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**Introduction to Genology**

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| **WHY DO LITERARY GENRES MATTER?** |

Literary genre is for many reasons a fascinating category. Not only is it an attempt to approach pieces of art systematically, but literary genres also reflect the dominating view of life and even lifestyles of a selected period. Critics often point out that each epoch had its “characteristic” genre:

* The prevalent genre of antiquity was **drama**;
* The dominating genre of the Middle Ages was **poetry**;
* The most popular genre of present period is **prose**.

As understanding literature relies on understanding the context and interrelation of literary pieces, attention will be paid to the genesis, transformations and experiments with literary genres in various literary periods in order to point out the continuity of development and relationships between various historical and contemporary genres.

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| **WHAT IS A “LITERARY GENRE”?** |

Before we advance to the essentials of genology (the literary discipline focused on literary genres), it is necessary to answer the basic question: what is a literary genre? The answer to this question is surprisingly complicated:

The English word “**genre**” derives from the French term *genre* (meaning “kind”, “type” or “class”; Cuddon, p. 342). It refers to a category or sort (Žilka, 1984, p. 208; Timofejev – Turajev, 1981, p. 293) of a literary work. *Genre* represents a normative aesthetic convention which serves as an invariant model for the creation of specific texts which represent variant forms of the genre invariant (Žilka, 1984, p. 208). In order to illustrate this ambivalent nature of genre, Chris Barker uses an illustrative metaphor: Genre is like jazz – it partially follows and copies the pre-described form but it also improvises and enriches the original form. The result is that the spectator perceives the original form as well as the improvisation based on the original as a creative enhancement of the original (Barker, 2006, pp. 202–204).

Thus genre and its formal elements (such as the type of hero, conflict and resolution, to name a few) **alter**, enrich (or diminish) with any new usage, and each deviation from the norm becomes a new norm. The history and evolution of literary genres has been a subject of many studies, for example those conducted by international scholars (George Steiner, Paul Hernadi, Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, to name a few) and Slovak scholars (Július Pašteka and Tibor Žilka and many others).

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| **WHAT IS GENOLOGY?** |

The research of literary genres is one of the oldest and most complex fields of literary inquiry. It is carried out by several disciplines, primarily by **genology** (Latin: genus = type) and also by genre criticism and genre scholarship, partially also by comparative criticism and a new type of rhetoric discourse called New Rhetoric. The nature of the research of literary genres has changed several times over its history. Historically, it encompassed:

* the normative historical research of literary genres (focused on normative taxonomy);
* the decoding functions of literary genres, advocated by J. Hvišč (Hvišč, 1979, p. 37);
* the search for complex literary relations, advocated by N. Frye (Frye, 1957, p. 131).

An understanding of literary genre inevitably requires an overview of the genesis of literary genre in the history of literature.

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| **SOME HISTORICAL APPROACHES TO LITERARY GENRES** |

Historically, there have been numerous approaches to the essence of literary genre. The very first attempt to systematically explore literary genre was made by **Aristotle** in *Poetics* (355 BCE). He believed that there were three literary genres – tragedy, comedy and poetry, and that they have fixed elements which should be identifiable. That his criteria for genres were so well formulated and non-prescriptive is perhaps why they have survived to the present.

In the **medieval period**, the research of literary genres stagnated. Scholars were mostly searching for petrified elements of genres and set strict categories for what is and what is not a certain genre.

A new **evolutionary approach to genre** was initiated by French scholar **Ferdinand Brunetière** in 1890, in his study *L’évolution des genres dans l’histoire de la littérature.* He set five basic phases of the “life” of literary genres:

* Creation and existence;
* Differentiation (from other genres);
* Stabilization;
* Modification;
* Transposition (“death” of the original genre and creation, “birth” of a new one; Brunetière, 1890, p. 15).

The 19th century, however, was greatly influenced by the **positivistic philosophy** and overoptimistic attempts to quantify research, even in humanities. Literary scholars were setting strict criteria on literary genres and conducted vigorous debates on whether a certain piece of literature (e.g. *The Lady of the Camellias* by Alexandre Dumas) contained pre-conceived elements (e.g. those of melodrama and tragedy) or not. Needless to say, this period was the golden age for vigorous scholarly debates searching for the “truth” about literary works.

**Post-war literary scholarship** was multi-layered; there were both conservative and liberal genologic wings.

The orthodox, conservative view is represented by George Steiner, the author of the monograph *The Death of Tragedy* (1963)*.* He denies the possibility of the evolution of genres, namely of tragedy, because, as he believes, tragedy was society-bound and the present-day society lacks the attributes of the ancient *polis* (town, community), which mostly lay on the principles of a closed society (compare: Karl Popper: *Open Society*). Thus, according to Steiner, no modern tragedy is possible.

Another “ultra-extreme” opinion on literary genres is represented by an Italian scholar **Bernardo Croce**. Croce denies the existence of literary genres as they are not inherent to the literary piece but only represent secondary, artificial aesthetic literary criteria.

There were also more tolerant attempts to organize literary genres. New literary pieces based on the original genres were understood as **enrichment of the original genre** rather than its destruction. For example, notable scholars **René** **Wellek and Austin Warren** respect the historical attempts at “pure” genres (*genre tranché*),but for modern understanding of literary genres they set less normative criteria. Modern theory of genres is more interested in search for a common feature among genres (Wellek & Warren, 1966, p. 235).

Oscar Mandel attempted to systemize theory of genres and divided existing definitions of genres (namely tragedy) into four groups:

* **Definition according to formal elements** (e.g. nobility of the hero, unity of time and place, etc.). However, this approach has been rejected by many modern scholars as dated and unreliable (R. C. Miller, Arthur Miller).
* **Definition according to situation**, focused on the essence of the situation depicted (e.g. Aristotle’s fall from great fortune to ill-fortune). This approach has been recognized by Július Pašteka and George Steiner.
* **Definition according to ethical directions**, focused on the overall meaning of the play and its legacy for the spectator.
* **Definition according to the emotional effect of the play (or work of art in general, note JJ)**, based on the original Aristotelian imperative of fear and sympathy as navigational emotions of a play. Paul Hernadi calls this type of definition by another name: “pragmatic orientation” (Hernadi, 1972, p. 37).

Many scholars have the doubted the measurability of personal experience of a literary genre. However, H. D. F. Kitto’s counterargument to these sceptical voices recommends “trusting” one’s literary intuition: “If the meaning is the total impact of the play on the audience, how is it possible to say what it is, since audiences vary from age to age? The answer is: If you trust the dramatist, if you will consider the form of his play, patiently and with some imagination, as being probably the best possible expression of what he meant, then you will be giving yourself the best chance of appreciating the impact of what he was hoping to make on the audience for which he was writing” (1960, p. 7).

There are almost as many **systematic** and **asystematic** **approaches** to understanding genres as there are genres themselves, and more will be developed. A scholar then faces the dilemma of which approach to select to obtain the most objective results. Sometimes, the literary work itself invites a specific method of research (e.g. some features of a classic genre are so obvious one cannot but trace them systematically, as for example in Arthur Miller’s play *Death of a Salesman*, 1949).

Other times, one just intuitively follows a certain type of genre and its elements and tries to interpret them in the selected work of art. In the next chapter, you will learn about more methods and forms of genological research.

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| **FORMS OF LITERARY GENRES** |

The form of literary genres contributes to the meaning of the artistic piece.

Wellek and Warren (Wellek & Warren, 1966, p. 231), for example, recognize:

* **Outer form of genre** (e.g. its metric system); and
* **Inner form of genre** (e.g. approach, tone, aim or theme and type of audience).

One should remember that in quality art, nothing is random, purposeless or left to chance. Each detail has its significance within the broader context of a literary work and enhances its artistic impact on the perceiver. The French sculptor August Rodin liked to sculpt his sculptures in the most solid shape possible because he ascribed to the maxim that if a sculpture is pushed down a hill, everything that falls off is redundant. The same is true for quality literary works, and the researcher’s role is to find the importance of details as well as the whole.

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| **THE METHODS OF GENOLOGICAL RESEARCH** |

According to a Slovak scholar Peter Zajac (Zajac, 1990, pp. 127–128), there are two basic approaches to the analysis of a literary genre:

(1) the bottom-up method, and

 (2) the top-down method.

**(1)** The **bottom-up** method (see Figure 1 below) starts with the analysis of individual genre elements. These elements can at first be fragmentary and seemingly unrelated. Later in the course of the play, novel or other kind of literary work they tend to unite into a meaningful unity (Zajac, 1990, pp. 127–128).

 (Figure 1)

**(2)** The **top-down** method starts with a pre-conceived genre hypothesis, which the researcher tries to support with individual elements, themes, and other literary features of the literary work. That means one intuitively feels a play is a tragedy and then starts to systematically search for a broader system of tragic elements (e.g. the nobility of the tragic hero, the moment of recognition, the presence of a chorus) in the play.

Zajac understands both methods as complimentary and interrelated as long as they equally incorporate two features: inner differentiation of literary works and their complex nature (Zajac, 1990, pp. 127–128).

Nevertheless, both methods evoke the basic question of genologic research, which was first asked by George Muller (Muller, p. 2):

*How can I define tragedy (or any other genre) before I know on which works to base the definition, yet how can I know on which works to base the definition before I have defined tragedy?*

This type of argumentation is called “**circular evidence**” and is generally inacceptable in exact scientific research. Robert B. Sewall, however, fully agrees with this sort of argumentation in literature and, with regard to the specific nature of a literary genre, accepts it as a legitimate form of genological research (Sewall, 1991, p. 175).

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| **THE HIERARCHY OF GENOLOGIC TERMINOLOGY** |

In most literary scholarships, a **tripartite** structure of genre systems, starting from the most abstract terms towards the most specific ones is followed (see Ivan Šuša: *K terminologickej diferenciácii v oblasti žánrovej klasifikácie z aspektu česko-slovenskej a talianskej teórie literatúry*):

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| **Literary type/kind (SK: Literárny druh):**(general, high level of abstraction)**↓** | **Lyrics, poetry****↓** | **Prose****↓** | **Drama****↓** |
| **Genre (SK: Žáner)**(more concrete,lower level of abstraction)**↓** | E.g.Poem**↓** | E.g.Saga,Novel**↓** | E.g.Tragedy,Comedy,*Drama***↓** |
| **Genre variant (SK: Žánrový variant):** (concrete, low level of abstraction) | E.g.OdeElegyIdyll | E.g.Heroic epos,Novel of adventure,Detective novel | E.g.Melodrama,Grotesque,Psychological play |

Unfortunately, many of these terms have more equivalents in various languages or they are misused. For example, *drama* denominates both literary kind and genre, which might cause genologic problems. Therefore, alternative terms for drama (as a genre) have been introduced (e.g. *drama,* drama as a genre, SK: činohra); however, they are not abiding and scholars use them at random. This often causes imprecision in genre classification.

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| **DRAMA AND DRAMATIC GENRES** |

Drama in general denotes “any work meant to be performed on a stage by actors” (Cuddon, p. 237). According to Aristotle, *drama* is an “imitated human action” (Cited in: Holman & Harmon, p. 154). Recognized features of drama are:

1. Story,

2. Action,

3. Actors who impersonate characters of the story. Historically, there were many historical variants and genres of drama:

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| **ANCIENT DRAMA** |

In order to understand the genesis of drama, it is essential to understand its beginnings in ancient Greece. The nature of the ancient plays was often interrelated with the type of theatre used for performances:

Ancient theatres, called “amphitheatres”, had a circular shape enhancing acoustics. All-men actors wore acoustics-improving masks (this is the origin of the smiling and frowning masks, the famous symbols of theatre). There were:

1. no curtains (thus the plays could not be divided into acts),
2. few props and
3. no spotlights. All these three features resulted in the verbal nature of the ancient plays, which were very rich in verbal descriptions of visual and sensual aspects of the play such as space, size, colours, textures and smells, as well as the emotional phenomena of the play.

In order to clarify the plot, ancient Greek dramas often employed a **chorus**, a group of actors who introduced the play, specifying its setting and main characters. At the end of the play the chorus summarized the overall message of the play.

Structure of an ancient play: The traditional structure of a play follows what is known as Gustav Freytag’s pyramid:

 Climax =

IN TRAGEDY =

catharsis

 / \

 Rising action (collision) Falling action

 / \

 Exposition Resolution = IN TRAGEDY = catastrophe

There were two basic types of ancient genres:

**Tragedy** – based on the creation of the emotions of fear and pity, resulting in catharsis and understanding both reasons for personal downfall of the individual and the overall social context of his or her failure.

**Comedy** – based on alienation and emotional separation between the spectator and the character.

**Roman drama** differed from the Greek plays. The plays were more violent and more importantly, they showed the acts of violence on the stage. Other Roman types of drama include for example Latin closet dramas of Seneca.

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| **MEDIEVAL DRAMA** |

Medieval drama denotes all forms of drama in the Middle Ages; however, it generally refers to drama of a religious nature, which influenced its subject-matter (stories of Resurrection, Ascension), liturgical tone and language (mostly Latin) (Holman & Harmon, p. 291).

Medieval drama included various genres, such as:

* **Miracle plays,** (based on the lives of saints, especially Virgin Mary);
* **Mystery plays, cyclic plays, moralities** (later became secularized and some were even banned. They are believed to be the basis for the later Elizabethan comedy).

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| **RENAISSANCE (ELIZABETHAN) DRAMA** |

The aforementioned facts about the technical and artistic development of drama in the Western world help us to understand more about the specifics of the English theatre. The first era to be discussed here is so called the “**Elisabethan Age**”, a term used for the period of the Renaissance during the reign of Elisabeth I of England (1558–1603). The name “the Elizabethan Age” sometimes also includes the Jacobean Period (1603–1625). Another informal name of the period is “Merrie England”. This refers to the overall successful and optimistic atmosphere of this period, rooted in colonial expansion and the resulting societal developments, incorporating new technologies and materials brought from overseas.

In the Elizabethan times, drama proliferated. Some of the popular genres of the period were:

* **Pastoral plays** (they developed from pastoral poems, usually describing the “pastoral” lives of shepherds and descriptions of the countryside).
* **School plays** (popular Elizabethan plays practiced and performed at schools, one form of school plays was the so-called “masque”),
* **University plays** (practiced and performed for the Queen Elizabeth by a group of academics called “the University Wits”).
* **Latin drama** (these were mostly translations of Italian plays).
* **Chronicles** (these were essentially historical plays which drew inspiration from period chronicles, such as *Holinshed’s Chronicles*).
* **Elizabethan comedies** (comedy, especially romantic comedies and court comedies, were popular genres of the period; they often used misunderstanding and mistaking one character for another as the central point of their subjects).
* **Elizabethan tragedies** (were as popular as comedies. Some variants of Elizabethan tragedy include tragedy of blood and revenge tragedy, which lay on the principle of poetic justice. Elizabethan tragedies often employed subjects such as the seven deadly sins and supernatural powers, and usually ended in the death of most of the characters).

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| **DRAMA OF THE JACOBEAN AND CAROLINE AGES** |

“The Jacobean Age” was significantly different from the libertine Elizabethan Age in its more serious and contemplative tone and philosophical subjects. In this period, Shakespeare wrote his major tragedies and tragicomedies, while Ben Jonson produced classic tragedies and realistic comedies, and many other authors flourished.

“The Caroline Age” referred to the reign of Charles I of England (1625–1642). Drama of the period includes many new forms such as the comedy of manners, the sentimental comedy and the domestic tragedy.

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| **THE DIVERSITY OF THE 19TH CENTURY DRAMA** |

The 19th century was significant for its technical improvements of theatrical techniques as well as for formal and intellectual changes in the structure and content of plays.

Technical improvements included the invention of:

* Spotlights (which allowed theatres to focus on the most important character in each section of the play),
* Curtains (which allowed plays to be divided into acts), and
* Other technical improvements (that allowed theatres to bring large objects, sounds, and other effects to the stage). However, all these inventions also contributed to a diminishment of the role of language, and plays became much less verbal and much more visual than in previous dramatic eras.

Some of the most significant genres of the period include:

* **Melodrama** (a play based on romantic plot, idealized characters and a romantic happy ending or extremely unhappy ending. In melodrama, the logical course of the plot is subordinated to sensational emotions, and thus melodramatic characters often find themselves in dramatic situations – lost in the desert without water, in the wilderness without matches, etc. Modern variants of classical melodramas are soap operas). Romantic tragedies were among the successors of melodramas.
* **Problem plays** (were similar to melodramas; however, the logic of plot now played a much more important role. The plot revolved around a specific “problem”, such as immigration to the USA, unwanted pregnancy, or dilemma between obeying one’s parents and the pursuit of happiness). Problem plays later inspired modern social, psychological and political dramas.
* **Verse drama** (was only distinguished by its verse form, popular with folk audience).

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| **20TH CENTURY “MODERN” DRAMA** |

English modern drama is so multi-layered that it invites many methods of classification (see: Štefan Franko : *Dictionary of Literary Terms,* 2003), such as:

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| **1.** **HISTORICAL CLASSIFICA-TION** | **2.** **THEMATIC CLASSIFI-CATION** | **3.** **SUBJECT MATTER** | **4.** **TECHNIQUE OF COMPOSI-TION/GENRE** | **5. FUNCTION** | **6.** **ELABORATI-ON OF THEME** |
| Angry Young Men–drama after 1956, when John Osborne’s play *Look Back in Anger* premiered. | Family play | Historical play | Modern play | Didactic play | Humorous play |
| “New wave” of British drama | Social play | Fantastic play | Postmodern play  | Entertaining play | Satirical play |
| 1st wave of British drama | Political play | SCI-FI | Total theatre |  | Experimental play |
| 2nd wave of British drama |  | Detective play | In-Yer-Face |  | Journalistic play |
| 3rd wave of British drama |  | Psychological play |  |  | 7. STREAM OF THOUGHT |
| 4th wave of British drama |  | Biographical play |  |  | Sentimental play |
|  |  |  |  |  | Romantic play |
|  |  |  |  |  | Realistic play |
|  |  |  |  |  | Naturalistic play  |
|  |  |  |  |  | Existential play  |

This list is by no means complete and new genre variants are perpetually being created. What is more, many modern genres purposely overlap with other genres, creating hybrids.

The reasons for the creation of new genres are various. Many were created “in opposition” to the traditional genres, in order to provoke and disturb the reader. One of the modern genres that purposely contradict features of traditional realistic plays is “**In-Yer-Face**” theatre. In-Yer-Face theatre uses both shocking language and shocking images to physically and emotionally discomfort the spectator and make him or her think about the issues in debate. John Osborne, one of the “Angry Young Men” and the author of iconic play *Look Back in Anger* (1956), inspired this genre.

Other new genres include **New Jacobean Theatre**, **Theatre of Urban Boredom** and many others.