

Literary Genre Descriptions

Bildungsroman (Coming-of-Age, Apprenticeship, Formation) novels recount the development (psychological and sometimes spiritual) of an individual, to the point at which the protagonist recognizes his place and role in the world. The main character undergoes adventures and/or inner turmoil in his growth and development as a human being. Some characters come to grips with the reality of cruelty in the world--with war, violence, death, racism, and hatred--while others deal with family, friends, or community issues.

****Comedy** is an amusing and entertaining drama. Comedy is often contrasted with tragedy, not only because it ends happily and presents the “lighter side” of life but also because it generally represents the experiences of ordinary people in common or vernacular language, whereas tragedy has traditionally depicted noble characters in a loftier literary style. Humor is the essential element of any comedy. Comic effect may be subtle or coarse; it is typically achieved through some incongruity, whether physical, verbal, or conceptual. Comedies may also be categorized as *low* or *high*. Low comedies typically rely on the crude or the obvious to evoke laughter; they include situation comedies, farces, and slapstick. High comedy is sometimes referred to as intellectual comedy or comedy of ideas. Although comedies aim to evoke laughter, they may also have a serious purpose.

****The piece must be in drama format to be considered a comedy.**

Dystopian (from the Greek for “bad place”) novels are usually set at some point in the author’s future and describe a society in which we would not want to live. The writer generally wants to alert readers to the potential pitfalls and dangers of society’s present course or of a course society might conceivably take one day. The dangers of modern times have led to the writing of dystopian novels which warn of an unhappy future. Many people think of dystopian novels as purely science fiction—while science fiction is a natural fit for a dystopian story, not all dystopian books are considered science fiction.

****Epic** is a long and formal narrative **poem** written in elevated style that recounts the adventures of a hero of almost mythic proportions, who often embodies the traits of a nation or people. The protagonist is a hero of great stature and significance (whether historical or mythic) with the traditional virtues of bravery and wisdom; the setting is on a grand and vast scale, often encompassing the known world at the time of the epic’s composition; the action requires noble, fantastic, and even superhuman actions; superhuman entities usually involve themselves in the action and in the affairs of the hero, who often must descend into some kind of underworld before he can claim victory. Epics also generally involve many of the following conventions: invoking a muse’s aid during the opening and posing the epic question; starting the narrative in *medias res*; introducing the roster characters in a formal manner and giving them particular speeches revealing their principal characteristics and attitudes; the use of epic similes.

**** The piece of literature must be written in verse to be considered an epic.**

Fantasy novels have roots in folk tales and fair tales. These novels contain at least one 'fantastic' element; something that it's not 'grownup' to believe is real. The setting may be our own Earth or some imaginary realm. Often the characters (humans, and/or elves and more) can do magical things, thanks to some innate 'talent' or arcane secrets. Those of good character usually win through, if only in the long run.

- **Science fantasy** is an interstitial novel, with the trappings of high technology, but also pervasive elements of traditional fantasy. These novels are not based in reality presupposing that magic and mythical/supernatural creatures exist. These stories describe worlds in which either both magic and science work, science is so sophisticated it simulates magic, or characters possess psychic powers so strong they resemble magic. Isaac Asimov, once asked to explain the difference between science fiction and science fantasy, replied that science fiction, given its grounding in science, is possible; science fantasy, which has no grounding in reality, is not.

- **Medieval fantasy** novels are set wholly or in part in a vaguely Arthurian or imaginary land populated by inhabitants subject to magic, as well as by magical figures, creatures, or beasts. These novels will feature knights and knaves, often together with sorcerers and dragons. Many fantasy novel settings include: ox carts, tavern wenches, and swords.

Gothic novels are characterized by a general mood of decay, action that is dramatic and generally violent or otherwise disturbing, loves that are destructively passionate, and settings that are grandiose, if gloomy or bleak. Many of these tales involve an evil from the past, as with haunted mansions; and/or encroaching personal insanity. Gothic writers seek to evoke an atmosphere of terror, often from an unidentifiable source. English and southern gothic tales are set in those locales, and traditionally have distinct styles. Gothic heroes and heroines tend to be equally mysterious, with dark histories and secrets of their own. The Gothic hero is typically a man known more for his power and his charisma than for his personal goodness; the Gothic heroine's challenge is to win his love without being destroyed in the process. Exaggeration and emotional language are frequently employed.

Historical novels make use of historical personages or events in a fictitious narrative. True-to-life elements may be added to lend a sense of authenticity to the novel, but in serious examples of this genre, historical events, processes, and issues are central to the story line rather than providing peripheral or decorative touches. Historical novels are often vehicles for their authors' insights into historical figures and their influences or into the causes and consequences of historical events, changes, or movements.

Horror novels seek to invoke horror. From subtle anxiety to blood-splattered scenes, in these stories, something is just *not right*. Candor, teamwork, and chastity often aide the protagonists as they face sickly goo, unwanted incursion, and incipient insanity. In the end, the evil element (whether human or monstrous or paranormal) either wins, or is not decisively vanquished. In its harsher forms, these stories and depictions are deliberately shocking and controversial.

Magical realism novels are characterized by a mixture of realistic and fantastic elements. Realistic details are intertwined with dreamlike sequences, abrupt chronological shifts, and complex, tangled plots. These novels also frequently have elements of fairy tales and myths in them. There are two conflicting perspectives, one based on a rational view of reality and the other on the acceptance of the supernatural as prosaic reality. Magical realism differs from pure fantasy primarily because it is set in a normal, modern world with authentic descriptions of humans and society.

Mystery/Detective novels involve a puzzle: an unsolved murder or serious crime, or some unexplained event, and both protagonist and reader get to figure it out, step by careful step. In virtually all cases, they do succeed. (These tales almost never feature a blue-collar type investigator, or a foolish criminal.) Almost all of its characters hail from an urban (and/or upper-class) background, and many of its heroes and villains return to complete an entire series. Mysteries thrive on complexity and misdirection, hence these descriptions are long. Stories in which the crime is not solved, or the criminals never apprehended (or at least identified) by the end of a novel (or series), are rare.

- **Legal (courtroom)** Usually the protagonist in these stories is a lawyer or court official who solves a case him-or-herself, while the stubborn (or corrupt) police are on the wrong track.
- **Police Procedural (forensic, serial killer, stalker, etc.)** This is a vast descriptive category. The protagonist is a police detective (or team of officers and technicians) who is tasked with catching fiendishly clever killer(s). Usually the story switches back and forth between the viewpoint of the investigator(s) and the criminal(s) as the crime spree continues.
- **Whodunit** tales are the most traditional of mysteries, and star a clever investigator who's either sent to, or was already present at, the scene of a murder. Often there are obvious suspect(s), but the real killer turns out to be the least likely character, as revealed during a confrontational gathering.

Psychological novels are those in which the thoughts, feelings, and motivations of the characters are of equal or greater interest than is the external action of the narrative. In a psychological novel the emotional reactions and internal states of the characters are influenced by and in turn trigger external events in a meaningful symbiosis.

Science Fiction novels are grounded in scientific or pseudoscientific concepts and, whether set on Earth or in an alternate or parallel world, employ both realistic and fantastic elements in exploring the question

“What if?” Science fiction novels deal with a situation that could not arise in the world we know, but which is hypothesized on the basis of some innovation in science or technology, or pseudo-technology. These novels might include journeys to unknown worlds, time travel, alien invasions and encounters, wars involving mass destruction, the destruction or assimilation of cultures, questions of identity, and the devolution of humanity.

Social (Sociological, Problem, Thesis) novels are works in which a prevailing social problem, such as gender, race, or class prejudice, is dramatized through its effect on the characters of a novel. These novels detail the political and economic conditions prevalent during the time in which the work is set. These novels usually implicitly or explicitly advocate some kind of social or political change.

****Tragedy** is a serious and often somber **drama**, written in prose or verse, that typically ends in disaster and that focuses on a character who undergoes unexpected personal reversals. Aristotle defined tragedy as a dramatic imitation of a serious, complete action of some magnitude that evokes both fear and pity in the audience and thereby allows catharsis to occur. Tragedies often begin happily, but that initial happiness is abruptly shattered by some unexpected occurrence; catastrophic consequences for the protagonist (and often for other individuals in tragic works) result from some error in judgment (harmartia/tragic flaw) made by the protagonist.

****The piece must be in drama format to be considered a tragedy.**

Thriller (Suspense, Action, Adventure) novels are defined by extraordinary situations that summon an emotional thrill. The time might be the past or near future, and the setting exotic or familiar. In every case the characters are swept beyond a humdrum life, by their career or some unforeseen circumstance. Perils will surge, and blows are traded, but the hero wins in the end.

- **Survivalist** thrillers center upon such rugged specimens of humanity. A disaster has struck a specific group of people, if not the entire planet, and survival depends upon toughness and skill.

- **Espionage** thrillers are not about the routine lives of actual spies or analysts, but rather the mythical havoc created by relentless agents and those who oppose them. This subgenre is usually set in periods of international tension, such as World War Two, the Cold War, and more recently the war against Islamic extremism.

- **Disaster** tales usually involve the response of those in power to an impending threat. Often some industrial carelessness provides the threat, and thus an incentive to cover it up. A policy that panic must be prevented via secrecy gives the hero (often a reporter) something to pursue.

- **Ecothriller** tales, as the name suggests, involve some threat (natural, or more often manmade) to the environment. The damage may be local or even worldwide.