

Romantasy: The Emergence of a New Genre

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ABSTRAKT

Romantasy je relativně nový pojem, ke kterému zatím nebyla vytvořena akademicky podložená definice. Tato bakalářská práce si proto klade za cíl charakterizovat základní znaky tohoto žánru prostřednictvím analýzy tří děl, která jsou do něj řazeny. Na základě jejich společných rysů vyvozuje, že žánr se vyznačuje specifickou dějovou strukturou, jež je zasazena do sekundárního světa. Protagonistkami jsou výhradně ženy, které se vyznačují vnitřní silou, nikoliv fyzickou. Jejich romantické protějšky jsou mužské mravně nejednoznačné postavy. *Romantasy* rovněž inklinuje k temnějším tématům a pracuje s určitými tropy. V rámci *romantasy* hrají *fantasy* i *romance* rovnocennou roli. Oba žánry jsou vzájemně propojené do té míry, že jejich oddělení by narušilo celistvost příběhu. *Romantasy* je tedy vznikající hybridní žánr, který se svým duálním zaměřením vymyká tradičnímu vymezení romantické a *fantasy* literatury.

Klíčová slova: literatura, *romantasy*, *fantasy*, *romance*, žánr, *Dvůr trnů a růží*, *Zmije a křídla noci*, *Čtvrté křídlo*, Sarah J. Maas, Carissa Broadbent, Rebecca Yarros

ABSTRACT

Romantasy is a relatively new term for which no academic definition has yet been developed. Therefore, this thesis aims to characterize the features of *romantasy* through an analysis of three novels in the genre. Based on their common features, it concludes that *romantasy* is characterized by a specific narrative structure set in a secondary world. The protagonists are exclusively women who are characterized by inner strength rather than physical one, while their romantic counterparts are male, morally ambiguous characters. *Romantasy* inclines towards darker themes and uses certain tropes. In *romantasy*, *fantasy* and *romance* are both vital. They are intertwined to the extent that separating them would disrupt the integrity of the story. Thus, *romantasy* is an emerging hybrid genre that, with its dual focus, defies the traditional delineation of *romance* and *fantasy* literature.

Keywords: literature, *romantasy*, *fantasy*, *romance*, genre, *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, *The Serpent and the Wings of Night*, *Fourth Wing*, Sarah J. Maas, Carissa Broadbent, Rebecca Yarros

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, romantasy has gained popularity among readers worldwide. Even though romance and fantasy have long coexisted, the term *romantasy* emerged only in the past few years. Despite its growing popularity and commercial success, romantasy remains an underexplored topic in academia. Moreover, as romantasy appeared only recently, there is a lack of academic sources, making it necessary to analyze romantasy through a combination of theoretical frameworks on different genres and published primary texts.

This thesis analyses three romantasy novels: *A Court of Thorns and Roses* (2015) by Sarah J. Maas, *The Serpent and the Wings of Night* (2022) by Carissa Broadbent, and *Fourth Wing* (2023) by Rebecca Yarros. Sarah J. Maas is one of the best-selling authors of the romantasy genre worldwide. She published numerous series, all of which were met with tremendous success, including *Throne of Glass* (2012–2018), *A Court of Thorns and Roses* (2015–present), and *Crescent City* (2020–present). She sold over 38 million copies in English and has published her books in 38 languages.¹ Her novels have been constant winners of the Goodreads Choice Award – from 2015 to 2018 her books placed first in the young adult fantasy genre, from 2020 to 2022 in fantasy, and in 2024 in romantasy (this genre was added to the awards in 2023 on Goodreads).²

Rebecca Yarros is an American author who wrote over twenty novels, including *In the Likely Event* (2023) and *The Emphyrean* series (2023 to present), for which she is mostly known.³ The first book of *The Emphyrean* series, *Fourth Wing*, won the Annual Goodreads Choice Award in the romantasy genre in 2023 and the TikTok Book Awards for Book of the Year in 2024.⁴

Carissa Broadbent is an American author who claims to write fantasy novels with a mix of romance. She published two series, the *Crowns of Nyaxia* and the *War of Lost Hearts*.⁵ The first book in the *Crowns of Nyaxia* series, *The Serpent and the Wings of Night*, has been well received by critics despite not having won any major literary awards. According to

¹ “About,” Sarah J. Maas, accessed December 24, 2024, <https://sarahjmaas.com/about/>.

² “Readers’ Favorite Books of 2024,” Goodreads Choice Awards 2024, Goodreads, accessed January 2, 2025, <https://www.goodreads.com/choiceawards/best-books-2024>.

³ “About,” Rebecca Yarros, accessed December 24, 2024, <https://rebeccayarros.com/about>.

⁴ “Readers’ Favorite Books of 2023,” Goodreads Choice Awards 2023, Goodreads, accessed January 2, 2025, <https://www.goodreads.com/choiceawards/best-books-2023>.; “Congratulating the Winners of the TikTok Book Awards UK and Ireland 2024,” TikTok, accessed December 24, 2024, <https://newsroom.tiktok.com/en-gb/congratulating-the-winners-of-the-tiktok-book-awards-uk-and-ireland-2024>.

⁵ “About,” Carissa Broadbent, accessed December 24, 2024, <https://carissabroadbentbooks.com/about/>.

Macmillan Publishers, the novel earned praise from journals such as Publishers Weekly, which recommended it as a must-read for fans of romantasy, and Library Journal, which described it as a “haunting, action-packed political fantasy with a doomed romance at its center.”⁶

This thesis aims to identify the features of romantasy through these novels as they adequately represent the genre.⁷ They were chosen for their popularity, narrative structures, and thematic elements. *A Court of Thorns and Roses* with *Fourth Wing* are both award-winning romantasy novels, therefore suitable for analysis as typical representatives of the genre. In contrast, *The Serpent and the Wings of Night*, which has not received any awards yet, is ideal for an identification of further aspects of the genre.

In order to identify the features of romantasy, the genre theory is introduced first as it is crucial to provide a baseline for further discussion of specific genres and sub-genres. Since romantasy does not have an agreed-upon academic definition, exploring the terms *young adult* and *new adult* alongside genres of fantasy and romance, their features, and some of their sub-genres is necessary. Romance and fantasy have a long tradition. Thus, a brief dive into their history is essential for highlighting important milestones in their development, which allows for a deeper understanding of how genres and sub-genres evolve. It also serves for discovering some features of the genres and clarifies how romantasy came into existence. Then, a plot summary of selected novels is required, as each has a different plotline and is set in a different world with different rules. These summaries serve as a starting point for identifying characteristics of each novel alongside the genre theory. The elements of romance, fantasy, their sub-genres, themes, and tropes are identified and explored in selected novels. Consequently, the features of romantasy are identified based on the novels' commonalities.

⁶ “The Serpent & the Wings of Night,” Macmillan Publishers, accessed April 25, 2024, <https://us.macmillan.com/books/9781250343178/theserpentthewingsofnight/>.

⁷ See, e.g., Sughnen Yongo, “25 Swoon-Worthy Romantasy Novels,” *Forbes*, January 11, 2025, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/entertainment/article/romantic-fantasy-novels/>, or “Romantasy Books,” Goodreads, accessed April 25, 2024, <https://www.goodreads.com/shelf/show/romantasy>.

1 RELEVANT GENRES

This section discusses the term *genre* and its formal, thematic, and rhetorical dimensions. These dimensions clarify that genres and sub-genres are fluid, ever-changing, as each has its audience, who expect specific themes, tropes, narrative structure, and format, which is essential for recognizing a particular genre or sub-genre. These expectations change with time, and so do the genres and sub-genres. Sub-genres serve further to specify the thematic or formal content of the genre.⁸ As such, genres and sub-genres are not separate categories but intervene with and influence one another. The terms *young adult* and *new adult*, alongside fantasy, romance, and their sub-genres, are further addressed.

According to John Frow, “genres define a set of expectations that guide our engagement with texts; these expectations are structured as cues which frame a text in particular ways and which may take a particular material form.”⁹ Understanding genre as a dynamic process rather than a rigid classification allows for a better appreciation of how texts function. Genres are not static but change according to the audience’s expectations.¹⁰ Frow defines genre as “a more specific organisation of texts with thematic, rhetorical, and formal dimensions.”¹¹ These dimensions are not separate but overlap.

The formal organisation of a genre, says Frow, is made up of both material and immaterial elements. Material elements refer to the physical or linguistic form the text takes – its length, whether it is spoken or written, in verse or prose, and how it uses grammar, syntax, sound, rhythm, and visual layout. On the other hand, immaterial elements, such as time, space, and enunciative position, shape how a genre presents its story or information and how it structures meaning and engages its audience.¹²

Frow comments that the thematic dimension represents the “shaped human experience”¹³ that it highlights and gives meaning to. This is conveyed through recurring themes, symbols, and narrative patterns. Thematic content includes types of actions, characters, and their significance. Actions can be historical events, personal conflicts, adventures, or others. Each genre has its typical set of character types, which, through their actions, shape the genre’s world with its “organization of space and time and a particular

⁸ John Frow, *Genre*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2015), 73.

⁹ Frow, *Genre*, 133.

¹⁰ Frow, *Genre*, 150.

¹¹ Frow, *Genre*, 73.

¹² Frow, *Genre*, 81–82.

¹³ Frow, *Genre*, 83.

mode and degree of plausibility.”¹⁴ Every world is specific to its genre, following its unique conventions and expectations.¹⁵

Frow argues that a genre’s rhetorical structure refers to how communication is organised between senders and receivers in a certain context. It affects the power dynamics, tone, and credibility in communication and determines whether a text presents information as fact, opinion, fiction, or truth, guiding how the audience interprets it. This process also involves modality, which shapes how words are framed and understood by expressing certainty, obligation, possibility, or desire.¹⁶

1.1 Young Adult and New Adult

The terms *Young Adult* and *New Adult* are not genres per se; rather, they serve as categories defined by their audience and themes.¹⁷ According to Michael Cart, Young Adult literature targets readers aged 12 to 18; however, estimates suggest that 65–70% of all Young Adult book sales were made to adults. This crossover readership has led to the creation of New Adult, which focuses on readers in the age group of 19–25.¹⁸ The depiction of sex in Young Adult literature often sparks controversy. However, Cart points out that portraying sexuality is essential since it reflects the reality that teenagers are sexual beings whose stories deserve a nonjudgmental representation in Young Adult literature.¹⁹

1.2 Fantasy

Defining fantasy presents few challenges due to its broad scope and frequent overlap with science fiction and horror genres. M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham describe fantasy as a genre that does not attempt to justify the fictional world through scientific principles. Instead, it rejoices in the impossible (e.g., magic, mythic creatures, etc.) and exists in an imaginative, invented world.²⁰ John Clute and John Grant propose that a “fantasy text is a self-coherent narrative. When set in this world, it tells a story which is impossible in the

¹⁴ Frow, *Genre*, 83.

¹⁵ Frow, *Genre*, 83.

¹⁶ Frow, *Genre*, 82.

¹⁷ Michael Cart, *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: Neal-Schuman, 2016), 65–67.

¹⁸ Cart, *Young Adult Literature*, ix–x.

¹⁹ Cart, *Young Adult Literature*, 185.

²⁰ M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 11th ed. (Stamford, CT: Cengage Learning, 2015), 355.

world as we perceive it; when set in an otherworld, that otherworld will be impossible, though stories set there may be possible in its terms.”²¹

However, Marek Oziwicz argues that fantasy is not simply a standalone genre, but a part of a meta-genre called *speculative fiction*, a super category of all genres that depart from consensus reality. In this sense, it is synonymous with *the fantastic*. This super category includes fantasy, horror, science fiction, their derivatives, hybrids, and cognate genres.²² As such, speculative fiction allows fantasy to coexist with other genres, enabling expansive exploration of human experience (such as morality, trauma, emotions) in unrealistic worlds.

These definitions reveal that fantasy is a vast genre connecting multiple elements. At its core, fantasy depicts realities that differ from reality yet remain self-coherent. Such realities can be set in a *primary world*, a world similar to the real one, or in a fully imagined *secondary world* and may or may not include magic, mythical beings, or supernatural systems, but they abide by their own internal logic, laws, and rules. This is all part of the world-building process.²³

1.3 Romance

Romance Writers of America, an association that calls itself “the voice of romance writers,”²⁴ states every romance must consist of “a central love story and emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending.”²⁵ Kristin Ramsdell defines romance as “a love story in which the central focus is on the development and satisfactory resolution of the love relationship between the two main characters, written in such a way as to provide the reader with some degree of vicarious emotional participation in the courtship process.”²⁶ The satisfactory ending is referred to as *happily ever after*.²⁷ According to Pamela Regis, the “romance novel is a work of prose fiction that tells the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines.”²⁸

²¹ John Clute and John Grant, *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1999), 338.

²² Marek Oziwicz, “Speculative Fiction,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*, March 29, 2017, 1, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.78>.

²³ J.R.R. Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories,” in *Tolkien On Fairy-Stories: Expanded Edition, With Commentary and Notes*, ed. Verlyn Flieger and Douglas A. Anderson (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008), 52.

²⁴ “About the Romance Genre,” Romance Writers of America, accessed March 15, 2025, <https://www.rwa.org/the-romance-genre>.

²⁵ Romance Writers of America, “About the Romance Genre.”

²⁶ Kristin Ramsdell, *Romance Fiction: A Guide to the Genre*, 2nd ed. (Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2012), 6.

²⁷ Ramsdell, *Romance Fiction*, 4.

²⁸ Pamela Regis, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 14.

Taken together, it can be said that romance revolves around two or more characters who fall in love with each other. The story focuses on the development of their relationship with a *happily ever after* ending, and the reader must be able to emotionally connect with the protagonist's feelings. Other elements of romance are not restricted. Ken Gelder notes that although romance often follows the same formula, it is highly diverse and consists of many sub-genres, such as gothic romance, paranormal romance, young adult romance, and many others.²⁹

1.4 Sub-genres of Fantasy and Romance

Romance and fantasy have existed for centuries, long before these terms were established. Thus, many of their sub-genres appeared, changed, evolved, or merged throughout time. As such, these sub-genres are often intertwined or overlap with each other, blurring the lines between them. Given the long history of fantasy and romance and their numerous sub-genres, this thesis focuses only on the most relevant sub-genres, namely high fantasy and dark fantasy.

Some define high, epic, and quest fantasy as distinct categories, while others use them interchangeably.³⁰ Weronika Łaszkiewicz defines high/epic fantasy as a sub-genre that centers on heroes in an imaginary secondary world. These heroes typically face an evil force, with the world's safety at stake. The plot often includes minor quests leading to a final goal.³¹ W. A. Senior comments that quest/epic fantasy revolves around a hero's journey, during which the protagonist, who often starts as an ordinary person, grows as they face challenges in a secondary world. The choices of protagonists in pivotal moments shape the fate of many. The journey is often driven by the need to save the world, achieve a goal, or obtain/destroy an object.³²

According to Clute and Grant, *dark fantasy* and *gothic fantasy* are terms often used interchangeably. Dark fantasy evokes specific emotions in readers, such as discomfort, dread, or unease. It includes dark themes and monstrous beings, but it is not merely horror

²⁹ Ken Gelder, *Popular Fiction: The Logics and Practices of a Literary Field* (London: Routledge, 2004), 44–49.

³⁰ Weronika Łaszkiewicz, *Fantasy Literature and Christianity: A Study of the Mistborn, Coldfire, Fionavar Tapestry and Chronicles of Thomas Covenant Series* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2018), EPUB e-book, chap. 1.

³¹ Łaszkiewicz, *Fantasy Literature and Christianity*, chap. 1.

³² W. A. Senior, "Quest Fantasies," in *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, ed. Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 190.

set in a fantasy context, as the rules of that world shape the horror elements.³³ Roz Kaveney argues that the protagonist usually believes they are living in a mundane world but learns otherwise through transformation or the discovery of new knowledge. The protagonist adapts, copes, survives, endures, and continues to live with the knowledge or transformation of any kind, which may lead to wisdom or enlightenment. A “sense of the liminal is central and crucial and foregrounded”³⁴ in dark fantasy, meaning the characters often live on the border of life and death, reality and fantasy, delusions and truths.

³³ Clute and Grant, *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, 249.

³⁴ Roz Kaveney, “Dark Fantasy and Paranormal Romance,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, ed. Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 214–218.

2 HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Fantasy and romance have existed for centuries, resulting in a rich and complex history. This section highlights only the most significant milestones and events from the past, while also clarifying the emergence of romantasy.

2.1 History of Fantasy

The development of fantasy as a distinct genre is relatively recent. However, its origins can be traced back to ancient storytelling traditions. Before the scientific revolution, supernatural elements were accepted as part of religious and cultural understanding, making early narratives rich with magic, gods, and otherworldly creatures.³⁵ As Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn point out, although earlier works about the fantastical, such as *The Odyssey*, *Beowulf*, or *The Midsummer Night's Dream*, influenced the later development, fantasy as a genre began to emerge centuries later.³⁶

It was not until the early 19th century that efforts to consciously create narratives that defy reality appeared. The development of fantasy literature began with Gothic and mythological elements adapted into American settings as writers like Charles Brockden Brown and Washington Irving used Gothic and fantastic elements in their narratives, grounding them in real American landscapes.³⁷ Edgar Allan Poe deepened the genre's exploration of death, madness, and premature burial, providing the foundation for psychological horror and grotesque fantasy.³⁸ As Rosemary Jackson emphasizes, early fantasy often exposed hidden cultural fears, expressing repressed anxieties through unreliable narrators like Poe's and eerie, haunted settings.³⁹ After the Civil War, fantasy turned toward Western-themed adventure in dime novels, while L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900) marked an early success in children's fantasy, combining escapism with commentary on real-world challenges.⁴⁰

According to Maria Nikolajeva, children's fantasy emerged during Romanticism, when childhood was recognized as a stage in life. Works like E. T. A. Hoffmann's *The Nutcracker*

³⁵ Clute and Grant, *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, 338.

³⁶ Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 3.

³⁷ Paul Kincaid, "American Fantasy 1820–1950," in *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, ed. Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 36–37.

³⁸ Kincaid, "American Fantasy 1820–1950," 37–38.

³⁹ Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 1981) 23.

⁴⁰ Kincaid, "American Fantasy 1820–1950," 42.

and the Mouse King (1816) and Carlo Collodi's *The Adventures of Pinocchio* (1881), despite their moral complexity, were aimed at children and intended for their education and socialization. The issue of power was a theme central in earlier children's fantasy, exemplified by Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1865), where Alice loses her sense of logic and control over her body.⁴¹ Edith Nesbit is often credited for establishing modern fantasy for children by integrating magic into the everyday world, while J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* (1911) is an example of early secondary world fantasy, which highlights the costs of clinging to eternal childhood.⁴²

At the beginning of the 20th century, writers like H. P. Lovecraft and Edgar Rice Burroughs diversified the fantastic into weird fiction and adventure. Specifically, weird fiction began with Robert W. Chambers's *The King in Yellow* (1895), yet Lovecraft popularized it.⁴³ The modern fantasy as a genre emerged with J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–1955) established many characteristics of the genre and high fantasy alongside the secondary world as an independent, internally consistent reality.⁴⁴ According to Clute and Grant, Tolkien's narrative follows a structure marked by *thinning*, the decline of the secondary world. This deterioration creates a sense of *wrongness* that demands *healing*, which is the purpose of the *quest*. Throughout the journey, characters reach *recognition* and achieve *eucatastrophe*, a sudden joyous turn.⁴⁵ Tolkien proposed that fantasy offers *recovery* by renewing the reader's perception of the world, *escape* by offering mental freedom from the burdens of reality, and *consolation* by providing emotional comfort, along with *eucatastrophe*.⁴⁶

C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* brought mythic and Christian themes to a wide audience. His works combine allegory and moral depth, which helped to shape fantasy as a genre capable of addressing spiritual and philosophical questions.⁴⁷ Together, Tolkien and Lewis laid the foundation for both the narrative forms and thematic structures of fantasy.

⁴¹ Maria Nikolajeva, "The Development of Children's Fantasy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, ed. Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 50–51.

⁴² Nikolajeva, "The Development of Children's Fantasy," 51–52.

⁴³ Kincaid, "American Fantasy 1820–1950," 44.

⁴⁴ Edward James, "Tolkien, Lewis and the Explosion of Genre Fantasy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, ed. Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 64.

⁴⁵ Clute and Grant, *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, 338–339.

⁴⁶ Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," 67–75.

⁴⁷ James, "Tolkien, Lewis and the Explosion of Genre Fantasy," 70–71.

While many authors adapted Tolkien's model, critics like Michael Moorcock reacted against it by emphasizing moral ambiguity and bleak aesthetics.⁴⁸ By the 1970s, the readers who had grown up with Tolkien and Lewis were still reading fantasy as adults. Publishers realized that "fantasy had emerged as a commercial and recognizable genre, [and] the fantasy boom began."⁴⁹ At the same time, the horror boom started with Stephen King's *Carrie*. As horror incorporated elements of the fantastic, new hybrid genres like dark fantasy and paranormal romance began to emerge by the early 2000s.⁵⁰

In the 21st century, fantasy established itself as a major force in global popular culture, driven by the success of *Harry Potter*, *The Lord of the Rings* films, and *Twilight*. These works brought fantasy into the mainstream, showcasing the genre's commercial potential and cultural influence across various media platforms.⁵¹ Fantasy has diversified in form, through new sub-genres and narrative structures, and voice, by embracing a wider range of cultural perspectives.⁵² Fantasy's rise in the 21st century is marked by its significant presence in films and TV adaptations, contributing to the genre's continued cultural relevance and global appeal.

2.2 History of Romance

Although the term *romance* has its origins in antiquity, its meaning varies across different historical periods. The direct predecessors of contemporary romances are often considered to be from the 18th century, particularly with the publication of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740),⁵³ who has long been regarded as the first English romance writer. His focus on a single action, courtship, rather than the episodic plots of earlier novels, brought romance into prominence.⁵⁴ While Richardson helped shape the structural style of romances, he built upon foundations established by earlier women writers.⁵⁵

⁴⁸ James, "Tolkien, Lewis and the Explosion of Genre Fantasy," 72–73.

⁴⁹ James, "Tolkien, Lewis and the Explosion of Genre Fantasy," 73.

⁵⁰ James, "Tolkien, Lewis and the Explosion of Genre Fantasy," 73–74.; Kaveney, "Dark Fantasy and Paranormal Romance," 214.

⁵¹ James, "Tolkien, Lewis and the Explosion of Genre Fantasy," 76–77.

⁵² Nnedi Okorafor, "Writers of Colour," in *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, ed. Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 188.

⁵³ Ramsdell, *Romance Fiction*, 6.

⁵⁴ Regis, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, 63.

⁵⁵ Jay Dixon, "History of English Romance Novels, 1621–1975," in *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*, ed. Jayashree Kamblé, Eric Murphy Selinger, and Hsu-Ming Teo (London: Routledge, 2021), 30.

Elizabeth Rowe (1674–1737) wrote epistolary novels from which *Pamela* was inspired, while Susannah Dobson (1742–1795) reintroduced medieval chivalry and helped legitimize the romance genre.⁵⁶ Eliza Haywood's (1693–1756) amatory fiction, often narrated from a woman's point of view, features heroines who pursue desire but are punished by society through silencing, death, or confinement. These themes, women's conflict between public behavior and individual desire, and the societal roles forced upon them, continued in Frances Burney's *Evelina* (1778) and Charlotte Smith's *Emmeline* (1788), where the theme of brother-protector as an ideal man appeared in contrast to the passionate but dangerous suitor.⁵⁷ At the same time, the gothic novel emerged with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) and later Anne Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794).⁵⁸

In the 19th century, historical romance gained popularity with Walter Scott's *Waverley* (1814). These novels blended romantic plots with national history and adventure.⁵⁹ Early gothic romances often featured heroines struggling to preserve their virtue in eerie, unreal settings. This genre remained popular into the Regency period and was satirized, but also defended, in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1817).⁶⁰ Maria Edgeworth influenced the domestic novel of manners by focusing on family life and women's equality in marriage, emphasizing love over duty and reason, a theme explored in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813).⁶¹ Regis points out that *Pride and Prejudice* contains key romance narrative elements: a flawed society, the meeting, the barrier, the attraction, the declaration, the point of ritual death, the recognition, and the betrothal, essential to modern romance structure.⁶²

The domestic novel branched into governess novels exemplified by Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), social problem novels such as Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1854–1855), and religious romances like Charlotte Yonge's *The Heir of Redclyffe* (1853), where the hero's death symbolized spiritual triumph.⁶³ Sensation novels such as *The Woman in White* (1860), *East Lynne* (1861), and *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) featured heroines facing betrayals and moral dilemmas, often ending in death or madness, while exploring themes of insanity, identity theft, illness, and family secrets, revealing the dangers of Victorian

⁵⁶ Dixon, "History of English Romance Novels," 30–31.

⁵⁷ Dixon, "History of English Romance Novels," 31.

⁵⁸ Ramsdell, *Romance Fiction*, 6–7.

⁵⁹ Ramsdell, *Romance Fiction*, 7.

⁶⁰ Ramsdell, *Romance Fiction*, 7.

⁶¹ Dixon, "History of English Romance Novels," 32.

⁶² Regis, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, 31–38.

⁶³ Dixon, "History of English Romance Novels," 32.

marriages. Toward the century's end, New Woman novels challenged the domestic novels, presenting heroines who rejected marriage and sought autonomy.⁶⁴

In the early 20th century, authors such as Marie Corelli and Florence Barclay combined romance with Christian spirituality, often using romantic love as a metaphor for divine union and moral clarity. Domestic novels remained popular with authors like Berta Ruck, whose *His Official Fiancée* (1914) introduced the Cinderella plot.⁶⁵ Novels such as Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) and Jean Webster's *Daddy-Long-Legs* (1912) engaged with themes of love and growing up. Though initially aimed at adult audiences, these novels became the foundation for the later Young Adult romance category.⁶⁶

Elinor Glyn's *Three Weeks* (1907) and E.M. Hull's *The Sheik* (1919) introduced novels with more explicit sexual themes, where love is founded on sexual attraction. Hull's novel featured the dangerous lover archetype and brought themes of sexual violence and racial identity into romance fiction.⁶⁷ The Great Depression and World War II marked a return to historical novels, including Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936) and Kathleen Winsor's *Forever Amber* (1944), providing an escape to the idealized views of the past.⁶⁸ During this time, Mills & Boon transitioned to a romance-exclusive publisher and formalized the structure of mass-market romance, shaping global trends through its later partnership with Harlequin.⁶⁹

In the 1960s, the success of Victoria Holt's *Mistress of Mellyn* sparked a revival of gothic and romantic suspense, leading to a boom in romances featuring mysterious settings and emotionally intense plots. The decade also saw the emergence of the *Young Adult* label and rising interest in both gay romances, after the 1969 Stonewall uprising, and the saga. The 1970s marked a shift toward sensual and sexually explicit historical romances like *The Flame and the Flower* and *Sweet Savage Love*. These novels boosted interest in all types of historical and saga romances.⁷⁰ The 1990s marked a period of diversification and innovation as sub-genres like multicultural romance, alternative reality romance, and romantic suspense expanded the genre's boundaries. Category lines and anthologies flourished alongside traditional historical and contemporary works. Technological advances introduced audio

⁶⁴ Dixon, "History of English Romance Novels," 33.

⁶⁵ Dixon, "History of English Romance Novels," 34.

⁶⁶ Ramsdell, *Romance Fiction*, 7.

⁶⁷ Dixon, "History of English Romance Novels," 33–34.

⁶⁸ Ramsdell, *Romance Fiction*, 8–9.

⁶⁹ Dixon, "History of English Romance Novels," 35.

⁷⁰ Ramsdell, *Romance Fiction*, 9–12.

editions, TV adaptations, and early digital publishing, while the internet transformed author-reader interaction and marketing. Academic recognition of romance grew with the publication of *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women* (1992) and organizations like the Romance Writers of America helping to legitimize the genre as a serious literary form.⁷¹

2.3 The Emergence of Romantasy

The term *romantasy* first appeared on Urban Dictionary in 2008, where it is described as a “novel that’s a hybrid between a fantasy and romance novel.”⁷² Yet, it is not included in any other relevant dictionary, except Collins.⁷³ Ella Creamer states in her article that Bloomsbury Publishing “coined the term [romantasy] to ‘identify the genre [Sarah J. Maas] was spearheading.’”⁷⁴ Though there is no evidence that Bloomsbury ever made such a statement. Although the term appeared as early as 2008, it gained popularity only recently.

The rise of digital publishing and self-publishing platforms in the 21st century can be argued to have contributed to the creation of the genre by allowing independent authors to publish their narratives without the constraints of traditional publishing.⁷⁵ Yet the popularity boom of romantasy has been fueled mainly by the influence of TikTok, and its hashtag #BookTok, which emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁷⁶ The BookTok community has become a significant influencer in shaping modern reading habits and trends by sharing users’ recommendations and reviews of various literary works through hashtags. This is particularly true for romantasy as its hashtag #romantasy has over 892.7K posts.⁷⁷

Even though the term romantasy is widely used within its community, in most of the online stores such as Amazon or Barnes & Noble, and other bookstores and libraries, these novels are being classified under either romance or fantasy or one of their sub-genres. On Amazon, *A Court of Thorns and Roses* is classified as paranormal fantasy,⁷⁸ *The Serpent and*

⁷¹ Ramsdell, *Romance Fiction*, 12–15.

⁷² “Romantasy,” Urban Dictionary, accessed April 9, 2025, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=romantasy>.

⁷³ See Cambridge Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, Oxford English Dictionary; “Romantasy,” Collins Dictionary, accessed April 8, 2025, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/romantasy>.

⁷⁴ Ella Creamer, “A Genre of Swords and Soulmates: The Rise and Rise of ‘Romantasy’ Novels,” *The Guardian*, February 2, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2024/feb/02/romantasy-literary-genre-booktok>.

⁷⁵ Markert, “Publishing the Romance Novel,” 362–363.

⁷⁶ Gitte Balling and Marianne Martens, “BookTok Helped Us Sell It: How TikTok Disrupts Publishing and Fuels the #Romantasy Boom,” *Convergence* (2024): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565241301271>.

⁷⁷ “#romantasy,” TikTok, accessed March 29, 2025, <https://www.tiktok.com/tag/romantasy?lang=en>.

⁷⁸ “A Court of Thorns and Roses (A Court of Thorns and Roses, 1),” Amazon, accessed March 30, 2025, <https://www.amazon.com/Court-Thorns-Roses-Sarah-Maas/dp/1635575559/>.

the Wings of Night as dark fantasy,⁷⁹ and *Fourth Wing* as fantasy.⁸⁰ Barnes & Noble does not show the specific classification of the novels, but they can be found under *Fiction*, *Science Fiction & Fantasy*, or *Romance*. This poses a question of whether this classification is sufficient, as it can be confusing for the readers. It can be argued that adding the section or category of romantasy can provide a clearer understanding of the novels' narrative structure and thematic focus, which is not fully conveyed by categorizing them simply as fantasy or romance.

⁷⁹ "Serpent and the Wings of Night: The Nightborn Duet Book One (Crowns of Nyaxia, 1)," Amazon, accessed March 30, 2025, <https://www.amazon.com/Serpent-Wings-Night-Nightborn-Crowns/dp/1250343178/>.

⁸⁰ "Fourth Wing (The Empyrean, 1)," Amazon, accessed March 30, 2025, <https://www.amazon.com/Fourth-Wing-Empyrean-Rebecca-Yarros/dp/1649374046/>.

3 THE FEATURES OF ROMANTASY

In this section, a plot summary of selected novels takes place as they are used to pinpoint the characteristics of each novel alongside the genre theory. The novels' commonalities are then summarized to identify features of romantasy. The issue of readers' expectations mentioned in section 2.3, which stems from insufficient classification, is further addressed as it is an essential part of the genre.

3.1 Sarah J. Maas's *A Court of Thorns and Roses*

The story follows Feyre Archeon, a 19-year-old huntress, who was forced to pick up hunting to survive. The story begins in winter when she struggles to find animals. Pressured by her starving family, she ventures further into the forest than normal and spots a deer. At the same time, an enormous wolf shows up. Feyre suspects the wolf might be a faerie in disguise, a being she despises due to the suffering they caused to humanity, and decides to kill it. The next evening, a golden beast bursts into her family's cottage, revealing the wolf was a faerie, and according to the Treaty between humans and faeries, Feyre must pay for its death. The beast offers her a choice: death or life in the faerie realm of Prythian. Feyre chooses life in Prythian.

As she lives in Prythian, she learns that she is in the Spring Court, the golden beast is Tamlin, a High Fae, and that their realm is under a curse. Tamlin and his friend Lucien hide the truth about the curse from Feyre, so she seeks out Suriel, an all-knowing fae, but learns only that Tamlin is a High Lord of the Spring Court as she is attacked by evil Naga faeries. Feyre grows closer to Lucien and Tamlin while discovering the beauty and dangers of Spring Court. During the appearance of will-o'-the-wisps, spirits, Feyre and Tamlin share their first kiss. After Rhysand, the High Lord of the Night Court, comes to threaten Tamlin, he sends Feyre back to the human realm, as Prythian is not safe for her anymore. Before she leaves, they share an intimate moment where Tamlin confesses his love for her, but Feyre remains silent. Back in the human realm, Feyre decides to return to Prythian to express her feelings to Tamlin, yet by the time she arrives, the Spring Court is in ruins. One of the faeries explains that Amarantha, a self-proclaimed High Queen of Prythian, stole the powers of all High Lords and cursed Tamlin, giving him a chance to break it over the course of 49 years. To lift the curse, Tamlin must bring a girl who hates faeries and killed one of his men to the Spring Court. She must fall in love with him, confessing her love sincerely to his face. Feyre sets out to save Tamlin.

In the process, she is captured by Amarantha and must complete three tasks or solve a riddle to save Tamlin. The first trial is to defeat a Middengard Wyrn, a giant worm-like creature. In the second one, Feyre must solve a riddle, and the last is to kill three faeries. She makes a deal with Rhysand to survive, in which Feyre must spend one week per month with him in exchange for his help. With his help, she completes the first two tasks. For the final task, she kills the two faeries, but the third one is Tamlin. Feyre realizes that his heart has turned to stone due to the curse and stabs him. The dagger stops when it hits the stone, but Amarantha refuses to honor their agreement and tortures Feyre to death. At the last moment of her life, Feyre realizes that the answer to the riddle is love. When she speaks it, Amarantha snaps her spine, but the curse breaks, and Tamlin with Rhysand defeat Amarantha. The High Lords of Prythian resurrect Feyre, granting her immortality. They are free of the curse, but Feyre must come to terms with her new life as High Fae, new trauma, and the lives lost in their battle.

As mentioned before, *ACOTAR* is classified as paranormal fantasy on Amazon. On other online stores, the classification differs. On Bloomsbury, its main publisher, it can be found under the category *Fantasy, Mythology & Sci-fi*.⁸¹ On Bookshop.org, the categories involved are *Fantasy*, *Fantasy romance*, and *Fantasy & magical realism (Children's / Teenage)*.⁸² On Waterstones, the novel is under the categories of *Fantasy*, *Fantasy romance*, and *Contemporary romance*, where contemporary and fantasy romance fall within *Romantic Fiction*.⁸³ And on Indigo, it is classified as romantic fantasy, a sub-genre of fantasy.⁸⁴ Thus, it can be argued that there is no clear classification except that the novel belongs to both fantasy and romance.

Firstly, *ACOTAR* belongs to both fantasy and romance fiction, as the narrative is set in a world that includes faeries and magic, Feyre and Tamlin fall in love with each other, the development of their relationship is central, and the novel ends with a *happily ever after*. Specifically, the novel is set within a richly developed secondary world, which consists of Faerie Realms, one of which is Prythian and mortal lands. There are seven Courts in

⁸¹ Amazon, "A Court of Thorns and Roses."; "A Court of Thorns and Roses," Bloomsbury, accessed April 9, 2025, <https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/court-of-thorns-and-roses-9781526605399/>.

⁸² "A Court of Thorns and Roses: Enter the Epic Fantasy Worlds of Sarah J Maas With the Breath-taking First Book in the Globally Bes," Bookshop.org, accessed April 9, 2025, <https://uk.bookshop.org/p/books/a-court-of-thorns-and-roses-sarah-j-maas/654528?ean=9781526605399>.

⁸³ "A Court of Thorns and Roses – A Court of Thorns and Roses (Hardback)," Waterstones, accessed April 9, 2025, <https://www.waterstones.com/book/a-court-of-thorns-and-roses/sarah-j-maas/9781635575552>.

⁸⁴ "A Court of Thorns and Roses," Indigo, accessed April 9, 2025, <https://www.indigo.ca/en-ca/a-court-of-thorns-and-roses/9781635575569.html>.

Prythian, each with a distinct political stance, ruled by a different High Lord, who each wield different powers. The supernatural beings featured in *ACOTAR* are primarily faeries (also known as fae), who are categorized into lesser faeries, special faeries, and High Fae. Among the High Fae are the High Lords, who have extra abilities. Another notable creature is the Middengard Wyrn. This vast world-building and secondary world setting is borrowed from high fantasy.

Most of the novel is set either in the Spring Court or Under the Mountain, yet it begins in the mortal lands. Feyre's life in the mortal lands carries traits of dark fantasy: "[The wolf] whirled toward me [...]. His low growl reverberated in the empty pit of my stomach as I surged to my feet, snow churning around me, another arrow drawn."⁸⁵ In this excerpt, Feyre attempts to kill the wolf, which later proves to be fae. As can be seen, her world is one of hunger, survival, and death, where violence is normalized. Even faeries are not romanticized: "Body big as a bear's, head something like a lion's—and three rows of teeth sharper than a shark's. [...] [The faerie] left the villagers in literal ribbons."⁸⁶ They are cruel beings feared by humans. Moreover, *ACOTAR* uses a first-person narrative, told from Feyre's point of view. This suggests an unreliable narrator and limits the information to her knowledge and experiences. As a result, the story becomes more personal and immersive, allowing readers to grow and change alongside Feyre.

As humans fear faeries, Feyre's first meeting with Tamlin is hostile: "'You murdered my friend,' [Tamlin] snarled. 'Murdered him, skinned his corpse, sold it on the market, and then said he *deserved* it.'"⁸⁷ She must bear consequences for her decision to kill the wolf, which in this case are either death or life in Prythian as can be seen from Tamlin's dialogue, "I can either gut you like a swine, or ... you can cross the wall and live out the remainder of your day in Prythian."⁸⁸ The theme of moral ambiguity is clear – Feyre kills the wolf, an act that is wrong, yet she does so to survive. Additionally, the choice between dying or living in Prythian may seem merciful; however, both options ultimately lead to death, and Tamlin's choice to keep Feyre alive stems mainly from his necessity for her to break the curse in the beginning. Yet these dark elements shift to the background once Feyre starts to adapt to the Spring Court.

⁸⁵ Maas, *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, 7.

⁸⁶ Maas, *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, 29.

⁸⁷ Maas, *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, 38.

⁸⁸ Maas, *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, 37.

Spring Court is described as “encased by woods, [that] stretched so far that I could barely see the distant line of the forest. So much color, so much sunlight and movement and texture.”⁸⁹ The world remains dangerous as Feyre must navigate encounters with evil faeries, yet survival is not as emphasized anymore. Instead, the focus shifts to Feyre’s relationship with Tamlin, her healing journey, and the beauty and mystery of Prythian. This creates a contrast with the cold and tense atmosphere of mortal lands. There are hints about the curse that affects Prythian, although it does not manifest until later in the novel. Moreover, the tropes of enemies-to-lovers and forbidden love start to appear alongside the slow-burn romance. As Feyre’s relationship with Tamlin deepens, she begins to heal emotionally. Mutual attraction between Feyre and Tamlin builds up, resulting in a kiss during the Summer Solstice, which occurs halfway through the novel.

Their happiness does not last as Rhysand comes to remind Tamlin of his deal with Amarantha: “I think I can safely report that you’ve already been broken and will reconsider [Amarantha’s] offer.”⁹⁰ Feyre still lacks knowledge about any relevant information; therefore, the theme of secrecy is emphasized. Before Feyre departs back to mortal lands, she and Tamlin share an intimate moment, and Tamlin confesses his feelings to her: “‘I love you,’ [Tamlin] said and stepped away. I should say it—I should say those words, but they got stuck in my throat, because [...] of what he had to face, because he might not find me again, [...] because he was immortal, and I would grow old and die.”⁹¹ Yet Feyre does not answer.

After Feyre comes back to the Spring Court, her love is used by the author as a device to drive the plot, and the focus shifts to the curse. It is revealed that Feyre could have broken the curse. This paints her as a chosen mortal for something greater than her, and her choice not to answer had world-level consequences – she could have freed all the High Lords and broken Tamlin’s curse. The theme of good vs. evil appears clearly.

In *Under the Mountain*, high fantasy with dark fantasy reappears. The arena in which Feyre fights the Middengard Wyrms is described as follows: “There had been no attempts to decorate the torch-lit cavern—and I couldn’t tell if it had been hewn from the rock or if it was formed by nature. The floor was slick and muddy, and I struggled to keep my footing as we walked,”⁹² evoking feelings of coldness and discomfort. Moreover, Amarantha and

⁸⁹ Maas, *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, 47.

⁹⁰ Maas, *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, 237.

⁹¹ Maas, *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, 251.

⁹² Maas, *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, 316.

her sadistic character, along with her actions in *Under the Mountain*, are marked by dark fantasy elements even more. She tortured a girl, whom she mistakenly believed to be Feyre:

There, nailed high on the wall of the enormous cavern, was the mangled corpse of a young woman. Her skin was burned in places, her fingers were bent at odd angles, and garish red lines crisscrossed her naked body. [...] “Perhaps I should have listened when she said she’d never seen Tamlin before,” Amarantha mused. [...] “Though her screaming was delightful. I haven’t heard such lovely music in ages.”⁹³

And her trials for Feyre are ruthless. These trials stand for courage, intellect, and sacrifice. The focus shifts back to Feyre’s survival, and she is put into the role of a hero who can save everyone, while the trials mirror the traits of epic quests. The hero’s journey can be seen as Feyre enters *Under the Mountain*, her decision influences the fate of many, she endures the trials, and ultimately transforms into the High Fae. Themes of choice, sacrifice, moral ambiguity, death, life, and transformation are evident.

Feyre’s character development reflects the core theme of personal growth found in Young Adult literature. The later inclusion of passionate and physically mature moments elevates the story into New Adult territory. The themes explored are intense – torture, trauma, death, and moral ambiguity – particularly during the trials, which go beyond typical Young Adult narratives. At 19, Feyre provides for her family. Her romance with Tamlin is filled with secrecy and sexual tension, while she must navigate her complicated connection with Rhysand. The decisions to kill for love and sacrifice herself are existential, portraying Feyre more as a young woman stepping into adulthood rather than as a teenager.

Furthermore, Feyre’s feelings for Tamlin and the curse are intertwined. Her love for Tamlin drives her to go to *Under the Mountain* and endure the brutal trials. It is her love that compels her to face her fears, withstand pain, and ultimately die. This intertwines romance and fantasy, making them inseparable, with love serving as the driving force behind resolving the curse and reclaiming stolen powers, contributing to a greater good.

Even though the ending of the romantic arc appears to be *happily ever after*, as the curse was broken and Feyre gets to live with Tamlin in the Spring Court, it is not fully truthful. Feyre is traumatized after killing the two faeries as shown in her monologue: “Even if those two dead faeries—even if *their* faces would never fade for me. If I could ever bring myself to paint again, I would never be able to stop seeing those faces instead of the colors and

⁹³ Maas, *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, 299.

light.”⁹⁴ She must also come to terms with her transformation into a High Fae. Implications of Tamlin’s overprotectiveness, Feyre’s suppression of emotions and guilt after surviving, and her bond to Rhysand emerge, indicating the development of a second love interest and darker themes in the next novels. On the other hand, the curse conflict was resolved with the defeat of Amarantha. Yet Amarantha’s servant, Attor, disappeared, which leaves the threat open-ended. These indications set the space for the next novels.

The novel shifts its focus. Firstly, it is on Feyre’s survival in the mortal lands, then on the romantic and healing arc in the Spring Court, and lastly moves onto the survival and transformation in *Under the Mountain*. The themes discussed include survival, freedom versus oppression, love, identity, secrecy versus truth, good versus evil, death, life, moral ambiguity, choice, sacrifice, guilt, and transformation. Both the romance and fantasy features are central and cannot be omitted without destroying the narrative. The tropes of enemies-to-lovers, forbidden love, slow-burn romance, and the chosen one are evident. The novel merges several sub-genres, particularly high fantasy and dark fantasy, not only paranormal. Therefore, the *romantasy* label would be a better fit to describe such a mix of sub-genres alongside its themes and narrative.

3.2 Carissa Broadbent’s *The Serpent and the Wings of Night*

Oraya, a human child, is discovered in a town destroyed by Rishan rebels and adopted by the Hiaj Nightborn King, Vincent. The two clans of the House of Night, Hiaj and Rishan, are at war over the control of the land. When Oraya is 23, she decides to enter the Kejari, a vampire tournament held once every century, where competitors fight to the death, and the last one standing is granted a wish from the goddess of the vampires, Nyaxia. Oraya plans to use her wish to become Vincent’s Coriatae, a soul-binding pact that transforms her into a vampire, linking her power with Vincent’s.

Once the Kejari begins, all contestants are placed in the Moon Palace. Oraya tries to find her way out but hears her friend Ilana screaming. Driven by rage, she tries to locate her but runs into Raihn, a Rishan vampire and her competitor. When the night ends, Oraya discovers Ilana’s lifeless body. Over the next several months, the contestants must go through five trials: the Full Moon, Waning Moon, Halfmoon, Crescent Moon, and New Moon trials.

⁹⁴ Maas, *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, 410.

In the Full Moon trial, which symbolizes Nyaxia's escape from the land of the White Pantheon, the contestants fight demons. Oraya defeats them with Raihn's assistance. After the trial, a vampire tracks her down and tries to kill her, leaving her severely injured. Raihn offers her an alliance and a health potion, but she refuses and tries to get help from Vincent instead. However, Vincent does not appear and is forced to work with Raihn to survive.

The Waning Moon trial represents Nyaxia's journey to the underworld, where contestants navigate deadly battles and an ever-changing maze. There, Oraya discovers dead human bodies and a little girl, which later causes a rift between her and Vincent. After she decides to help the girl, she encounters Raihn, and they fight alongside each other. After the trial, Oraya returns to vampire hunting in the human district to cease her anger over the lost human lives. Raihn catches her in the act and proposes they train by hunting vampires instead of fighting each other. He also reveals that he used to be human (most vampires are born, not turned). This is when Oraya genuinely agrees to the alliance.

An attack on the Moon Palace occurs, after which Rishan vampires are tortured and interrogated because Vincent believes they are behind the rebellion. When Oraya asks about the attack, Vincent refuses to tell her anything. Oraya pleads with Vincent not to harm Raihn, a Rishan, yet he returns severely injured, creating another rift between her and Vincent.

The Halfmoon trial, where contestants fight in teams, represents Nyaxia and her lover, Alarus, battling to escape the Pantheon prison. Each group must navigate the prison, blinded and magically bound together. This bond enables them to hear their thoughts, share feelings, and see one another. Oraya comes close to death, but with Raihn's help and through his feelings, she understands that emotions, which she had been taught to suppress by Vincent, are the essence of her magic. At last, Oraya's power ignites, incinerating the surrounding vampires and monsters.

The Crescent trial, representing Nyaxia's rescue of Alarus, exploits vampires' bloodlust, forcing the contestants to feed on poisoned animals. Oraya feeds Raihn her blood to keep him alive, but the vampire venom heightens her already existing attraction to him. They realize that the trial is taking place in the ruins of Salinae, and that Vincent has ignited a war, mercilessly slaughtering all Rishan vampires and humans in their territories, including her family, whom she wanted to find after the Kejari.

Oraya and Raihn give in to their mutual attraction and share an intimate moment. In the New Moon trial, each contestant faces imitations of the gods of the Pantheon, illustrating

Nyaxia's rise to power. After defeating the gods, they must face the remaining contestants. In the final battle, Oraya hesitates to kill Raihn, but he sacrifices himself to ensure her victory.

Devastated, Oraya wishes for Raihn to be the victor. Raihn is revived and asked by Nyaxia to make his wish, which is to restore his power as a Rishan Heir. His first act is to kill Vincent, claiming the throne. Once he is dead, a Hiaj Heir Mark appears on Oraya's skin, revealing that she is Vincent's biological daughter and half-vampire. As the vampires turn against her, seeing her as a threat to Raihn's reign, Raihn forces Oraya to marry him for protection, ensuring her safety and securing his rule.

The Serpent and the Wings of Night is classified as dark fantasy on Amazon. Macmillan Publishers, alongside Indigo and Bookshop.org, classify the novel as fantasy.⁹⁵ On Waterstones, it is in categories of *Fiction-related items & special features*, *Contemporary romance*, and *Fantasy romance*, where contemporary and fantasy romance are sub-categories of *Romantic Fiction*.⁹⁶ The inconsistency in its classification again reflects the use of different sub-genres, making romantasy a more appropriate fit.

The novel is set within a secondary world, Obitraes, which consists of human nations and three vampire kingdoms: the House of Night, the House of Shadow, and the House of Blood. In the House of Night, two clans of Nightborn vampires reside, Hiaj and Rishan, constantly engaged in a power struggle for supremacy. Their magic stems from the night sky. The Shadowborn of the House of Shadow can wield mind magic, shadow magic, and necromancy. The House of Blood is regarded as inferior by the other two kingdoms, as it was cursed by the goddess Nyaxia. Its inhabitants, Bloodborn, can wield blood magic and often die young due to the curse. The Kejari tournament is hosted by the House of Night in the Moon Palace. As can be seen, the novel showcases a secondary world and expansive world-building, integrating detailed geography, faith ideology, politics, a magic system, and mythic creatures, which are the elements of high fantasy.

⁹⁵ Amazon "The Serpent and the Wings of Night."; "The Serpent & the Wings of Night," Macmillan Publishers, accessed April 10, 2025, <https://us.macmillan.com/books/9781250343178/theserpentthewingsofnight/>; "The Serpent & the Wings of Night: The Nightborn Duet Book One," Indigo, accessed April 10, 2025, <https://www.indigo.ca/en-ca/the-serpent-the-wings-of-night-book-1-of-the-nightborn-duet/9781250343185.html>; "The Serpent & the Wings of Night," Bookshop.org, accessed April 10, 2025, <https://uk.bookshop.org/p/books/the-serpent-the-wings-of-night-carissa-broadbent/7595292?ean=9781250343178>.

⁹⁶ "The Serpent and the Wings of Night – Crowns of Nyaxia (Hardback)," Waterstones, accessed April 10, 2025, <https://www.waterstones.com/book/the-serpent-and-the-wings-of-night/carissa-broadbent/9781035040933>.

The novel starts with a prologue, in which Vincent adopts Oraya. This immediately establishes the dark fantasy tone, as the adoption evokes a sense of liminality and themes of survival, identity, and origin, which are central throughout the novel. Oraya, a human, is placed in a world of vampires to which she does not belong and is raised in a society that views her as prey. The relationship between Oraya and Vincent is both parental and political, emphasizing the theme of conditional love, where affection, control, and expectations are intertwined. As Vincent tells her, “*You are not safe. Not in this castle. Not in this room. You are prey in a world of predators,*”⁹⁷ highlighting that Oraya’s world is deadly, a place where survival is earned, not granted.

The first few chapters begin during Oraya’s training arc, where she hunts vampires and trains in combat with Vincent. Unlike the vampires, Oraya is physically weaker and socially isolated. Therefore, she must rely on her intelligence and precision to fight them, making her an underdog protagonist: “I couldn’t be stronger than [vampires], so I had to be more precise. No time for mistakes.”⁹⁸

To enter the Kejari, Oraya offers her blood, life, and victory to Nyaxia, showcasing themes of sacrifice and blood-bargains: “I offer myself to you, Nyaxia. I offer you my blood, my blade, my flesh. I will compete in the Kejari. I will give you my victory, or I will give you my death.”⁹⁹ Once she enters the Kejari, the focus shifts to the tournament, and the theme of survival remains central. The Kejari starts earlier than anticipated, putting Oraya in immediate danger and signaling the shift from a training arc to a genuine threat. The dark fantasy tone is highlighted as Oraya is plunged into thick darkness, emphasizing her disorientation, fear, and self-reliance:

My eyes opened, and met only an impenetrable wall of black. Complete, utter darkness, so thick it choked me. [...] The scent of must and blood burned my nostrils. My palms pressed to the ground. Hard, dusty tile. [...] Dread rose as I pieced it together. [...] Panic spiked, but I forced it into submission. No, I could not afford to panic. Because this was it. [...] The Kejari had begun.¹⁰⁰

Before the first trial, Illana is murdered and Oraya kills the vampire responsible, “I took my dagger and plunged it into [the vampire’s] chest [...], pushing until the blade pierced his heart. [...] [I] made sure Ilana’s blood marked him as I let him slump down,”¹⁰¹ which

⁹⁷ Carrisa Broadbent, *The Serpent and the Wings of Night* (London: Tor, 2024), 54.

⁹⁸ Broadbent, *The Serpent and the Wings of Night*, 11.

⁹⁹ Broadbent, *The Serpent and the Wings of Night*, 47.

¹⁰⁰ Broadbent, *The Serpent and the Wings of Night*, 49.

¹⁰¹ Broadbent, *The Serpent and the Wings of Night*, 67.

emphasizes the themes of death, grief and loss, which are explored throughout the novel. Moreover, the narrative situation is first-person, with Oraya as an unreliable narrator. This creates subjective and limited access to information and perceptions, enhancing tension and emotions while immersing readers in Oraya's experiences.

Oraya's first meeting with Raihn is hostile: "A strong grip folded around my shoulders, pulling me back against a firm wall of a body. [...] I didn't bother fighting against the grasp that held me. It wouldn't work. He was too strong. So I stabbed the bastard."¹⁰² Yet in the Full Moon trial, they cooperate to kill the demons. Due to this cooperation and Oraya's survival, their alliance is formed. This marks the beginning of tropes of enemies-to-lovers, slow-burn romance, and forbidden love as they are from opposing factions – Rishan and Hiaj, vampire and human.

The Waning Moon trial explores themes of empathy, survival, morality, and emotional repression as Oraya makes the irrational choice to save the child, which goes against everything Vincent has taught her, and reaffirms her human identity. Moreover, indications of the war appear, yet they manifest later in the novel, highlighting the theme of secrecy.

The hostility between Oraya and Raihn is gradually replaced by attraction, particularly after the Waning Moon and Halfmoon trials. In the Half Moon trial, the trope of forced proximity emerges alongside the themes of trust and vulnerability as Oraya and Raihn share everything through the bond. The bond foreshadows significant shifts in Oraya's allegiance and collapses some of the barriers of romance, acting as a fantasy element that drives the romance forward: "Raihn looked at me like my well-being was actually important to him. That he must actually care, because I'd *felt* the way he cared. I'd felt his panic when I was in danger, and that meant he'd felt mine when I thought Angelika would kill him."¹⁰³

In the Crescent Moon trial, the focus remains on survival, yet the relationship and sexual tension are fronted. Oraya saves Raihn by giving him her blood, but due to the vampire venom, her barriers are loose, resulting in the development of their relationship, "The venom ate away the final dregs of my self-control, unleashing a wave of desire that utterly ravaged me. [...] I wanted to offer every expanse of my skin to him,"¹⁰⁴ which after the trial culminates into a sexual intimacy. This illustrates how a fantasy element propels

¹⁰² Broadbent, *The Serpent and the Wings of Night*, 58-59.

¹⁰³ Broadbent, *The Serpent and the Wings of Night*, 321.

¹⁰⁴ Broadbent, *The Serpent and the Wings of Night*, 400.

romance. Additionally, Oraya starts to view Vincent not as an ideal figure but as someone who is manipulative and flawed, signaling a change in Violet's values and beliefs.

The New Moon trial is advanced due to real-world threats: "Nyaxia recognizes there is no certainty that Sivrinaj will exist in three weeks,"¹⁰⁵ marking a shift from tournament into political rebellion and war. The themes of betrayal, secrecy, and manipulation appear when Oraya discovers that Vincent has used her as a political pawn, hiding truths about her origin. Raihn's death carries the theme of sacrifice, and Oraya's decision to revive him has world-level consequences as Raihn kills Vincent, becomes a king, and changes the rule. To save Oraya, he claims her as a political hostage, even though he doesn't truly mean it. Yet, Oraya is unsure of what to believe in. This showcases the themes of trust and betrayal, power and vulnerability, manipulation, misunderstanding, and love.

The Kejari tournament serves as a fantasy device that amplifies tension and propels the romantic arc, character development, their choices, and the plot. Similarly, Oraya's romance directly affects the outcome of Kejari, her magic, emotional development, and thus her decisions. These decisions have consequences in the world and politics, making romance and fantasy features equally significant.

Oraya's journey is one of transformation. Vincent defines her early identity; she is his adoptive daughter, a mere human, who believes in everything he tells her. She was raised to be emotionless, ruthless, and distrustful. Yet this is challenged by the Kejari and Raihn. As she fights her own battles, Oraya is forced to question the morality of the world, and with the intervention of Raihn, her human identity becomes a source of strength, which is no longer derived from Vincent's protection. By the novel's end, Oraya is a skilled warrior, winner of the Kejari, and subject of Nyaxia's interest, who questions beliefs, loyalties, and limits imposed on her. It mirrors the hero's journey of high fantasy as she undergoes trials, receives a mentorship, and must be deemed worthy of Nyaxia's divine blessing.

The novel falls into the New Adult category as Oraya is 23, and graphic violence, slavery, emotional trauma, and feelings of existential dread are portrayed. The narrative develops a gradual romantic and sexual tension, layered with emotional depth, avoiding an idealized depiction of romance. Oraya's choices reflect those of an adult facing severe consequences.

¹⁰⁵ Broadbent, *The Serpent and the Wings of Night*, 425.

Overall, high fantasy provides a structure for the novel through the Kejari, divine hierarchies (Nyaxia and 12 gods of Pantheon), vampire hierarchies, and elaborate world-building, while dark fantasy infuses it with moral complexity, emotional gravity, and dark aesthetics. Romance connects dark and high fantasy by personalizing the stakes of each. As such, themes like divine power and war of high fantasy are reframed through the protagonist's feelings. The romantic relationship serves to explore the character's vulnerabilities and moral struggles, tied to dark fantasy. Romance is not merely a subplot as it is essential for character and plot development. Therefore, romance and fantasy are central, intertwined, and omitting either would undermine the rich narrative. This indicates that the term *romantasy* might be a more suitable term for this blending of genres.

3.3 Rebecca Yarros's *Fourth Wing*

The story follows a 20-year-old Violet Sorrengail, who is forced by her mother, a high-ranking general in the kingdom of Navarre, to enroll at the Basgiath War College, a brutal training ground, to become an elite dragon rider. She must cross a deadly parapet to get into the college. There, she meets Xaden, whose father was executed by Violet's mother for leading a rebellion. Violet had two siblings: an older sister, Mira, who is an elite dragon rider, and an older brother, Brennan, who died during the rebellion. The children of the rebellion leaders were all marked by tattoos and forced to become dragon riders.

After crossing the parapet, Violet must face numerous trials to survive in college, among which are sparring matches, the Gauntlet, the Threshing, assassination, and a series of War Games. Violet overcomes the sparring matches with her knowledge of medicinal herbs. The Gauntlet is a deadly climbing challenge that Violet conquers with strategy rather than strength, unlike everyone else. During the Threshing, Violet bonds with two dragons – Tairn, a large black dragon, and Andarna, a small golden dragon. Black dragons are exceptionally rare and powerful, and no one has ever bonded with two dragons before. With this, everyone's eyes are on Violet. Tairn is mated with Xaden's dragon, Sgaeyl, creating a bond between them. Due to this mating bond and the assassination attempt on Violet, Xaden is forced to protect her as the dragon riders share their feelings with their dragons – he starts to train her, and their relationship deepens, leading to a growing attraction and mutual trust.

Violet discovers her unique signet power – the ability to wield lightning – but struggles to control it. During the War Games, the academy sends Violet, Xaden, and a small group of students on a mission to an outpost beyond the kingdom's borders. Xaden is forced to

admit that he has been supplying weapons to Poromiel, a neighboring kingdom. Violet sees this act as a betrayal, but she doesn't have much time to consider it, as a nearby outpost is attacked by venin – people corrupted by dark magic who can summon wyverns to battle dragons and gryphons.

The Navarrian government has misled its people, portraying Poromiel as a war-hungry kingdom, denying the existence of venin. Xaden is leading the rebellion alongside others to challenge the ruling regime of Navarre and combat the venin. Violet discovers that her childhood friend, Dain Aetos, has been using his signet power to read her mind to spy on Xaden's activities. She joins the battle when venin attack, during which she is poisoned and nearly dies. After the battle, she learns that her brother Brennan, whom she thought was dead, is alive and part of the rebellion.

Fourth Wing is classified differently on various platforms. On Amazon and Indigo, it is categorized as fantasy,¹⁰⁶ while on Bookshop.org, it falls under fantasy romance.¹⁰⁷ Waterstones lists it under fantasy romance, a subcategory of romantic fiction.¹⁰⁸ Its first publisher, Entangled Publishing, classifies it as New Adult and fantasy.¹⁰⁹ These diverse classifications reflect the novel's wide appeal and its ability to blend elements of fantasy and romance. It's also worth noting that even on the same website, the paperback and hardcover versions of the novel are categorized differently; specifically, on Amazon, the paperback version is classified as epic fantasy. This discrepancy in categorization highlights the challenges of classifying a work that spans multiple genres. Therefore, the term *romantasy* could be more appropriate to describe this blend of genres.

Fourth Wing takes place in a world filled with magic and mythical beings. The romantic relationship is integral and propels the story forward. While the romance development is satisfying, and the *happily ever after* lasts for a time, the novel goes beyond that. Thus, it belongs to fantasy and romance fiction. Specifically, the novel is set in an imaginary secondary world consisting of two kingdoms, Navarre and Poromiel, and the Barrens. Navarre has a strict military system and hierarchy, which is pivotal as most of the story

¹⁰⁶ Amazon, "Fourth Wing.," "Fourth Wing," Indigo, accessed April 10, 2025, <https://www.indigo.ca/en-ca/fourth-wing/9781649374042.html>.

¹⁰⁷ "Fourth Wing: Discover the Global Phenomenon That Everyone Can't Stop Talking About!," Bookshop.org, accessed April 10, 2025, <https://uk.bookshop.org/p/books/fourth-wing-your-new-fantasy-romance-obsession-starts-here-rebecca-yarros/7400234?ean=9780349436999>.

¹⁰⁸ "Fourth Wing – The Empyrean (Hardback)," Waterstones, accessed April 9, 2025, <https://www.waterstones.com/book/fourth-wing/rebecca-yarros/9780349436999>.

¹⁰⁹ "Fourth Wing," Entangled Publishing, accessed May 10, 2025, <https://entangledpublishing.com/books/fourth-wing>.

unfolds at Navarre's Basgiath War College, the kingdom's most elite and lethal military academy. The college is divided into four quadrants: Riders, Scribes, Infantry, and Healers. The Riders Quadrant is the most prestigious and deadly, where dragon riders are trained. The Scribe Quadrant focuses on training scholars, historians, and researchers. The Infantry Quadrant prepares ground soldiers for traditional warfare, while the Healer Quadrant trains medical personnel. Among the mythical beings featured in the novel are dragons, who can be distinguished by their colors, Gryphons, Venin, and Wyverns, with the magic system built around these beings or their sources of power. All of the world-building and secondary world is a hallmark of high fantasy.

The novel starts with Violet, who trained her whole life to be a scribe, being forced into the Riders Quadrant by her mother: "You're the daughter of a rider, [...] and today is Conscription Day. [...] I will not watch one of *my* children enter the Scribe Quadrant, Violet."¹¹⁰ This introduces the theme of legacy and identity vs expectation as Violet lacks control over her life, with her role dictated by her family, all of whom are dragon riders.

The opening chapters carry traits of dark fantasy, marked by violence, institutional cruelty, and a morally gray worldview, as Violet must cross the deadly parapet to enter the Riders Quadrant. Before her turn to cross it, she witnesses a fellow cadet's death on the parapet: "I [...] jerk [my] attention to the parapet just in time to see Dylan slip. [...] [Dylan's] feet kick beneath him, scrambling for a purchase that isn't there. [...] [He] loses his grip on the water-slick stone and falls, disappearing from view."¹¹¹ Violet's world is one of survival, where the weak are weeded out and the theme of life and death is explicit. As Violet reflects, "Conscription Day is always the deadliest,"¹¹² and her anxiety, "If I panic, I'll die. If I slip, I'll die. If I ... *Oh, fuck it*,"¹¹³ shows the narrative situation is first person told from Violet's point of view, making Violet both the protagonist and the narrator. Therefore, the readers experience her emotions and the world through her subjectivity, which contributes to her unreliability as a narrator. This limited narrative situation restricts information while showcasing Violet's isolation and development, allowing readers to identify with her while reinforcing the emotional and physical stakes of her survival.

Violet and Xaden first meet during the parapet trial. They start off with animosity, as evidenced in their dialogue: "'Your mother captured my father and oversaw his execution.'

¹¹⁰ Yarros, *Fourth Wing*, 4.

¹¹¹ Yarros, *Fourth Wing*, 22.

¹¹² Yarros, *Fourth Wing*, 1.

¹¹³ Yarros, *Fourth Wing*, 26.

Wait. Like *he* has the only right to hatred here? Rage races through my veins. ‘Your father killed my older brother. Seems like we’re even.’”¹¹⁴ Their relationship is politically and emotionally tense. The themes of inherited conflict and moral ambiguity emerge, alongside the beginning of the enemies-to-lovers and forbidden love tropes. Moreover, Violet is in love with her childhood friend Dain, which is evident from her thoughts: “The beautiful, easygoing smile that’s starred in way too many of my fantasies [...]. Sometime in the last year, Dain Aetos went from attractive and cute to *gorgeous*.”¹¹⁵ This suggests the love triangle trope.

Once Violet enters Basgiath War College, the focus shifts to her training arc, and the themes of survival, violence, and social hierarchy become central as she faces numerous obstacles and trials such as sparring matches, the Gauntlet, the Threshing, squad battles, and War Games. Violet’s rare condition, which makes her joints snap easily, and weak build, becomes a site of constant struggle in the combat-oriented Riders Quadrant, making her an underdog character. Yet she overcomes the sparring matches and the Gauntlet with her knowledge and intellect, redefining what strength means at Basgiath. This is an innovative take on the training arc, where instead of becoming a model soldier, she disrupts it entirely.

This disruption culminates in Threshing, where she is chosen by two dragons for her character instead of strength. While this event pushes the story into a romantic arc due to the mating bond of Tairn and Sgaeyl, it signifies Violet’s change from the weakest to a person of significance. The trope of the chosen one is used and modified, as Violet was not chosen by prophecy or power, but because she survived long enough to be recognized. Violet’s acceptance by the dragons suggests that the institutional evaluation is flawed.

After the Threshing, the trope of forced proximity appears as Xaden reveals to Violet that “Tairn’s bonds are so powerful, both to mate and rider, because *he*’s so powerful. Losing his last rider nearly killed him, which, in turn, nearly killed Sgaeyl. Mated pairs’ lives are [interdependent],”¹¹⁶ and “if you die, [Violet], it sets off a chain of events that potentially ends with *me* dying, too.”¹¹⁷ This is followed by a kiss between Dain and Violet, which redefines her emotional alignment. When Dain kisses Violet, her perspective is that “[i]t was everything I’ve ever wanted...except... *Shit*. I don’t want this anymore.”¹¹⁸ This moment

¹¹⁴ Yarros, *Fourth Wing*, 22.

¹¹⁵ Yarros, *Fourth Wing*, 35.

¹¹⁶ Yarros, *Fourth Wing*, 202.

¹¹⁷ Yarros, *Fourth Wing*, 202.

¹¹⁸ Yarros, *Fourth Wing*, 206.

reframes the love triangle not as a choice between two men, but a decision of whom Violet wants to become. Violet's transformation throughout the novel is both physical and emotional. It represents a transition from her past self, burdened by self-doubt as a scribe, to her present identity as a bonded dragon rider, skilled in combat, learning to embrace her power and vulnerability: "I am not the same person [Mira] left at the base of that turret, and [...] she knows it, too."¹¹⁹

The last War Game is marked by deception, secrecy, and betrayal. During the event, Xaden and Violet realize they have been sent to their deaths by the academy. This moment marks a shift into high fantasy and political rebellion. The academy's purpose to train military personnel is revealed to be only a front, hiding the war with venin. As Violet comments, "Until a few hours ago, I didn't even know venin existed outside fables."¹²⁰ This concealment of venin by Basgiath and Navarre marks a systemic betrayal, revealing that the college functions as a mechanism of control and information suppression. The deception by both Dain and Xaden further prolongs this chain of betrayal.

Throughout the novel, Dain insists on protecting Violet, refusing to treat her as an equal. Yet he uses his signet power on Violet to search her memory without her consent, leading to Violet and Xaden being sent to their deaths during War Games. Moreover, Xaden is in alliance with Poromiel to defeat venin, yet he withholds the truth from Violet until she discovers it amid a Poromiel attack, which undermines the trust between them. Violet does not only feel emotionally betrayed, but she realizes her understanding of the world and of her relationship has been shaped by lies: "'Everything I feel—' I swallow, fighting to hold on to the anger so I don't fall apart. '*Felt* for you was based on secrets and deception.'"¹²¹ Taken together, these betrayals expose Basgiath as a means of Navarre's manipulation, where information is manipulated to control its people. Violet's late manifestation of her signet power emerges only after she is fully aware of the truth and immersed in real danger.

Fourth Wing leans heavily into New Adult. Violet is 20, not a teenager, and she navigates physical injury, emotional trauma, and moral dilemmas. The novel features graphic violence, brutal deaths, and the consequences of war. Additionally, reflections on desire or intimacy are present alongside sexual scenes, which are described in detail over several pages.

¹¹⁹ Yarros, *Fourth Wing*, 352.

¹²⁰ Yarros, *Fourth Wing*, 528.

¹²¹ Yarros, *Fourth Wing*, 483.

Violet and Xaden's relationship develops gradually from the beginning of the novel. Early on, their interactions are shaped by mutual hatred, suspicion, and dominance, particularly with Xaden's role as Violet's wingleader. However, this dynamic softens as Violet proves her value, and Xaden is forced to protect her. The mating bond, a significant plot device, makes Violet and Xaden feel emotions of not only their dragons but each other's as well, resulting in an enforced vulnerability. As such, the bond acts as a catalyst for the collapse of barriers in their relationship, intensifying their mutual attraction and eventually leading to sexual intimacy.

The elements of fantasy are central to the novel. In the Basgiath War College, cadets frequently die during the training, and power can be gained not only through fantasy elements but also from political alliances. These elements establish a high-stakes fantasy world where death lurks around every corner and trust is a luxury, which further raises the emotional stakes of romance. As a result, fantasy and romance are equally important. Violet's relationship with Xaden directly influences her ability to survive and uncover secrets. Likewise, her dragon bonds and signet power mirror her emotional maturation and empowerment, which are gained through love and self-assurance.

While it is questionable whether the romantic arc ended satisfactorily, as Xaden lost Violet's trust near the end, it goes beyond the classical *happily ever after*. Moreover, in the last chapter, Violet wakes up in a rebellion hideout and discovers that her brother is not dead and is part of a rebellion. This marks a cliffhanger in both romance and fantasy plots, which makes readers invested in the love story and larger world conflict, ensuring appeal to the readers of both romance and fantasy. And even if not immediately evident, Violet's choice carries world-level consequences that begin to unfold by the end of the novel. Her decision to side with Xaden links her fate to a political resistance that poses a direct threat to the militarized kingdom of Navarre. And even if not immediately evident, Violet's choice carries world-level consequences that begin to unfold by the end of the novel. Her decision to side with Xaden links her fate to a political resistance that poses a direct threat to the militarized kingdom of Navarre.

Overall, *Fourth Wing* blends elements of high fantasy, dark fantasy, and romance. It creates a story where romance is not a sub-plot but a driving force of character and plot development. The presence of dragons, war, and betrayal sets the stakes high, while the love arc adds emotional depth and complexity. Violet's journey is defined by her resistance to a system that seeks to control her, physically and emotionally, and her empowerment through

love, knowledge, and self-discovery. Hero's journey can be seen in her transition. The novel explores numerous themes, but the core ones may be considered legacy, identity, expectation, survival, violence, social hierarchy, transformation, love, and betrayal. The tropes enemies-to-lovers, forbidden love, love triangle, underdog heroine, forced proximity, and the chosen one deepen the emotional and political complexity of the story. The novel's ending on a cliffhanger in both romance and politics ensures investment from both fantasy and romance readers. As such, the term *romantasy* most accurately reflects its dual focus on romance, fantasy, and the blending of sub-genres.

3.4 Summary

The term *romantasy* seems to apply solely to written prose or audiobooks. Each novel originates from a multi-volume series, features a unique world map, and is divided into chapters. They all use first-person narrative with the protagonist as an unreliable narrator, which fosters a deep connection between the reader and the protagonist, allowing the readers to see and immerse themselves in the secondary world, the protagonist's internal growth, feelings, and emotions, while restricting the information. It can be said that readers of *romantasy* expect a romantic arc and supernatural elements to be present.

Romantasy employs imagined secondary worlds, each having a distinct magic system, geographical layout, political system, and mythic beings. Therefore, it falls under the broader umbrella of speculative fiction. Each novel combines elements of romance and fantasy, specifically high fantasy and dark fantasy, in a way that complements rather than competes with one another. The romantic arc often serves to deepen the emotional stakes of the fantasy narrative. As characters fall in love, their motivations in conflicts become more personal, and their choices in battle, politics, or power are shaped by romantic relationships. Although it may have started as a sub-genre, its dual focus on fantasy and romance, as well as its blending of sub-genres, increasing popularity, and market influence, enables it to establish itself as an emerging hybrid genre.

Themes that are central in each novel and therefore could be said to be common for *romantasy* are self-discovery, which comes with identity and transformation, moral dilemmas and ambiguity, choice, power, love, violence, survival, manipulation, secrecy, and death. Each book employs tropes of enemies-to-lovers and forbidden love alongside slow-burn romance, with emotional depth and physical intimacy. The aim of *romantasy* can be argued to be transformation rather than *happily ever after*, since only *ACOTAR* achieved it,

while all three protagonists experienced a transformation. While the novels lean towards New Adult, this is not a defining feature of romantasy. Instead, it demonstrates that romantasy inclines to the exploration of darker themes and sexuality. Two out of three novels conclude with a clear cliffhanger in both romantic arc and conflict, while *ACOTAR* only foreshadows future development. This may be due to Maas being among the early contributors to the genre in 2015, when readers' expectations had yet to be established. Yet even this subtle hint is enough to keep readers engaged. Therefore, these unresolved endings, along with the genre's tendency toward serialization, could be considered typical of romantasy.

Each protagonist starts off with disdain for the male counterpart. This barrier in romance is shaped and resolved by the fantasy elements as the characters' relationships evolve in response to the supernatural challenges they encounter. Thus, both romance and fantasy are equally essential and central to romantasy. Elements from both genres serve as devices to propel the plot, romantic arc, and character development. Therefore, neither can be excluded without undermining the richness and depth of the narrative structure. This supports the argument in section 2.3 that categorizing romantasy as romance, fantasy, or its sub-genres is inadequate because fantasy does not focus exclusively on love and relationships, while romance encompasses a far broader scope. Moreover, the blend of high fantasy, dark fantasy, and romance creates a unique narrative.

From the description of each novel can be seen that romantasy follows a recognizable narrative structure that mirrors the hero's journey, though in modified form to suit its blend of romance and fantasy. First, the protagonist is introduced or forced into a dangerous world to which they do not belong. Second, the protagonist develops a relationship with the male counterpart, which does not have to be romantic at this point. The protagonist undergoes personal growth in the face of external threats and emotional challenges, which can happen in any part or throughout the whole novel. Then follows the romantic development, which emerges through fantasy elements, their challenges, or amid conflict. The choices of the protagonists gradually lead to world-level consequences. And the conflict is resolved through the empowerment or sacrifice of either the protagonist or the male counterpart.

Additionally, the novels depict only female protagonists alongside male counterparts. Two protagonists are purely human, while Oraya is a half-vampire. The same holds for their male counterparts, two of whom are supernatural beings, while Xaden is a human. This may be due to the absence of supernatural beings resembling humans in the *Fourth Wing*. Thus,

it can be argued that the portrayal of the protagonist or her counterpart as mythic beings represents a trend, rather than a necessity. All three male counterparts are powerful, secretive, and morally ambiguous characters, while each protagonist is willful and starts as an underdog, fighting against the odds, establishing herself in the world, acquiring power, and experiencing some form of transformation.

CONCLUSION

To identify the features of romantasy, the genre was discussed through its thematic, rhetorical, and formal dimensions, emphasizing its evolving nature, while providing a theoretical framework. The Young Adult and New Adult categories are defined alongside fantasy, romance, high fantasy, and dark fantasy, which are later used to identify features of selected novels. A brief historical context of fantasy and romance was introduced to illustrate how genres emerge, evolve, and merge, clarifying the rise of romantasy. It was found that romantasy gained popularity primarily through social media after COVID-19.

The discrepancy in the categorization of the novels was addressed to highlight their hybrid nature, further reinforcing the argument that romantasy is an emerging hybrid genre rather than a sub-genre. From the commonalities of each novel, it was found that romantasy uses a secondary world setting with a first-person narrative and an unreliable narrator, while following a recognizable narrative structure. The cliffhanger ending may be a feature of romantasy, though further research is needed to confirm this. The protagonists are limited to mentally strong females, who start as underdog characters, with powerful, morally grey male counterparts. Romantasy leans toward serious topics such as identity, transformation, moral ambiguity, power, survival, and death, which is evident through the themes and its inclination towards the New Adult audience. Its dual focus on romance and fantasy creates a unique narrative where both genres are equally central.

To conclude, this thesis has identified features of romantasy, contributing to a clearer understanding of the genre. However, the limited sample size means that these findings should be viewed as preliminary. Further research that examines a broader range of texts is essential to fully validate and refine the proposed genre characteristics.

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