

THE MULTIFUNCTIONALITY OF FANTASY LITERATURE: ESCAPE, SUBVERSION, AND RECOVERY IN MODERN NARRATIVE**Pyosova Shamsiyabonu Baxtiyor qizi***PhD Candidate at Termiz State University*

Abstract *This article explores the multifunctional nature of fantasy literature, focusing on three core functions: escape, subversion, and recovery. Drawing upon the theoretical frameworks of J.R.R. Tolkien and Rosemary Jackson, as well as insights from neuro- and psycholinguistic research, the study demonstrates how fantasy literature offers meaningful psychological and emotional relief (escape), challenges dominant cultural and ideological norms (subversion), and provides readers with renewed perspectives on reality and moral values (recovery). Through the analysis of literary works such as *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and *Harry Potter*, this study highlights the genre’s complex role in engaging readers cognitively, emotionally, and socially. The article further suggests that fantasy literature holds significant potential for interdisciplinary research, especially in cognitive and psycholinguistic studies.*

Keywords *Fantasy literature; escape function; subversion; recovery; Tolkien; Jackson; psycholinguistics; cognitive processing; reader response; emotional engagement.*

МНОГОФУНКЦИОНАЛЬНОСТЬ ФЭНТЕЗИ-ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ: БЕГСТВО, ПОДРЫВ И ВОССТАНОВЛЕНИЕ В СОВРЕМЕННОЙ НАРРАТИВНОЙ ПРОЗЕ**Ильёсова Шамсиябону Бахтиёровна***Докторант Термезского государственного университета*

Аннотация: *В статье рассматривается многофункциональная природа фэнтези-литературы, акцентируя внимание на трех основных функциях: бегство (escape), подрыв (subversion) и восстановление (recovery). Опираясь на теоретические концепции Дж. Р. Р. Толкина и Розмари Джэксон, а также на данные нейро- и психолингвистических исследований, автор демонстрирует, как фэнтези предоставляет читателю психологическую и эмоциональную разрядку (бегство), бросает вызов господствующим культурным и идеологическим нормам (подрыв), а также способствует переосмыслению реальности и моральных ценностей (восстановление). На основе анализа произведений Властелин колец, Хроники Нарнии и Гарри Поттер показана сложность воздействия жанра на когнитивное,*

эмоциональное и социальное восприятие читателей. Статья подчеркивает актуальность фэнтези как объекта междисциплинарных исследований в сфере когнитивных и психолингвистических наук.

Ключевые слова: *фэнтези-литература; функция бегства; подрыв; восстановление; Толкин; Джексон; психолингвистика; когнитивная обработка; восприятие читателя; эмоциональная вовлеченность.*

The Definition and Scope of Fantasy Genre

The fantasy genre is one of the most imaginative and multifaceted areas of literature, offering readers experiences that transcend the boundaries of ordinary reality. Numerous scholars have provided definitions that attempt to capture the nature and complexity of fantasy.

Tzvetan Todorov (1970) defines fantasy as “that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event.” This emphasizes the psychological tension between the familiar and the unknown, focusing on the reader’s mental state when encountering supernatural phenomena. Rosemary Jackson (1981), taking a more critical approach, describes fantasy as “a literature of subversion”, highlighting its capacity to challenge dominant ideologies, social norms, and cultural structures by presenting alternative realities.

J.R.R. Tolkien (1939), in his influential essay *On Fairy-Stories*, offers a philosophical perspective, defining fantasy as “a natural human activity” and a form of sub-creation. For Tolkien, fantasy allows writers to participate in creative processes that mirror divine creation, constructing secondary worlds where readers experience escape, recovery, and consolation.

Brian Attebery (1980) further contributes by arguing that fantasy is “not a single, definable literary genre but a fuzzy set of texts that share certain prototypical features.” According to Attebery, works such as *The Lord of the Rings* serve as central examples of the genre, with other texts existing along a spectrum of similarity.

Incorporating these views, this study adopts a comprehensive definition of fantasy:

Fantasy is a literary genre characterized by the creation of imaginary worlds governed by distinct laws that diverge from those of everyday reality. It involves the naturalization of supernatural or impossible events within these worlds, inviting readers to suspend disbelief and immerse themselves in narratives that explore themes of wonder, subversion, and transformation. Fantasy destabilizes conventional understandings of reality by introducing extraordinary elements, such as magic, mythical creatures, and heroic quests, while maintaining internal coherence through consistent world-building. It is both a creative and

cultural act that challenges dominant ideologies, evokes emotional and imaginative engagement, and fulfills a fundamental human desire to explore possibilities beyond the empirical world.

The genre identity of fantasy is thus shaped by its unique features. Central to the genre is world-building, where authors construct elaborate secondary worlds complete with histories, cultures, and governing rules. Neologisms—invented words and names—serve as linguistic markers of otherness, enriching the world’s depth (Higley, 2007). Additionally, the genre often incorporates supernatural and mythical elements, including magical systems, legendary creatures, and epic quests (Manlove, 1975; Dyakov, 2000). These core elements collectively contribute to the genre’s ability to transport readers into richly imagined realms.

Historical Development of Fantasy

The origins of fantasy literature are deeply rooted in myths, legends, and fairy tales, which have been integral to human storytelling traditions across cultures. Ancient mythologies—such as Greek, Norse, and Celtic myths—provided rich narratives of gods, heroes, and supernatural beings that served as early forms of fantasy storytelling. Fairy tales, as collected by authors like the Brothers Grimm and Charles Perrault, also represent early expressions of fantastical narratives, often blending moral lessons with magical elements.

The transition to modern fantasy occurred gradually, with significant developments during the 19th and 20th centuries. The works of George MacDonald and William Morris laid early foundations for modern high fantasy, incorporating detailed world-building and mythic structures. However, it was J.R.R. Tolkien who established the modern fantasy genre as we know it today. His epic work, *The Lord of the Rings*, introduced complex secondary worlds, constructed languages, and richly developed mythologies, setting the standard for subsequent fantasy literature.

C.S. Lewis, Tolkien's contemporary, contributed significantly with *The Chronicles of Narnia*, blending allegory with fantasy, while J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series expanded the genre’s popularity in contemporary culture, introducing new generations to fantasy's possibilities. Modern fantasy continues to evolve, incorporating diverse cultural influences, subgenres, and hybrid forms, while maintaining its essential features of imaginative world-building and narrative exploration of the impossible.

Existing Approaches to Fantasy Functions

Scholars have proposed various approaches to understanding the functions of fantasy literature, emphasizing its psychological, philosophical, and social roles.

J.R.R. Tolkien’s (1939) theory of fantasy functions introduces three key concepts: Escape, Recovery, and Consolation. Escape refers to the reader’s temporary release from the

constraints of ordinary life into imaginative realms. Recovery involves a renewed appreciation of reality after experiencing the wonder of the fantastical. Consolation offers hope and moral uplift, often manifested through the eucatastrophe—an unexpected happy ending that brings joy and relief.

Rosemary Jackson (1981), representing a more critical theory, focuses on fantasy’s function as subversion, arguing that it challenges dominant cultural narratives and ideologies by presenting alternative, often transgressive realities. Jackson suggests that fantasy destabilizes established norms, enabling readers to question existing power structures and social conventions.

From a psychological and cognitive perspective, fantasy literature offers profound emotional and cognitive benefits. Fantasy stimulates the imagination, engages cognitive flexibility, and allows readers to process complex emotions and psychological conflicts through symbolic narratives. Studies in neuro- and psycholinguistics suggest that reading fantasy activates multiple brain regions involved in language processing, emotional regulation, and imaginative visualization, thereby contributing to readers’ emotional well-being and cognitive development.

2. Escape Function in Fantasy Literature

One of the central functions of fantasy literature is its capacity to offer escape, a concept famously theorized by J.R.R. Tolkien in his essay *On Fairy-Stories* (1939). Tolkien challenges the often negative connotation associated with escapism, arguing that escape in fantasy literature is not a form of unhealthy avoidance, but rather a meaningful and legitimate human need. He distinguishes between mere escapism and meaningful escape, emphasizing that fantasy provides a necessary relief from the constraints and sufferings of everyday life. According to Tolkien, “Why should a man be scorned if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home? Or if, when he cannot do so, he thinks and talks about other topics than jailers and prison walls?” (Tolkien, 1939).

In this view, fantasy serves as a restorative escape, allowing individuals to momentarily detach from the burdens of reality such as social pressure, personal trauma, or existential anxiety. Unlike superficial escapism, which merely distracts, Tolkien’s meaningful escape fosters renewal, offering readers new perspectives on life by presenting alternative worlds imbued with wonder, hope, and moral clarity.

Furthermore, fantasy's escape function does not seek to deny reality but rather enriches it by providing readers with a refreshed vision of the world. This process, which Tolkien refers to as “recovery,” allows readers to return to their everyday lives with renewed clarity, imagination, and emotional resilience. The fantastical worlds act as mirrors that reflect human desires, fears, and aspirations in heightened, symbolic forms.

Psychological and Cognitive Aspects of Escape

From a psychological and cognitive standpoint, the escape function of fantasy literature has significant implications for readers' mental well-being and cognitive processing. Neuro- and psycholinguistic research indicates that engaging with fantasy narratives activates multiple brain regions involved in language comprehension, imagination, emotional regulation, and mental simulation (Mar, Oatley, & Peterson, 2009; Gottschall, 2012). These cognitive processes enable readers to deeply immerse themselves in the narrative world, experiencing emotions and scenarios far removed from their everyday lives.

Fantasy's capacity to create imaginary worlds fosters cognitive flexibility, allowing readers to explore alternative possibilities, moral dilemmas, and emotional experiences in a safe and controlled environment. This imaginative engagement can function as a form of emotional catharsis, enabling readers to confront and process complex feelings indirectly. For individuals coping with stress or trauma, fantasy provides a psychological sanctuary, offering comfort, hope, and even healing through its narratives of triumph, resilience, and moral justice.

Moreover, fantasy literature supports the development of theory of mind—the ability to understand and empathize with others' perspectives—by presenting diverse characters, cultures, and moral conflicts within richly detailed fictional settings. Through engagement with fantastical narratives, readers exercise their imaginative empathy, fostering emotional growth and deeper self-reflection (Kidd & Castano, 2013).

In sum, the escape function of fantasy literature serves not merely as entertainment but as a complex neuro-psychological process that contributes to emotional well-being, personal growth, and cognitive development.

Literary Examples of Escape Function

The escape function is vividly demonstrated in numerous works of modern fantasy literature. In J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, readers are transported into Middle-earth, a meticulously constructed secondary world filled with epic quests, mythical creatures, and profound moral struggles. The immersive quality of Tolkien's world-building allows readers to temporarily leave behind their reality and engage deeply with themes of heroism, sacrifice, and the battle between good and evil.

Similarly, C.S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia* offers readers an escape into a magical world accessible through the simple act of opening a wardrobe. For many readers, particularly children, the narrative serves as both a literal and metaphorical escape from war, loss, or personal hardship. Lewis integrates allegorical elements that enable readers to explore spiritual and moral questions in a fantastical context, providing comfort and meaning amidst adversity.

J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series exemplifies fantasy's escape function for contemporary audiences. The hidden magical world of Hogwarts, existing parallel to the ordinary world, allows readers to step into a realm of wonder, friendship, and adventure. At the same time, the narrative addresses real-life issues such as loss, discrimination, and identity, making the escape both entertaining and emotionally resonant.

These examples illustrate how fantasy literature offers readers a space for safe psychological distance, where they can process personal and collective challenges through imaginative immersion. The escape function thus serves as a vital mechanism not only for entertainment but also for emotional regulation, resilience-building, and moral contemplation.

3. Subversion Function in Fantasy Literature

Beyond its escapist qualities, fantasy literature functions as a profound subversive force, challenging dominant cultural, political, and ideological structures. Rosemary Jackson (1981), in her influential work *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, argues that fantasy operates by disrupting the boundaries of reality, confronting readers with alternative ways of understanding the world. According to Jackson, fantasy "does not celebrate the impossible, but rather undermines the taken-for-granted assumptions of the possible." In this sense, fantasy is not simply a departure from reality but a deliberate interrogation of it.

Fantasy narratives often engage directly with issues of gender, politics, ideology, and religion, offering alternative social orders, identities, and moral codes that challenge established norms. In many works, traditional gender roles are questioned or inverted, political hierarchies are destabilized, and religious dogmas are reimagined. Through these alternative realities, fantasy exposes the constructed nature of cultural norms, inviting readers to reflect critically on their own society.

The subversion function allows authors to address controversial or marginalized topics in a way that is both imaginative and safely distanced from real-world repercussions. By displacing these issues into fantastical settings, authors create spaces where readers can confront sensitive subjects indirectly, fostering critical thinking and moral exploration. This aligns with Jackson's assertion that fantasy functions as a "mirror image of cultural anxieties and desires," simultaneously reflecting and contesting societal values.

Psycholinguistic Aspects of Subversion

From a psycholinguistic perspective, the subversive function of fantasy literature involves disrupting familiar cognitive patterns and challenging readers' expectations of reality. Fantasy achieves this by introducing linguistic novelty, such as neologisms, invented languages, and symbolic imagery, which prompt the brain to engage in complex processing of "the strange" or "the other." As readers encounter unfamiliar concepts, beings, or worlds,

their cognitive systems must reorganize and adapt, fostering cognitive flexibility and openness to new perspectives.

This process of encountering "otherness" stimulates brain regions involved in semantic integration, emotional regulation, and imaginative simulation (Mar et al., 2009; Kidd & Castano, 2013). As readers process these disruptions, they experience both estrangement and reflection, allowing them to question deeply ingrained beliefs and cultural assumptions. In this way, fantasy serves not only as entertainment but as a cognitive laboratory where readers can safely explore complex social and moral issues.

Subversive fantasy also engages readers on an emotional level, often producing feelings of discomfort, curiosity, or even cognitive dissonance. These emotional responses encourage readers to reevaluate their own positions and consider alternative viewpoints. Thus, psycholinguistic mechanisms play a crucial role in the subversion function by facilitating both intellectual and emotional engagement with challenging themes.

Literary Examples of Subversion Function

The subversive function is vividly illustrated in numerous works of modern fantasy literature. In C.S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*, while the narrative presents a clear religious allegory rooted in Christian theology, it simultaneously reimagines spiritual themes through the lens of fantasy. By displacing religious narratives into a fantastical world, Lewis enables readers to engage with questions of faith, morality, and sacrifice in new and thought-provoking ways.

J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series offers a more direct form of social subversion. Throughout the series, Rowling critiques issues such as classism, racism, authoritarianism, and social inequality within both the magical and non-magical worlds. The oppressive regime of Voldemort and the Ministry of Magic serves as a metaphor for real-world totalitarian systems, while the marginalization of non-pureblood wizards reflects broader issues of racial and social discrimination. In this way, Rowling uses fantasy to expose and challenge deeply embedded societal injustices.

Feminist fantasy literature also exemplifies the subversion function by redefining gender roles and empowering marginalized voices. Authors such as Ursula K. Le Guin (*The Left Hand of Darkness*) and Marion Zimmer Bradley (*The Mists of Avalon*) reimagine traditional gender binaries, offering complex portrayals of gender identity, power, and agency. Through these narratives, fantasy provides a space to question patriarchal structures and envision more equitable alternatives.

Similarly, dystopian fantasy subverts dominant political ideologies by presenting bleak, authoritarian futures that reflect current anxieties about surveillance, state control, and loss of individual freedom. Works such as Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* illustrate the

dangers of political oppression and media manipulation, encouraging readers to critically examine the power dynamics in their own societies.

In these examples, fantasy’s subversion function operates on multiple levels—cultural, psychological, and linguistic—creating rich and layered narratives that challenge readers to reflect on their own values, beliefs, and societal structures.

4. Recovery Function in Fantasy Literature

Tolkien’s Concept of Recovery

Among the central functions Tolkien identifies in fantasy literature is Recovery—the ability of fantasy to restore a fresh perspective on reality. In his essay *On Fairy-Stories* (1939), Tolkien describes recovery as “the regaining of a clear view... seeing things as we are (or were) meant to see them — as things apart from ourselves.” Recovery allows readers to experience a renewed sense of wonder toward the ordinary world, often dulled by routine, familiarity, or disillusionment.

Through the process of entering fantastical worlds filled with magic, myth, and mystery, readers detach temporarily from their own reality, allowing them to return with new insights and emotional clarity. The sense of wonder generated by fantasy reawakens an appreciation for beauty, simplicity, and moral values that may have become obscured by the complexities of modern life. In Tolkien's view, recovery is not escapism in the negative sense, but a kind of spiritual renewal that reconnects individuals with essential human truths such as hope, courage, sacrifice, and moral integrity.

Moreover, fantasy’s capacity for moral reflection plays a critical role in the recovery function. By presenting ethical dilemmas, heroic quests, and narrative resolutions, fantasy invites readers to contemplate deeper questions of right and wrong, good and evil, and personal responsibility. In this way, recovery functions as both a philosophical and emotional recalibration, enabling readers to realign their values and beliefs.

Emotional and Cognitive Recovery Through Fantasy

From a psychological and cognitive perspective, the recovery function of fantasy literature serves as a valuable tool for personal growth and emotional healing. Engaging with fantasy narratives activates complex neural mechanisms involved in emotional processing, narrative empathy, and symbolic meaning-making (Green & Brock, 2000; Mar et al., 2009). Readers often project their personal struggles, fears, and hopes onto the fantastical scenarios, finding symbolic parallels that allow them to process unresolved emotional conflicts.

This cognitive engagement fosters narrative transportation—a deep absorption into the story world—which enhances emotional catharsis and self-reflection. As readers navigate the moral and emotional journeys of fictional characters, they experience vicarious learning

that can lead to emotional resilience and psychological insight. The symbolic distance provided by fantasy enables readers to explore difficult emotions—such as grief, loss, or identity crises—within a safe and imaginative space.

From a psycholinguistic standpoint, fantasy employs metaphorical language, symbolic imagery, and narrative complexity that stimulate higher-level cognitive processing. These linguistic features encourage readers to interpret deeper meanings and engage in semantic reorganization, ultimately contributing to cognitive flexibility and emotional integration (Kidd & Castano, 2013; Gottschall, 2012). In this way, fantasy operates not only as entertainment but as a therapeutic medium for psychological growth and recovery.

Literary Examples of Recovery Function

The recovery function is powerfully illustrated in numerous works of modern fantasy literature. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien offers readers a profound sense of recovery through the epic journey of Frodo and Sam. The narrative confronts darkness, loss, and despair, yet ultimately affirms hope, friendship, and moral endurance. The restoration of peace in Middle-earth serves as a metaphor for readers' own longing for restoration and moral order in the real world.

Similarly, C.S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia* invites readers into a world where spiritual renewal and moral lessons are embedded within the magical narrative. Characters such as Lucy Pevensie experience profound personal growth through their encounters with Aslan, symbolizing themes of forgiveness, redemption, and faith. For many readers, especially children, Narnia offers a gentle framework for grappling with questions of loss, courage, and trust.

In J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, recovery manifests through themes of grief, identity, and resilience. As Harry confronts the deaths of his parents, godfather, and numerous friends, readers witness his emotional journey from trauma to acceptance and growth. The series provides readers, particularly adolescents, with meaningful narratives about coping with loss, developing a sense of self, and finding hope even amidst adversity.

These examples demonstrate how fantasy narratives guide readers through complex emotional landscapes, offering both cognitive and emotional recovery. By confronting hardship within the safety of fictional worlds, readers gain insights into their own emotional experiences and emerge with renewed perspectives on life's challenges.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined the multifaceted functions of fantasy literature, focusing on the interrelated roles of Escape, Subversion, and Recovery as conceptualized primarily through the works of J.R.R. Tolkien and Rosemary Jackson, alongside insights from psycholinguistic and cognitive research. The findings demonstrate that fantasy serves not

only as a form of entertainment but also as a complex literary mechanism that engages readers intellectually, emotionally, and psychologically.

The Escape function, as described by Tolkien, offers readers meaningful relief from the pressures and limitations of ordinary life. Far from representing mere escapism, fantasy provides a temporary detachment that allows for emotional restoration and renewed engagement with reality. The Subversion function, grounded in Jackson’s theory, reveals fantasy’s capacity to challenge social, political, ideological, and cultural norms. By presenting alternative realities, fantasy enables critical reflection on existing power structures and personal beliefs. Finally, the Recovery function highlights fantasy's ability to renew the reader’s sense of wonder, encourage moral contemplation, and facilitate emotional healing, both individually and collectively.

These three functions are deeply interconnected. Escape allows the reader to step outside of ordinary experiences; Subversion uses that distance to question and reframe reality; and Recovery enables the reader to return to the real world with new insights, clarity, and emotional resilience. Together, they reflect the genre’s unique capacity to engage with the complexities of the human condition in a safe yet powerful narrative framework.

For modern readers, fantasy continues to hold profound significance. In a world increasingly marked by social tensions, psychological pressures, and cultural fragmentation, fantasy literature offers a space for imaginative engagement, personal reflection, and cultural critique. Its capacity to address universal human concerns through symbolic and metaphorical storytelling ensures its continued relevance across generations and cultural contexts.

This study opens avenues for further research, particularly in the fields of neuro- and psycholinguistics, where the cognitive and emotional impacts of fantasy literature remain rich for exploration. Future studies may investigate how different subgenres of fantasy uniquely stimulate the brain, contribute to emotional regulation, or serve as therapeutic tools for various psychological conditions. Additionally, comparative cross-cultural studies could shed light on how fantasy functions across diverse linguistic and cultural traditions, broadening the understanding of its global significance.

In conclusion, fantasy literature stands as a powerful, dynamic genre that not only entertains but also challenges, heals, and transforms its readers. Its enduring appeal lies in its ability to merge imagination with profound human truths, making it an indispensable subject for continued scholarly exploration.

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