

A Game of Thrones:
Will the Real (anti-)Hero Please Stand Up?

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A Game of Thrones is the first novel in George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series, slated for seven novels of which five have been completed. Published in 1996 by Bantam Books, *A Game of Thrones* introduces the fantastic world of Westeros, a medieval-style land of swords and Kings, wildlings and dragons, years-long summers and longer winters. Martin devoted himself to the writing of *A Song of Ice and Fire* after ten years as a writer and producer in Hollywood, with *Twilight Zone*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Doorways* among his credits. Martin left his lucrative Hollywood career behind to pursue his love for fantasy writing, perhaps because, as he said in 1986, "Reality is beans and tofu, and ashes at the end. Reality is the strip malls of Burbank, the smokestacks of Cleveland, a parking garage in Newark. Fantasy is the towers of Minas Tirith, the ancient stones of Gormenghast, the halls of Camelot. Fantasy flies on the wings of Icarus, reality on Southwest Airlines. Why do our dreams become so much smaller when they finally come true?" (Perret)

Indeed, Martin must have found writing for Hollywood, with its cookie-cutter, formulaic approach to storytelling, far too small for his vision. In Westeros, Martin's characters are steeped in tradition, loyal to a fault, ambitious without regard, and wise beyond their years. His plot and subplots are intricately woven tapestries of intrigue and deceit, honor and villainy. *A Game of Thrones* embodies many characteristics of Joseph Campbell's Heroic Monomyth, with one excellent caveat: it is difficult, if not impossible, for the reader to discern which of the

author's richly drawn characters is the story's hero. Martin achieves this by combining a unique writing structure with character development that eschews stereotype for a value system in which good and evil often intertwine as intricately as his plotlines.

The Story

King Robert Baratheon reigns over the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros from his seat on the Iron Throne in the South, having wrested the throne from the Targaryen Dynasty in a war that culminated with Robert's slaying of Rhaegar Targaryen at the Trident river. King Robert solidified his claim to the throne by marrying Cersei of House Lannister, rulers of the West and the wealthiest family in all of the Seven Kingdoms. Cersei's handsome, brutal brother Jaime is always by her side, with their other brother, Tyrion, a wretched and shunned dwarf, surviving by the only means he has: his wits.

By Robert's side throughout the war was his childhood friend and confidante, Eddard Stark, the Lord of the North. Known to his close friends and family as Ned, he rules the frigid, expansive North from his home, Winterfell. He holds deep and abiding love for his wife, Catelyn, and their five children: Robb, Sansa, Arya, Bran, and Rickon. Ned also insists that his bastard son, Jon, live with the family, an arrangement Catelyn detests but begrudgingly accepts. Ned Stark is a man of conviction, steeped in tradition; *A Game of Thrones* begins with his personal beheading of a deserter of the Night Watch, an execution he insists is necessary because of tradition, and one he forces his sons Robb, Jon and Bran to witness, though Robb and Jon are only fourteen and Bran eight.

To the East, in the Free City of Pentos across the Narrow Sea, the only surviving heirs to the Targaryen bloodline plot to regain the crown from King Robert. Viserys Targaryen,

obsessed with claiming his right to rule the Seven Kingdoms, promises his younger sister Daenerys in marriage to the powerful warlord, Khal Drogo of the Dothraki, with the understanding that Drogo will lead his horde of fierce horsemen against King Robert. Daenerys is only thirteen and an unwilling bride, but loyalty to, and fear of, her abusive brother pushes her into the arms of the intimidating Drogo.

A Game of Thrones centers around these families. House Baratheon, House Lannister, House Targaryen, and House Stark struggle against evils within and without, some desiring power, some desiring peace. Neither proves easily attainable as the intricacies of Martin's plot are unveiled.

The Hero's Journey, Only Different

"The hero's journey always begins with the call. One way or another, a guide must come and say, 'Look, you're in Sleepy Land. Wake. Come on a trip. There is a whole aspect of your consciousness, your being, that's not been touched. So you're at home here? Well, there's not enough of you there.' And so it starts."

-Joseph Campbell, A Joseph Campbell Companion

It is clear from the outset of *A Game of Thrones* that Martin is accepting of Campbell's Heroic Monomyth. What is not clear is which of his characters is actually the hero. This lack of clarity is by no means due to writer's ambiguity, but rather a concerted effort on Martin's part to imbue many of his characters with heroic traits, while also allowing them distinctly non-heroic acts and attitudes as may be found in the prototypical anti-hero.

The aforementioned beheading of a deserter by Ned Stark is a prime example of Martin's preference for the anti-hero. After Ned beheads the man, he asks his son Bran if he

knew why he did it. Bran mistakes the question and explains the man's crimes. Ned good-naturedly corrects him:

"The question is not why the man had to die, but why / must do it."

Bran had no answer for that. "King Robert has a headsman," he said, uncertainly.

"He does," his father admitted. "As did the Targaryen kings before him. 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 do that, then perhaps the man does not deserve to die."

(Martin)

Ned's words are honorable, filled with tradition and strength, traits inherent in any hero. Yet they are couched in the reality that Ned just cut off the head of another man, whose crime (as the reader knows) was to witness the terrifying murder of his entire party by unmentionable evils that lurk north of The Wall. And Ned made his eight year old son watch the beheading to boot. Thus the reader is attracted to Ned's heroic qualities while simultaneously disturbed, if not disgusted, by his behavior.

Another potential hero, Daenerys Targaryen displays throughout the novel a heroic journey that begins with her marriage to Khal Drogo, followed by her acceptance (if only temporarily) by the Dothrakis as their Khaleesi or queen, and her expression of undying love for Drogo through her willingness to ask for black magic to help heal his wounds and save his life. Yet again, this terrified young girl who grows into a strong woman, into a queen, exhibits decidedly anti-heroic behavior when she first suffocates her vegetative husband, then

commands that the *maegi*, the black magic woman whom she believes caused the deaths of her baby and Drogo, be bound to the funeral pyre built to burn the body of her husband:

Dany poured the oil over the woman's head herself. "I thank you, Mirri Maz Duur," she said, "for the lessons you have taught me."

"You will not here me scream," Mirri responded as the oil dripped from her hair and soaked her clothing.

"I will," Dany said, "but it is not your screams I want, only your life."

Daenerys burns the woman alive, an act of vengeance that shows her to be far too human to fill the shoes of Hero. And if she is the story's anti-hero, she is one of many.

A major reason the reader finds Martin's multiple anti-hero approach palatable is the structure in which the story unfolds: from the points of view of eight of the characters whom, at their own points in the story (and perhaps in their own minds), might be deemed the hero. Bran Stark, Catelyn Stark, Daenerys Targaryen, Ned Stark, Jon Snow, Arya Stark, Tyrion Lannister, and Sansa Stark each relate the story's events from their own third person omniscient perspective. This allows the reader entry into the world of Westeros not from the perspective of a just a single character, but multiple characters, each with their own thoughts, desires, and opinions of the story's events.

Within this structure Martin employs aspects of the Hero's Journey, also with multiple characters, resulting in a lack of commitment to a singular hero. Frequently seen is the Call to Adventure, wherein the hero is summoned away from his everyday life to a place unknown (Campbell); and whether outright or in their minds (a fact we know because of the shifting point of view), most of those called also Refuse the Call. Ned Stark is the first to be called when King Robert travels personally to Winterfell to request that he come south to Kings Landing and

serve as the Hand of the King. Ned is torn, on the one hand bound by tradition and fealty to do as his friend the King requests:

Robert grasped Ned by the elbow. "I have need of you, Ned."

"I am yours to command, Your Grace. Always." They were words he had to say, and so he said them, apprehensive about what might come next.

And on the other hand, reluctant to leave his difficult yet simple life in Winterfell behind for a far more difficult existence serving the King and his court:

Robert was offering him a responsibility as large as the realm itself.

It was the last thing in the world he wanted.

Robert ultimately agrees to serve the king, albeit reluctantly, a decision that plagues him and leads to his eventual death. Ned experiences several other aspects of the Hero's Journey along the way, including the Crossing of the First Threshold:

He belonged in Winterfell. He belonged with Catelyn in her grief, and with Bran. A man could not always be where he belonged, though. Resigned, Eddard Stark put his boots into his horse and set off after the king.

He also finds himself in the Belly of the Whale, wherein the hero is finally separated from his known world and self. Ned experiences this on his arrival at Kings Landing, when it becomes clear he must dedicate himself to the king and the tasks at hand. It is here, while Ned faces the Road of Trials aspect of the Hero's Journey, that Ned as Hero or anti-hero begins to fall apart, and his demise is confirmed when Robert dies, and Ned is ordered beheaded by the newly crowned Joffrey.

Normally, going to such great lengths to establish a character as heroic and then killing him off unceremoniously might have a chilling effect on the reader. Martin avoids this by almost mirroring Ned Stark's Hero's Journey in Daenerys Targaryen. She is also called to adventure when she is forced into marriage with Khal Drogo. Her brother, Viserys, makes it clear that she must become a woman, and though only thirteen she must marry and "please" Drogo so they may use his army against their enemies. Daenerys is terrified, and pleads with Viserys:

"I don't want to be his queen," she heard herself say in a small, thin voice. "Please, *please*, Viserys, I don't want to, I want to go home."

"*Home!*" ...he said sharply. "We go home with an army, sweet sister. With Khal Drogo's army, that is how we go home. And if you must wed him and bed him for that, you will." He smiled at her. "I'd let his whole *khalasar* fuck you if need be, sweet sister, all forty thousand men, and their horses too if that was what it took to get my army."

She also experiences the Crossing of the First threshold, when she rides the beautiful horse Drogo gives her for their wedding. And when they consummate their marriage, she moves undoubtedly into the Belly of the Whale. Daenerys, like Ned, also dies, though symbolically, and her emergence unscathed from the fires of Drogo's funeral pyre, the newly hatched dragons at her breast, signifies that her Hero's Journey will continue.

Other characters also experience aspects of the Hero's Journey. Catelyn is called when she must leave Bran and go to Kings Landing to warn Ned of the Lannister's treachery. Jon is called when he must leave his family and dedicate his life to the Night Watch and the guarding of the Wall. Robb is called when Ned's death forces him to become the head of House Stark,

and he must raise and lead an army against the Lannisters. Arya is called when she must leave Winterfell behind and go to Kings Landing with her father. Each of these characters at first refuses the call, but ultimately sets out on the journey for better or for worse.

Why Does It Work?

Martin's approach appeals to the reader on two levels. First, it does not completely disregard the Hero's Journey and the effect it has on a story and its audience. It does, however, selectively utilize aspects of the journey, and applies those aspects to more than one character. This results in a more true depiction of the human psyche, as everyone at some point in her life has felt she was, or at least pretended to be, a hero. As Charlie Jane says, "Why is one hero so special anyway?" Our lives are constantly filled with heroes, from the guy who jumpstarts our car to that teacher we will never forget. Martin taps in to that desire we all have for many heroes, and to be saved many times.

Martin knows, however, that none of us are fools, which is his second level of appeal. Heroes, at least in the Superman way, are not real. All the real heroes are tragically flawed, and part of the human condition is accepting our heroes for the wonderful people they are, and the wonderful people they are not. Martin paints very real characters who can be heroic, but who also show the non-heroic tendencies such as vengeance and greed that make us believe them, and often love them, even more.

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