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Game of Thrones and a New Face of Fantasy

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ABSTRACT

Ever since stumbling across the HBO show “Game of Thrones”, I have been fascinated with the story, the characters, and the themes that take place in George R. R. Martin’s fantasy world. I picked up his books and gave them a read and realized that he has written a fantasy that is unlike any other that I have read before. Because of its popularity coming mainly from the television series, I took it upon myself to focus on the first novel in the series and explain how this first book set in motion an unforgettable and original take on a traditional fantasy setting.

George R. R. Martin’s *Game of Thrones* provides an extremely innovative take on traditional fantasy, a genre popularized by Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*. Many characters, themes, common lessons, and other literary components that Tolkien established are recognized and altered by Martin, and he sets a precedent that his fiction will not follow the traditional formula. These changes are purposefully misleading and markedly different from what many may expect from the fantasy genre, and, therefore, spark new interests and new appreciation for the genre.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments.....	iii
Introduction.....	1
Social Class and Wealth as New Elements.	5
Magic and Religion.....	10
Politics and Power.....	16
Ned Stark: The Hero.....	24
Conclusion.....	36
Works Cited.....	37

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INTRODUCTION

Fantasy has existed for millennia. It has evolved to become a beloved and extremely intricate genre where attention to detail, believability, and creativity are praised with millions of readers flocking for more. In a few cases, the modern fantasy genre has transcended its own niche market and established itself as a favorite to the general public, often spurring a growing passion for the magical worlds it brings.

Rosemary Jackson defines:

“Literature of the fantastic has been claimed as ‘transcending’ reality, ‘escaping’ the human condition and constructing superior alternate ‘secondary’ worlds...this notion of fantasy literature as fulfilling a desire for a ‘better’, more complete, unified reality has come to dominate readings of the fantastic, defining it as an art form providing vicarious gratification.” (Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion 2)

These classifications fall in line with the expectations from both modern and ancient forms of fantasy.

The origins of the fantasy genre go back even before written narrative. Myths like Homer’s *Iliad* can be considered fantasy when it was still being uttered as an oral history. One of the first written legends, *Beowulf*, which Tolkien studied and used to inspire his own works, marks one of the oldest English writings ever found. We all know of these stories because of their lasting mark on our current literature, and we see many of their supernatural elements within the fantasy genre specifically.

For many years these stories and myths dictated Western culture and its histories, “But the literary paths of realism and fantasy began to diverge in the 1600’s as new systems of

learning from the Renaissance brought about a rejection of superstition in favor of science and reason” (Matthews 2). Grand stories faded out of popularity, but over time folk legends continued to develop. Typically, though, these legends were designed for children. According to Myrna Allen’s *A Brief History of Fantasy*, “The first pieces of fantasy literature for children and young adults appeared in the 1800s” (5). Even so, the genre seemed to have been killed and then reborn “in the nineteenth century because the romantic and post-romantic era was busy rediscovering European mythology,” revitalizing that interest in the supernatural once again (Moran 15). Although having come back into the literary fold, it isn’t until the twentieth century, however, that we see a significant shift in how fantasy literature is marketed and consumed as an established genre.

Allen points to Edith Nesbit as the one who sets the stage for future fantasy writers in the twentieth century: “Nesbit laid out the ground rules for the use of magic in fantasy literature. She wrote about childhood and the collision of magic and the ordinary, not about morals and lessons but about what would happen when magic popped up in a child’s everyday life” (*A Brief History of Fantasy* 6), which makes sense since these imaginative works had been associated with childhood lessons for hundreds of years. Nesbit published enough work like *A Book of Dragons* (1900) and *The Phoenix and the Carpet* (1904) to set an example for which magical creatures and what types of magic would be popular to use in subsequent writings.

From here, it gets interesting. Almost forty years after Nesbit’s writings, the most impactful, fantasy author ever would publish *The Hobbit*. Marketed as a children’s novel, Tolkien’s first published fantasy engaged in complex concepts. With the *Hobbit*, the focus was more intricate than a simple adventure and a children’s lesson, but it involved a break of habit and an eventual yearning for home after a life-changing risk. J. R. R. Tolkien later grabbed hold

of a new adult audience with his *Lord of the Rings* series which awoke a broader audience as well as more mature subject matter. He was also one of the first fantasy authors to take the story outside of our own world and normalize it (*Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature* 65). Other notable, fantasy authors had contained their fantasies within our earth or within dreams. A great example is C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* and Rowling's *Harry Potter* series where there are portals that exist on earth that will send readers to a different world or a secret part of reality. There is no questioning Tolkien's impact on the genre. He created an entirely new world, languages, races, and mythologies to create a fantastically believable world and conflict to convey complex themes. Tolkien's ambition came from his love of language and eventually led to his creation of Middle Earth. And with creating a whole new world, he understood that it would require more flesh and detail.

The issue here, however, was that the genre was slow to innovate beyond Tolkien's own works. Patrick Moran writes, "The reason Tolkien holds such an important place in the canon of fantasy is because he was the first author to play a canonical role for all subsequent fantasy" (29-30). Tolkien's commitment to detail, backstory, and creativity inspired many fantasy writers after him. Edward James notes that "most subsequent writers of fantasy are either imitating him [Tolkien] or else desperately trying to escape his influence" (*Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature* 62). Terry Brook's *The Sword of Shannara* (1977), Tad Williams's *Memory, Sorrow, and Thorn* (1988), and Robert Jordan's *The Wheel of Time* (1990) are just a few examples of the many books and series considered to be Tolkien "clones".

The fantasy market sold well between the 1950s and 1970s largely because of the efforts and influence of Tolkien, but since then, only a few fantasies have enjoyed that same popularity. J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series has amassed an insanely large fan following, and her books

sold all over the world. The reason why I am not conducting my argument around Rowling's books is because they are largely a reawakening of the old fantasy markets for younger readers, and they still follow the plot formula of the genre. The *Harry Potter* series became popular in part because of its immersion into a late twentieth-century setting, which was certainly innovating, as well as its model around schools and familiar institutions in our own world. While creative, Rowling also still follows many of the common conventions and themes which Tolkien had put into place, the greatest being that "time in *The Lord of the Rings* begins and ends with moral order" (*Survey of Modern Fantasy Literature* 913). Each book in Rowling's series presents a problem for the protagonists to solve, and each book ends with Harry saving the day somehow. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and *Hobbit* end similarly. While yes, each book makes it known that there is a looming darkness like the villains Sauron or Voldemort, the heroes will always return to a temporary state of safety and eventually a permanent one where the evil has been rid from the world. George R. R. Martin's fantasy works departs from this stipulation.

I'm interested in George R. R. Martin's *Game of Thrones* novel, first published in 1996 and now a part of the larger *A Song of Ice and Fire* series, because of its large deviations from traditional themes, characters, and plot devices in a genre that has been largely inspired by Tolkien's books. It is important to note that Martin understands deeply the traditions set in place with settings, characters, and magic and he purposefully works against these expectations. I would regard Martin's novel as the start of an important component of late-twentieth-century fantasy. It achieves this status because it has successfully set itself apart from a genre that has tended to repeat itself.

Social Class and Wealth as New Elements

While fantasy plots can center on any character, seemingly indifferent of their social class, *Game of Thrones* exists entirely from the point of view of the nobility. In a world where feudalism, lordships, and kingdoms are the domineering force of both power and wealth, this makes sense. Political feuds, wars, and magic typically reside with those who are accustomed to profit from them, and if this book were narrated from a commoner's point of view it would not be as exciting and the point of view would not have sufficient knowledge of what and why things may happen. Tolkien's Bilbo and Paolini's Eragon are good examples of "commoners" whose adventures tell them more about the world around them, but neither of their lives in the beginning of the story or throughout inform much about the social hierarchy of their respective worlds. The feudalist society that Martin depicts removes the commoners from the action, but he does so very consciously. Martin inserts details and comments from a top-down lens—meaning someone in power observes those without any. This may be Martin's way of defining what a realistic, fantastic world would be like if traditional, medieval customs are kept intact.

There are two characters in the entire book that do not have a significant birthright yet still acquire great seats of power: Petyr Baelish, also known as Littlefinger, and Varys the Spider. I include these characters because of their unique ambition. In a feudal society, social class defines the person and their titles and can also give description of where they came from and where their legacy may lead. Last names have great meaning, especially in this novel, and accordingly there's a glossary in the back of the novel with all the great houses and the lesser houses that serve under them; but, alternatively, those with low names (or no names at all) hold no power unless given privilege from those who already have power. For Petyr Baelish and Varys, one had a weak house name and the other had none. Varys says, "The Red Keep shelters

two sorts of people, Lord Eddard. Those who are loyal to the realm, and those who are loyal only to themselves” (321). Here, Varys describes how he initially did not trust Ned Stark because of the nature of those that pursue power in King’s Landing. Varys believes that he serves the realm, while at the same time he must serve himself if he is to maintain his position as Master of Whisperers.

Petyr Baelish’s high ambition has taken him from a low name to the Master of Coin. He aims to please whoever is above him to earn their favor. Littlefinger informs Ned that “The Crown is more than *six* million gold pieces in debt, Lord Stark. The Lannisters are the biggest part of it, but we have also borrowed from Lord Tyrell, the Iron Bank of Braavos, and several Tyroshi trading cartels” (194). Littlefinger accumulates this debt to please King Robert. Littlefinger cares not for the money the Crown owes or what aftermath it may bring; he only has his welfare and high position in mind. He also invests to secure his own personal wealth. He runs brothels throughout King’s Landing, and through these brothels Littlefinger learns a great deal of information. Brothels serve many men which will yield many whispers, and in King’s Landing secrets hold great power.

Both Varys and Littlefinger make a business out of information and use it for their own social elevation. Yet Varys makes an important point: “I command whispers, not warriors” (321). He insinuates that even though he is a powerful man, real power resides in the lords with military force. Varys can inform, plot, and scheme, but because he is not a lord, he cannot march an army or pose a threat. As a former commoner, Varys understands that the lowly are at the mercy of those who were born into powerful families. He asks Ned, “Why is it always the innocents who suffer most, when you high lords play your game of thrones?” (636). By “innocents” Varys means the common people: those without land, servants, money, or power.

The commands from the nobility have a lasting impact on those specifically below them on the social hierarchy, and in times of war or struggle the peasants will feel the hunger of a famine or the sting of war long before they may affect the lords they serve.

Martin demonstrates the difficulties of the lower classes through descriptions of King's Landing. Catelyn, Ned Stark's wife and the lady of Winterfell, describes her first impressions of the city:

The city covered the shore as far as Catelyn could see; manses and arbors and granaries, brick storehouses and timbered inns and merchant's stalls, taverns and graveyards and brothels, all piled on one another...Between buildings were broad roads lined with trees, wandering crookback streets, and alleys so narrow that two men could not walk abreast.
(168)

The congested city teems with all types of life. Martin lists the different markets, ranging from granaries to brothels stacked on top of one another, showing how diverse and how populated the city it is. This description also conveys the lack of regulation of where each market or store is placed allowing for a variety of different people and products to be seen at once. Martin then writes, "And above it all, frowning down from Aegon's high hill, was the Red Keep," the royal fortress. Martin strategically uses "frowning down" to describe the immense power and fear that the upper class holds over its citizens. While five hundred thousand people crowd the city, only a fraction of a fraction reside in the monstrous Red Keep that overlooks the city in its singular glory. The geographical distance and differences between how the normal citizen and how the royal family live begs the question whether or not a monarchy can rule with empathy for those under them.

King Robert insists on hosting a tournament for Eddard's arrival, which brings great economic attention to the city. With great festivals like this one, travelers come from all over the country to display their prowess, but it also comes at a price to the common folk. The Commander of the City Watch explains because of the tourney, "Knights have been arriving from all over the realm, and for every knight we get two freeriders, three craftsmen, six men-at-arms, a dozen merchants, two dozen whores, and more thieves than I dare guess." The city is congested. The Commander adds that the heat is also causing a stir: "last night we had a drowning, a tavern riot, three knife fights, a rape, two fires, robberies beyond count, and a drunken horse race down the Street of Sisters" (272). Notice how these effects of the tournament are described. Merchants, craftsmen, whores, and knights arrive. Incoming nobility will look to spend money while the other newcomers seek to make money. These benefits to the city are associated with the knights and the lords; meanwhile the negative effects link to common areas. Riots in taverns, knife fights, and drunken horse races involve commoners. Common people cannot afford or hold swords so they must use knives, and taverns are meant to accommodate all people but more likely the middle to lower class citizens will occupy them. However horrible these reports are, they are still framed and viewed from the perspective of the ruling class. While the city's unrest creates a great deal of stress for Ned, he never experiences himself the hardship of a normal citizen. It isn't until Arya must go into hiding that readers see the truth of what it must be like to be a poor citizen of King's Landing.

Arya's unusual ability to stay unrecognized helps her escape notice from the City Watch and blend in with the lower class. Arya finds herself in Flea Bottom, the poorest neighborhood in King's Landing. "The Bottom had a stench to it, a stink of pigsties and stables and tanner's sheds mixed in with a sour smell of wineskins and cheap whorehouses" (721). Martin emphasizes

olfactory details which alone provide so much description. Arya certainly didn't need to mind what her nose found in the Red Keep or at Winterfell, but in the squalor of Flea Bottom these little details tell how low living standards can be. Arya must also scavenge for food. This chapter opens with her pursuing a pigeon to trade with a baker, but she is turned away. She keeps the bird and decides to trade it in at a pot-shop, "In the Bottom there were pot-shops along the alleys where tubs of stew had been simmering for years, and you could trade half your bird for a heel of yesterday's bread and a 'bowl o' brown'." This quotation shows that these pot-shops are an established system for those who are too poor to purchase other food. The description is less about Arya's lack of options and more about the status of the city. Later she comments that these pot-shops were never empty. Martin shows a clear disparity between the luxury that the king and other lords enjoy in their holdfasts, and he uses Arya to describe an alternative lifestyle where people must steal bread and eat city pigeons and bowls of brown. Furthermore, the tournament had a significant impact on the people of King's Landing, and Arya overhears, "talk of war on every lip" (718). A war would require the city to fortify and secure its gates and for many men and provisions to leave the city, meaning even less bread and stew for those that already struggle to survive in the city.

Although it may seem that Martin critiques a feudalist society, he brings realism into his story. This realist viewpoint of a distinct social hierarchy sheds light on what may be lacking in other fantasy novels. The Shire in *Lord of the Rings*, in contrast, represents a type of rural utopia and outside of it exists elven cities and cities occupied by men where little mention is given to the peasant class. We read about great adventures and overcoming natural elements, but Martin's point here is that this standard medieval setting is a rough world to live in. Most people's quality of life depends on who their parents and grandparents were. The high lords and kings are the

more interesting characters in both this genre and in history because they are born with more power and freedom than the typical man who is solely defined by his trade. Martin maintains a running theme of unfairness so his readers and characters will learn that life in these times shouldn't be romanticized.

Magic and Religion

Active magic is the defining aspect that separates fantasy from ordinary fiction. Or better yet, active structural magic is the key to the fantasy genre. Magic acts as the present force that builds these literary worlds and defines their characters, cultures, and plot lines. For a novel that mentions magic plenty, however, *Game of Thrones* is better known for its complex characters and its political conflicts. Why is the magical aspect of this book downplayed? Martin frames this book as if it will be filled with this plot element, but he omits it from the main mission of his characters until the very end of his first novel of the series. Martin uses magic to establish his world but he does not emphasize it to the point of driving the story. Martin's magic instead contains mystery and in times is tied directly to the religious beliefs of his characters. Ryan Mitchell Wittingslow points out the differences between Martin's magic and Tolkien's: "For unlike Tolkien, there is no grand narrative, and certainly no single coherent oral history...the denizens of Westeros and beyond are incapable of even agreeing upon the boundary conditions of the debate" ("Religion and Free Will from the Seven to the Faceless Men" 113). The supernatural elements of *Game of Thrones* reflect a world where the general population views spells and sorcery as religious phenomena, or as ancient history. Also, magic is positioned elsewhere in distant regions throughout the World of Ice and Fire, mimicking the religious diversity of our own world.

The religions of Westeros are related to both family and region. The history of Westeros stems in ages, and as time went on each age lost more and more magic from the land. There are the old gods, who were worshipped by the First Men, the first humans to land on Westerosi soil, and the Children of the Forest, a magical race. There is also mention of giants, dire wolves, and other magical beings that seem to no longer to exist except rumors of them north of the Wall. “In time, the First Men even put aside the gods they had brought with them, and took up the worship of the secret gods of the wood,” involving the Weirwood trees whose carved faces leaked red sap (738). These old gods reflect a detached religion, one that favors nature in its purest state and has little to no rituals. Still, it holds a great magical power to those of the North as Bran’s prophetic dreams keep luring him to a three-eyed crow and to these Weirwood trees. The northern gods, having ties to magical races, are deeply rooted in the history of the First Men as well as the geography due to the coming of a new age of men to Westeros who kept their own religion and spread it throughout the continent.

The Andals landed in an age after the First Men’s landing and spread their Faith of the Seven throughout the land while actively eradicating the Children of the Forest along with their Weirwoods, the root of their religion. Any citizen below the Neck, the southern tip of the North, had grown up believing in the Seven or had no other choice but to convert to this new religion. While Martin doesn’t describe this faith with many magical ties, it does reflect generally the culture of Medieval Catholicism in its many rituals, blessings, and traditions: “Catelyn had been anointed with the seven oils and named in the rainbow of light that filled the sept of Riverrun. She was of the Faith, like her father and grandfather and his father before him. Her gods had names, and their faces were familiar,” (23). The seven gods’ identities are also very similar to that of ancient Greek gods who each embody some sort of elemental power. Those who serve the

Faith of the Seven have linked the older gods with the harshness of the North. Catelyn's first chapter begins with her discomfort within the godswood at Winterfell and even Tyrion mentions to Bran that "These northern gods are cruel to let the child linger in such pain" (90).

Each religion has its own brief history and magical background. The old gods remain in the North and beyond the Wall where there live magical beings, and they clearly are involved in Bran's prophetic dreams; the Seven remain below the Neck and those who believe in them cannot accept the primal, indiscriminate nature of the old gods. Martin's magic with these old gods likens to myth and legend. It is seemingly random and tends to be forgotten. The people have not forgotten about the magic that dwelled in the World of Ice and Fire—they simply believe that it no longer exists.

The first magical event in *Game of Thrones* occurs in the Prologue. Several rangers of the Night's Watch venture north beyond the Wall and find frozen dead bodies. Later they are attacked by a White Walker (creatures also known as the Others). This monster is closely associated with cold weather and death, and readers see hints of this association throughout the novel. While approaching our prologue characters, even though already in a tundra-like environment, they notice the Other's presence has significantly chilled them. At the very end of the prologue, a ranger, slain at the hands of the Other, resurrects, "The right eye was open. The pupil burned blue. It saw" (11). A White Walker proves difficult to kill and if someone is killed by one, the creature's magic turns them into a zombie with blue eyes. The prologue proves that these creatures do exist, and they do in fact still play some role in how this series will shape, yet few *Game of Thrones* characters actually believe they still exist or are even a real part of history. This plot feature aligns with an earlier point that magical beings have washed into fable to the point of disbelief.

An important character to establish the White Walkers as a legend is Old Nan, Bran's keeper. She mentions the story of the Long Night:

In that darkness, the Others came for the first time...They were cold things, dead things, that hated iron and fire and the touch of the sun, and every creature with hot blood in its veins. They swept over holdfasts and cities and kingdoms, felled heroes and armies by the score, riding their pale dead horses and leading hosts of the slain. (240)

This rich, detailed event described by Old Nan is believed by Bran to be a mere story. Old Nan continues referencing real events of ancient Westeros, including that this happened in the time of the First Men, before the Andals came. As a reader, we learn that there is some truth to the story of the Long Night and we also learn about the time frame for this event. The issue, however, is that while the reader has proof since the beginning of the novel that this magic exists, the characters believe it to be only another fable. Although Martin imprints a warning into the Stark words "winter is coming," the warning is perceived as a seasonal precaution rather than a magical one. Later on, as Bran becomes more in tune with his prophetic dreams and tales from Osha, the escaped wildling, he implores Maester Luwin about the details of magic and the mysteries of the world. Luwin replies saying, "The wildling woman could give Old Nan lessons in telling tales" (580). As a scholar, his voice speaks loudly about the culture of Westeros and how these magical events may have happened in the distant past but believes that they certainly do not persist in their present day.

Martin's world has plenty of concrete evidence saying that magic did exist at one point. Daenerys is given fossilized dragon eggs, for example, and Arya hides among the dragon skulls in the bowels of the Red Keep. The main issue, however, is there are few who actually encounter magic first hand and survive in this novel. All the characters in the prologue die from either the

White Walkers or from the penalty of desertion, which the first chapter of the book centers around. Jon and Daenerys are the only characters that face magic in real time, not in a dream, and survive. Jon fights the wight, saving the Old Bear, and Daenerys hatches her dragon eggs in a pyre of fire with herself unburned. Both of these were localized events with only few in attendance to actually see for themselves, but both also importantly spur further action. Mormont decides to range north and send word of the presence of a greater evil at hand as a result of Jon's brave actions, and Daenerys now has three dragons which she may use to reclaim the Iron Throne. These myths and legends were accepted by many to have happened long ago. The learned Maesters and commoners believe that their world is dry of the magic that once littered their earth, but the novel's presentation of magic shows it to be awakening from history.

Martin continues to make his magic inconspicuous by denoting that it thrives in certain regions versus others. Because almost all of his characters live in Westeros, they believe that the old magic lives elsewhere, specifically in the east. Daenerys is a focal character for this idea since she lives in Essos for this novel and she possesses innate magical abilities because of her Targaryen blood. The Targaryen family ruled Westeros after migrating from Valyria in the east, and their dragons were a direct source of magical ability. In the time of the book, however, there are no surviving dragons: "Viserys had told her that the last of the Targaryen dragons had died no more than a century and a half ago" (234). This rough date marks the end of known magic in Westeros. The children of the forest, giants, and other magical beings are said to be all gone (all of which are distinctly Westerosi), while the dragons come from the east and have passed into history with their demise. There is nothing for the west to grasp that is presently magical. "Magic had died in the west when the Doom fell on Valyria and the Lands of the Long Summer" is the reason why eastern magic with the Targaryens had to leave west. Daenerys was born in Westeros

and her brother taught her the histories of those people. Despite never living any long period of time in Westeros, her lifestyle as a runaway kept her ignorant of the realities of the east. She assumes that magic is livelier in Essos: “Danny had always heard the east was different. It was said that manticores, and aeromancers practiced their arts openly in Asshai, while shadowbinders and bloodmages worked terrible sorceries in the black of night” (235). Martin instills this stereotype into his characters for the purpose of keeping magic a secret and making it seem far away from their present lives. Daenerys’s association with magic and the east will drive the last third of her story and reinforces her dangerous decision to trust in a witch.

Daenerys doesn’t fully witness the blood magic from Mirri Maz Duur, but she puts her faith in the woman for a few reasons. She trusts Mirri Maz Duur in part because Daenerys believed she saved her from rape, but also because Mirri Maz Duur is foreign to Daenerys. Daenerys has stereotyped this woman in more ways than one, and it ends up hurting her in the end. Despite the Dothraki around her claiming she was a maegi, or witch, Daenerys asked where she was trained in the healing arts. Mirri Maz Duur says, “I went in caravan to Asshai by the Shadow, to learn from their mages. Ships from many lands come to Asshai, so I lingered long to study the healing ways of distant peoples”; she lists few more people she learned from and their exotic origins, one included a Maester from Westeros teaching her in Asshai (672). Daenerys assumes Mirri Maz Duur to be credible due to her experiences with the unknown, eastern city of Asshai, from which only rumors of magic come. Daenerys’s presumptions are satisfied and she wrongfully trusts in this maegi in a time of great desperation.

Martin lays the groundwork for magic in his novel by cementing it within our own associations with magic relating to religious beliefs, legends, and that it only happens elsewhere. This is a type of magical realism that generally does not exist within other fantasy stories.

Because the main portion of the plot surrounds the politics and conflicts between high lords and ruling families, it is easy to forget that magic is present in this book; however, Martin certainly writes it as a real element of the story. While *Lord of the Rings*, *The Broken Sword*, and other fantasy novels display active magic along with a variety of magical races, Martin writes *Game of Thrones* to purposely subdue its supernatural forces for the sake of realism. This strategy partially reflects our own society and, most important of all, builds the suspense of the impending doom that exists north of the Wall and across the Narrow Sea.

Politics and Power

The quintessential element of *Game of Thrones* that garners attention from modern readers is its political depth amongst the nobility, which often seems reminiscent of Shakespeare's work found in *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Richard III*. Who holds power? Who should serve whom? And finally, how will a character go about gaining either power, safety, or their own agenda? *Game of Thrones* is decorated with characters who use their political power more to achieve greater status rather than to rule. King's Landing, the capital of Westeros, is the hub of power for the continent, and it is also where the king and his court reside. Because of the nature of the traditional monarchy, which is often displayed in medieval-based fantasies, Martin uses his ambitious characters to drive the action of the story and to introduce Ned, as well as the audience, to a cutthroat environment. The political scene of Westeros corrupts those who play the game of thrones.

First, we must understand the political structure of the world our characters live in. The Seven Kingdoms is a feudalist monarchy. To clarify, King Robert Baratheon rules over one

nation called the Seven Kingdoms, not just one of several other kingdoms. When a king dies in King's Landing, the oldest son or male heir will assume the throne at the proper age. Under Robert is his Small Council, consisting of different lords that govern an individual aspect of both King's Landing and the rest of the country, which can include Master of Coin, Master of Ships, and other titles that would sit on an executive council. This Small Council is headed by the Hand of the King who is the right hand to the king and carries out whatever the king and the council propose. The Hand of the King (similar to a medieval steward) will fill the position as acting lord regent in the case of the king's absence. Moving outside the seats in King's Landing, lords rule over designated lands for the king. There are high lords and lower lords, but the highest lord can be called Warden. Ned Stark acts as Warden of the North, meaning he is the highest lord that rules over the area called the North; Tywin Lannister is Warden of the West, and so on. Under these lords, are others who hold claim over a holdfast, including a piece of land and its residents. These lower lords' allegiance is to whichever lord governs the whole of the region, and ultimate allegiance should be to the one king, Robert.

King Robert Baratheon can be described as an unconventional "good king." I use quotations because of the fantasy tropes that tend to define a "good king." It is common in the fantasy genre to tie the ruler with the condition of the land. Robert Baratheon claimed his seat by leading a revolution against the Mad King, liberating Westeros from a senile tyrant. Robert Baratheon accordingly should be a foil to the Mad King and restore the kingdom to peace and prosperity. Carl Yokel, in his discussion of the *Chronicles of Amber* series, observes that "the task of the hero, which is inevitably to restore the wounded land and thus revitalize the king; the land mirrors his condition" (*A Survey of Modern Fantasy Literature*, 32). In the Amber series, the prosperity and fertility of the kingdom reflect the king's health, but there are many other

examples of the land correlating with the temperament and competence of the ruling king. Denethor and Théoden of *Lord of the Rings*, for example, show how their own corruption and despair brought on by the forces of evil affect their kingdom's condition. Once Aragorn, the good king, comes, he saves the people and the land follows suit. Martin, however, writes the opposite. He expresses how the Seven Kingdoms fare well at the start of the novel in contrast to Robert's kingly policies. Robert tells Ned of the prosperity he sees in the south during this long summer, "And you ought to see the towns, Ned! Flowers everywhere, the markets bursting with food, the summerwines so cheap and so good that you can get drunk just breathing the air. Everyone is fat and drunk and rich" (41). By these standards, Robert should be a just, fair king, right? Yet when Robert names Ned Hand of the King, he explains, "I am planning to make you run the kingdom and fight the wars while I eat and drink and wench myself into an early grave" (47). Martin's monarch has no interest in ruling, yet the kingdom prospers anyway. Another contributing factor is the opinion of the people. The commoners of Westeros must have some relevant opinion of the king or else he would be overthrown like the previous one, and according to Petyr, "Never has a king been so beloved as our Robert...At least in Lord Varys's hearing" (173). This quote is rather difficult to interpret because of who spoke it: Littlefinger. It is hard to tell whether he says this ironically, but one can assume that because of the deficiencies of the Mad King, and because of the fertility and wealth brought on by the summer, it has some validity. Both the people and the land mostly favor Robert even though he is not a capable ruler.

Robert turns away from his responsibilities, which leaves his council and his Hand with the responsibility and true political power. This dynamic allows the novel to focus on the complexities and relationships among the characters who seek personal benefit through political

maneuvering. For the purpose of this argument, I will break down each character's ambitions individually and discuss the reasons why they are so captivating.

First, there is Varys. Varys acts as the Master of Whispers in Robert's Small Council. Also known as "The Spider," Varys's political niche relies on the value of information. He runs a network of "little birds" who spy on others and feed him information. Varys then informs other members of the council of the whereabouts of their enemies and other pertinent conditions that affect the kingdom. Varys is also a eunuch, which eliminates one aspect of desire among his priorities and influences how he is perceived by others. The most interesting trait of Varys has to do with who he is loyal to. While Arya ventures into the bowels of the Red Keep, she overhears plotting between two men. They discuss the conditions of the kingdom as well as the progress that Daenerys Targaryen has made in the east. One says, "What I can do, I will...I must have gold, and another fifty birds" (345). This speaker can only be Varys because of his mention of the "birds" and here he seems to be plotting with the intention of seeing Drogo and Daenerys's arrival in Westeros. Varys is employed by the king and the Lannisters, yet he wants to see Daenerys in Westeros. Clearly, Varys must serve enough to keep himself alive, but his intentions seem devious and mysterious. It isn't until Ned's imprisonment that readers get a better idea whom Varys serves. Ned asks why he must acquiesce to Cersei, and Varys responds, "I want you to serve the realm...If you will give her the peace she needs and the time to deal with Stannis, and pledge to carry her secret to your grave, I believe she will allow you to take the black and live" (635). Varys believes that Ned is an honorable man and capable leader, and he begs that Ned throw aside his honor so he can be a valuable asset in the future. Through his own words, Varys is loyal to the realm—he wants to see it in good hands. One can make an argument that he truly serves Daenerys, and wants Eddard out of the way of her conquest of Westeros, but why

would Varys want Ned alive if that were the case? Varys is a captivating character whose priorities are not always clear. He works in the shadows and challenges the audience to keep an eye on him.

Littlefinger, on the other hand, fits a different role entirely. Littlefinger is Master of Coin, meaning he takes care of the financial aspects of the kingdom. In his first Small Council meeting Ned learns “the Crown is more than *six* million gold pieces in debt,” and Littlefinger lazily answers Eddard’s concern with, “The master of coin finds the money. The king and the Hand spend it” (194). Littlefinger does what he must to appease his superiors even if it means making unwise decisions (the expensive Hand’s Tournament being a prime example). Littlefinger’s intentions are entirely selfish, and he embraces it. As the catalyst that will ultimately doom Ned to imprisonment, Littlefinger drops hints about not only himself but his plans to betray Ned. Littlefinger suggests to Ned that Petyr can pay the City Watch to take control of the kingdom before Cersei can, and he poses the question, “When the queen proclaims one king and the Hand another, whose peace do they protect? ... They follow that man who pays them” (513). For someone who proposes such an idea, and for someone who has said before not to trust him, this statement provides a clear hint that Ned shouldn’t go along with Littlefinger’s plan since Littlefinger will supply the Watch with their pay. Martin designs Littlefinger’s character to lure Eddard into his trap, and as readers we can only assume that this isn’t the first (and won’t be the last) time that Littlefinger exercises some sort of betrayal for his own interests. In this case, Littlefinger will receive an elevated rank after exposing the “traitor” in Eddard Stark. With both of these examples, the tournament and Ned’s betrayal, important events occur as a result, such as the death of Jon Arryn’s squire and even the death of the apparent protagonist. Petyr uses politics and deception as tools to gain power at the expense of others. The residual damage that his

political ambitions arouse spur more action throughout the series. Petyr plays the trickster and villain, and thus he is a key tool in Martin's politics and narrative structure, moving the plot and themes that surround playing the game of thrones.

Now we must move on to the case for Eddard Stark who, despite not wanting the Hand's role, must become a politician and work for what he believes is right. Ned doesn't enjoy politicking mainly because he has a very chivalric, traditional approach which he has come to learn living almost his whole life in the harsh lands of the North, far from the court. He would prefer to get to the point of the matter rather than hint and gossip: "He had no patience with this game they played, this dueling with words" (192). This thought from Ned does not mean that he isn't intelligent, but more that he would much rather spend his time acting rather than talking. The greatest reason why he must succumb to King's Landing's devious charm is because of his devotion to what is right. While Robert is out hunting, Ned hears word of Gregor Clegane terrorizing the countryside of the Riverlands. Ser Gregor being one of Tywin Lannister's bannermen does not quell Ned from declaring Clegane an enemy of the crown and from summoning Tywin to answer for his bannerman's crimes. We already know how powerful Tywin is and how much money he has allowed the crown to borrow, yet Ned keeps to his values even though a challenge against such a power would not be the best political move. Ned believes in a straight-forward approach to justice and his ultimate downfall as a politician happens when he acts upon Robert's dying words. If Ned were to remain silent concerning Joffrey's incestuous parentage, the realm would not have suffered the beginning of the war with the North and with Stannis. "So Ned bent his head and wrote, but where the king had said 'my son Joffrey,' he scrawled 'my heir' instead. The deceit made him feel soiled," is the ultimate example of how Ned transforms into a plotter (504). From here he gives his trust to Littlefinger in an attempt to

place Stannis on the throne instead of Joffrey. Ned didn't enjoy what he felt he had to do, but he thinks a lie should not stand against justice and truth. Eddard falls into the claws of the political landscape and it corrupts his own actions, forcing him to change his dying friend's words. Ned felt that the only way to uphold what was right in a place like King's Landing was to deceive.

Cersei, the Queen, has been conditioned to buy into the politics of the capital. Her desires mostly stem from her hatred of Robert, her love for Jaimie, and her dedication to the safety of her children. She reveals that the night of her wedding Robert whispered Lyanna Stark's name, and she has hated Robert more and more as the years went on. She openly declares her love for Jaimie, her brother, to Ned, knowing he has already learned their secret. But most of all, her love for her children is unyielding. She has lied and ensured that Robert believed he had sired those children to keep them safe from his wrath. She is willing to do everything to keep them safe: "She put her hand on his good leg, just above the knee. 'A true man does what he will, not what he must.' Her fingers brushed lightly against his thigh, the gentlest of promises" (487). Cersei attempts to dissuade Ned from acting on her children's legitimacy by offering herself to him. Of course, Ned denies her, but she does not regret her actions. One could argue that Cersei's actions towards Ned in this chapter offer a moral compromise. If Ned had been a weaker man, Joffrey would have taken the throne and Ned would not have attempted to give it to Stannis instead. Eddard offers her some mercy, allowing her to take herself and children into exile to avoid Robert's anger. Cersei quietly dispels these threats and mentions how Ned could have been king. After so many years in the capital, knowing how true power can be divided and corrupted under a weak ruler, Cersei understands her own political leverage as a queen and the nature of power in their government. Her greatest point in her critique of Ned is, "When you play the game of thrones, you win or you die. There is no middle ground" (488). She is right. No person can seek

power halfheartedly or with unselfish intentions. Ned attempted to do so and met his end through it. Cersei learned the game well and now plays it to protect her children and to grab power where she can.

Given the nature of the monarchy, a negligent king gives up power to those who hope to take it for themselves. Martin hones in on the political landscape that drives the action in King's Landing which will ultimately affect the rest of the kingdom. This cutthroat environment features characters like Varys and Littlefinger, whose allegiances are somewhat ambiguous, as they plot for what they hope to achieve, and their own seat in power impacts the rest of the nation. They are also mainly to blame for why characters like Cersei and Ned are forced to join the game because, if not, then they face personal danger or risk seeing a kingdom guided by injustice. In his critical study of *Game of Thrones*, Joseph Young writes:

At heart, Martin's fantasy is not morally innovative. His characters, though sometimes labyrinthine examples of moral ambiguity, are part of a long tradition of such creations in modern fantasy. Mervyn Peake, J.K. Rowling and J. R. R. Tolkien all depict evil as a human problem, using magic to highlight the issue rather than settle it. (37)

I must disagree. Young forgets that evil in his examples stems from a “dark lord” type or some sort of antagonist being that uses magic to display their terror on the world. If we were to eliminate these “dark lords” from Tolkien and Rowling, there wouldn't be a story worth telling. *Game of Thrones* still has a human story to tell with each family and politician pursuing their own agenda. The people of Westeros create the conflict—not a dark lord. The Mad King's terror sparked a revolution, the mysterious death of Robert Arryn forced Ned south, and Ned's attempts to restore justice and moral order to an already corrupt system kills him and sets the nation ablaze with another war. Yes, evil is a human problem here but it is totally unaided by magic.

Martin hides an evil magical villain, who is not human, and displays the real danger: unquenchable ambition.

Ned Stark: The Hero

George R. R. Martin writes *Game of Thrones* from the point of view of nine different characters, including the prologue in the third-person perspective of Will. Each perspective carries a different weight according to the plot, and they are mostly represented in different geographic locations throughout Westeros and Essos. I will discuss the most prominent character Martin writes in the book: Eddard Stark. One could label Ned Stark as the main character of *Game of Thrones* but definitely not as the main character of the *Song of Ice and Fire* series. Martin decides to kill Eddard Stark short of one hundred pages before the end of the novel in a rather sudden and surprising manner. As an audience, it is natural to be surprised when the main character of the book is offed well before the end of the novel, and it seems like Martin relishes the shock factor that many readers, and even watchers of the famous show, feel when the stroke is made. Martin's decision to kill Eddard Stark has significance in the fantasy genre because Eddard Stark fits familiar criteria that would make him a likeable, trusted character that audiences would expect to follow for the rest of the series. By constructing a character like Ned, Martin invites his audience to be comfortable, even during a time we should be worried for Ned's fate. The impact of Ned's death is heightened by the fantasy stereotypes of a main character, and his ultimate end squashes the audience's expectations that they are reading a fantasy novel that follows the formula closely.

If we reflect on what qualities make up a traditional fantasy hero a picture comes to mind where the character is typically a male, a warrior of some type, who maintains a solid foundation of moral standards and a sense of justice. Richard Matthews's "Plotting the Modern Mythic Hero" chapter points out:

The heroes are physically handsome, strong, courageous, virtuous, and innocent. Although they are clearly human, they transcend their humanity to measure themselves against the gods. Morris does not belittle Thiodolf [*The House of the Wolfings*] in the comparison. Instead, he confers on the hero the necessity to create and affirm an atemporal moral framework, which, like a god, he will validate through both word and deed. (88)

Matthews's description of William Morris's hero covers a wide range of fantasy heroes that must behave with honor and virtue. They hold a leadership role or eventually assume one where the fate of many have been trusted in their hands. Tolkien's heroes share many of these qualities.

Another example of such a character would be Aragorn from *Lord of the Rings*. In fact, I would argue that along with Aragorn, Gandalf, Frodo, and Sam also generally fit this classification of a likeable and honorable hero. Since Tolkien, fantasy protagonists, although unique in their own world, share similarities to the point where the reader can automatically trust in them and believe that they will be an integral part of the progression of the story. Harry Potter, Eragon of *The Inheritance Cycle* series, and Conan the Barbarian all fit the role of the hero that will save the world and whose destiny will find peace or prosperity after an arduous struggle. Martin uses this same model to construct Eddard Stark. Similar to Aragorn, Eddard is a warrior; he is also wise, just, and humble. Both Aragorn and Eddard must travel to the conflict from elsewhere because others believe that they will help make the world good again. Eddard is nearly incorruptible and always strives to do the right thing. This is Tolkien's model in place. Gandalf,

Aragorn, Frodo, and Sam each exemplify “qualities of mind and heart of which Tolkien himself approved and tried to embody” (*A Survey of Modern Fantasy Literature* 901). Ned Stark fits in this same framework, but his rigid dedication to act nobly and honorably betray him.

First, Martin keeps Ned as an observer of the “old ways.” Characters who stay true to a more ancient way of practice garner some charm for readers of fantasy fiction. As long as their old way maintains a sense of morality, there is no reason for a reader to distrust their views. If anything, it’s admirable. There is also a deep tie with the geography and the old way. The First Men inhabited the North and their traditional way of life combined with the Northern terrain construct Ned’s core beliefs. Bran’s first chapter follows the execution of a deserter from the Night’s Watch. Bran learns from his father about the law, but more importantly, he learns why Eddard, the high lord in the North, must conduct the beheading himself:

Yet our way is the older way. The blood of the First Men still flows in the veins of the Starks, and we hold to the belief that the man who passes the sentence should swing the sword. If you would take a man’s life, you owe it to him to look into his eyes and hear his final words. And if you cannot bear to do that, then perhaps the man does not deserve to die. (16)

Eddard maintains a respect for his heritage to uphold what his ancestors have passed on, and he also believes that there is a justified reason for why it must be done this way—it is about mercy and about distinguishing an ordinary man from a good man. Ned doesn’t enjoy governing in this way, but he understands that the law must be followed or else chaos would ensue. The Northerners live a harsher, simpler way of life. Because of its colder climate, it forces them to continue to prioritize safety over much else. This reflects an older way of living where survival and order still are paramount. They also worship the old gods, an older religion in Westeros,

where their gods exist mysteriously within the earth and the trees. Similar to pagan and even Native American worship, the Northerners rely on the old gods to keep them safe during harsh winters and to protect them from what may lurk beyond the Wall. Though Ned never states whether he believes or knows about the Others, he understands he must prepare for worse times and keeps his ancestors' house words dear to him: Winter is coming.

As medieval Europe remains a common setting of traditional fantasy, there usually exists some sort of military conflict followed closely by a chivalric code observed by the warriors and main characters that assume a combat role in the story. Eddard Stark was a key piece in Robert's rebellion against the Mad King. Eddard learned how to fight and how to command beside Robert in the Eyrie under Jon Arryn's teachings, and Ned and Robert both led the rebellion when they were young men. Though he has fought in Robert's Rebellion and against Balon Greyjoy's Rebellion, Ned doesn't enjoy or yearn for conflict. During the Hand's Tourney, which Ned openly opposed, Jon Arryn's squire was killed by the Mountain during the joust. Ned states, "This was needless. War should not be a game" (306). This brief statement shows how Ned views physical conflict. He would only engage if it was necessary. He knew the tournament would cost a great deal of money to an already in-debt crown, but here he makes it clear that he is not a fan of tournaments in general, especially when death can be a looming possibility.

Eddard also views violence through a lens of honor. In the wars that he has fought, he observes a common code of honor and looks down on those who openly ignore it. For a similar reason Eddard had to behead the deserter, Ned views Jaime Lannister with much disdain because he has never been punished for killing the Mad King during the Rebellion. Ned doesn't dislike Ser Barristan Selmy or any other Kingsguard member because they fought with the Targaryens; he thinks ill of Jaime because he violated his oath to keep the king safe by stabbing him during

the advance on King's Landing. Also, Tywin Lannister betrayed Aerys Targaryen's trust and joined Robert's forces when his victory was inevitable after remaining neutral for most of the war. "They had taken the city by treachery... There was no honor in that conquest," shows how although the Lannisters played an integral role in taking the city and securing the crown for Robert, Eddard cannot respect their contributions because they were done without honor (115).

In its most simple elements, Ned's honor stems from his belief that there is sanctity both in life and in promises. This is a general feature of the fantasy hero. When Ned, his daughters, and bannerman join the king and his caravan on the King's Road, there occur a significant sequence of events at the Inn at the Crossroads. Arya encounters a drunk Prince Joffrey while she plays swords with a butcher's boy. Arya's direwolf, Nymeria, attacks Joffrey in defense of Arya and they run away. Once Arya is found, the king holds something similar to a trial and can't get to the bottom of it. Arya forces Nymeria to leave, and Cersei ruthlessly convinces Robert that there should be some sort of punishment. A verdict is set that even though Lady, Sansa's direwolf, had nothing to do with the event there should be a price to pay for wounding Joffrey. Here Ned speaks out against Robert, "Do it yourself then, Robert," he said in a voice cold and sharp as steel. "At least have the courage to do it yourself," imploring that Robert observe the act in the old way like Ned had done in the first chapter. Robert leaves the room and Ned decides to do the deed himself for a different reason: "She is of the north. She deserves better than a butcher" (158). Eddard clings to the traditional, honorable way to kill, and here, after Robert refuses, Ned reasons that since the direwolf comes from his own realm, and from his own way of life, he should do it. He also partially distrusts Robert's men through a combination of his disappointment of Robert's decisions and also because he is aware of the reputation of Ilyn Payne, the king's executioner, being a harsh, merciless man. Knowing how Ned is and how his

sword, Ice, is made of Valyrian steel, the audience can trust that he ensures that the wolf will die a quick and clean death. As the Warden of the North and Lord of Winterfell and as a Stark, Ned observes a traditional form of justice, one working not through brutality but through respect.

Shortly after Eddard executes Lady, he bumps into his chivalric foil, the Hound. Sandor Clegane serves the Lannisters and he stands as Joffrey's personal guard. Eddard sees that Sandor Clegane had captured and killed Mycah, the butcher's boy, at the request of either Joffrey or Cersei. Even though Clegane follows his orders, he seems to relish the art of killing: "He ran.' He looked at Ned's face and laughed. 'But not very fast'" (159). The Hound laughs because he knows how Eddard chooses to live by an honor code that the Hound scoffs at. Martin creates the Hound as a disgraceful yet docile warrior to emphasize the cruelty of the Lannisters as well as the harsh truths of the warrior class in Westeros. "Spare me your empty compliments, girl...and your ser's. I am no knight. I spit on them and their vows. My brother is a knight," he tells Sansa (301). The Hound makes it clear that he does not value any such promises and has no respect for those who commit to them. He mentions his brother, the Mountain, being a knight who throughout the story terrorizes commoners and seeks destruction and death wherever he goes almost entirely through his own pleasure. The Hound sees little value in a chivalric manner of life; he cares only for surviving the only way he knows how. Charles H. Hackney writes that "Chivalry is presented in the novels as a clash between high idealism and grim reality," ("Knighthood and the Chivalric Virtues in Westeros" 113). Ned Stark signifies this high idealism and works to achieve it in himself and in others, while the Hound represents the grim reality of being a warrior.

Martin clearly constructs Eddard as the moral hero in the story. Martin maintains Ned's commitment to core values such as mercy, finding and implementing truth and justice, reluctance

to seek power, and love for his children and family. Beginning with Eddard's commitment to being merciful, I have already discussed the ways which he shows mercy even in times where he must commit the deadly action, but now the focus will shift to his efforts to prevent death on others before a sentence is passed. At a Small Council meeting, one where Robert attends, the members discuss the progression of Viserys and Daenerys across the Narrow Sea and their recent alliance with the Dothraki. Varys carries word of Daenerys's pregnancy, and Robert fears its sex upon birth. The possibility of another male Targaryen, and one that is the son of a khal, places fear into Robert and whether his subjects will stay loyal to his rule or call him a usurper. Renly mentions that Jon Arryn and Robert should have had Daenerys and her brother killed years ago instead of letting them go. Ned replies, "Mercy is never a mistake, Lord Renly" (352). Ned understands the small probability of the threat with Daenerys being only fourteen years old, the possibility that she could birth a female or dead child, as well as the Dothraki's inability to travel across the sea, but he states most plainly his stance on showing mercy to others. He later puts Robert to the test over his paranoia: "Robert, I ask you, what did we rise against Aerys Targaryen for, if not to put an end to the murder of children?" (353). Ned's statement reinforces his motivation for why the rebellion happened in the first place, which was to keep the realm safe from the Mad King and his tyrannical spurts of murder. His specific mention of children relates to his acknowledgment of the innocent.

Being the just and honest man he is, it seems only natural that Martin keeps Ned firm on his quest for the truth even in uncomfortable circumstances. By placing Ned in the court of King's Landing, he must work against the politicians who knowingly overlook the crimes of the other members of the court for their own personal benefit. Ned quickly recognizes that "he did not belong here, in this room, with these men...*I am surrounded by flatterers and fools*, the king

had insisted,” fully aware that he may be the only honest man at that council table (193). Upon arriving at King’s Landing, Ned quickly investigates why his old friend, Jon Arryn, mysteriously died and concludes that it must link to his discovery of Gendry and other bastards of Robert as well as the truth of Joffrey’s parentage. The issue here, however, is that Ned knows of Robert’s wrath if he were to find out Joffrey was Jaime Lannister’s son. Robert would seek them out and kill both Jaime and Cersei as well as their children. Ned risks the stability of the entire kingdom because he now knows that Stannis is the true heir to the throne. He talks with Littlefinger about his discovery and what he believes should be done, “Unless, my lord? There is no seeming to this. Stannis is the heir. Nothing can change that” (511). Martin writes Ned so that the truth *must* happen. Even if it may shake the kingdom’s wellbeing, Ned’s commitment to how things should be blinds him to the treachery around him. This trait, which is a common one among other fantasy heroes, proves to be Ned’s weakness and will lead to his betrayal and death.

His reluctance to seek power resembles Aragorn’s character. The only difference between the two is that Aragorn is afraid of his fate and birthright, whereas Eddard already has power but does not see the value of seeking more of it.

“You should have taken the realm for yourself. It was there for the taking. Jaime told me how you found him on the Iron Throne the day King’s Landing fell, and made him yield it up. That was your moment. All you needed to do was climb those steps, and sit. Such a sad mistake.”

“I have made more mistakes than you can possibly imagine,” Ned said, “but that was not one of them.” (488)

Cersei explains to Ned how he should have taken hold of the throne instead of Robert, knowing in hindsight that he would be a much more capable ruler than her own husband. Ned disagrees with her analysis of it as a mistake because Robert had a legitimate claim to the throne, one of his ancestors marrying a Targaryen; Robert was also the face of the rebellion, and Ned simply does not want that responsibility knowing how it can affect the one who holds it. Ned only wanted to go back to his home in the North. In truth, Ned would have made a good king. He would have also made a good Hand if it weren't for the conspirators around him. Martin emphasizes Ned's quality and justness, yet his character understands that immense power can corrupt the one who holds it. Ned is not a negligent ruler who would prefer to do something else; more so, he is a very capable leader who does his duty well and sees no value in adding more at the cost of his honor and morality.

Ned loves his children. Although it may seem like this should be a given, this assumption that lords love their children may not be a fair one given how offspring are used as a means of political advancement. A son guarantees the family name continues, and a daughter can be married off for strategic purposes. A wet nurse would typically spend more time parenting the little lordlings than the lords and ladies that birthed them. Stark takes a close interest in his children while still maintaining a firm hand. When Bran asked for the direwolf pups, Ned made it clear, "I will not have you wasting the servants' time with this. If you want these pups, you will feed them yourselves... You must train them as well," giving the children a fair compromise where most other lords in the realm would dispose of the pups or allow their children to keep their new prize without much responsibility (20). But beyond his parenting techniques, his love for his children, including Jon his bastard, shows a progressive side to his character. Allowing Arya to keep her Needle and to attend dancing lessons would be extremely uncommon in a

feudal society. He knows his children and understands Arya's wildness, Sansa's poshness, as well as the boys' own unique attributes. He teaches Arya the importance of keeping a family close, "The same blood flows through both your hearts. You need her [Sansa] as she needs you...and I need both of you, gods help me" (223). Eddard's confession here only increases his charm as a main character. Despite his stern, old-school ways, and along with his own thoughts on display through perspective chapters, Eddard's top priority in this scene is his love for his family. The whole reason Ned traveled south in the first place was because of the letter Catelyn received from Lysa, her sister, about Jon Arryn and his concern for the safety of his family as well as Robert, his friend. He reasons, "Our House will be safer for it," which the reader eventually finds out was the wrong decision (64).

The climax of *Game of Thrones* occurs when Eddard Stark confesses his "treasons" in exchange for safety at the Wall, and when Joffrey, betraying the deal that Varys delivered from Cersei, asks for his head anyway. Despite all his efforts to seek the truth, to observe an honorable way of life, and to keep his children safe from torment and harm, Ned still dies. It may seem somewhat abrupt for the main character of the book and the hero of the story to suddenly be killed because of a boy king's pride, but in truth, Martin foreshadows this and leads the audience tactfully down this path. Ned was never a politician. He was not designed to be, elevating what is right versus what will help his agenda. He plays the game of thrones and loses. Ned's ultimate mistake was not in trusting Littlefinger or digging deep into Jon Arryn's death or even declaring Joffrey a product of incest and therefore no true king. His mistake was leaving the North in the first place. After being asked to accept the role of Robert's Hand:

For a moment Eddard Stark was filled with a terrible sense of foreboding. *This* was his place, here in the north. He looked at the stone figures all around them, breathed deep in

the chill silence of the crypt. He could feel the eyes of the dead. They were all listening, he knew. And winter was coming. (48)

Martin makes it quite explicit here that Ned can feel that the weight of his decision will affect everything. The crypt, where dead Starks reside, tells him to not go south. He belongs in the North—he knows this—yet he decides to go south for the sake of Jon Arryn and Robert and, foolishly, his family. In this moment, Ned realizes that “winter was coming” but he misinterpreted his instincts. As a hero may do, he thinks of others before he considers how this can affect his own wellbeing. He believes the kingdom may be in danger, but actually the threat was to himself. Joffrey’s refusal to spare his life now seems less of an inexplicable decision. Ned’s fate was to die the moment he agreed to leave the North.

Martin continues to torment Ned and forces him to give up his own values. Cersei’s plan pitted his children’s safety against Ned’s word and the truth that he searched so hard to find. When the time came for Ned to confess, he agrees. He knows that his confessions are lies, but he does so for the sake of his family. Asking Ned to abide by Cersei’s wishes and without realizing how his children may be affected, Ned responds, “If I did, my word would be as hollow as an empty suit of armor. My life is not so precious to me as that,” but when Varys mentions his children Ned begs, “*No,*” Ned pleaded, his voice cracking, ‘Varys, gods have mercy, do as you like with me, but leave my daughter out of your schemes. Sansa’s no more than a child” (636). Cersei located Ned’s weakness and it worked. Ned confesses, giving in to the corrupt forces he had tried to combat for most of the novel. It is hard to say what Ned’s thoughts are after the examples above because this information was presented in his last perspective chapter. The next chapter featuring Ned shows his execution from Arya’s perspective, which is an absolutely diabolical way to present his death. Martin forces Ned to give up his integrity for the sake of his

children only to make both his daughters spectators to the event. Arya realizing that he would be beheaded by his own sword, Ice, is an added cruel bonus. And with Joffrey's decision, and the court's sudden reactions trying to convince him to change his mind, and the uneasiness of the crowd, Yoren finds Arya and shields her from view. And so, both Arya and the reader are left with this: "Dimly, as if from far away, she heard a ... a *noise* ... a soft sighing sound, as if a million people had let out their breath at once" (727). Martin stresses the gentle "noise" knowing a child has just heard her father's death.

Joseph Young writes, "It is commonplace of both popular and academic criticism of Martin to cite the death of Eddard Stark as the point of which *Game of Thrones* became a distinctive, original contribution to fantasy," with which I must agree (9). Martin created a character that filled the shoes of the honorable, selfless hero that fantasy readers are so accustomed to reading and rooting for. By highlighting and following that formula, Martin earns the trust of his audience and sneaks the important details under their noses which led to his execution. And I admit, I didn't see it coming, either. Through this course of action, Martin has now left the series up in the air. Who will be the hero now? Is it Daenerys? Jon? Arya? Bran? Tyrion? Eddard's character kept the reader comfortable, knowing there was one honorable person in this fantasy world that has the ability to make things better, and his death presents a new direction to the series: No character is safe, and this will not be your ordinary fantasy story.

CONCLUSION

George R. R. Martin's *Game of Thrones* novel incorporates aspects of classic medieval settings, disguises magic within its own realism, emphasizes the danger of human ambition, and convinces the audience to think that the story will follow the familiar genre formula. Martin's dash of reality, relating a fantasy story to aspects of our own lives, gives the world a new meaning. With Ned Stark's death as the greatest example, it is clear that Martin wrote this book to set himself apart from previous writers within the fantasy genre. *Game of Thrones* reads less like a mythical tale and more like tragedy, which is why it has become so popular and why it deserves the praise it has received.

With a series of novels with this much popularity, I wonder if George R. R. Martin will have a similar impact on the fantasy genre as Tolkien did. The fantasy genre is evolving. Martin's first novel here displays, and in a way replicates what Tolkien introduced, how mature and challenging thematic elements can still be used in a genre where the supernatural and the magical are alive and active. *Game of Thrones* is the second great fantasy of the twentieth century, and I predict that many fantasy authors in the future will consider Martin just as impactful to the genre as Tolkien, simply because he succeeded in distancing himself from established genre conventions. Martin's *Game of Thrones* incorporates an awareness of the fantasy norms and purposefully breaks these standards to create a fantasy never seen before. Along with the television show, this book series set a new precedent within the fantasy genre and has now become the new face of popular fantasy.

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