GENRES GENERAL

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Genres in Fiction

WHY DO GENRES EXIST?

stories are categorised into genres by everyone from authors to critics to readers
- It's a way to bring order to the different types of stories that exist
  - A suspense-thriller must be suspenseful and thrilling,
  - a horror story must be frightening,
  - a comedy must be funny,
  - while a drama may not need to create any of these reactions

STORIES AIM TO EVOKE AN EMOTIONAL RESPONSE

All stories aim to evoke an emotional response in the reader:
- and all the structural and linguistic elements are designed to evoke an emotional response
  - "make 'em laugh,
  - make 'em cry."
    - And at their core, genres spring from the same source as all storytelling: desire—
      - the desire to experience love,
      - to overcome fear (even the terror of death),
      - to understand the meaning of it all (whatever "it" may be)
      - or simply to escape the ordinariness of real life
      - and experience places and thrills that only the imagination can provide.
        - It's not an intellectual longing, or stories would be made from philosophical treatises.
          - It's a deep, gut-based desire for
            - a heightened sense of order,
            - of connection,
            - of adventure,
            - of love
            - or hate
            - or hilarity
            - or passion—
            - of power over the mysteries of life.

GENRE = CLASSIFICATION OF KEY EMOTION

Stories allow us to enter other worlds and vicariously experience the struggles and eventual successes or failures of the characters.
- We can come away unharmed, yet still filled with the emotional power of the experience.
  - This is what Aristotle meant by "catharsis":

- we are emotionally purified by
  - sorrow,
  - by laughter,
  - by sheer adrenaline—
    - by having accompanied the fictional protagonists through their varied crucibles of intense experience and emotion.
      - These emotions are also the primary effects that the author is trying to achieve over the reader/audience
        - And, remember, that the key emotion, above all, is empathy,
          - the emotion that makes us feel as though we are connected to the protagonist and experiencing the same things they do
            - Genre is simply the classification of these variations in experience and emotion.

THE KEY EMOTION DEFINES THE GENRE

Sometimes authors may employ the strategies of different genres.
- A gothic story may incorporate action, horror and comedy genres in almost equal measure.
  - After empathy, many different emotions may be aroused over the course of a given story
    - One of these emotions (apart from empathy) will be primary to each particular genre
      - the one most intimately related to the theme and purpose of the story,
        - to the catharsis at the end.
          - This specific emotion guides and defines the story's genre.
            - For example:
              - Gothic = fear
              - Adventure = bravery
              - Comedy = humour

COURAGE GENRES

Action-Adventure, War, Western, Historical epic, Heroic Science Fiction, Dystopian
- One of the strongest human desires is to be brave, to have what it takes to save
    - ourselves
    - and our loved ones,
    - even our nation,
    - without sacrificing our dignity or morality.
        - We want to have courage in the face of pain, but particularly in the face of death.
            - The fear of death— that final, inevitable and most impenetrable mystery of all—
                - drives the belief in God,
                - the impulse to create art
                - and even the act of war;
                    - for by creating something that will outlast us, or by killing a deadly opponent, in effect we have killed death itself, achieved a glorious immortality, at least in reputation.
                        - Of course, most of us aren't brave.
                            - We are terrified of
                                - pain
                                - and the oblivion that may await us all,
                                - of the fundamental uncertainty with which death confronts us, and we will do almost anything we can, from working out until our muscles scream, to plastic surgery or even going to Switzerland for sheep-hormone injections, to put off the final day of reckoning.

ACTION-ADVENTURE

Action-adventure stories are perhaps the most successful genre worldwide because they specifically address courage in the face of death.
- The Mel Gibson epic *Braveheart* (written by Randall Wallace) makes this explicit in the title (BRAVE-HEART).
    - In such stories, the antagonist represents death,
        - an enormously powerful and lethal presence against which success seems hopeless.
    - The protagonist represents ourselves—
        - an enhanced version, to be sure,
            - smarter,
            - stronger,
            - better equipped—
                - but basically someone through whose struggles we manage not only to fight the grim antagonist,
                    - but to win a new shot at life.

- The emotional stakes are profound:
  - death has been beaten back and the life force reaffirmed.

COMMON ELEMENTS IN COURAGE GENRES

Enslavement or deprivation of free will
- represents death, a spiritual death

an intensified setting
- Many action adventures take the hero on a journey to a strange and terrifying new location to confront the antagonist
  - The antagonist often represents death
- In the classic myths and fairytales, the hero had to leave the bounds of the normal world in order to confront the demonic adversary and bring back the "elixir" or life force, which it guards
  - Similarly, in action-adventures, especially those with a science fiction element, the lair of the antagonist is often otherworldly
- if the antagonist has brought the battle into the protagonist's "normal" world, the ordinary location must be reimagined to become a place of otherworldly terror.
  - For example, the normal world can be disrupted and threatened with destruction from some ultra-powerful force

The protagonist with whom we identify (empathise with)
- He/she belongs to the normal state of whatever world is created,
  - to its community.
- In order for the protagonist to represent us, he must in most cases share our own fears,
  - so we can empathize with his situation.
- He must be an underdog, because that's someone with whom we can identify.
  - Therefore, the protagonist is usually given a "ghost,"
    - a personal shortcoming or fear that provides an internal obstacle;
      - like the fear of being rejected
      - the fear of failure
      - an inability to understand people they love
      - etc
- the protagonist lacks self-confidence on some level.
  - This is the first level of his conflict.
    - But he also has skills or potential that make him the uniquely suited character to challenge the death force.
      - There is often a prologue scene or short sequence at the beginning that reveals the capabilities of the protagonist,
        - and that later is usually related to the climactic confrontation, bringing the story full circle.
          - And when the protagonist finally masters the skills necessary to defeat the antagonist, when he realizes his potential and manages to over- come his fear, the awesome power of the enemy is diminished.

Victory over Death

- Eventually, the tide turns for the protagonist.
    - Somehow the kidnapped child or loved one escapes,
    - the mentor manages to encourage him from beyond the door of death,
    - or an ally frees the threatened innocent people and the protagonist is freed to dispatch the antagonist.
        - Usually wounded during the time of his distraction, the protagonist must now call on the moral strengths instilled by the mentor and his own internal morality, until he is able to rise above his injuries.

FEAR AND LOATHING

Gothic, Horror, the Supernatural, dystopian and dark Science Fiction
- stories devoted to fear are almost equally as popular as those devoted to courage;
  - there are obvious and famous examples like *Frankenstein*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, or the endless variations on the zombie and vampire subgenres,
    - but the fear category also includes such all-time blockbuster stories as *Jaws*, *Alien*, *Jurassic Park* and even The *Dark Knight*.
      - Here, fear is primary and death is much more personal, malicious and often serves no larger aim than simply to demonstrate its power over us.
        - In a fear story, we are overwhelmed by the face-to-face confrontation with our deepest and most irrational insecurities,
          - The protagonist is often a flawed hero plagued by internal fears and doubts.
            - For example, in *The Dark Knight*, the character Bruce Wayne adopts is not like those of *Captain America*, *Superman*, the Green Lantern or even Iron Man, as emblems of the invincibility of good- ness and human capability. In the telling of his origin in Detective Comics #33, he realizes that in order to revenge his parents' death and fight the terror that afflicts Gotham, he himself must "strike terror into their hearts. I must be a creature of the night, black, terrible...a...a bat!" In effect, he has decided to appear like a vampire.
              - his own internal darkness becomes most horribly and threateningly externalized in the personification of chaos that is the Joker, the antagonist;
                - the Joker is actually rather similar to the shark in *Jaws*—he represents our darkest fear that the world is savage and irrational, and that we live in a bubble, an illusion of control and moral compass

COMMON ELEMENTS IN FEAR GENRES

Remember that the fear genres often reflect and explore our deepest fears, especially those of a particular society
- typical fear genre elements include the following
  - Mystery
  - revenge
  - medieval magic
  - the grotesque
  - deformity
  - illusion
  - terror

- monsters
  - monsters are personifications and embodiments of our fears
- perversity
- dissipation
- degeneration
- good and evil
- decay
- neglect

decay

- One of the major goals of the gothic genre is to tap into the subconscious fears of a particular society
  - the gothic genre evolved from Jacobean tragedies such as Macbeth and became extremely popular in the Victorian period as a way of reflecting Victorian fears about their society...
    - one of their major fears was that their society which they believed to be the best in the world would one day break down and decay
      - so what you often get in gothic texts is descriptions of decay and neglect –
        - however, this fear is not just relevant for Victorian society, it is relevant for all societies
          - decay can be portrayed in any number of ways:
            - physical decay of the human body
            - decay of buildings
              - for example, crumbling cathedrals
            - decay of institutions
              - educational institutions
              - government institutions
              - medical institutions, etc
                - authors often illustrate to the reader how institutions which once were so powerful, begin to crumble
            - decay of the mind
            - decay of morality

dreams and nightmares

- Mary Shelley claimed that *Frankenstein* actually was inspired by a nightmare she had after discussing the experiments of Erasmus Darwin to animate lifeless matter.
- Horace Walpole claimed that he wrote the very first Gothic novel, The Castle of Otranto, after having a nightmare in June 1764 of a giant armoured hand reaching out of a castle hallway
  - and since that one night of unquiet sleep in the mid-eighteenth century the form has gone on to articulate the
    - nightmares
    - hallucinations
    - phobias
    - anxieties
    - and drug-induced deliriums of generations of subsequent writers.
      - Dreams and nightmares tap into the uncertainties that lurk in the mind when the body stretches out for rest and surrenders thoughts to the fantasies of sleep
        - They probe our subconcious and illuminate universal realities—
          - the curiosities
          - impulses
          - and urges that drive the conscious mind to strange actions

mental landscape: the landscape is not just a background
- it represents the inner, mental, emotional landscape of the writer and / or the characters
  - o This is also known as a mental landscape.
    - ▪ A mental landscape is a landscape that reflects the thoughts and feelings of the characters, who view it or journey through it.
      - Often the language about landscape can also be used of the mind.
        - o This idea of an intimate connection between the landscape and the "soul", the mental landscape, is common throughout many literary genres but has its origins in Gothic fiction.
          - ▪ For example, the haunted castle with all its horrors can be viewed as a projection of the corrupt and malevolent psyche of its master.
            - The castle becomes a character in its own right.
              - o The skeletons hidden in chests and closets symbolize repressed desires
              - o ghosts represent unconscious fears
              - o and monsters are manifestations of the uncanny in the Freudian sense.
                - ▪ In mental landscape, the reader is implicitly invited to see that the landscape is an expression of the mind of the character that moves through it.

monsters
- Monsters are physical embodiments of our internal fears
  - o For example, the monster in Frankenstein represents the monstrous potential of science that the Victorians feared
  - o The shark in Jaws represents our irrational fears of sharks and, perhaps, the unknown

Fearful atmosphere
- Fear genres thrive on a particular type of atmosphere
  - a murky, terror-ridden atmosphere,
  - ominous tone and mood,
  - and vague geographical settings among Gothic structures and ruins,
    - o particularly caves,
    - o abbeys,
    - o towers,
    - o castles,
    - o crypts,
    - o and oratories.
      - ▪ Implying duplicity and danger to innocent or naïve characters were also formulaic elements,
        - Other formulaic elements are
          - o sliding panels,
          - o underground passageways,
          - o shuttered windows,
          - o and trapdoors.

NEED TO KNOW (MYSTERY) GENRES

Detective Story, Suspense Thriller, Political Thriller
- Fascination with the idea that just below or beyond normal appearances, a hidden truth is "out there"
  - o This is the basis for detective stories, and thriller genres.
    - ▪ The protagonist may be a cop, a private detective or just an ordinary person put into a situation where nothing is as it seems.
      - These stories draw power from our own sense of powerlessness in a world in which events often happen mysteriously
        - o and almost always beyond our control;
          - ▪ we suspect there is more to any given situation than we are actually aware of.
            - It could be
              - o a criminal,
              - o supernatural
              - o or political conspiracy story.
                - ▪ The antagonist is equally mysterious. All we have at the start is some faded and often confusing evidence, like the washed-out tracks of an animal in the woods

COMMON ELEMENTS IN NEED TO KNOW (MYSTERY) GENRES

Suspense vs. Surprise
- the primary tools that create curiosity and fascination are suspense and surprise.
  - o Suspense comes from withholding information from the protagonist,
    - ▪ though not necessarily from the audience.
      - If we know no more than the protagonist does, then suspense comes from empathizing with his or her vulnerability as we watch events unfold.
      - If we do know more than the character, then suspense comes from being helpless to assist or warn the protagonist of imminent danger, from the tension of waiting for an attack to take place.
        - o For example, we see a figure with a knife hiding around the corner as our protagonist approaches, unaware.
          - ▪ When authors want to create suspense, they limit what their protagonist knows, but may want to provide some clues to the reader.
  - o Surprise, on the other hand, always applies to both the character and the audience.
    - ▪ For example, the protagonist is walking down a hallway when someone unexpectedly bursts out with a knife.
      - He— and we—react with adrenalised shock.
        - o Surprise is also a key element of a "reversal"—
          - ▪ when someone we think is an ally proves actually to be an enemy,

- or vice versa,
  - or when the innocent character seems to have escaped a pursuer but has actually run into a blind alley.
    - A classic fear technique (which also applies to a need-to-know movie) incorporates both—
      - we know there's a killer in the basement, but the character doesn't and goes down into danger unwittingly.
      - Or he or she may suspect danger, but goes down anyway to investigate.
        - Usually we see this from his or her P.O.V., which keeps our vision claustrophobically limited, blind to what is beside or behind us. We might also intercut this with the similarly claustrophobic point of view of the killer, who is focused intently on his prey. When the killer springs into the character's P.O.V., the suspense is ended by the surprise. Sometimes—and this effect has been overused to the point of cliché—the surprise is manipulated into a two-part sequence. The suspense of the approach to the basement and the first surprise frightens us, but is harmless: it's only a cat or a pigeon that has burst out at us. The resulting relief lulls us (and the character) into a false sense of security, and then the second surprise is sprung as the killer leaps out.

The "Innocent Man"
- Rather than having a detective whose life is devoted to solving crimes, in these stories, an innocent man (or woman) is
  - suddenly thrust into danger,
  - caught up in some mysterious conspiracy,
  - and in order to survive, must figure out what has disrupted the bland, ordinary course of his or her life, and why.
    - These stories share many elements with the fear movie genres:
      - some dark power is at work in the world and has either specifically targeted the protagonist for destruction,
      - or the protagonist has inadvertently stumbled across its path and plan.
        - Authors ensure that something about the protagonist justifies making him or her the lead character in their story,
          - something beyond simply being "innocent."
            - Something in the protagonist's life and character must make him or her vulnerable to becoming involved.
              - For example, in Three Days of the Condor, the protagonist is a low-level information gatherer for the CIA; his work is pedestrian, but his proximity to the sinister power of the organization puts him in jeopardy.