil. R. Helms remarks, that a fantasist is restricted in the “holy antagonism”, the characters can be at a time either good or evil, white or black, the golden mean never comes in [4].

In the years after publication of Tolkien’s seminal works, the genre of fantasy has exploded upon popular culture. As A. Bells shrewdly remarked: “A great number of writers gave Tolkien the highest of all honours – the effort of imitation” [5, p.165]. B. Attebery claims that upon the publication of *The Lord of the Rings* fantasy was released from a kind of “literary ghetto” [3, p.68].

*A Wizard of Earthsea* by Ursula Le Guin (1968) was a new step in the development of fantasy genre as the writer kept more within the realistic laws, while Tolkien remained closer to those of a fairy-tale. *The Chronicles of Amber* by Roger Zelazny (the first novel published in 1970) combined a fairy-tale, profound philosophical background and a tricky plot [10]. The authors gained worldwide acclaim but it was not until Terry Brooks’ *The Sword of Shannara* debut in 1977 when the torrent of Tolkien-esque imitative bestsellers sprang to the utmost [10].

Brooks’ success proved to publishers that fantasy can be a profitable product [2]. Thus, according to J. Clute, in fact this was the end of epic fantasy as such – Tolkien laid the canons, Le Guin and Zelazny introduced the elements of “high literature”, while Brooks created a solid commercial product [6].

Thereupon there was a flood of “handicraftsmen, gambling on Tolkien’s popularity” [2, p.161]. Series is the most widespread epic fantasy form [2]. Unfortunately, the majority of them are written as far as will go, based on the principle “till they read it” [10]. Thus, by now Terry Brooks has already published ten volumes and is still going to proceed [10]. The series by David Carroll Eddings is a hybrid of epic saga, love story and chivalrous romance with elements of thriller. His bestsellers were a success at the end of the 1980-s, but presently the author is “liable to constant self-repetitions” [6]. Thus, epic fantasy obviously

suffers from lack of new ideas [6]. As A. Austin notes, the genre is exhausted, “formulaic and of low quality”, with each new book or series drawing on the same patterns as its commercially successful predecessors. Besides, in his essay *Quality in Epic Fantasy* he calls them “clichéd, trivial and superficial” and in “the inexcusably crude manner” [4].

Le Guin argues in *From Elfland to Poughkeepsie* that the products of such assembly-line literary production (Jordan, Brooks, Goodkind) are not fantasy because their authors “use all the trappings of fantasy without ever actually imagining anything” [8, p.26].

Meanwhile, the publication of Martin’s first novel in 1996 brought about the new era of epic fantasy. According to L.Grossman: “*of those who work in the grand epic-fantasy tradition, Martin is by far the best. In fact, with his newest book, A Song of Ice and Fire, currently descending on bookstores and ascending best-seller lists, this is as good a time as any to proclaim him the American Tolkien*” [7]. Indeed, *A Song of Ice and Fire* is one of the most elaborated epic cycles nowadays. What distinguishes Martin, is his endeavour to bring the realism of his novels to the level of exceptional climax [11]. In his pseudo-historical large-scale epic, the author carefully recreates the medieval setting and flavour, the forth part having appeared in 2005. In Martin’s opinion: “Ten years from now, no one is going to care how quickly the books came out. The only thing that will matter, the only thing anyone will remember, is how good they were. That’s my main concern, and always will be” [7].

The plot of *A Song of Ice and Fire* is many-stranded, encompassing a wide variety of struggles for power. Martin’s unquestionable novelty consists in the fact that the series is told in the limited third-person through the eyes of a number of point of view characters. Besides, Martin’s combination of poetic and obscene language in his writings subverts the conventions of the fantasy genre as well. Thus, *A Song of Ice and Fire* is an elaborate and unprecedented combination of contradictory elements. The originality of the writer’s method, as well as the traditions, borrowed from Tolkien’s heritage, undoubtedly contribute to the appeal of his secondary world.

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