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THE CITY TOPOS AS A SUBJECT IN THE GENRE OF URBAN FANTASY

This article is devoted to the study of the urban fantasy genre, in which the city acts not merely as a backdrop but as an active subject of the narrative, influencing the plot and character development. The central hypothesis of this work is that the city's subject nature is a key genre-defining identifier in the studied genre. The research relies on Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic method, which allows for the interpretation of urban elements in fantasy as symbolic constructions of the «Big Other» and the «Little Other». Within this approach, the city is viewed as a symbolic space that shapes the characters' identities and structures their interactions. In urban fantasy, the urban topos functions both as the Big Other, representing cultural and social structures, and as the Little Other, reflecting the characters' inner conflicts and processes of self-identification. The article also explores the historical development of the urban fantasy genre, from the works of Charles Baudelaire and Edgar Allan Poe to contemporary authors such as Neil Gaiman, Jim Butcher, and China Miéville. The contributions of these authors to the formation of the genre and the distinctive features of their works are analyzed. Special attention

is given to the specificity of Kazakhstani literature, where the urban fantasy genre is currently underdeveloped. It is noted that in Kazakhstani literature, urban fantasy is not yet represented in its pure form, presenting opportunities for future authors and researchers.

Keywords: city, urban fantasy, genre, subject, Big Other, Little Other, psychoanalysis.

Introduction

While in real life, the city is by definition devoid of subjectivity, as E. Malaya aptly notes: «even our generalization of its chaotic diversity of streets, houses, people, cars, dumps, yards, and so on into a single image is a distortion of reality» [1, p. 142], in the cultural context, cities are centers of symbolic interaction where cultural norms and human identities are formed and transformed. From a psychoanalytic perspective, this fact is explained by the city being a projection of the collective unconscious, reflecting the inner conflicts and desires of its inhabitants. For example, Sigmund Freud compared the structure of the city to the psychic architecture of a person, where historical layers overlap, creating a mutual dynamic of memory and experience [2, p. 55]. Jungian theories also use the image of the city to explain archetypes of the collective unconscious, where urban spaces become symbols of various aspects of the psyche and collective experience [3, p. 135].

There are several literary approaches that explore the city as a subject in a literary text: for example, within the study of spatial narrative, the city is considered an active element of the narrative, influencing the actions and psyche of the characters. An example is Michel de Certeau's theory, which in his work «The Practice of Everyday Life» emphasizes that urban spaces create specific conditions for interaction and everyday life, directly affecting the perception and behavior of characters [4, p. 91]. Mikhail Bakhtin, in his work «Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel», defines the chronotope as «the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships artistically expressed in literature» [5, p. 206]. According to Bakhtin, the chronotope is not just a backdrop for events but an active element that influences the plot dynamics and characters. In Bakhtin's theory, the city represents a specific spatiotemporal unity that forms certain social and cultural interactions. The urban chronotope is characterized by a high density of events, intensity of social connections, and diversity of cultural contexts. Michel Foucault, in his concept of heterotopia, describes special spaces that exist outside ordinary social norms and create alternative realities. Urban spaces in fantastic literature often function as heterotopias, where different cultures, classes, and identities intersect, making them crucial for the plot and character development [6, p. 13]. Furthermore, the city in literature can be used as a metaphor for exploring social

and psychological themes. For example, in James Joyce's «Ulysses», Dublin becomes a symbol of the human consciousness, where each district of the city reflects various aspects of the protagonist's inner world.

It is noteworthy that the image of the city in the discourse of transitional periods of culture, such as eras of social revolutions, wars, and post-colonial transformations, becomes a reflection of collective anxieties and hopes, a place for seeking identity and new meanings. However, in the context of Kazakhstani literature, urban themes have been insufficiently explored (as well as in Turkic literature in general, where traditional Turkic literature focuses more on rural and historical motifs). As Professor A. K. Ishanova rightly notes, «While in world and Russian literature, in cinema, music, and visual arts, the city has long occupied an important place as a way of special interpretation of various anthropological experiences, representations, and mytho-poetic associations, in Kazakh culture this deeper understanding of the metaphysics and poetics of the city is only beginning to be explored by researchers» [7, p. 72]. In this light, addressing urban themes represents an important step in rethinking Kazakhstani literature.

The interest of this article lies in the young and almost unexplored genre of urban fantasy in the context of domestic literary studies. Using examples of popular texts in this genre, we attempt to prove that the genre-defining category here is the presence of the city as a subject and to determine the genre's place in Kazakhstani literature.

Materials and methods

This article employs the method of chronological description and comparative method.

To identify the genre indicator of urban fantasy, we use Lacan's psychoanalytic approach. This method allows for the interpretation of urban elements in fantasy as symbolic constructions of the «Big Other» and the «Little Other». Through this scientific lens, the urban topos appears as a symbolic *subject* space that shapes the characters' identities and structures their interactions.

The study material includes texts of popular urban fantasy.

Results and discussion

In the genre of urban fantasy, cities often transcend their roles as mere settings, evolving into dynamic entities that shape and influence the narrative. As A. Goss points out, «Urban fantasy creates a dynamic interplay between the mundane and the extraordinary, often using the cityscape as a symbolic representation of cultural and social tensions. This duality allows for the exploration of identity, power, and the human experience within an urban environment» [8, p. 198]. This perspective is echoed by J. Williams, who argues that the city «often acts as a character in its own right, influencing the narrative through its architecture, history, and the cultural memory embedded within its streets» [9, p. 145]. Such treatment of urban spaces

enables the genre to delve into complex themes like identity formation and social dynamics, which are further explored through the concept of ‘urban mysticism.’ According to L. Novak, «urban mysticism in fantasy literature transforms the city into a site of spiritual and metaphysical experiences, challenging the boundaries between reality and the supernatural» [10, p. 87]. This mystical representation of cities is intricately tied to broader societal issues, as T. Zhang observes: «The city in urban fantasy serves as a microcosm of societal issues, often reflecting broader themes of alienation, gentrification, and the erosion of cultural identity through its portrayal of magical and fantastical elements» [11, p. 344]. Finally, R. Mitchell encapsulates the essence of urban fantasy by noting that it «blurs the lines between the real and the imagined, using the urban environment as a canvas to explore existential questions and the human condition within a fantastical framework» [12, p. 218].

Urban fantasy is a hybrid genre that emerged from the need to classify a specific series of novels, «Anita Blake: Vampire Hunter» by American writer Laurell K. Hamilton (1993), which broke traditional genre boundaries by disrupting ideas of stable genre constructs. As Susan Jackson notes in her article on urban fantasy, «The Anita Blake series served as a catalyst for reconsidering genre canons, giving authors more freedom to experiment» [13, p. 150]. The difficulty of genre definition in urban fantasy lies in its hybrid nature, combining elements of various literary traditions, making it challenging to clearly identify specific characteristics. Urban fantasy blends features of fantasy, realism, detective, and romance, creating a narrative. This genre mixing leads to variability in plots, characters, and themes, complicating the creation of a unified definition. The evolution of the genre and adaptation to cultural changes add new subgenres and forms, constantly altering its boundaries. Intertextual references to other genres and works create additional layers of meaning, complicating classification. Moreover, it is necessary to note that the perception and understanding of the genre depend on cultural and historical context. Genre definitions are usually not specific, for example, S. Ekman gives the following definition of the genre: «Urban fantasy, a genre of speculative fiction in which magic and monsters exist in a contemporary society, is characterized by its modern, often urban setting. This genre juxtaposes the ordinary and the magical, allowing readers to explore the interaction between modernity and the supernatural» [14, p. 24]. Such a definition, in our opinion, does not determine the specific characteristics of urban fantasy and can be applied to a wide range of fantasy subgenres. In our opinion, as a primary indicator of genre definition, we can propose the function of the city as a subject in the text.

To prove this thesis, let us turn to the history of the genre: the origins of the urban fantasy genre can be traced back to cultural and literary traditions laid out in the works of Charles Baudelaire and Edgar Allan Poe. Baudelaire’s Paris, depicted

in his famous poetry collection «*Les Fleurs du Mal*», represents a topos filled with metaphysical melancholy and decadent aesthetics, creating the foundation for the subsequent development of the urban fantasy genre. Baudelaire was one of the first to introduce the idea of the city as a subject. In Edgar Allan Poe's gothic tales, the city serves as a source of existential horror and psychological collision for the characters. For example, in his story «*The Man of the Crowd*», London is portrayed as a labyrinth filled with mysteries and hidden threats, leading the protagonist to a state of paranoia.

Since the early 1990s, the urban fantasy genre has been rapidly developing and gaining popularity, primarily in American literature (this is explained by the specifics of the urbanization process in the USA, the influence of postmodernist literary trends, and media support (video games, TV series)).

One of the key authors working in this direction is Neil Gaiman, whose novels «*Neverwhere*» and «*American Gods*» have become landmark works defining the genre's further development. Gaiman creates complex urban worlds where ancient myths intersect with American everyday reality.

Jim Butcher, with his series «*The Dresden Files*», has also made a significant contribution to the urban fantasy genre. His works, with elements of detective fiction, describe the adventures of wizard Harry Dresden in modern-day Chicago. The series explores themes of corruption, crime, and power, reflecting acute social issues. The city's streets, buildings, and even underground tunnels create a unique atmosphere where magical and criminal intrigues unfold. Chicago in «*The Dresden Files*» becomes a place where magical and real worlds intersect, affecting the characters' perception of reality.

Robert Jackson Bennett, in his novel «*City of Stairs*», presents a complex urban world filled with political intrigue and mystical elements. The fictional city of Bulikov, a former center of a great empire, serves not just as a backdrop but as an active element of the narrative, reflecting historical and cultural transformations. Bennett uses concepts from postcolonial theory and urban deconstruction, in this context, the city becomes a space of power and resistance, representing the dynamics of hegemony and subalternity.

Cassandra Clare, in her «*The Mortal Instruments*» series, creates an urban world of Shadowhunters, where magic and modernity coexist in the space of New York. The city functions as a metaphorical and metonymic field, influencing the characters' identities and interactions. Clare uses the urban context to analyze themes of belonging and social mobility, applying concepts from spatial theory and the phenomenology of place.

China Miéville is one of the most influential authors in the urban fantasy genre. In «*Perdido Street Station*», Miéville creates the fictional city of New Crobuzon,

whose topos functions as Foucault's heterotopia, where various social, cultural, and political spaces coexist and interact, often in conflict with one another.

To expand our genre hypothesis, let us turn to Lacan's theory. The city as a *subject* in urban fantasy can be analyzed through Lacan's concepts of the «Big Other» (l'Autre) and the «Little Other» (le petit autre), which allows for a deeper understanding of the genre's specificity and the symbolic architecture of the narrative in the studied genre. The Little Other and the «Big Other» in Lacan's theory are also *subjects*, as they actively participate in the process of forming the individual's identity and consciousness. The «Little Other» is other people or images with whom the *subject* interacts and through which they become aware of themselves. The «Big Other» represents the symbolic order, including language, culture, and social norms, created and maintained by the collective consciousness of many *subjects*. Thus, the *subject* in Lacan's philosophy and psychoanalysis represents the unity of individuality and symbolic structure. In the context of urban fantasy, the city plays the role of the «Big Other», creating a symbolic space that forms the rules, norms, and meanings that structure the characters' lives. The urban environment, with all its social, cultural, and historical aspects, becomes the context through which the characters become aware of their roles, desires, and identities. For example, the city may be governed by its own set of rules and laws, determining the possible actions and interactions of the characters. These symbolic structures distinguish urban fantasy from other forms of fantasy, where the symbolic order may be represented by mythological or natural elements.

Thus, the city as the Big Other sets the framework and boundaries for the narrative. For example, in Gaiman's «Neverwhere», the underground London, London Below, is an alien world with its own rules and norms. For the protagonist, Richard Mayhew, this city is the «Big Other», a structure dictating its laws and transforming his identity. In Clare's «City of Bones», the New York of the Shadowhunters' world is full of secrets and magic. The city acts as the Big Other, establishing its rules for characters like Clary Fray. New York becomes a space where heroes confront foreign forces and structures, shaping their destinies.

The «Little Other» in Lacan's theory represents reflection and interaction at the level of interpersonal relationships, through which the subject becomes aware of their «self» in relation to the «other». In urban fantasy, this reflection can be embodied in the characters and their relationships with the city as an active and living subject. The city as the «Little Other» provides the characters with a mirror reflection of their own fears, desires, and identities. Interaction with the city, its streets, buildings, and inhabitants becomes a way of self-knowledge and awareness of their role in the world. The city, acting as the «Little Other», creates specific social and emotional interactions that reflect the characters' internal conflicts and dynamics. For example, hidden streets or mysterious places in the city can

symbolize the characters' repressed fears or desires, forcing them to confront their own demons. This interaction and reflection through the city distinguish urban fantasy from other genres, where the «Little Other» may be represented by natural or mythological beings. For example, in Gaiman's «American Gods», the town of Cairo, Illinois, and other small towns across the USA, where key events unfold, become spaces that the hero Shadow transforms during his journey. These towns reflect his personal development, becoming part of his inner world. In Bennett's «City of Stairs», the city of Bulikov symbolizes complex history and politics. The main character, Shara Thivani, interacts with this city, uncovering its secrets and changing its fate. Bulikov becomes part of her identity, transforming her and revealing her inner world. Thus, we observe that in the presented texts of urban fantasy, the city functions as an active subject of the narrative.

The city often serves as an active *subject* in the texts of contemporary Kazakhstani authors, such as Odegov, Kalaus, Serebryansky, and others. As E. Shmakova notes in her article on the «Almaty text»: «The spiritual and cultural component of the urban text, based on the opposition of urban topoi of the past and the present, allows the author not only to show the changes occurring with the city and people but also to express their own worldview of the changes taking place» [15, p. 22]. However, in the context of Kazakhstani fantasy (it is worth noting that historical fantasy, low fantasy, children's fantasy, etc., are extremely popular subgenres in contemporary domestic literature), the subgenre of urban fantasy is practically not represented in its pure form: the city, as a rule, plays the role of an object, a backdrop for the unfolding plot. For example, in the texts of Z. Nauryzbayeva and L. Kalaus about the adventures of Batu, modern Almaty serves as the starting point for the adventures of the boy Batu and his friends. This is a place where children live their ordinary lives, facing everyday problems such as studying and relationships with other children, as well as encountering mythological characters. During their adventures, Batu and his friends visit Astana and important historical and cultural sites such as the Degelen nuclear test site and the Konyr Aulie cave. While urban topoi are present in the texts about Batu as important elements that help reveal cultural, historical, and mythological aspects of Kazakh culture, they still serve as objects and remain on the periphery of the narrative. Similarly, in B. Momysuly and Yu. Serebryansky's «Black Star», the celestial city of Tengri, although presented as a «locus amoenus», does not influence the actions and self-awareness of the characters or the course of the plot. All events occur solely through the actions of the characters.

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Conclusions

The urban topos in urban fantasy plays the role of a *subject*, which, being both the Big and Little Other in Lacan's terms, shapes and directs the development of the characters. The Big Other symbolizes cultural and social structures/norms, while the Little Other actualizes the characters' internal conflicts and processes of self-identification. Thus, the city as a *subject* creates a symbolic space that structures the characters and serves as the driving force of the plot. Based on this hypothesis, we propose considering the presence of the city (whether fictional or real) as a *subject* of the plot as a genre indicator. In Kazakhstani literature, according to our observations, the urban fantasy genre is not yet represented in its pure form, where the city would play the role of a full-fledged *subject*. This situation opens up broad prospects for future authors and researchers. Moreover, the development of this genre in domestic literature can not only enrich the literary palette but also help form a holistic and multifaceted image of Kazakhstani cities. As N. L. Nabilkina rightly notes: «The cultural image of the city consists of many components. The literary component is one of the most important, linking these aspects together. It allows presenting the national character, way of life, urban environment, and the 'soul' of the city» [16, p. 59]. Urban fantasy provides rich material for research, and its unique ability to combine various genre elements makes it one of the promising directions in contemporary literary thought.

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УРБАНИСТИК ТОПОС КАЛАЛЫҚ ФЭНТЕЗИ ЖАНРЫНЫҢ СУБЪЕКТІСІ РЕТІНДЕ

Мақалада қалалық фэнтези жанры зерттелген, мұнда қала тек фон ретінде ғана емес, сюжетке, кейіпкерлердің дамуына әсер ететін баяндаудың белсенді субъектісі ретінде көрінеді. Жұмыстың негізгі гипотезасы – фэнтези жанрында қаланың субъектілік болмысы басты жанрлық айқындауыш болып саналады деген тұжырым.

Зерттеу жұмысы Ж. Лаканның психоаналитикалық әдісіне сүйенеді, бұл әдіс бойынша фэнтезидің урбанистикалық элементтерін «Үлкен Бөгде» мен «Кіші Бөгденің» символдық құрылымы деп қарастырады. Осы ұғым аясында қала кейіпкерлердің сәйкестігін қалыптастырып, олардың өзара ықпалдастығын қамтамасыз ететін символдық кеңістік ретінде көрініс береді. Қалалық фэнтезидағы урбанистік топос мәдени және әлеуметтік құрылымдардың көрінісі болып саналатын Үлкен Бөгденің де, қаһармандардың ішкі қайшылықтары мен өзін-өзі айқындау үдерісін бейнелейтін Кіші Бөгденің де ролін атқарады.

Сондай-ақ мақалада Шарль Бодлер мен Эдгар Аллан По шығармашылығынан бастап, қазіргі Нил Гейман, Джим Бутчер мен Чайна Мьевильге дейінгі авторлардың шығармаларындағы қалалық фэнтези жанрының тарихи дамуы талданған. Осы авторлардың жанрды қалыптастыруға қосқан үлесі мен олардың шығармаларының ерекшелігі зерттелген.

Мақалада қалалық фэнтези жанры аса жақсы дами қоймаған қазақстандық әдебиеттің ерекшелігіне баса назар аударылған. Автор қазақстандық әдебиетте қалалық фэнтези жанрының таза

сипатта көрініс таппағанын атап көрсеткен, бұл болашақ авторлар мен зерттеушілерге таптырмас жаңа мүмкіндік.

Кілтті сөздер: қала, қалалық фэнтези, жанр, субъект, Үлкен Бөгде, Кіші Бөгде, психоанализ.

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УРБАНИСТИЧЕСКИЙ ТОПОС КАК СУБЪЕКТ В ЖАНРЕ ГОРОДСКОГО ФЭНТЕЗИ

Статья посвящена исследованию жанра городского фэнтези, в котором город выступает не просто фоном, а активным субъектом повествования, влияющим на сюжет и развитие персонажей. Основной гипотезой работы является утверждение, что субъектная природа города является ключевым жанроопределяющим идентификатором в изучаемом жанре.

Исследование опирается на психоаналитический метод Ж. Лакана, позволяющий интерпретировать урбанистические элементы фэнтези как символические конструкции «Большого Другого» и «Малого Другого». В рамках данного подхода город рассматривается как символическое пространство, формирующее идентичность персонажей и структурирующее их взаимодействие. Урбанистический тоpos в городском фэнтези выполняет роль как Большого Другого, представляющего культурные и социальные структуры, так и Малого Другого, отражающего внутренние конфликты и процесс самоидентификации героев.

В статье также рассматривается историческое развитие жанра городского фэнтези, начиная с творчества Шарля Бодлера и Эдгара Аллана По и заканчивая произведениями современных авторов,

таких как Нил Гейман, Джим Бутчер и Чайна Мьевиль. Анализируется вклад этих авторов в формирование жанра и особенности их произведений.

Особое внимание уделяется специфике казахстанской литературы, где жанр городского фэнтези на данный момент не достаточно развит. Отмечается, что в казахстанской литературе жанр городского фэнтези пока не представлен в чистом виде, что открывает перспективы для будущих авторов и исследователей.

Ключевые слова: город, городское фэнтези, жанр, субъект, Большой Другой, Малый Другой, психоанализ.

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