Genres and Conventions

‘Narrative form,’ the subject of the preceding chapters, often means something entirely different from the tools and techniques described in most of this text. To the question ‘What form is this narrative?’ an interlocutor may expect an answer that names a genre. It is an epic in twelve books. It is a mystery novel, with a gathering of characters in an English country house, one of whom will be revealed to be the murderer. It begins as a psychological thriller and halfway through turns into a farce. It is a space opera. It is the third and climactic part of a fantasy trilogy. These forms (or kinds, types, or subgenres) have often been left out of theoretical discussion of narrative form, as the undignified sub-literary cousins of ‘serious fiction’ which obey no formulas, as the irrelevant impingements of ancient traditions on up-to-date narratives, or as the too-contingent categories that confute the premise of structuralist ahistoricity. The rejection of the idea of genre often implies that genre impedes originality, that it imposes form onto an artist’s ideas, and that it is the enemy of innovation. Yet as Claudio Guillén observes, genre is but an ‘invitation’ to combine matter and form in ways that resemble previously achieved combinations (Literature as System, 109). Neither a strict recipe nor an exclusionary tradition, genre can thus be seen as Guillén recommends, as a problem-solving model, whose usefulness is demonstrated when real writers match matter and form (Literature as System, 110–11). The result of this process may in fact be the creation of an innovative narrative in a never-before-seen form. This chapter seeks to reintegrate the discussion of forms in narrative with narrative form. It does so by introducing in summary fashion the complex area of genre theory, as it pertains to narrative.

Terms

The pertinence of genre to the analysis of narrative, particularly in its prose fiction forms, does not always appear obvious to the critic.
confronting the ancient divisions of literature, often described as ‘the three genres.’ Where does the novel go among epic, drama, and lyric? There is something extremely unsatisfactory about placing novels, short stories, and novellas as subdivisions of ‘epic,’ and not only because of the hierarchical relation implied by the family tree. Genre theorists have proposed many alternative versions of this triad, sometimes revising it to include many subdivisions, and sometimes simplifying it to fewer categories. Narrative fits more easily in the contemporary version of ‘the genres,’ replicated in introductory literature courses and textbooks as poetry, drama, and fiction (film and nonfiction jostle at the edges). These categories do not sustain much scrutiny. Never mind that poetry can be fictional and narrative, that drama and fiction can be in verse, and that fiction need not take the form of prose narrative. Though these broad, tripartite divisions are often called ‘the genres,’ or even ‘the three genres,’ I avoid that usage here. They are also often called modes, a term which suggests their special differences of approach to representation, sometimes seen as inhering in their typical grammatical person, their implicit relations to the audience, or their fundamental subjects. Few critics take the task of dividing literature into intrinsic and mutually exclusive modes seriously these days, though a preoccupation with forms that blend modes suggests that the modes themselves retain some significance. For the student of narrative form it is sufficient to know that from the Renaissance and the Romantic periods, highly elaborated genre systems, some claiming descent from the classical theorists, gave pride of place to one exemplary kind of narrative, the epic poem.

Following Wellek and Warren in their Theory of Literature, I set these modes, or ‘ultimate’ genres, aside and use the term genre to mean ‘historical genre.’ That is, a genre means the name by which we recognize a group of texts dynamically linked through shared formal, stylistic, and thematic features. Typically, a genre persists through more than one literary period, though a period may be characterized by the efflorescence of a particular genre or related kinds. A single writer may be seen, in hindsight, to have inaugurated a genre, but to become a full-fledged genre, the cluster of qualities must appear in texts by different authors. Though genres overlap with one another in various different ways, through historical developments, shared techniques, and as a result of thematic similarities, they are often perceived as articulating ‘boundaries’ between those of their group and those of another grouping (the sets vary according to the system of generic classification in use). While these very systems of classification may appear to impose from above artificial separations into classes or families whose