

# FACES OF EVIL IN MODERN FANTASY

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## Abstract

Fantasy literature has enjoyed a vast increase in cultural prominence in the last quarter-century. What was once considered a marginal genre of scant literary merit is now enormously popular, enjoying huge sales and steadily increasing critical respectability. This change is partly due to the fashion in the early years of this century for cinematic adaptations of fantasy novels. Film “franchises” such as *The Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter* sold tens of millions of tickets apiece and prompted sympathetic reappraisals of their source material among both popular and academic audiences. Though this trend seemed to have run its course by about 2010, the television show *Game of Thrones* (2011-present) appears to have taken it to a new level. After six seasons the show continues to break ratings records and seems likely to be remembered as part of the *zeitgeist* of this decade. This success has naturally prompted renewed interest in George R.R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire*, the series of novels on which the show is based. Recent editions of Martin’s books have become runaway bestsellers and the forthcoming installments will no doubt do the same. Martin has also become a success with the critics, who praise the complexity of his characters and the moral depth of his work. Long-time readers and scholars of fantasy obviously welcome this.

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Nevertheless a slightly patronizing attitude towards fantasy can be discerned amid the praise lavished on Martin’s books. Fantasy has long had a reputation as a superficial genre that entertains readers without requiring much intellectual engagement from them. Often published in paperback format with colourful or lurid cover art, fantasy is open to interpretation as cheap, formulaic entertainment, the literary equivalent of junk food, to be derided by serious scholars. (Shippey xxi) Those who praise Martin are typically at pains to present him as atypical of his genre. This, for example, from the introduction to *Game of Thrones and Philosophy*:

Previous works of epic fantasy tended to operate with a straightforward moral compass where the antagonist was some variety of “Dark Lord” and the protagonists were defined by their opposition to this evil character based on their obvious moral goodness. In contrast, Martin’s story has been written with no dark lord to speak of, instead focusing the narrative on the dynastic conflicts that rend the Seven Kingdoms apart beneath the shadow of a looming catastrophe. (x)

Garcia and Antonson applaud Martin’s books for transcending the apparently long-accepted limitations a formulaic genre. The view of fantasy they propound here is, it must be said, rather sweeping. Stories of the sort they describe certainly exist, but Martin’s books are by no means the first fantasies to offer morally complex conflicts or to feature sophisticated characterization. In fact, while Martin undoubtedly does both these things very well, modern fantasy has a long tradition of doing the same. The purpose of this essay is to survey some noteworthy examples of this and to show that, rather than offering fantasy readers something genuinely new, Martin is using the long-established capacity of fantasy to highlight the human qualities of his characters.

The capacity of fantasy to do this has been apparent at least since the publication of Mervyn Peake’s *Titus Groan* in 1946. Peake tells the tale of Gormenghast, an impossibly ancient, immense castle – nobody knows how ancient or immense, since there are no records of its construction or usable maps of its layout. Nobody has ever come to the castle, or left it; it is a completely self-contained society. Isolated from the rest of the world, and therefore from any other frame of reference, the inhabitants of Gormenghast exhibit a peculiar lack of curiosity. As Carey notes, “They never ask the right questions; how did we get here, who made me, where am I?” (118-119) Rather than seeing their situation as unusual, they simply accept it as normal and bow to its demands, which themselves make no sense. The castle’s lords, the Earls of Groan, are obliged to undertake completely pointless rituals and ceremonies governing every aspect of their lives. Earl Sepulchgrave, the castle’s current ruler, must dress in certain clothes on certain days, walk certain corridors, open or close certain locks, pour wine or moat water into or out of certain vessels in certain rooms at certain times and so on, in strict accordance with ancient books of instruction that fill the castle library. Other members of his household must periodically do the same. Nobody knows why. “It was not certain what significance the ceremony held,” we are told, “for unfortunately the records were lost, but the formality was

no less sacred for being unintelligible.” (295) The ceremonies, devoid of meaning, are nevertheless seen as absolutely necessary by all. Living in a world without context, people are depicted – and see themselves – purely in terms of their role within this regime, a dehumanizing trend that prevents them from forming any meaningful personal connections with each other. (Young 54) Sepulchrae is lost in resigned melancholy, completely subjugated to the castle – “How could he love this place?” we are asked. “He was part of it. He could not imagine a world outside it; the idea of loving Gormenghast would have shocked him.” (62). His wife Gertrude is a misanthropic idiot who cares only for her pets, his daughter Fuchsia a scatterbrained daydreamer, their manservant Flay an unhinged conservative who sees rebellion against the Groan Lore – something his housemates are quite incapable of – in every one of the castle’s innumerable shadows.

The plot of the novel, and its 1949 sequel, revolve around one such insurrection. Peake’s story opens with the teenage servant Steerpike escaping from the castle kitchens. He initially hopes to leave the castle, but spies a better route for self-improvement, hatching a series of plots to move up through the castle hierarchy. These schemes rapidly become successful, as well they might. Peake repeatedly shows Steerpike as far more sensible than his housemates. While they busy themselves with a series of rigid, pointless rituals they do not even pretend to understand, Steerpike is repeatedly shown making disciplined, constructive use of his time and resources, laying plans and working hard to execute them. Deciding that burning the castle library would advance his plans, he surveys the room at some length:

His survey was exhaustive, and when he finally left the building he appreciated to a nicety the nature of the problem. Lengths of oil-soaked material would have to be procured and laid behind the books where they could stretch unobserved from one end of the room to the other. (262)

Peake spends an entire chapter depicting Steerpike carefully arranging this, carrying out the work when he will not be observed, utilizing resources that come to hand during the fact and displaying a capacity for both abstract thought and forward planning. Nobody else in the novel behaves in this way. This capacity to think matters through and work rationally towards their solution mark him as the most sensible character in the novel, not simply more intelligent than the

other characters but operating on an entirely different intellectual level – our level, the level that can see the castle and its ritual as the absurd, toxic follies they are. As he himself observes, he is “clever enough to know that [he is] clever,” (176; cf. Ian Johnson 9), able to think beyond the castle’s stultifying routine and exploit the inability of the other inhabitants to do the same. In doing so he is the most credible, relatable, human character in the novel. Steerpike could be seen as something of a hero, an intellectually kinetic, free-thinking meritocrat striking against a repressive regime.

Yet Steerpike is far from hero material. He is a picture of utilitarian rationality but not morality. He feels no remorse when his arson causes an accidental death, instead assaying the corpse as a source of resources for further schemes. (337) He cruelly manipulates the affections of Fuchsia, a foolish but honest and open-hearted girl, laying plans to cynically seduce her when the time is right. His manipulation of Sepulchre’s feeble-witted sisters Cora and Clarice is even easier, and provides frightening insight into his capacity for cruelty. When they displease him, he orders them to crawl under the carpet of their room:

Steerpike derived as much pleasure in watching these anile and pitiful creatures, dressed in their purple finery, as they crawled beneath the carpet as he got from anything. He had led the gradually, and by easy and cunning steps, from humiliation to humiliation, until the distorted satisfaction he experienced in this way had become little short of a necessity or him. Were it not that he found this grotesque pleasure in the exercise of his power over them, it is to be doubted whether he would have gone to all the trouble involved in keeping them alive. (*Gormenghast* 48)

Steerpike is not merely using his intellectual superiority over these women, but viciously exploiting it and coming to unhealthily enjoy mistreating them. When they outlive their usefulness Steerpike locks them in a remote room and leaves them to starve to death, intellectually outmaneuvering the other characters to explain their disappearance. Nor are these the only deaths he engineers. One of his major promotions is secured by the simple expedient of murdering his predecessor. It is heavily implied that he murders Fuchsia’s nanny, a harmless, doddering old woman. Eventually his villainy is discovered, and he escapes into unexplored regions of the castle, from which he emerges to satisfy an emerging “lust for killing” (442) slipping, Peake tells us, “into the skin of a solitary Satan as if he had never known the flourish of language or the delights of civil power.” (443)

This is, however, more than just a simple case of a villain slowly being unmasked. Peake plays with his reader's sympathies. Even as he kills, Steerpike retains a degree of reader sympathy for the simple reason that he remains the most relatable character in the novel. (Eckstein 93) This monstrous serial killer possesses a clear, uncluttered, rigidly sensible intellect that makes him a far more human character than any of the dehumanized wretches he interacts with. Yet it is precisely this capacity for human thought that leads him to evil. His ability to think, talk and run rings around his housemates, the fact that he is "clever enough to know [he is] clever," has fostered in him a contempt for those unable to see past the fantastic idiocies of the castle. That contempt allows him to ignore the effects that his machinations will have on these people. He plans to seduce Fuchsia in order to compromise her position as a member of Gormenghast's ruling dynasty and leave her open to blackmail without any thought of how this will ruin the poor girl's life. As already seen he viciously mistreats Fuchsia's aunts, deriving active enjoyment from their pain and humiliation. The Groans have become tools to him, to be used and discarded without fear of consequence; his gift of the gab will shield him from any repercussions. Steerpike's human thought processes fact dehumanize the Groans more effectively than their unnatural surroundings have ever done. Steerpike's ability to connive, torture and kill stems not from any dark sorcery, but from his ability to think like a real person and his willingness to abuse that ability.

In sculpting this character therefore, Peake has applied himself to the long-standing question of whether one performs evil acts because one is evil, or one becomes evil by acting evilly. Steerpike does the latter. His cruelty and violence are the results of an all-to-explicable process. Like a concentration-camp guard, he does evil because he discovers he can, and can get away with it. Evil in Gormenghast is not a remote, external force; it lies in the human mind, and is unleashed when a human being is empowered to act without fear of being called to account for his actions. Far from being the sort of objectively evil "dark lord" Garcia and Antonnson complain about, Steerpike is evidence of a fantasy author actively engaged with the question of what evil is, where it comes from, and what literary depictions of it can demonstrate about humanity.

One fantasy author frequently accused of moral oversimplification is J.R.R. Tolkien. Critics have frequently used Tolkien as a point of reference when discussing George R.R. Martin, generally arguing that

Martin is the more morally sophisticated writer of the two. This, for example, from *Time Magazine* book editor Lev Grossman:

Tolkien's work has enormous imaginative force, but you have to go elsewhere for moral complexity. Martin's wars are multifaceted and ambiguous, as are the men and women who wage them and the gods who watch them and chortle, and somehow that makes them mean more. *A Feast for Crows* isn't pretty elves against gnarly orcs. It's men and women slugging it out in the muck, for money and power and lust and love.

Grossman's comments continue a tradition of dismissals of Tolkien's work stretching back to 1956, when Edmund Wilson dismissed *The Lord of the Rings* as "juvenile trash" (314) presenting only a battle "of the Forces of Evil with the Forces of Good, the remote and alien villain with the plucky little home-grown hero." (313) Certainly many readers enjoy Tolkien's work on roughly those terms. Yet if those readers – or Grossman or Wilson – engaged fully with *The Lord of the Rings* they would find the novel incorporates a fascinatingly complicated presentation of evil.

At the heart of Tolkien's narrative lies the One Ring, which the heroes seek to destroy lest it fall back into the hands of its maker, the Dark Lord Sauron. The Ring, the wizard Gandalf explains, will grant absolute power to those who use it, yet in doing so will rob them of any shred of morality, goodness or dignity. Tolkien offers the shriveled, unhinged wretch Gollum, the Ring's previous owner, as a picture of what long-term use of the artifact will do to an individual, and the blasted, ruined wasteland of Mordor as evidence of its effects on the world at large. By a combination of happenstance and careful planning by Gandalf the Ring has fallen into the hands of people who appreciate this point and are working to rid Middle-earth of this menace by means of an expedition to Orodruin, the volcano in which it can be destroyed. Yet they are not doing this because they themselves are morally faultless – far from it. They are doing this because they understand how the Ring works. It is, as noted by leading Tolkien scholar Tom Shippey, "addictive" (119). A single use of the Ring achieves a goal and produces no apparent ill effects, so the user uses it again, and again, and so on, becoming accustomed to using its limitless power to solve problems and increasingly heedless of other concerns in their life, including any moral convictions they may hold dear. Their ability to do things increases without any accompanying expansion of their ability to grasp the consequences of their actions.

The power of the Ring thus swamps morality; the most noble of intentions will be twisted to heedless, arrogant evil.

Tolkien's discussion of Frodo's use of the Ring cleverly implies this process in action. He first puts the Ring on in the house of Tom Bombadil in the spirit of experimentation; no harm is done. When he does so again at the *Prancing Pony* inn, however, "It seemed to him, somehow, as if the suggestion had come to him from outside" (154) – the Ring is gaining power over his decision-making process. When he uses the Ring to escape the Ring-wraiths at Weather top he unequivocally feels something "compelling him to disregard all warnings, and he longed to yield." (191) By the time he reaches Cirith Ungol he watches his own hand move towards the Ring "as if he looked on some old story far away" (*The Two Towers* 61) – the matter seems to be passing beyond his control. Finally, when the time comes to destroy the Ring at Orodruin, he states "I do not choose now to do what I came to do." (924) Shippey perceptively interrogates Frodo's turn of phrase here; of course he does not choose. The Ring chooses for him. (140)

The Ring is an external, evil, almost animate force, a fragment of its creator's dark will pressing on the user's mind. This does not reduce Tolkien's tale to a simple matter of moral good versus immoral, remote evil, however, or even a case of good people being turned evil. For one thing it means there is nothing remote about Sauron; Frodo carries the villain with him, literally around his neck, throughout the story. For another, as Shippey observes, morally faultless characters would have nothing to fear from the Ring. They could and would steadfastly resist it. But this external evil has what Shippey describes as "an echo in the hearts of good," (142) a capacity to influence those who possess it or even think about it too much, an influence the heroes of the novel manifestly fear. The Ring awakens the potential for evil within them all, bringing those traits to the surface and empowering it to overwhelm the moral convictions that should keep such ugliness in check. Tolkien provides some chilling glimpses of this. Bilbo, the uncle from whom Frodo inherits the Ring, asks to hold it and momentarily seems to become "a little wrinkled creature with a hungry face and groping bony hands" when he is refused; "[Frodo] felt a desire to strike him." (*Fellowship* 213) It is hard to know precisely what Tolkien is communicating here – the debasing power the Ring still has over Bilbo, the growing desire Frodo has to keep hold of it, or some combination of both – but it reflects well on nobody. When confronted with the Ring, Boromir begins to stride about,

speaking ever more loudly. He seemed to have forgotten Frodo, while his talk dwelt on walls and weapons, the mustering of men,; and he drew plans for great alliances and glorious victories to be; and he cast down Mordor, and became himself a mighty king, benevolent and wise. (*Fellowship* 389)

The last phrase is obviously ironic. Boromir's daydreams stem from a native and generally laudable personal trait – his desire to protect his homeland. Faced with the prospect of being able to act on that desire without limit or consequence, however, the instinct to protect Gondor is twisted into a sort of malevolent foolishness, into dreams of self-aggrandizement with no link to reality. He understands that with the Ring, his ability to act would expand, his ability to keep track of how those acts would affect other people, or even himself, is already swiftly contracting. This power to pervert native personality traits is why upstanding people like Gandalf and Aragorn fear the Ring as much as they do. Perhaps the most frightening instance is when Frodo offers the Ring to Galadriel, queen of Lothlorien, who Boromir has been sharply rebuked for not trusting (349):

For many long years I had pondered what I might do, should the Great Ring come into my hands, and behold! it was brought within my grasp. The evil that was devised long ago works on in many ways, whether Sauron himself stands or falls. Would that not have been a noble deed to set tot the credit of his Ring, if I had taken it by force or fear from my guest?

And now at last it comes. You will give me the Ring freely! In place of the Dark Lord you will set up a Queen. And I shall not be dark, but beautiful and terrible as the Morning and the Night! Fair as the Sea and the Sun and the Snow upon the Mountain! Dread as the Storm and the Lightening! Stronger than the foundations of the earth. All shall love me and despair! (356)

Thank goodness – so to speak – that Galadriel is able to put aside this temptation. Like Gollum before her and Boromir afterwards, however, Galadriel exhibits a personal trait – in her case her clearly conscious awareness of her majesty and beauty – that the Ring could pervert. This is how the Ring works, by warping native traits of the characters into loathsome, immoral exaggerations of themselves, and for that to happen, as Shippey observes, “there has to be something for it to work on.” (138) Tolkien's readers are repeatedly shown how various



personality traits – Smeagol’s avarice, Boromir’s patriotism, Saruman’s lust for knowledge, even the humble Sam’s love of heroes and desire to become “Samwise the Strong, Hero of the Age”(880) – can be twisted in this way. The Ring works does not turn people evil, it brings native capacities for evil to the surface. The heroes in *The Lord of the Rings* are not heroes because they are morally pure, as Wilson complains, nor because they oppose Sauron, as Garcia and Antonnson imply. Tolkien’s heroes are heroes because they appreciate their own corruptibility, and strive keep themselves in check as they pursue their onerous and risky attempt to work in the common good.

What Tolkien presents, therefore, is far from a black-and-white tale of good versus evil; indeed it is not a worthy that Galadriel outfits the Fellowship of the Ring in grey. The Ring is an alien force that works by appeal to native weaknesses; Tolkien’s heroes face a moral battle within themselves and between each other as much as a physical one with orcs and trolls. To Tolkien, a veteran of the First World War writing as the Second World War and its aftermath prompted widespread reconsiderations of what people are capable of, this must have seemed eerily resonant. Certainly Shippey seems justified in his conclusion that this is a major reason for the breadth and depth of the appeal of *The Lord of the Rings*. (142) Sauron is perhaps the archetypical example of the sort of “dark lord” Garcia and Antonnson complain about, but Tolkien has not simply used magic to create a nasty villain for “good guys” to cast down. Rather he uses magic to illustrate the imperfections of humanity, our capacity for both good and evil, and our responsibility to keep the darker sides of ourselves in check. Like Peake’s, this is a novel about what evil is and where – within ourselves – it comes from.

Another fantasy author whose work exerts a tremendous power over its readers is JK Rowling. The battle that Harry Potter and his friends wage against the Dark Lord Voldemort is told in some of the best-selling novels in history; Professor McGonnagall speaks prophetically in the first book when observes of the then-infant Harry that “Every child in our world will know his name!” (*Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* 15) Rowling’s tale does at first glance appear to be a straightforward case of good against evil; Harry is certainly heroic and Voldemort a callous, fascistic murderer out to ethnically cleanse the wizarding world. Harry exhibits all manner of likeable attributes – charity, courage, loyalty, compassion – while Voldemort is the most convincingly vile characters in modern literature.

Nevertheless Voldemort, like Steerpike, was not born bad, at least not inescapably so. He is a convincing villain in large part because Rowling has done such a thorough job of explaining how he got that way. As the series progresses, Harry's mentor Dumbledore reveals more about the Dark Lord. Voldemort was once aboy named Tom Riddle, who had much in common with Harry. Both boys can speak to snakes. Both are orphans, offspring of mixed marriages between a wizard and a non-wizard, raised in unpromising circumstances – Harry by boorish foster-parents, Tom in a “grim” (*Half-Blood Prince* 251) orphanage – before being whisked away to Hogwarts at age eleven. Both come to regard the school as their true home. Obviously Harry and Tom had the same problems and opportunities; yet Harry turns out as the promising, upstanding wizard citizen while Riddle becomes “the most dangerous Dark wizard of all time.” (258) Rowling has constructed the character in such a way that those who know what to look for to find out what went wrong. Critic Christopher Bell goes so far as to describe Voldemort as “wholly a creation of environmental circumstance.” (45)

Bell cites Riddle as a classic case of moral disengagement – a process he notes as having affected such real-world individuals as the perpetrators of the Columbine High School massacre in 1999. (43-44) He notes how Rowling's wizarding world, just like our own, features a number of institutions – notably Hogwarts itself – that both encourage the pursuit of power, rank and material success as well as moderating that pursuit by encouraging moral and humanitarian behavior. As headmaster of Hogwarts, for example, Dumbledore enjoys unparalleled respect and freedom of action in the wizard community; he also carefully teaches his students “not only to use magic, but to control it” (256) via strict moral accountability. Riddle, Bell suggests, observed the first part of this equation but been excluded from the moral community Dumbledore is trying to build. Isolated among Muggles, he also fails to form resonant friendships among wizards, something that Harry does singularly well. Tom's Muggle father must have been the cause of bullying in the common-room of the elitist Slytherin House. (49) Thus Tom does not have a stake in the moral regime of Hogwarts; the human relationships and lives that morality safeguards are of little concern to him. After he left Hogwarts, furthermore, his attempts to climb the ranks of wizard society are stymied as he is repeatedly passed over for the job of Defence Against the Dark Arts master at his prestigious school. A young man who inherited his grandfather's sense of entitlement (“I knew I was special” [*Half-Blood Prince* 254])

has joined a society that respects power and then been foiled in his attempts to gain that power within the moral orthodoxies of that society. As Bell notes (46) this kind of situation tends to produce moral dislocation in real human beings; improperly integrated into the moral frameworks of society people often resolve to pursue what their society values and applauds without reference to the ethical strictures that society places on that pursuit. Although Rowling is vague on the details, it is clear that by his twenties Riddle was already doing this:

You call it ‘greatness,’ what you have been doing, do you?” asked Dumbledore delicately.

Certainly,” said Voldemort, and his eyes seemed to burn red. “I have experimented; I have pushed the boundaries of magic further, perhaps, than they have ever been pushed –

Of some kinds of magic,” Dumbledore corrected him quietly. (*Half-Blood Prince* 415)

Bell goes further, noting that Voldemort also engages in predictable methods of excusing his crimes. He accuses Muggles of being uncivilized savages – after all, they abandon their children in orphanages – therefore not deserving of decent treatment. (55) This rash conceit, Bell argues, allows Voldemort to depersonalize Muggles, to see them not as individuals but as instances of an infuriating, ongoing problem that deserves an aggressive solution. Not only was Voldemort not born evil; the ways in which he justifies his misdeeds are demonstratively those by which real people become divorced from the moral norms of real society.

Voldemort had problems growing up – problems severe enough that Dumbledore is once actually moved to ask Harry if he is “feeling sorry for Volemort?” (*Half-Blood Prince* 246) Voldemort’s actions make this largely impossible – ask Mister and Mrs Diggory – but Rowling has taken care to explain to Harry where his nemesis is coming from, and what drives him. This authorial decision contributes significantly to the moral depth of Rowling’s tale in that the reader learns along with Harry. Voldemort thus becomes not a depersonalized, objectively evil “Dark Lord” but someone whose undeniably evil acts have a clear, psychologically plausible explanation. As with Peake and Tolkien’s tales, evil in the *Harry Potter* books is the result of the pressure of outside forces on recognizable, flawed, well-drawn human minds. Tom Riddle takes a power he has been given and practices it without the moral strictures that Harry accepts, becoming in some respects akin to the users of

Tolkien's Ring; his magical power increases without any corresponding growth in his ability to relate his actions to the impact they have on others. Indeed, as Bell has demonstrated, that ability contracts. Perhaps the main reason Harry and the reader *cannot* feel sorry for Voldemort is that he has made an effectively conscious decision to ignore the effect his magic had on other people, using his growing power in hateful ways for spiteful reasons. In interviews, Rowling has been careful to note that Voldemort had the ability to rise above his problems and become a decent person, but he did not do so. (Sutton-Ramspeck<sup>81</sup>) To paraphrase Dumbledore, therefore, where Potter chose what was right, Riddle chose what was easy. Put simply, he failed to rise above the problems Harry surmounted, and his resentment festered until it overwhelmed his sense of human decency.

Voldemort's magical activities define him. Actions speak louder than words, and magical actions all the more loudly. As Tolkien avers in his landmark essay "*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*," literature that places human activities in a broader context, contrasting them with manifestly, inarguably inhuman forces, provides a renewed focus on what a human being is and what they are capable of. (33) All three of these authors have done this. Peake has used a patently supernatural situation – the absolute isolation of Gormenghast – to deprive most of his characters of part of the reasoning power of the human mind, then asked how a person still possessed of that faculty would behave in such a situation. Tolkien creates a magical outside force that requires his characters to grapple directly with their own personalities and make fundamental, defining moral choices. Rowling watches as an all-too-human mind abuses the power of magic. It is in contrast to the special effects of Rings, Death Eaters and gigantic wild castles that we can see humanity in a fresh light. The capacity to provide this contrast means that while fantasy may *depict* wizards, goblins and dragons, it achieves its resonance because it is *about* people. All the writers examined here use fantasy to address the question of what evil is and how and why humanity is capable of it, and to emphasise their respective answers.

How does George R.R. Martin's work fit into this tradition? Garcia and Antonson suggest it does not, that there is no specific, unquestionable evil in the story, merely a tangle of conflicting agendas and objectives in the game of thrones, the venal conflict over which noble family will rule Westeros. Grossman, as noted above, sees this as a strength in Martin's writing.

Martin certainly focuses the plot on his human characters, and has cleverly exploded the notion that any of them is inherently morally superior to any other. The first volume, for example, focuses on Lord Eddard Stark, a responsible husband and father, stern but fair to his vassals and a wise councilor to King Robert Baratheon, who he aided in seizing the throne in an uprising against an unhinged and unworthy king fifteen years before the story begins. When King Robert learns the whereabouts of the mad king's daughter and spitefully orders her assassination, Eddard councils against this on moral grounds; it is, he insists, not justifiable to murder a blameless teenage refugee. A good man, it would seem. Yet the portions of the tale told from the point of view of Danyeris Targarean, the girl he is defending, suggests she sees him differently – as a key collaborator in the plot that killed her father and brother and drove her into exile, deserving of punishment when she returns to claim the throne of her ancestors, as she means to do. It is hard to dispute the letter of this assessment. And Danyeris is far from innocent; Martin's first book closes with one of her persecutors screaming in agony as she is burned alive on the princess's orders. It is seldom clear who, if anybody, counts as the hero in Martin's work.

Yet those who see Martin's work as innovative within the fantasy genre are on weaker ground in asserting there is no supernatural villain. Grossman's assertion to this effect is, surely, mistaken. In the words of Jeor Mormont, commander of the Night's Watch, "You don't build a wall 700 feet high to stop savages in skins from stealing women." He is clearly right; Martin begins his tale with an attack by wights, inhuman, pitilessly murderous monsters, against a detachment of Mormont's men. This is the threat that the Wall was built to repulse. North of the Wall the dead are rising from their graves to assault the living; such attacks are becoming steadily more numerous and will soon begin to threaten the realms of men. These creatures are not just another competitor in the game of thrones. They will not be bought off, bribed, or connived with as the nobles of Westeros so frequently do with each other. The wights are completely inhuman, as external and evil a force as any in modern fantasy literature.

So Martin uses fantasy to create an external, supernatural evil. But like Peake, Tolkien and Rowling he uses this unquestionably inhuman force to reveal something about humanity. When a messenger from the Wall arrives at King's Landing, the capital city of Westeros to warn his government of the emerging threat he is made fun of:

Tyrion called down Little finger. “Buy our brave Ser Alliser a hundred spades to take back to the Wall with him. “Spades?” Ser Alliser narrowed his eyes suspiciously. If you *bury* your dead, they won’t come walking,” Tyrion told him, and the court laughed openly. “Spades will end your troubles, with some strong backs to wield them.”  
(*A Clash of Kings* 367)

After this mocking interlude, the Westerosi unhesitatingly resume the game of thrones. Only the few who have seen a wight and lived to talk about it grasp the gravity of this situation. Importantly, the reader falls into that category. As such *A Song of Ice and Fire* vindicates Tolkien’s aforementioned comments (“The Monsters and the Critics 33) about the power of fantasy to create contrasts that refresh our understanding of humans and human activity. The game of thrones is being conducted in the context of a looming, supernatural catastrophe, a completely inhuman common enemy. The contrast between such unquestionable inhumanity and the all-too-human rough and tumble of Westerosi politics casts the antics of Stark against Lannister, Greyjoy against Tyrell, Martell against Clegane, Old Gods against the New and indeed the Night’s Watch against itself in an entirely new light.

Put simply, the existence of the wights makes the game of thrones tragically silly. Martin’s characters treat the game as all-important; they behave appallingly in order to secure perceived advantages over each other, yet the coming of the wights renders any such advantages completely pointless. Recounting a single subplot in *A Clash of Kings* makes this point clear. After Eddard Stark’s execution his son Robb leads an army south to avenge his father. Theon Greyjoy, Robb’s foster-brother, returns to the lightly-defended castle of Winterfell and treacherously seizes it with a tiny force of his true father’s men, killing many of the guards and servants who served him uncomplainingly throughout his youth. When the other Stark heirs go missing Theon murders innocent children and presents their corpses – their faces obscured – to the people of Winterfell as proof that he now controls the castle. Later he himself is ousted from this seat by Ramsay Bolton, an even more brutal character who tortures Theon into catatonic madness, skins disobedient vassals alive, marries a girl purported to be Eddard Stark’s daughter in order to legitimize his claim to the castle and repeatedly rapes her in pursuit of an heir of his own. Such crimes are committed because Winterfell is a large castle, and prestigious aristocratic titles are associated with it.

It is also one of the first human strongholds the wights will assault when they breach the Wall and move south through the lands of men, as they surely will. The reader understands something the characters do not – that the important thing is not who controls Winterfell but that the castle is strongly garrisoned and ready to repel an attack from that terrible foe. Vaguely aware of the impending danger the lords of Westeros continue their petty squabbles, committing ghastly crimes as they do so. The existence of the wights reveal the pettiness of this dispute, the irrelevance of that struggle; when winter finally comes, it will not matter who won the game of thrones. The living dead may still be defeated, but only by a combined effort the Westerosi are so far singularly unwilling to undertake. Rather than a book that abjures evil, Martin has written a story as yet devoid of the sort of consciously self-effacing moral courage that led the Free Peoples of Middle-earth to put aside their feuds and concentrate on eliminating the Ring. What his stories lack is goodness.

This plays to Martin's objectives as a novelist. As Susan Johnson has shown (148-150) Martin's core business in this story is to critique aristocracy, to show the foolishness of putting too much faith in romantic ideas like crowned kings, noble knights, revered queens and oath-bound warrior brotherhoods. He has said as much in interviews:

Chivalry was among the most idealistic codes the human race has ever come up with for a warrior. These are men who were sworn to protect the weak. Then you look at the reality, and their brutality was extreme. (Hibberd)

Such people, Martin repeatedly reminds his readers, are just people; he goes to considerable length to explode the idea that there is anything glamorous or special about them. Note how often his characters must pause their adventures to use the bathroom, for example. (*A Game of Thrones* 160; 656-657; *Clash* 109; 753; *A Storm of Swords* 1.414; 1.1.454; *A Dance with Dragons* 877; 937) After winning an important battle Tywin Lannister rides his warhorse all the way into the royal palace, in full armour, to report his victory to the king – but the dramatic effect of his gesture is spoiled when the horse drops a load of dung in the middle of his speech. (*Clash* 817-818) Lannister himself will later die while sitting on a toilet, an undignified end for a man deeply concerned with his aristocratic legacy. Characters in these novels urinate, defecate, vomit and much else besides, seldom able to enjoy a moment of drama or glamour without their bodies spoiling it for them.

The one thing left to them is the game of thrones, their great battle over the lordship of the realm. Martin is always careful to point out the cost of that, writing frequently about the innocent people being harmed as a result of this supposedly principled conflict. Within weeks of her father's execution, ten-year-old Arya Stark has encountered trains of dispossessed refugees (*Clash* 74) experienced the bewildering, gory confusion of combat (203), heard the screams of torture victims (376), and witnessed numerous other women being raped. (378) Conventions of chivalric, civilized warfare are blithely abandoned or portrayed in ways that demonstrate their ineffectuality. Tyrion Lannister pauses in the brutally-narrated Battle of Blackwater to accept the surrender of a bested foe:

"Yield. Ser knight, I yield to you. My pledge, here, here." The man lay in a puddle of black water, offering up a lobstered gauntlet in token of submission. Tyrion had to lean down to take it from him. As he did, a pot of wildfire burst overhead, spraying green flame. In the sudden stab of light he saw that the puddle was not black but red. The gauntlet still had the knight's hand in it. He flung it back. "Yield," the man sobbed hopelessly, helplessly. Tyrion reeled away. (773)

Tyrion's opponent is not a noble knight graciously accepting defeat by a brother in arms but a frightened man frantically trying to bargain his way out of a situation quite beyond his control. His surrender is not grand but pathetic. Tyrion's response is not magnanimity but fear. There is, Martin insists, nothing glorious or glamorous about being a king or a warrior; those who think otherwise are repeatedly made to look stupid in his books. His supernatural evil puts this point beyond doubt. All this suffering and destruction is for naught. Winterfell, King's Landing, the Seastone Chair, the Iron Throne – all will be swept before the wights from the north when they come. The game of thrones means nothing, yet its players play on. To those properly informed of the situation – including the reader – this conflict is tragically ironic, a perfect, inarguable example of aristocrats behaving destructively while believing they are doing the opposite.

The common thread between all four of these authors is that they use magic to increase, not decrease, the moral depth of their work. In doing so each author has revealed something about humanity. In the febrile, dehumanizing environment of Gormenghast, Steerpike's agile, undamaged human mind allows him to do whatever he wants. It turns out that he really wants to dominate, control and mistreat his housemates.



By stepping outside reality Mervyn Peake has illustrated in starkly basic terms how someone so like us can go wrong, simply by exploring their human potential. JRR Tolkien's world depicts characters struggling with the pressure of a more abstract, external evil force, but one that achieves its effects by pressing on their own moral weaknesses. Tolkien uses magic to illustrate that the potential for evil is present in all of us, and how our ability to keep this in check makes us who we really are. JK Rowling's books tell a tale of good versus evil, yet they incorporate a fascinating forensic exercise in accounting for evil, explaining in scientifically convincing terms how two children born in similar circumstances can take radically different paths in their personal moral development. How they handle magic, an abstract, unquestionable power, is the litmus test of that development. Finally George RR Martin uses a looming supernatural catastrophe to throw his characters in a new light, to explode any lingering belief that he is writing about the grand deeds of good men and instead reveal a petty, pointless conflict between people he has made it his business to criticise. What none of these authors do is present a straightforward evil in order to facilitate the adventures of straightforward heroes. They use fantasy to reveal something about humanity – an undertaking for which the genre is admirably suited.

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