Structural Approach of Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children Through Fantastic Theory

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Abstract

This study investigates the fantastic elements in Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children through a structural analysis grounded in Tzvetan Todorov's Fantastic Theory. The film was chosen because of its rich and complex depiction of a supernatural world that remains embedded within a coherent and believable narrative framework. Adopting a qualitative descriptive method, the research examines how motifs, plot structures, characters, settings, and decor work together to construct the fantastic dimension of the story. Data were obtained primarily through close observation of selected film scenes, with additional insights drawn from relevant secondary literature to strengthen interpretation. The analysis demonstrates that the film skillfully blends both marvelous and uncanny elements, such as recurring time loops, peculiar abilities possessed by children, and the presence of mythical creatures, in order to sustain the logic of its fantasy world. These elements function not merely as imaginative spectacle but as integral narrative devices that support broader thematic concerns. Central to these are issues of identity formation, the protective boundaries of community, and the tension between freedom and safety, which resonate with universal human dilemmas. The findings suggest that Todorov's theoretical framework is particularly effective for dissecting the layered structures of fantasy in contemporary cinema, as it highlights the interplay between realistic and supernatural elements that define the genre. In conclusion, the study affirms that fantasy in film is not solely a mode of escapism but also a medium for deeper reflection on social, psychological, and existential aspects of human experience.

Keywords: Fantastic theory; Structural analysis; Fantasy film; Miss Peregrine

INTRODUCTION

Fantasy has long established itself as a central genre in both literature and film, offering audiences imaginative experiences that stretch beyond the boundaries of reality. Unlike realist genres that seek to mirror everyday life, fantasy constructs worlds governed by altered rules of time, space, and logic, allowing the impossible to become possible. Scholars argue that such imaginative departures are not merely escapist but carry symbolic weight, providing a medium to address complex psychological, moral, and social questions (Harjanti, 2019; Wardaningsih & Kasih, 2022). Through the use of magical systems, mythical creatures, or distorted temporalities, fantasy generates symbolic spaces where questions of identity, otherness, power, and belonging can be critically examined. This symbolic capacity is what gives fantasy its cultural resonance, enabling creators and audiences alike to negotiate fears, desires, and ethical dilemmas within imaginative story worlds.

In contemporary cinema, fantasy films occupy a dual role as both entertainment and cultural reflection. On one hand, they provide visually spectacular escapism, inviting viewers to immerse themselves in magical realms. On the other, they reveal anxieties, values, and transformations that are deeply rooted in social and historical contexts. Liu (2021) suggests that the rise of fantasy cinema in the 21st century reflects an ongoing cultural desire to grapple with uncertainty, trauma, and transformation in an era of rapid change. Similarly, Schmidt (2024) notes that fantasy films often dramatize the negotiation between the ordinary and the extraordinary, mirroring how individuals navigate personal and collective crises. Thus, fantasy cinema becomes a vehicle not only for pleasure but also for processing complex cultural tensions, showing that the fantastic is inseparable from lived human experiences.

Among contemporary examples, *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* (2016), directed by Tim Burton, stands out for its intricate blending of the familiar and the supernatural. Based on Ransom Riggs' bestselling novel, the film tells the story of Jake, a teenager who discovers a hidden community of children with peculiar abilities, sheltered within a 24-hour time loop created by Miss Peregrine. Burton's stylistic hallmark—his merging of gothic aesthetics with surreal imagination—infuses the narrative with a tone that is both unsettling and enchanting (Anderson, 2020). Unlike more conventional fantasy films that rely on grand quests or epic battles, *Miss Peregrine* situates its fantasy elements in the intimate context of family, belonging, and protection. The time loop, while fantastical in concept, also symbolizes the desire for stability amidst chaos, highlighting the psychological need for safe spaces in uncertain worlds. The film therefore resonates as both a spectacle and an allegory for human concerns about safety, identity, and temporality.

Although fantasy has been widely examined as a theme in literature and film, studies often privilege thematic interpretation over formal analysis. Much scholarship emphasizes character arcs, archetypes, or moral symbolism—for example, Iswara (2020) focuses on the hero's journey as a lens for interpreting fantasy characters, while Oktaviani (2019) discusses symbolic representations of good and evil in narrative worlds. These perspectives contribute valuable insights, but they risk overlooking how fantasy functions structurally as a narrative system. As Huang (2021) points out, the unique power of fantasy lies not only in its themes but also in its formal mechanisms—how plots are organized, how settings are constructed, and how time and space are manipulated to sustain a coherent yet uncanny story world. Nugroho and Fitriani (2022) similarly argue that without structural attention, analysis of fantasy risks flattening into mere allegory, neglecting how narrative techniques actively shape audience experience.

To address this gap, this study employs Tzvetan Todorov's Fantastic Theory as its primary analytical lens. Todorov (as cited in Djokosujatno, 2005) defines the fantastic as the moment of hesitation between a rational and a supernatural explanation of events. This hesitation creates narrative tension, as audiences must decide whether the strange phenomena they encounter can be rationalized within natural laws or accepted as supernatural. Todorov further distinguishes between the uncanny—where the seemingly inexplicable is eventually explained logically—and the marvelous—where the supernatural is acknowledged as genuine and forms the logic of the narrative (Martinez, 2019). This theoretical framework offers a systematic method for categorizing fantastic elements, avoiding overly subjective interpretation by grounding analysis in structural distinctions.

Applying Todorov's theory to modern fantasy films like *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* provides a rigorous approach to understanding how narrative structures sustain the fantastic. For instance, the film's use of time loops exemplifies Todorov's marvelous category, as the supernatural manipulation of time is never rationalized but

instead forms the central organizing principle of the narrative. Meanwhile, the hesitation experienced by Jake, who initially doubts the existence of peculiar abilities, situates viewers in the liminal space of the fantastic itself, before ultimately embracing the marvelous. Schmidt (2024) and Kristianto and Goenawan (2021) emphasize that such structural analysis clarifies how plot, character, space, and time collaborate to shape the audience's perception of the story world. By identifying moments of hesitation, resolution, and acceptance, Todorov's framework illuminates how fantasy narratives sustain both tension and coherence.

The importance of this approach lies in its potential to bridge thematic and structural analysis. By situating fantasy within a formal system of categories, Todorov's theory makes visible how narrative mechanics themselves produce meaning. In the case of *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children*, the structural interplay of uncanny and marvelous elements reveals deeper cultural and psychological dimensions. The uncanny elements—Jake's initial uncertainty, his encounters with strange but explainable clues—allow viewers to relate to skepticism and doubt. The marvelous elements—children's peculiar powers, the permanence of the time loop—symbolize the acceptance of difference and the embrace of alternative realities. This structural balance ensures that the fantastic functions not only as spectacle but also as a vehicle for reflection on identity, belonging, and resilience.

Taken together, the study of fantasy through Todorov's Fantastic Theory underscores the genre's relevance for contemporary film analysis. While previous scholarship has emphasized themes, symbolism, or archetypes, structural analysis provides a systematic framework for examining how fantasy worlds are built and sustained. *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* demonstrates how the fantastic can be formally embedded within plot, character, and setting to address cultural anxieties about time, protection, and identity. More broadly, such analysis reinforces the idea that fantasy is not a secondary or escapist mode but a vital narrative strategy that allows cinema to interrogate the boundaries between reality and imagination. By combining formal and thematic perspectives, researchers can uncover the multilayered significance of fantasy in modern storytelling, affirming its role as a genre that both enchants and provokes critical reflection.

The novelty of this study lies in its focus on the structural construction of fantasy elements in Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children using Todorov's dual concepts of the uncanny and the marvelous. While most previous analyses have interpreted fantasy films through thematic or psychoanalytic perspectives (Sagala et al., 2022; Saragih et al., 2021), this study applies a formal narrative framework to evaluate how fantasy is established, maintained, and resolved throughout the film. Furthermore, it incorporates recent scholarly discourse (Liu, 2021; Schmidt, 2024; Wardaniningsih & Kasih, 2022), ensuring relevance within current academic conversations in literary and film studies Zhao (2023).

Therefore, this research seeks to answer the following questions: What types of fantastic elements - marvellous and uncanny - are present in Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children?; How are these elements structurally constructed in the film? And How do these structures support character development and thematic depth?

METHOD
Research Design
This research applies a qualitative descriptive design to explore the structural construction of fantastic elements in Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children (2016) through the theoretical lens of Tzvetan Todorov's Fantastic Theory. A qualitative approach is appropriate because it allows for interpretative analysis of symbolic meaning and narrative structure within a text (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Specifically,

the study adopts a structuralist perspective that focuses on narrative devices such as plot, setting, character function, and motifs, which are essential in constructing a coherent fantasy world. Todorov's classification of the fantastic distinguishing between the uncanny (explainable phenomena) and the marvellous (accepted supernatural occurrences) serves as the central theoretical framework to analyze how fantasy operates within the film's structure (Djokosujatno, 2005; Liu, 2021).

Research Object

The object of this study is the feature film Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children, chosen for its complex blending of the real and the supernatural within a consistent narrative logic. The research focuses on selected key scenes rather than the entire film to maintain depth and relevance. These scenes include moments where the protagonist encounters peculiar characters, discovers the time loop, confronts mythological creatures like the Hollowgasts, and ultimately accepts the supernatural world as his reality. These narrative segments were purposefully chosen because they represent points of tension, transformation, and thematic development that align with Todorov's categories. The emphasis on structurally significant scenes is consistent with qualitative film analysis, which prioritizes depth over breadth (Schmidt, 2024; Wardaningsih & Kasih, 2022).

Data Collection Technique

Data was collected through repeated and intensive viewing of the film, accompanied by structured note-taking. The researcher developed a scene-based coding sheet that recorded the location, narrative function, Todorovian category (marvellous or uncanny), and emerging themes such as identity, protection, isolation, and power. The coding scheme was based on a thematic matrix that aligned each scene with its structural and symbolic significance. Although this study did not involve human participants, it maintains transparency by explaining how scenes were selected and analyzed, which aligns with best practices in textual qualitative research (Kristianto & Goenawan, 2021; Sagala, Hasibuan, & Panggabean, 2022). Secondary data, including peer-reviewed journal articles and scholarly books, were used to support interpretation and strengthen theoretical validity.

Data Analysis

The analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles et al. (2014), involving three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. During data reduction, only scenes with clear fantastic tension or structural importance were selected. In the display phase, the coded data were organized into a thematic chart that linked each scene to Todorov's theoretical categories and its function within the story. For example, Jake's early hesitation to believe in the peculiar world was coded as an instance of the uncanny, while his later acceptance of time loops and magical powers represented a shift into the marvelous. The conclusion stage involved interpreting these patterns to explain how fantasy operates as both a narrative and symbolic force within the film. To ensure the study's credibility, triangulation was employed by comparing primary visual data with secondary theoretical literature, and an audit trail of analytical decisions was maintained to enhance dependability and confirmability (Liu, 2021; Wardaningsih & Kasih, 2022).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis reveals that Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children integrates elements of the fantastic using both marvellous and uncanny categories as described by Tzvetan Todorov. These elements are embedded not only in the narrative plot but also within the structure of space, character development, and temporal dynamics. The film

constructs a world where the supernatural is normalized, allowing audiences to experience moments of hesitation and wonder about both key features of Todorov's theory.

Table 1. Types of Fantastic Elements in Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children

No	Element	Description	Todorov's Category
1	Peculiar abilities	Children possess supernatural powers (levitation, invisibility, etc.)	Marvellous
2	Time loop	Miss Peregrine resets time daily to 1943	Marvellous
3	Hollowgasts and Wights	Creatures from failed experiments with grotesque forms	Marvellous
4	Jake's hesitation	Uncertainty about reality upon discovering peculiar world	Fantastic/Uncanny
5	Normalization of magic	Peculiars use powers for daily tasks (e.g., heating water instantly)	Marvellous

These elements are not merely decorative but serve functional roles within the story. The peculiar abilities of the children are not presented as anomalies but as natural parts of their identities. The supernatural is not feared within their world but embraced, and this is central to the marvelous mode of fantasy. Similarly, the presence of the time loop, a 24-hour repetition of September 3, 1943.creates a structured, cyclical temporal setting that contrasts with the linear flow of time in Jake's everyday reality. This temporal dissonance serves as a narrative device that protects the peculiar children, yet also isolates them.

Table 2. Narrative Structure and Fantasy Function

Stage	Scene Description	Fantasy Function
Exposition	Jake grieves grandfather's death; introduced to legends of peculiar children	Introduces doubt (Uncanny)
Inciting Incident	Jake visits Cairnholm; discovers ruined home and peculiar children	Entry into fantastic realm
Rising Action	Learns about peculiarities and time loop; sees Hollowgasts	Shifting from doubt to acceptance
Climax	Jake embraces his gift; leads children to defeat Barron	Full acceptance of the marvellous
Resolution	Jake chooses to live with peculiars; embraces his identity	Integration of fantasy as reality

The film also constructs its fantasy through narrative structure, including motifs such as the symbolic use of eyes (which Hollowgasts consume to gain power), emphasizing vulnerability and surveillance. The character roles reinforce the fantastic: Jake begins as a rational outsider and transforms into a believer and protector; Miss Peregrine acts as a guide between worlds; the peculiar children symbolize diversity and self-acceptance; while the antagonist Barron embodies the dangers of corrupted power. Their interactions highlight the tension between logic and imagination. Spatial and temporal settings further accentuate the film's fantasy. Miss Peregrine's home is depicted as a gothic sanctuary physically isolated and visually rich with vintage décor that reinforces the aesthetic of timelessness.

The time loop itself functions as both refuge and prison, preserving safety at the cost of freedom. Meanwhile, Jake's modern world is depicted in muted, bland tones, reinforcing the emotional emptiness and chaos of reality. This contrast enhances the audience's immersion into the marvelous. Lastly, the realistic decor plays a subtle but vital

role in bridging the ordinary with the extraordinary. The film begins with familiar settings Jake's Florida home and suburban life which ground the viewer in reality. As Jake enters Miss Peregrine's world, the decor becomes increasingly stylized but remains internally consistent. This careful blending of realism and fantasy allows for greater narrative immersion. The visual contrast between Jake's dull home and the vibrant, peculiar universe deepens the impact of his transformation. Overall, the film exemplifies how fantasy, when structured coherently through Todorov's lens, not only creates an engaging story world but also opens space for exploring themes such as identity, isolation, belonging, and moral responsibility. The fantastic is not used simply to decorate the plot but serves as its backbone, shaping character growth and thematic depth from beginning to end.

To enhance narrative clarity, the protagonist's psychological and structural transformation is illustrated in the following timeline graph (Figure 1). The diagram visualizes Jake's progression through Todorov's narrative categories starting from the uncanny, where his reality is disturbed by the unknown, through the phase of hesitation as he questions the existence of the peculiar world, and finally reaching the marvellous, where he accepts and actively engages with the fantastical reality. This visual representation demonstrates how Jake's internal journey mirrors the narrative arc of the film, emphasizing structural movement and thematic development. Each narrative phase is marked not only by plot events but also by shifts in Jake's beliefs, agency, and alignment with the fantasy world.
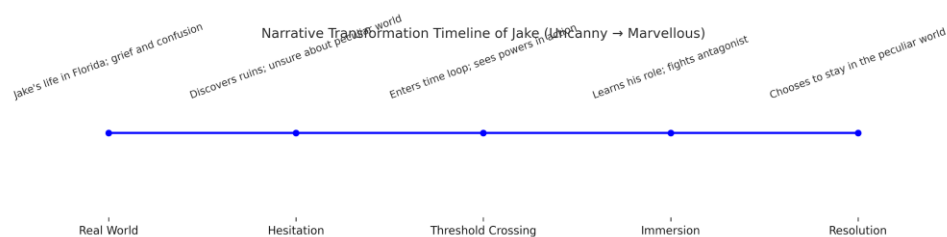

Figure 1. Narrative Transformation Timeline of Jake (Uncanny → Marvellous)

In addition to the narrative structure, the film's use of recurring motifs significantly contributes to its thematic depth and symbolic resonance. Figure 2 presents a motif map that outlines the key symbolic elements in Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children, such as eyes, the time loop, Miss Peregrine's bird transformation, and the Hollowgasts. Each of these motifs is directly linked to central themes in the film. For instance, the motif of eyes is associated with power, knowledge, and surveillance embodied through the Hollowgasts' grotesque consumption of eyes. The time loop, while providing safety, simultaneously represents stagnation and control. Miss Peregrine's bird form symbolizes maternal protection and transformational leadership, while the Hollowgasts represent corrupted ambition and the dehumanizing pursuit of immortality. These motifs, when viewed collectively, form a symbolic network that enhances the viewer's understanding of the film's deeper moral and psychological dimensions. By mapping these elements visually, the analysis reveals how symbolism functions structurally within the fantasy narrative.
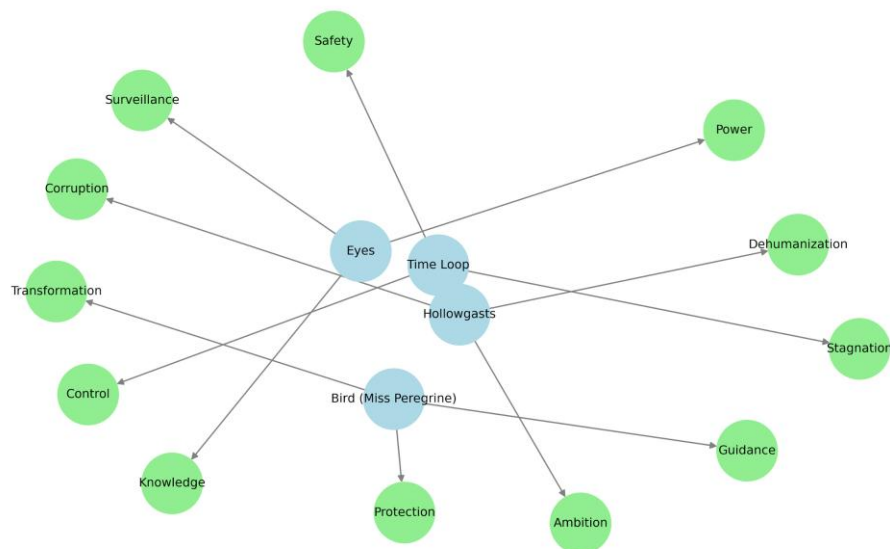
Figure 2. Motif Map: Symbols and Thematic Links in Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* integrates Todorov's categories of the marvelous and the uncanny in ways that advance both the narrative structure and thematic depth of the film. The children's peculiar abilities, the cyclical time loop, and the Hollowgasts embody the marvelous, while Jake's initial hesitation situates the narrative within the fantastic before ultimately moving toward acceptance. These results are consistent with Todorov's notion that the fantastic emerges from a moment of uncertainty between natural and supernatural explanations before resolving into either the uncanny or marvelous (Todorov, 1973; Martinez, 2019). By framing the film through this structuralist lens, the analysis confirms the theoretical relevance of Todorov's model for modern fantasy cinema, particularly in contexts where narrative devices are deliberately constructed to sustain tension and coherence .

These results resonate with earlier studies that emphasize the symbolic richness of fantasy narratives. Harjanti (2019) found that fantasy motifs in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* serve as more than imaginative devices; they function as symbolic explorations of human anxieties. Similarly, in *Miss Peregrine*, motifs such as eyes, time loops, and bird transformations are not ornamental but integral to advancing questions of identity, power, and protection. This finding also parallels Wardaniningsih and Kasih's (2022) study of Disney's *Encanto*, which argued that fantasy elements allow for nuanced explorations of belonging and self-definition. By linking marvelous events to universal dilemmas, Burton's film demonstrates how fantasy cinema continues to serve as a mirror for real-world struggles, even when framed within highly stylized supernatural worlds.

At the same time, the study extends beyond thematic readings by highlighting the structural construction of fantasy elements. Much previous research, such as that by Iswara (2020) and Oktaviani (2019), emphasized character symbolism or archetypal roles without closely examining how narrative frameworks embed fantasy into the story. The present findings challenge this limitation by showing that fantasy in *Miss Peregrine* is sustained through a systematic interplay of plot stages, temporal disruptions, and spatial contrasts. For example, Jake's progression from doubt to acceptance aligns with Kristianto and Goenawan's (2021) model of three-act narrative development, yet the shift here is also structurally marked by Todorov's categories of hesitation and resolution. This dual

reading demonstrates that fantasy can be understood both as a thematic allegory and as a structural mechanism, bridging two approaches that are often studied separately.

One notable point of comparison lies in Nugroho and Fitriani's (2022) study of *A Monster Calls*, which similarly integrated symbolism and structure in analyzing a fantasy film. They found that symbolic motifs such as the yew tree function both narratively and thematically, offering catharsis for the protagonist's trauma. The present study confirms this dual role of motifs, with *Miss Peregrine*'s recurring imagery of eyes and time loops serving as structural devices that organize the narrative while simultaneously reinforcing themes of vulnerability and entrapment. These parallels suggest that fantasy cinema often relies on symbolic motifs that carry both narrative and psychological weight, a finding that aligns with Huang's (2021) argument that structural patterns in young adult fantasy films are essential to sustaining narrative coherence.

However, this study also departs from earlier analyses in key ways. Whereas Liu (2021) emphasized linear narrative structures in short films, *Miss Peregrine* deliberately employs cyclical temporality through its time loop, which complicates traditional narrative flow. This dissonance illustrates how fantasy films can disrupt realist expectations of chronology while still maintaining coherence through marvelous logic. Schmidt (2024) has argued that alternating structures in film often generate meaning by juxtaposing different narrative logics, and Burton's use of a time loop exemplifies this principle. The result is a narrative that feels both disorienting and cohesive, underscoring Todorov's claim that the fantastic thrives on the tension between rational and supernatural frames of reference.

The practical implications of these findings are significant for both educators and creators. For educators, the study demonstrates how Todorov's Fantastic Theory can be applied not only to literary texts but also to multimodal narratives in contemporary cinema. This application provides students with a structured framework for analyzing fantasy that avoids overly subjective interpretations while still accommodating symbolic richness. For creators, the findings highlight the importance of embedding fantasy elements within coherent structures rather than relying solely on spectacle. Burton's film shows that audiences are more deeply engaged when fantasy elements serve both narrative and thematic functions, a lesson that can inform scriptwriting and production practices in fantasy media.

Theoretically, the results also extend Todorov's model into the cinematic domain. While Todorov originally developed his categories in relation to literary texts, this study affirms their adaptability for film analysis. The hesitation experienced by Jake and the resolution into the marvelous exemplify how cinematic techniques—visual motifs, temporal editing, and spatial contrasts—can be mapped onto Todorov's theoretical distinctions. This adaptation supports Zhao's (2023) argument that Todorov's framework remains useful for analyzing modern interactive and visual narratives, even as storytelling media evolve. At the same time, the study highlights areas where Todorov's model might be expanded. For example, the normalization of supernatural powers in *Miss Peregrine* suggests that fantasy cinema often collapses the boundary between the marvelous and the everyday, raising questions about whether Todorov's binary categories fully capture the hybridity of contemporary narratives.

Finally, discrepancies between the findings and earlier expectations warrant further reflection. Rabkin (2015) and Pranajaya (1992) positioned fantasy as a genre primarily concerned with escapism, while this study reveals its structural capacity to interrogate identity and belonging. The contrast may be explained by shifts in cultural production, where modern fantasy films increasingly address social anxieties such as isolation, diversity, and resilience. Moreover, Burton's gothic aesthetic complicates Todorov's framework by infusing the marvelous with a sense of the uncanny, blurring distinctions

that Todorov maintained as separate. These tensions suggest that while Todorov's theory remains foundational, contemporary films may require a more flexible interpretive framework that accounts for hybridity and intermediality.

This discussion situates the findings of the present study within broader academic debates on fantasy in literature and cinema. By confirming Todorov's relevance, extending structural analysis to film, and highlighting both convergences and divergences with prior research, the study contributes to a nuanced understanding of how fantasy operates as both a narrative structure and symbolic discourse. The theoretical implications underscore the adaptability of Todorov's categories, while the practical implications point to their pedagogical and creative value. Ultimately, the film demonstrates that fantasy, when constructed coherently through structural mechanisms, not only enchants but also provokes critical engagement with themes central to human experience, reaffirming its enduring significance in modern storytelling.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this research confirm that *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* constructs its fantasy world through a carefully balanced interplay of Todorov's categories of the marvelous and the uncanny. The peculiar abilities of the children, the cyclical time loop, and the monstrous presence of Hollowgasts and Wights exemplify the marvelous, while Jake's hesitation and gradual acceptance of the supernatural reflect the transitional space of the fantastic itself. These structural elements are not merely decorative but serve as the backbone of the narrative, guiding character transformation and sustaining thematic depth. Through motifs such as eyes, time manipulation, and protective spaces, the film weaves together a coherent fantasy structure that reflects universal concerns about identity, belonging, and the moral boundaries of power. The analysis demonstrates that Todorov's Fantastic Theory remains a powerful framework for dissecting contemporary fantasy cinema, enabling scholars to move beyond thematic interpretation and toward a deeper understanding of how structural mechanisms shape narrative coherence and symbolic meaning.

More broadly, this study underscores the cultural and pedagogical significance of analyzing fantasy cinema through structuralist perspectives. Theoretically, it contributes to the growing discourse on narrative studies by extending Todorov's framework—originally applied to literary texts—into the cinematic domain, demonstrating its continued relevance in multimodal storytelling. Practically, the findings highlight the potential for fantasy films to serve as tools for teaching narrative analysis, critical thinking, and symbolic interpretation, as they invite audiences to reflect on dilemmas of freedom, safety, and self-acceptance. The study also opens space for rethinking Todorov's binary distinctions, as Burton's film reveals a fluid blending of the marvelous and uncanny that challenges rigid categorization. Future research might expand these insights by applying similar structural approaches to diverse cultural contexts, or by integrating audience reception studies to examine how viewers negotiate hesitation and acceptance in relation to the fantastic. Ultimately, *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* illustrates how fantasy cinema, when analyzed structurally, is not only a source of enchantment but also a profound medium for exploring existential and social dimensions of human life.

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