

# Empirical Approaches to Literature

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## Studying Literary Genres: The Empirical Angle

### 1. The Meaning of „Empirical“ in Genre Studies

First, I would like to outline the meaning of „empirical“ with regard to the study of literary genres. Then I will focus on two areas where the empirical perspective might offer new ways to study and understand literary genres, and finally I will briefly suggest two additional areas for an empirical investigation of literary genres.

In using empirical methods, one does not necessarily share the naivete of „classical“ empiricism, with its aversion to theory, nor the confidence of logical empiricism in the possibility of attaining a metaphysical „Truth“; rather, one wishes to re-establish a fruitful relationship between theoretical abstractions and concrete texts and contexts. Thus, I suggest understanding „empirical“ as opposed to „speculative,“ but not necessarily to „theoretical.“ The major task of the empirical perspective in literary studies in general and in literary genres in particular, as I see it, is to translate theoretical generalizations into concrete hypotheses. These hypotheses may in turn corroborate certain theories, and open up new perspectives for studying the actual ways in which literary genres are organized, perceived, and function within literary communities.

Thus, I do not claim that the empirical perspective should replace theories, or interpretations. Such a „heroic“ stand is not only unrealistic, but might also be harmful. The development of theoretical generalization has its own logic and justification, and, in a complementary manner, the constant process of re-reading, and re-interpreting literary texts is also a vital component of literary life.<sup>1</sup> The empirical perspective with its emphasis on concrete hypotheses may however provide an excellent meeting ground between theory and interpretation, and between different critical and theoretical approaches.

### 2. How are Generic Categories „Stored“?

The first area in genre studies that could profit from the empirical perspective can be encapsulated in the question: How do people perceive genre categories? The general theoretical assumption that I adopt is that the concept of a genre is built around prototypical members.<sup>2</sup>

1 It is easy to see that my definition here of „empirical“ is a minimalistic one. There is a twofold reason for this minimalism: first, I think it enables us to incorporate into the empirical perspective certain useful observations and study that was done from other perspectives; and secondly, we will be able to avoid disappointment if the „maximal“ goals are not achieved.

2 See my „Genre theory and family resemblance – revisited,“ *Poetics* 20 (1991), 123–138, later incorporated in my *METAPHORS OF GENRE* (University Park, 1993), 54–65. The important role of prototypical members in the categorizing of literary genre was pointed out in less systematic terms by Marie Laure Ryan, „On the Why, What and How of Generic Taxonomy,“ *Poetics* 10 (1981), especially 118.

Using Wittgenstein's famous notion of „family resemblance,“ Eleanor Rosch has proposed a model for describing the internal structure of categories of natural languages.<sup>3</sup> Her basic hypothesis is that

„(M)embers of a category come to be viewed as prototypical of the category as a whole in proportion to the extent to which they bear a family resemblance to (have attributes which overlap those of) other members of the category. Conversely, items viewed as most prototypical of one category will be those with least family resemblance to or membership in other categories.“<sup>4</sup>

Rosch's basic hypothesis appears as valid and illuminating in the field of literary genres as in that of common natural language categories. One major implication of these principles is that literary genres are perceived neither as rigid and unified categories, nor as a conglomeration of literary texts, randomly collected, sharing merely a loose network of similarities. Rather, they are perceived as structured categories, with a „hard core“ consisting of prototypical members,<sup>5</sup> characterized by the fact that they bear a relatively high degree of resemblance to each other.

Thus, when we wish to describe tragedy, for example, we should neither adopt the rigid criterial approach insisting on a tight set of necessary and sufficient conditions, nor deny the existence of a structured „hard core“ in the „literary category,“ the genre, of tragedy. Instead, in order to understand the way „tragedy“ is apprehended, we should look for the prototypical members of the genre, i.e., for those texts considered to be the most representative tragedies. In trying to characterize „tragedy,“ the most fruitful approach is to focus on works such as *Oedipus Rex*, *King Lear*, and *Phedre*, because they are perceived as prototypical tragedies. And one of the reasons why they are deemed typical is because they share many traits (e.g., a tragic hero with a *hamartia*, a structured plot that includes a comparatively distinct *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis*, etc.). The term „many“ is used in this context, of course, relatively: *Oedipus Rex* and *King Lear* share more thematic and structural traits than either (or the two of them) might have in common with works such as Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*.

To corroborate the hypothesis that literary genres are organized around typical members, I composed three types of questionnaire and distributed them among two groups of students. The first questionnaire asked the students to write down the immediate associations that came to their minds when presented with the names of ten relatively familiar generic categories. This was an „open“ questionnaire in as much as it did not give any directions for responding to the given generic category. The second questionnaire offered a list of possi-

3 See Eleanor Rosch and Carolyn B. Mervis, „Family Resemblance: Studies in the Internal Structure of Categories,“ *Cognitive Psychology* 7 (1975), 573–605; and Eleanor Rosch, „Principles of Categorization“ in Eleanor Rosch and Barbara B. Lloyd (eds.), *Cognition and Categorization* (Hillsdale, NJ, 1978), 27–48. For an important criticism of Rosch's conclusions, see George Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things* (Chicago and London, 1987), especially 40–45. Lakoff argues that Rosch's experiments corroborate „prototype effects,“ not necessarily the explanation of the structure of categories based upon prototypes. Even if we accept Lakoff's criticism, it should not affect certain findings in my own study.

4 Rosch, „Family Resemblance,“ 575.

5 Sometimes there may be only one prototypical member „par excellence,“ but that should not necessarily lead to E.D. Hirsch's claim, in *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, 1967, 50), that „a type can be entirely represented in a single instance.“

ble characteristics of literary works and the names of famous and well-known authors and literary works. The students were given again the names of the ten generic categories, and were asked to mark on the heterogeneous list all the items that seemed pertinent to the specific genre. The third questionnaire was composed of ten titles of works of literature, most of them related to, or highly representative of the literary genre of the novel, and the students were asked to mark on that list only the five works that they deemed most representative of the novel. In order to avoid a biased test, I gave the students the first, „open“ questionnaire first, and only then distributed the other two.<sup>6</sup> All three questionnaires were conducted within strict time limits, to ensure that the students' responses reflected the immediate and basic way generic categories are „stored“ in their minds, and not any specific theory or approach to literary genres.

Since I have presented the full results of these questionnaires elsewhere,<sup>7</sup> I would like to touch here only on some important findings. First, responses to the third questionnaire were almost unanimous, despite the novel's alleged undelineated and diffuse nature. The same five works were chosen as the most representative novels by the two groups of students. This consensus unequivocally corroborates, in my view, the hypothesis that generic categories are organized around a „hard core“ of representative works.

As for the results of the first two questionnaires, which were more complex and multifaceted, I would like to focus on one major issue in the students' responses to generic names, namely, the relations between characteristics, on the one hand, and on the other, the names of prototypical works or authors. In both the first, „open“ questionnaire, and the second, „closed“ one, the students could have responded with a list of textual characteristics (formal, structural, thematic, affective), and/or names of literary works representative of different genres and names of authors who have become almost (metonymically) synonymous with certain genres (e.g., Sophocles with respect to tragedy; Agatha Christie with respect to the detective novel).

By and large, responses to the two questionnaires, in all ten generic categories, included a combination of characteristics and names. Thus, the results seem to corroborate the hypothesis according to which generic categories are perceived as *a combination of textual characteristics and prototypical members*. In response to the generic category of „detective story,“ for instance, there was a combination of characteristics such as „suspense,“ together with names such as Agatha Christie. It is important to note that by mentioning abstract traits as characteristic of certain genres (e.g., „suspense,“ „funny,“ „plot,“ „rhythm“), the respondents undermined the relativistic approach to literary genres that denies the possibility of formulating certain traits as descriptive terms for literary genres. Needless to say, by adopting the prototypical assumption one does not commit oneself to the proposition that all members of a literary genre share these traits – as long as the prototypical members do share them.

Whereas some of these questionnaires and tests should be further elaborated and refined, I think the basic picture they provide is clear.

6 The three questionnaires (translated into English), together with analysis of the obtained results, are given in my „The Structure of Generic Categories: Some Cognitive Aspects,“ *Journal of Literary Semantics* (forthcoming).

7 Ibid.

### 3. Generic Categories in Book Reviews

Now I would like to discuss an additional area in which a systematic empirical method may help one to better understand the ways in which generic categories function within literary communities: book reviews. To provide a useful service for their readership, editors of the Book Review sections of newspapers are obliged, on the whole, to present the abundance of books they receive each week according to certain headings. One basic way to help their readers to orient themselves is by using generic categories. My hypothesis was that these generic categories reflect certain accepted notions about generic divisions in contemporary literary communities.

To check also the hypothesis that different literary communities are differed in their generic divisions, I conducted a comparative study: I examined the American *The New York Times Book Review*, the British *Times Literary Supplement*, and the Israeli *Ha'aretz's Sfarim* literary supplement, all central in their respective literary communities.<sup>8</sup>

From first scrutiny of these three literary supplements, the American *NYTBR*, as compared to the other two, seems to be different in that it rarely uses generic categories. I would like to suggest that the minimal use of generic labels in the American publication can be explained by three factors. First, the general cultural preference in American life for the individual over the collective has a direct consequence in a preference for dealing with the individual text rather than groups of texts (i.e., genres, schools, etc.). Secondly, the fact that the American literary system does not have close, intimate relations with the traditional European literary heritage, including its division into classical genres, may also contribute to the rare use of generic labels. And, finally, the influential critical approach of „the New Critics,“ with its emphasis on the „text itself,“ has had a very powerful impact on American literary life, implying the examination of a literary work in and of itself and paying little attention to its place within a generic tradition and historical context.

Still, despite this general American tendency, it is instructive to see that one cannot avoid using generic classificatory terms altogether. Whereas the editors of the *NYTBR* do not use generic subdivisions in their presentation of the major review articles, they do make use of such generic terms in the „In Short“ section, where readers would appreciate immediate orientation. Thus, one can find headings such as „Three novellas“ (*NYTBR*, July 25, 1993) or „Thriller“ and „Southern Novel“ (*NYTBR*, August 29, 1993) that supply the necessary generic guidance.

In the British *TLS*, the use of generic labels is also most conspicuous in the „In Brief“ and „Listings“ sections. These sections are divided into subdivisions such as „Biography,“ „Fiction,“ „Poetry,“ „Theater,“ and the like. The Israeli *Sfarim* [Books] supplement of the daily newspaper *Ha'aretz* uses generic labels extensively, both for its major review articles and for the brief presentation of „New Books.“ Thus, each page of the supplement is given a title such as „Prose Fiction,“ „Poetry,“ „Children's Books,“ and, in the non-fiction category, we can find headings such as „Israeli History,“ „Literary Criticism“ and the like. It is interesting to note that despite the fact that the Israeli *Sfarim* is highly influenced by American models (including publishing a „Best Selling“ list), when it comes to generic

8 I used a randomly chosen selection of four issues of each of these literary supplements from 1993 and 1994.

division, it adopts a more „European“ approach that pays attention to generic divisions as an important means of orientation.

On the basis of a brief scrutiny of these three literary supplements, I would like to make two observations: (1) all three literary supplements tend to use broad generic categories, or „super-genres“ (e.g., „poetry,“ „fiction“), rather than specific genres or sub-genres (e.g., „sonnet,“ „historical novel“). This seems to indicate that contemporary readers and, by implication, also writers, are working in broader generic frameworks than they used to in the past; and (2) the classical tripartite global division of genre (i.e., drama, prose, poetry<sup>9</sup>) seems to be replaced in contemporary Western literary communities by a global dual division into „fiction“ and „non-fiction.“

## 5. Concluding Remarks

To conclude: the psychological tests that examine how generic categories are „stored“ in our mind, and the Book Review divisions of generic categories both reflect two semi-conscious, pre-theoretical systems of genre classification in the literary communicative situation, and these systems participate, in their turn, in shaping our concepts of literary genres. Findings of this sort represent, to my view, the big advantage of the empirical perspective. Instead of carrying on endless debates concerning the „real nature“ of literary genres, debates that often stem from a preconceived ideological stand, the empirical approach enables us to provide an informed and tested answers to questions such as What place do genres play in contemporary literary communities?

Finally, before ending my presentation, I would like to mention two additional areas in genre studies that call for the empirical approach. One has to do with examining how librarians make use of generic categories in their classificatory schema and in their practice. The other is a study of the ways book stores shelve their stock according to generic divisions. Since I do not as yet have definite findings in these two additional areas, let me leave the discussion of them for another opportunity. In the meantime, I hope I have been able to demonstrate the fact that the term „empirical,“ used with caution, can indeed suggest new perspectives for genre studies.

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9 For an excellent presentation of the transformations of the classical tripartite division of „super-genres“ in Western literary tradition, see Gerard Genette *The Architext* (Berkeley, 1992).