

DEFINING FANTASY LITERATURE: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF STRUCTURAL, ONTOLOGICAL, AND POSSIBLE WORLDS APPROACHES

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Abstract: The definition of fantasy literature remains a contested issue within literary studies, as competing theoretical perspectives emphasize different aspects of the genre. This article examines three major frameworks for defining fantasy: the structural, ontological, and modal (possible worlds) approaches. Through a comparative theoretical analysis, the study evaluates the strengths and limitations of each approach in order to determine their explanatory power and applicability to diverse literary texts. The structural approach, associated with narrative patterns and reader hesitation, offers a clear but often rigid framework that struggles to accommodate hybrid forms. The ontological approach shifts the focus to the nature of reality within the text, highlighting the role of internally coherent secondary worlds, yet it tends to rely on binary distinctions between the real and the supernatural. The modal or possible worlds approach provides a more flexible model by conceptualizing fantasy as the construction of alternative worlds governed by their own internal logic; however, its abstract nature can complicate practical application. By tracing the development from structural to ontological and ultimately to modal frameworks, this article argues that each successive approach addresses key limitations of its predecessors while introducing new challenges. The study concludes that the possible worlds approach offers the most comprehensive foundation for defining fantasy literature, while also suggesting the need for an integrated model that combines structural, ontological, and modal perspectives.

Keywords: fantasy literature; structural approach; ontological approach; possible worlds theory; literary theory; genre definition

Introduction

Fantasy literature has emerged as one of the most theoretically significant fields within contemporary literary studies due to its distinctive capacity for fictional world-construction, reader immersion, and ontological experimentation. Far from functioning merely as escapist narrative, fantasy increasingly occupies a central position in discussions of narratology, cognitive poetics, genre theory, and possible worlds theory. The growing scholarly interest in fictional worlds and reader cognition has consequently intensified debates concerning the nature and definition of fantasy as both a literary genre and a narrative mode. Despite the expanding body of scholarship devoted to fantasy studies, the genre continues to resist a single, universally accepted definition, largely because different theoretical approaches emphasize different aspects of textual representation, narrative structure, and fictional ontology.

One of the earliest systematic attempts to define fantasy can be found in the structural approach most prominently associated with Tzvetan Todorov. In *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, Todorov conceptualizes fantasy as a moment of hesitation experienced by both reader and character when confronted with apparently supernatural events. Within this framework, fantasy exists in the unstable space between natural and supernatural explanations, thereby situating the genre within a highly specific narrative structure and readerly response. Although this model offers methodological clarity and systematic genre classification, its

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strict reliance on epistemological uncertainty significantly limits its applicability to many canonical works of fantasy in which supernatural elements are fully normalized within coherent fictional worlds.

In response to the limitations of structural definitions, ontological approaches relocate fantasy from epistemological hesitation toward the construction of internally coherent secondary worlds. This perspective is most closely associated with J. R. R. Tolkien, whose essay *On Fairy-Stories* reconceptualizes fantasy through the idea of “sub-creation.” Rather than defining fantasy through ambiguity or uncertainty, Tolkien emphasizes the creation of immersive secondary worlds governed by their own internal logic and consistency. Such an approach significantly broadens the scope of fantasy studies by legitimizing narratives in which the supernatural is not questioned but accepted as part of the ontological structure of the fictional world itself. Nevertheless, while ontological models successfully account for world-building and immersive narrative environments, they often remain philosophically descriptive and provide insufficient methodological criteria for distinguishing fantasy from other forms of imaginative literature.

More recent developments in literary theory have introduced modal and possible worlds approaches, which reconceptualize fantasy not merely as a genre characterized by supernatural content, but as a system of fictional world-construction shaped through reader cognition and interpretive engagement. Drawing on the work of scholars such as Marie-Laure Ryan and Lubomír Doležal, possible worlds theory views literary texts as the construction of alternative ontological systems that may diverge from actual reality in varying degrees. Within this framework, fantasy becomes less dependent on rigid generic boundaries and increasingly associated with the cognitive processes through which readers construct, interpret, and navigate fictional worlds. This approach therefore offers a more flexible model for understanding hybrid narratives, immersive world-building, and interpretive plurality. At the same time, however, the increasing flexibility of possible worlds theory raises important questions concerning genre boundaries and definitional precision.

Despite the contributions of structural, ontological, and modal approaches, no single framework has fully succeeded in providing a comprehensive definition of fantasy literature capable of accounting simultaneously for narrative structure, fictional ontology, and readerly world-construction. As contemporary fantasy narratives increasingly blur generic boundaries and foreground immersive fictional environments, earlier models based solely on structural ambiguity or supernatural content appear insufficient for analyzing modern forms of fantasy fiction. Consequently, a comparative reassessment of these approaches remains necessary in order to understand both the evolution of fantasy theory and the broader theoretical transformations within literary studies. The central research question guiding this study is how structural, ontological, and possible worlds approaches differ in defining fantasy literature and to what extent each framework addresses the limitations of its predecessors. This article argues that the evolution of fantasy theory from structural and ontological models toward possible worlds approaches reflects a broader shift in literary studies from rigid genre classification toward cognitively oriented models of fictional world-construction. While structural and ontological approaches establish important foundations for understanding fantasy, possible worlds theory provides a more flexible framework by emphasizing reader cognition, fictional world-building, and interpretive plurality. From this perspective, fantasy literature may be understood not merely as a genre of the supernatural, but as

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a cognitive-literary space formed through the interaction between textual structures and readerly mental construction.

Literature Review

1. Structural Definition of Fantasy

The structural approach represents one of the earliest systematic attempts to define fantasy literature within modern literary theory. This perspective is most prominently associated with Tzvetan Todorov, whose influential work *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* conceptualizes the fantastic as a moment of hesitation experienced by both reader and character when confronted with apparently supernatural events. According to Todorov, fantasy exists within a temporary state of uncertainty situated between rational and supernatural explanations. Once this hesitation is resolved, the narrative transitions either into the uncanny, where events receive a rational explanation, or into the marvelous, where supernatural phenomena are accepted as genuine within the fictional world.

Todorov's model provides an important methodological foundation for fantasy studies because it establishes relatively precise criteria for genre classification. By emphasizing narrative structure and readerly response, the structural approach introduces a systematic framework through which fantasy may be distinguished from neighboring literary forms. In this sense, the fantastic emerges not merely through the presence of supernatural elements, but through the unstable interpretive position created between competing epistemological possibilities. The significance of Todorov's theory therefore lies in its attempt to define fantasy through narrative function rather than thematic content alone.

However, despite its analytical precision, the structural model remains highly restrictive in its application to fantasy literature. Since Todorov's framework depends upon sustained hesitation between natural and supernatural explanations, it struggles to account for many canonical fantasy texts in which supernatural elements are fully normalized within coherent fictional worlds. In works such as *The Lord of the Rings*, the existence of magic, nonhuman races, and alternative cosmologies is never presented as ambiguous either to characters or to readers. Consequently, although such works occupy a central position within modern fantasy literature, they remain theoretically incompatible with strict structural definitions of the fantastic.

The limitations of structural approaches become even more evident when fantasy is reduced solely to the presence of supernatural phenomena. Under such conditions, the category risks becoming excessively broad, encompassing ghost stories, fairy tales, Gothic fiction, and other forms of supernatural narrative that differ significantly from immersive secondary-world fantasy. As a result, the structural model faces a dual theoretical problem: it is simultaneously too narrow to include many foundational fantasy texts and too broad to provide stable generic boundaries when supernatural content alone becomes the defining criterion.

Further developments within structural fantasy theory can be observed in the work of scholars such as Eric S. Rabkin and Colin Manlove. Rabkin emphasizes the importance of structural reversals and narrative disruption in producing the fantastic effect, while Manlove foregrounds the role of the supernatural within fantasy narratives. Although these scholars expand Todorov's framework in important ways, they largely remain within structurally oriented paradigms that prioritize formal textual mechanisms over fictional ontology or reader cognition.

Ultimately, the structural approach establishes an essential foundation for fantasy theory by introducing methodological rigor and systematic genre analysis. Nevertheless, its dependence on epistemological hesitation and formal narrative criteria limits its capacity to explain immersive secondary-world fantasy and cognitively complex forms of contemporary speculative fiction. These limitations consequently motivate the emergence of ontological approaches, which shift attention away from structural ambiguity toward the construction of internally coherent fictional worlds.

2. Ontological Definition of Fantasy

In contrast to structural models, the ontological approach shifts the focus from narrative form to the nature of reality within the text. This perspective is most prominently associated with J. R. R. Tolkien (*Tolkien, 1939/2008*), whose essay *On Fairy-Stories* provides a foundational rethinking of fantasy literature. Tolkien rejects narrow definitions based on fairies or supernatural elements alone, arguing instead that fantasy should be understood through its engagement with “Fairy,” a realm encompassing not only magical beings but an entire secondary world with its own internal coherence.

As Tolkien explains, a fairy-story is not merely a story about fairies, but one that “touches on or uses Faerie,” understood as a complex and self-contained realm of meaning. This definition significantly expands the scope of fantasy, allowing for a broader range of narratives that construct alternative realities. Central to Tolkien’s theory is the concept of “sub-creation,” whereby the author builds a secondary world that operates according to its own internal logic, inviting the reader into a state of “secondary belief.”

Further development of the ontological approach can be found in the work of Northrop Frye (*Frye, 1957*) and Rosemary Jackson (*Jackson, 1981*). Frye situates fantasy within a broader system of literary modes, emphasizing its mythic and symbolic dimensions, while Jackson interprets fantasy as a literature of subversion that challenges dominant cultural norms. Despite these contributions, the ontological approach has been criticized for its reliance on relatively stable distinctions between reality and the supernatural, which may not adequately reflect the fluidity of contemporary narrative forms.

3. Modal / Possible Worlds Definition of Fantasy

More recent theoretical developments have led to the emergence of the modal or possible worlds approach, which reconceptualizes fantasy in terms of fictional world construction and semantic plurality. Scholars such as Marie-Laure Ryan (*Ryan, 1991*) and Lubomír Doležel (*Doležel, 1998*) argue that literary texts generate “possible worlds” that may differ from the actual world in systematic ways. Within this framework, fantasy is understood not as a deviation from reality but as the creation of alternative ontological systems governed by their own rules.

This approach offers a more flexible and inclusive model, capable of accommodating a wide variety of texts, including those that blend genres or operate across multiple ontological levels. Farah Mendlesohn (*Mendlesohn, 2008*) further refines this perspective by proposing a taxonomy of fantasy based on the relationship between the fictional world and the reader’s perception, distinguishing between immersive, portal, intrusive, and liminal fantasy.

Despite its strengths, the possible worlds approach also presents challenges. Its abstract and highly theoretical nature can make it difficult to apply in concrete textual analysis, and it may risk overgeneralization by including too broad a range of narratives under the category of fantasy.

Taken together, these three approaches—structural, ontological, and modal—represent successive attempts to define fantasy literature with increasing scope and flexibility. Each framework addresses specific limitations of its predecessors while introducing new conceptual challenges. This progression suggests not a replacement of earlier models, but an ongoing theoretical evolution that calls for critical comparison and synthesis.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and theoretical research design aimed at examining and comparing three major approaches to defining fantasy literature: the structural, ontological, and modal (possible worlds) frameworks. Rather than relying on empirical data or quantitative analysis, the research is grounded in conceptual and comparative literary analysis.

The primary method employed is **comparative theoretical analysis**, which involves the systematic examination of key scholarly texts associated with each approach. Foundational works by Tzvetan Todorov (*Todorov, 1973*), J. R. R. Tolkien (*Tolkien, 1939*), and Marie-Laure Ryan (*Ryan, 1991*) serve as the core theoretical sources, supplemented by contributions from other scholars within each framework. These texts are analyzed in order to identify their defining concepts, underlying assumptions, and criteria for categorizing fantasy literature.

The analysis is conducted through a **close reading** of theoretical arguments, focusing on how each approach conceptualizes the nature of fantasy, the role of the supernatural, and the relationship between narrative structure and fictional worlds. Particular attention is given to points of convergence and divergence among the approaches, as well as to their respective strengths and limitations.

In addition, the study employs a **comparative evaluation framework**, in which each approach is assessed according to several criteria: conceptual clarity, flexibility, applicability to diverse texts, and explanatory power. This allows for a systematic comparison that highlights both the evolution of theoretical perspectives and the extent to which later approaches address the shortcomings of earlier ones.

The research is limited to theoretical discourse and does not include extensive textual analysis of specific literary works. Instead, it focuses on the development of definitions within literary theory, aiming to provide a clearer understanding of how fantasy has been conceptualized across different scholarly traditions.

Comparative Analysis of Fantasy Definitions

The limitations of the structural approach become particularly evident when applied to canonical works of fantasy literature. Since Todorov's model (*Todorov, 1973*) relies on the presence of hesitation between natural and supernatural explanations, it excludes texts in which the supernatural is fully accepted. For instance, *The Lord of the Rings* does not produce such hesitation, as its secondary world operates according to internally consistent supernatural laws that are never questioned by either the characters or the reader. Consequently, despite being widely regarded as a central work of fantasy, it cannot be adequately classified within Todorov's framework.

At the same time, if the mere presence of supernatural elements is taken as the defining feature of fantasy, the category becomes excessively broad. Under this criterion, narratives such as ghost stories or traditional fairy tales—many of which are structured around isolated supernatural events—would also fall under the label of fantasy. This creates conceptual ambiguity, as these

forms often differ significantly from high fantasy literature in terms of world-building, narrative scope, and thematic complexity. Therefore, the structural approach faces a dual limitation: it is too restrictive to include foundational fantasy works, yet too expansive when reduced to the presence of the supernatural, thereby weakening its effectiveness as a comprehensive definition.

The ontological approach to fantasy is primarily grounded in the concepts of sub-creation and secondary worlds, most notably developed by J. R. R. Tolkien (1939/2008). In this framework, fantasy is defined not by hesitation or ambiguity, but by the construction of a self-contained world that operates according to its own internal logic and rules. This shift allows the ontological approach to overcome one of the key limitations of the structural model, namely its inability to account for works of high fantasy. Texts such as *The Lord of the Rings*, where Middle-earth functions as a fully realized secondary world with its own history, languages, and cosmology, demonstrate how the supernatural can be normalized within a coherent system. Similarly, *The Chronicles of Narnia* presents a distinct secondary world governed by consistent magical and moral laws, further illustrating the centrality of world-building in defining fantasy.

However, despite this significant improvement, the ontological approach introduces new challenges. In contrast to the structural model, which offers a relatively clear and systematic methodology for defining the genre, Tolkien's theory remains largely philosophical and descriptive. It provides a rich conceptual understanding of fantasy but lacks precise criteria for distinguishing the genre from other forms of imaginative literature. For example, works such as *Pan's Labyrinth* or *Coraline* also construct alternative realities, yet differ significantly in tone, structure, and genre classification, raising questions about the boundaries of the ontological definition.

Further complications arise in the work of Northrop Frye (Frye, 1957), who connects fantasy to broader mythic and romantic traditions. While this perspective deepens the historical and symbolic dimensions of fantasy, it risks reducing the genre to a continuation of myth and romance rather than recognizing it as a distinct literary category. As a result, the specific importance of world-building—central to Tolkien's vision—may be diminished.

Similarly, Rosemary Jackson (Jackson, 1981) interprets fantasy as a mode of expressing the underlying ideologies and tensions of society. Although this approach provides valuable insight into the cultural and political functions of fantasy, it shifts the focus away from the internal structure of the fictional world. Consequently, the significance of world-building as a defining feature of fantasy becomes less central within this interpretation.

The modal or possible worlds approach represents a further shift in the understanding of fantasy, emphasizing the role of cognition and reader response. Rather than focusing solely on the structure of the text or the ontological status of the fictional world, this approach considers how readers actively construct possible worlds in their minds during the process of reading. Marie-Laure Ryan (Ryan, 1991), for instance, highlights that the significance of fantasy lies not only in the world created by the author, but also in the mental world reconstructed by the reader.

This process can be illustrated through works such as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, where the logic of the fictional world is not fixed but constantly reinterpreted by the reader. The narrative invites multiple possible understandings, demonstrating how meaning emerges through cognitive engagement rather than purely textual structure. Similarly, in the *Harry Potter* series, readers construct a detailed mental model of the wizarding world by integrating textual information with their own prior knowledge and imaginative frameworks.

This perspective is further supported by Peter Stockwell (*Stockwell, 2002*), whose work in cognitive poetics suggests that readers interpret texts by relying on pre-existing mental schemas. In this sense, fantasy emerges through the interaction between textual cues and the reader's cognitive structures, making the experience of the genre both dynamic and subjective.

Additionally, Brian Attebery (*Attebery, 1992*) challenges the notion of fantasy as a rigidly defined genre, proposing instead that it should be understood as a "fuzzy set" of texts connected by shared patterns, motifs, and conventions rather than strict boundaries. This can be observed in texts that blend genres, where readers may interpret the same work as fantasy, science fiction, or magical realism depending on their perspective.

However, this increased flexibility also introduces significant challenges. By emphasizing reader cognition and fluid boundaries, the modal approach risks dissolving the distinctions between fantasy and other genres. If fantasy is defined primarily through subjective interpretation or loosely connected motifs, it may lose the clear criteria necessary for distinguishing it from adjacent genres such as science fiction or magical realism. As a result, while the possible worlds approach offers a highly adaptable framework, it does so at the cost of definition precision.

The comparative analysis of structural, ontological, and modal approaches to fantasy literature reveals a clear theoretical progression from rigid formalism to increasing conceptual flexibility. The structural model, most notably associated with Tzvetan Todorov, provides a precise and methodologically consistent framework, yet its reliance on hesitation significantly restricts its applicability, excluding many canonical works of high fantasy. The ontological approach, developed by J. R. R. Tolkien and further expanded by scholars such as Northrop Frye and Rosemary Jackson, addresses this limitation by emphasizing sub-creation and coherent secondary worlds. However, while this model broadens the scope of fantasy, it remains largely philosophical and lacks clear methodological boundaries, leading to potential ambiguity in genre classification. The modal or possible worlds approach, represented by Marie-Laure Ryan and Brian Attebery, introduces a highly flexible and cognitively oriented framework that accounts for reader interpretation and hybrid genres. Yet, this flexibility comes at the cost of definition precision, as the boundaries of fantasy risk becoming indistinct.

Taken together, these approaches should not be understood as mutually exclusive, but rather as complementary perspectives that illuminate different dimensions of fantasy literature. The structural approach contributes analytical clarity, the ontological approach highlights the centrality of world-building, and the modal approach captures the dynamic interaction between text and reader. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of fantasy may require an integrative framework that combines the methodological rigor of structural analysis, the ontological depth of secondary world construction, and the interpretive flexibility of possible worlds theory. Such a synthesis allows for a more balanced and nuanced definition of fantasy, capable of accommodating both its formal characteristics and its evolving literary practices.

Conclusion

This article contributes to ongoing debates in fantasy theory by offering a systematic comparative analysis of three major definitional frameworks and proposing an integrative perspective that reconciles their limitations. The structural model provides clarity but remains too restrictive to account for many canonical works. The ontological approach expands the scope of fantasy through the concept of secondary worlds, yet lacks precise methodological boundaries. The modal approach introduces a more dynamic and reader-centered perspective, though it risks dissolving the distinctions between genres.

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Taken together, these findings suggest that no single approach is sufficient on its own. Rather than replacing one another, these models should be understood as complementary frameworks that address different dimensions of fantasy literature. A more effective definition of fantasy may therefore emerge from combining the structural emphasis on narrative form, the ontological focus on world-building, and the modal recognition of reader cognition. Such an integrative perspective not only resolves the limitations of individual approaches but also reflects the complexity and evolving nature of fantasy as a literary genre.

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