

# Using Speculative Fiction Tropes

by Alan Vincent Michaels

## *R-SPEC Panel Members*

**Alan Vincent Michaels** (moderator)

**Eric Scoles, Lynn Spitz, Hugh Sullivan, and Ted Wenskus** (panelists)

## *About the Presentation*

During this discussion about speculative fiction tropes – character types, plot points, and story structures – that crop up repeatedly and sometimes for no good reason, we’ll explore how they can be used in your story, novel, role-playing game, or a video or movie script.

Knowing when to avoid a fantasy or science fiction trope will help your prose have its own unique voice. Knowing when to use a trope to your advantage can help you create something new, interesting, or simply hilarious. The choice is up to you.

Our panel will present some of the common tropes and you’re invited to share tropes that appeal to you or tropes you’re thoroughly tired of seeing. We’ll also discuss how to fix tropes and get them to aid your story, and we’ll see if there are any tropes worth saving.

Use your notes from this presentation and review the resources listed in this handout to help you enhance your writing in ways you may not have thought about before.

## *What is a Trope?*

“A **literary trope** is the use of figurative language, via word, phrase or an image, for artistic effect such as using a figure of speech. The word **trope** has also come to be used for describing commonly recurring literary and rhetorical devices, motifs or clichés in creative works.”

Source: **Trope (literature)** on **Wikipedia** [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trope\\_\(literature\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trope_(literature))

“The noun **trope** traditionally refers to any figure of speech in which a word or phrase conveys a meaning other than its literal sense. For instance, the phrase *broken heart* and the use of *Wall Street* to refer to the U.S. finance industry are tropes because their literal meanings are different from what we understand them to mean.

“In recent usage, however, *trope* is a catchall for any familiar thing that recurs in art, media, politics, or social interaction, even if the recurring element is not figurative. For example, one might call *the bumbling husband* a sitcom trope because that sort of character appears often, or one might call the phrase “do more with less” a trope because politicians say it frequently.”

Source: **grammarist.com** <https://grammarist.com/words/trope/>

These “twists and turns” of language are numerous, and we’ll certainly only scratch the surface here. They are found in abundance in poetry and literature, and that’s just the beginning. All forms of written, audio, and visual media, including social media, become fertile ground for these word and phrase choices to turn us and alter our way of thinking.

## Types of Tropes

The types of tropes found in literature and poetry include, but are certainly not limited to:

- Allegory
- Analogy
- Anthropomorphism
- Cliché
- Exclamation
- Hyperbole
- Irony
- Metaphor
- Oxymoron
- Paradox
- Parody
- Satire
- Simile
- Tautology

Refer to the **Figure of Speech** page on Wikipedia for a longer list of **schemes** and **tropes** that you can mine for your own writing pleasure: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Figure\\_of\\_speech#Tropes](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Figure_of_speech#Tropes)

## Some SF Tropes to Use – Carefully

What comes to mind when you think of these tropes? Yes, the science fiction genre is supposed to be virtually limitless, so why do writers keep harking back to these tropes?

- Alien invasion
- Artificial intelligence uprisings
- Bodily modifications
- Clones
- Cryosleep
- First contact
- God-like aliens
- Immortality
- Interspecies romance
- Interstellar travel / FTL travel
- Nanotechnology
- Parallel and alternative universes
- Post-apocalyptic world
- Robots
- Sentient starships
- Space pirates
- Superpowers
- Time travel
- Wormholes

## Some Fantasy Tropes to Use – Carefully

Similar themes and plot devices arise again and again in all fantasy genres. From **Pulver and Burke** (see “Selected Internet Resources” on the next page):

- Hero becomes ruler of the land and all is good and peaceful, even though he spent his formative years as a swineherd.
- Hero falls in love with heroine at first sight.
- Hero goes to dwarves to get magical gifts.
- Little people come from a country resembling England to defeat the evil wizard/king/complete the quest/save the world/etc.
- Modern human, usually an American, gets pulled into a fantasy world, usually a pseudo-medieval one, and manages to save the day without dying of disease or ignorance.
- One twin is good the other is evil.
- The quest is for a jewel/sword/ring/box or other artifact that can destroy/save the world.
- Twins separated at birth meet accidentally and fulfill a destiny.
- Untrained/untried novice goes up against a battle-hardened veteran and wins.
- Virtual reality used to create a game environment that becomes real, trapping the players in that created world.

## Some SF and Fantasy Tropes to Avoid

Here are just a few examples of SF/Fantasy tropes to avoid OR completely own in your writing if you can find a compelling and intriguing way to use them. From **Whitbrook** (see “Selected Internet Resources” below):

- Common Nouns out the Wazoo
- Evil Empire of Evil Evilness
- Faux-Medieval Europe
- Homogenous Race
- Insert Apostrophe Here for Exoticness
- Precursor Civilisation
- Single-Use World

## Some Horror Tropes to Avoid

Where to start with horror tropes? Haven't they already been done to death? Sorry! From **vtropes.com** (see “Selected Internet Resources” below), here are my favorites:

- A room full of \_\_\_\_\_ (zombies, rats, dead people, ghosts, et cetera!)
- Abandoned hospital
- Ancient tomb or an artifact of doom
- Blood bath
- Buried alive
- Mad scientist
- Mummy
- Run or die
- Screaming woman
- Super-persistent predator
- Swarm of \_\_\_\_\_ (rats, spiders, ants)
- The Doll Episode
- You are who (or what) you eat
- Zombie apocalypse

## Selected Internet Resources

vtropes.com – <https://vtropes.org>

- **Fantasy** – <https://vtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/Fantasy>
- **Horror** – <https://vtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/HorrorTropes>
- **Science Fiction** – <https://vtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/ScienceFiction>

## Blogs

- **To Trope or Not to Trope** - C. Clark  
<http://blog.pshares.org/index.php/to-trope-or-not-to-trope/>
- **7 Worldbuilding Tropes Science Fiction and Fantasy Needs to Stop Using** - J. Whitbrook  
<https://gizmodo.com/7-worldbuilding-tropes-science-fiction-and-fantasy-need-1659804610/>
- **Ten tropes you'll find in science fiction - over and over again** - A. Wilkins  
<https://io9.gizmodo.com/ten-tropes-youll-find-in-science-fiction-over-and-ove-5628989>
- **The 25 Greatest Science Fiction Tropes Ranked** - R. Johnson  
<https://www.barnesandnoble.com/blog/sci-fi-fantasy/the-25-greatest-science-fiction-tropes-ranked/>
- **Grand List of Fantasy Clichés** - K. Pulver & J. S. Burke  
<http://www2.silverblade.net/cliches/>
- **The Grand List of Overused Science Fiction Clichés** by J. VanSickle  
<http://www.geocities.ws/evilsnack/cliche.html>
- **10 Great Science Fiction Trope Tees on Etsy** by E. Wenstrom  
<https://bookriot.com/2018/06/18/science-fiction-trope-tees/>

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