

GENRE

1. Introduction

Whenever we pick up a book, one of the first questions we unconsciously ask is:

Is it a poem? Is it a novel? Is it a play? Is it a biography? Is it a detective story?

These questions concern genre. Genre is one of the oldest and most fundamental concepts in literary criticism. It helps us classify literary works according to shared features, conventions, form, subject matter, style, and purpose. Without genre, readers would have no expectations about how a literary work should be read or interpreted.

2. Etymology

The word genre comes from the French word *genre*, meaning kind, type, or class. The French word derives from the Latin *genus*, meaning race, family, category, kind. Thus, genre literally means a class or category of literature.

3. Definition

A genre is a category or class of literary works characterized by common conventions of form, style, subject matter, structure, and purpose. Works belonging to the same genre share recognizable characteristics, although individual authors often modify or challenge these conventions.

4. Why Genre is Important

Genre helps both writers and readers. For the writer, it provides a set of conventions on which to build. For the reader, it creates expectations.

For example, If we begin reading a detective novel, we expect a crime, clues, investigation, suspense, and solution. If we begin reading a tragedy, we expect conflict, suffering, and catastrophe.

5. Historical Development of Genre

A. Classical Greece

The earliest systematic study of genre appears in Aristotle's ***Poetics***. Aristotle classified literature mainly according to medium, object of imitation, mode of imitation. He primarily discussed Epic, Tragedy, and Comedy. Although comedy is

largely lost in the surviving Poetics, Aristotle recognized it as an important literary form.

B. Roman Criticism

Roman critics such as Horace emphasized that each genre should follow its proper rules. Epic should remain grand, Comedy should remain humorous, and Tragedy should remain serious. Mixing genres was generally discouraged.

C. Renaissance

European writers revived classical genres. They believed every genre possessed fixed rules. For example, an epic should include invocation of the Muse, heroic subject, elevated style, supernatural intervention, etc.

D. Neoclassical Period

Genre became highly regulated. Critics believed good literature follows established conventions. Breaking genre rules was often considered artistic failure.

E. Romantic Age

Romantic writers challenged rigid genre divisions. They believed imagination matters more than rules. Poets increasingly experimented with lyric, dramatic poetry, and mixed forms.

F. Modern Period

Twentieth-century writers blurred genre boundaries. Today, a novel may include poetry, drama, letters, diary entries, journalism, mythology, etc. Modern criticism therefore views genre as flexible rather than fixed.

6. Characteristics of Genre

Genres possess:

A. Shared Structure

Examples

i. Tragedy

→ rise and fall

ii. Comedy

→ conflict followed by reconciliation

iii. Novel

→ extended narrative

iv. Lyric

→ concentrated emotional expression

B. Shared Themes

i. Epic: heroism, nation, war, destiny

ii. Comedy: love, marriage, misunderstanding, social harmony

C. Shared Style

i. Epic: formal, elevated, grand

ii. Comedy: conversational, light, witty

iii. Lyric: musical, compressed, personal

7. Major Literary Genres

Abrams differentiates the traditional literary divisions into three major genres.

A. Poetry

Poetry emphasizes rhythm, imagery, concentrated language, and sound.

Major poetic genres include: Epic, Lyric, Ballad, Elegy, Ode, Sonnet, Pastoral, and Satire.

B. Drama

Drama is written primarily for performance.

Major dramatic genres include: Tragedy, Comedy, Tragicomedy, Melodrama, Farce, and Masque.

C. Prose Fiction

Prose fiction presents imagined narratives.

Major genres include: Novel, Romance, Novella, Short Story, Gothic Fiction, Picaresque Novel, Bildungsroman, Historical Novel, Detective Fiction, and Science Fiction.

8. Subgenres

A subgenre is a smaller category within a larger genre.

Example:

A. Novel => Historical Novel, War Novel, Spy Novel, Campus Novel, Detective Novel, Psychological Novel, Epistolary Novel

Each has its own conventions.

9. Major Examples of Genres

Epic:

Homer's *Iliad*

Milton's *Paradise Lost*

Tragedy:

Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*

Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

Comedy:

Shakespeare's *As You Like It*

Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*

Novel:

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*

Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*

Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*