

ANALYZING POSTMODERN ASPECTS  
OF MEDIEVAL FANTASY FICTION:  
*A SONG OF ICE AND FIRE*  
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**Abstract**

The aim of this article is to analyze George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* in order to demonstrate that in spite of its medieval character, Martin's work is based on post-modern conventions and enters into a dialogue with the expectations of the twenty-first century readers. Thus, the article analyzes the structure of the narrative, the world depicted in it, and its characters. This analysis is preceded by a discussion of "fantastic neomedievalism", particularly in the works of J.R.R. Tolkien and later Tolkienesque fantasy prone to nostalgic rendition of the Middle Ages. The study is complemented by a passage on other fantasy novels which show signs of postmodern sensibility and, therefore, offer a glimpse into the process of transformation within medieval-inspired fantasy, of which Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* can be regarded as the most recent product.

**Key Words:** postmodernism, medieval fantasy, J.R.R. Tolkien, George R.R. Martin

Since its emergence from the literature of Victorian England, fantasy fiction has been enamored with the Middle Ages. When William Morris, a prominent Victorian writer and social activist, published the prose romances<sup>1</sup> strongly

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, *The Wood Beyond the World* (1894), *The Well at the World's End* (1896), and *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* (1897).

inspired by his personal fascination with the Middle Ages,<sup>2</sup> little did he suspect that these works would be the foundation for one of the most recognizable and lasting sub-genres of modern fantasy, i.e. high/epic fantasy (often overlapping with the category of heroic fantasy),<sup>3</sup> which was later popularized by J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955) and emulated by generations of post-Tolkienian writers. Through the works of Tolkien and his successors, medieval-inspired worlds—with their feudal kingdoms, warring monarchs, questing swordsmen, and noble princesses—as well as certain chivalric ideals defining the protagonists<sup>4</sup> became staple elements of fantastic world-building and the core of fantasy as a modern genre.

This practice of resorting to medieval imagery is described by Kim Selling as “fantastic neomedievalism”<sup>5</sup>—a term which she borrows from Umberto Eco. Fantastic neomedievalism constitutes a branch of medievalism, i.e. the process of incorporation and reconstruction of medieval images and ideas in more contemporary works, which is a tendency that is hardly a postmodern invention

<sup>2</sup> A. Hodgson, *The Romances of William Morris*, Cambridge: CUP, 1987, pp. 10-12.

<sup>3</sup> Internal division is a problematic issue as far as modern fantasy is concerned. High/epic fantasy, often considered prototypical fantasy literature, is usually set in a secondary world filled with various elements of magic and driven by quests/adventures which affect the well-being of the hero and his world (*The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, eds. J. Clute and J. Grant, London: Orbit, 1997, p. 466). Because these secondary worlds more often than not are inspired by the Middle Ages, this sort of fiction can also be called medieval fantasy. Moreover, *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* notes that the term “heroic fantasy” might be synonymous with epic fantasy (*The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, p. 464), and in *Historical Dictionary of Fantasy Literature* Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is also categorized as heroic fantasy (B. Stableford, *Historical Dictionary of Fantasy Literature*, Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, 2005, p. 197). When Thomas Honegger discusses the correspondences between the Middle Ages and heroic fantasy, he analyzes Robert E. Howard's *Conan the Barbarian*, C.S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, which he respectively calls sword and sorcery heroic fantasy, Christian heroic fantasy, and epic fantasy (T. Honegger, *(Heroic) Fantasy and the Middle Ages – Strange Bedfellows or an Ideal Cast?*, “*Itinéraires*”, 2010, n/p). The ambiguity of the names high/epic/heroic fantasy is only a fragment of the genre's problems with internal division. For the sake of this work, I will refer to high/epic and medieval fantasy, since this is how George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series is categorized (e.g. in Stableford's *Historical Dictionary of Fantasy Literature* the series is called epic fantasy (p. 267), and authors of the collection *Mastering the Game of Thrones* (pp. 16, 17, 21, 71, 251) also use the names of high and epic fantasy in reference to Martin's series).

<sup>4</sup> R. H. Thompson, *Modern Fantasy and Medieval Romance: A Comparative Study*, in: *The Aesthetics of Fantasy Literature and Art*, ed. R. C. Schlobin, Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1982, pp. 213-214.

<sup>5</sup> K. Selling, ‘*Fantastic Neomedievalism*’: *The Image of the Middle Ages in Popular Fantasy*, in: *Flashes of the Fantastic: Selected Essays from The War of the Worlds Centennial, Nineteenth International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts*, ed. D. Ketterer, Westport: Praeger, 2004, p. 212.

since it has been present in art for centuries. Noting the prevailing fascination with all things medieval, Umberto Eco starts his seminal work “Dreaming of the Middle Ages” with an ironic comment that “Indeed, it seems that people like the Middle Ages”,<sup>6</sup> which is then followed by the scholar’s analysis of the influence which the Middle Ages has had on Western culture and history. Following Eco’s claims, Tison Pugh and Angela Weisl add that the Middle Ages “continues to enthrall for its pageantry and its manners, for its ideals of courtly love and chivalry, for its literary and artistic accomplishments, in such plentitude that, although the Middle Ages did in fact end, medievalisms, it appears, will never cease to be reborn.”<sup>7</sup>

As far as the prevalence of fantastic neomedievalism is concerned, Selling points out that writers have generated quasi-medieval fantasy worlds not only because of the popularity of Tolkien’s creation, but also because of the convenience of such a solution, since the Middle Ages offers ample material that can be converted into a believable yet at the same time surprising fantasy world that will fulfill the writer’s and readers’ nostalgic longing for the past long gone.<sup>8</sup> As a result of such practice, the image of the Middle Ages becomes “mythologized”<sup>9</sup> and, inevitably, distorted. After all, even Morris and Tolkien,<sup>10</sup> for all of their passion for and knowledge of the medieval period, did not mirror it perfectly in their works (if that was ever their aim). Both writers imbued their works with personal experiences and beliefs: the works of Morris are deeply grounded in socialist values<sup>11</sup> and those of Tolkien reflect his dedication to Christianity, fondness for Norse sagas, and views on industrialization.<sup>12</sup> Also, both Morris and Tolkien presented an idealized version of the Middle Ages. Thus, scenes of violence are seldom described in gruesome detail, sexuality is a topic only hinted at, and rape is veiled with euphemisms—if it ever takes place at all. There is hardly any sickness, poverty or filth. While cruelty and injustice do exist, these quasi-medieval worlds nonetheless seem pure and unspoiled.

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<sup>6</sup> U. Eco, *Dreaming of the Middle Ages*, in: *Travels in Hyperreality: Essays*, U. Eco, trans. W. Weaver, San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986, p. 61.

<sup>7</sup> T. Pugh and A. J. Weisl, *Medievalisms: Making the Past in the Present*, London and New York: Routledge, 2013, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> K. Selling, *Fantastic Neomedievalism*, pp. 212-213.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 213.

<sup>10</sup> Eco calls the works of Tolkien escapism (*Dreaming of the Middle Ages*, p. 65).

<sup>11</sup> F. Boos, *Gender Division and Political Allegory in the Last Romances of William Morris*, “*Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies*” 1992, I. 2, pp. 12-23.

<sup>12</sup> Ch. Scull and W. G. Hammond, *The J.R.R. Tolkien Companion & Guide*, vol. 2, London: HarperCollinsPublishers, 2006, pp. 1105-1110.

And as far as the quest is concerned, it is highly unlikely that it will be prematurely terminated by the protagonist's sudden illness, lack of funds or unlucky death (since the hero's death needs to be heroic and meaningful). Selling aptly summarizes this curious representation of the Middle Ages in fantasy fiction:

On the whole, the medievalism of mainstream high fantasy presents a very selective and positive image of the Middle Ages, following the example set by J.R.R. Tolkien's anitmodernist text *The Lord of the Rings*. Given the predominance of this romanticized, idealistic version of the medieval, one could almost forget that an equally valid image is the filthy and oppressive world of the Crusades and the Inquisition, where life could be likened to that in the "state of nature", to quote Hobbes, "poor, nasty, brutish and short."<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, many readers of fantasy fiction have probably forgotten about the other side of the Middle Ages, and that is one of the reasons why George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series has become such a novelty. Martin has created a cruel and violent feudal world whose inhabitants, be they kings or peasants, are fallen creatures plagued by doubts, failures, lust, and ambition. When juxtaposing Martin's vision with the purity—and naivety—of Tolkienesque quasi-medieval worlds, it becomes clear why readers of Martin's work might want to claim that his creation depicts the "real" Middle Ages, since it restores the less savory aspects of medieval life in place of nostalgic idealism. Yet without diminishing Martin's knowledge of the Middle Ages or his accomplishment as a writer, it should be clearly stated that *A Song of Ice and Fire* is not the "real" Middle Ages, but its fantastic reconstruction.<sup>14</sup> Though the series aspires to historical realism, it is a mosaic of medievalism and postmodernism—and the author's conscious choice to present such a violent world and, in that way, break with the patterns of high/epic fantasy is a very sign of the latter. While the medieval aspects of Martin's series and their historical accuracy have already received much scholarly attention,<sup>15</sup> the aim of this paper is to explore

<sup>13</sup> K. Selling, *Fantastic Neomedievalism*, p. 214.

<sup>14</sup> It would be interesting to explore what people actually perceive as the "real" Middle Ages, since contemporary ideas about this particular period are often an artificial construct based as much on modern literature and movies as on accurate historical records. Kathleen Biddick's *The Shock of Medievalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998) is an insightful work on the shifting perception of the Middle Ages and the discipline of medieval studies.

<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, *Beyond the Wall: Exploring George R.R. Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire* edited by James Lowder (2012), *George R.R. Martin's "A Song of Ice and Fire" and the*

some of the postmodern aspects of *A Song of Ice and Fire* in order to demonstrate how Martin's saga works according to postmodern mechanisms and expresses postmodern concerns aimed at twenty-first century readers.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the proposed analysis will focus on the structure of the narrative (approach to patterns characteristic of high/epic fantasy, multiple third-person narration), the world depicted in it (fragmentation and moral relativism), and the characters (issues concerning race, feminism, liberty, and disability). This investigation will be complemented by a brief passage on other works that could be categorized as "medieval" fantasy fiction in order to emphasize the point that Martin's blending of the Middle Ages with postmodern sensibility is not, nonetheless, a singular phenomenon.

Given the scope and range of contemporary literature, providing a universal definition of postmodernism is a difficult task.<sup>17</sup> In their attempts at defining postmodernism, scholars have focused on its various aspects, hence, e.g. Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra and hyperreality, Donna Haraway's analysis of the cyborg, Brian McHale's shift from epistemology to ontology, or Bran Nicol's analysis of metafiction. In this article I will refer to those widely recognized features of postmodernism which are the most meaningful in the context of the relationship between Martin's saga and the patterns of high/epic medieval fantasy. Following Jean-François Lyotard work *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), it has been widely accepted that people can no longer rely on grand narratives (meta-narratives) such as the beliefs in steady progress, the power of human reason, and the existence of absolute and objective truths. Given the postmodern distrust of and skepticism toward such notions, the grand narratives have been gradually substituted with micro-narratives, language games, and (local) discourses of different cultural significance, all of which negate the validity of such concepts as the ultimate truth, single interpretation, and objective reality, and instead emphasize the plurality of voices and diversity of experience. Postmodernism welcomes diverse cultural

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*Medieval Literary Tradition* edited by Bartłomiej Błaszczewicz (2014), Carolyne Larrington's *Winter is Coming: The Medieval World of Game of Thrones* (2015), and Shiloh Carroll's *Medievalism in A Song of Ice and Fire and The Game of Thrones* (2018).

<sup>16</sup> The first volume of the series, *A Game of Thrones*, was published in 1996. The following volumes are *A Clash of Kings* (1998), *A Storm of Swords* (2000), *A Feast for Crows* (2005), and *A Dance with Dragons* (2011). Martin is currently working on subsequent installments.

<sup>17</sup> J. Casey, *Modernism and Postmodernism*, in: *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, eds. E. James and F. Mendlesohn, Cambridge: CUP, 2012, pp. 113-124. P. Stasiewicz, *Między światami: Intertekstualność i postmodernizm w literaturze fantasy*, Białystok: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu w Białymstoku, 2016, p. 278.

identities and examines the power relations between them, at the same time giving voice to the oppressed and the repressed. Moreover, for postmodernism nothing is sacred, and everything can be questioned and investigated—or ridiculed, if need be, since irony and parody are key elements of the repertoire of a postmodern artist. What is more, postmodernism legitimizes the mixing of forms and conventions as well as the artist's play with the audience's knowledge and expectations. Consequently, boundaries become blurred, truth is fragmented, and no single interpretation can satisfy everyone as there exist different legitimate versions of truth and reality.

In spite of the series' medieval guise, the structure of Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* and the world depicted in it reflect all of the above-mentioned elements.<sup>18</sup> First of all, George R.R. Martin is a writer well aware of the patterns underlying high/epic fantasy. In the interview for *The Rolling Stone* he argues, for instance, that "The Tolkien model led generations of fantasy writers to produce these endless series of dark lords and their evil minions who are all very ugly and wear black clothes. But the vast majority of wars throughout history are not like that."<sup>19</sup> Moreover, not only does Martin question the validity of certain formulaic solutions long-present in high/epic fantasy, but he also objects to the naive innocence of (post-)Tolkienian fantasy<sup>20</sup>:

*Lord of the Rings* had a very medieval philosophy: that if the king was a good man, the land would prosper. We look at real history and it's not that simple. Tolkien can say that Aragorn became king and reigned for a hundred years, and he was wise and good. But Tolkien doesn't ask the question: What was Aragorn's tax policy? Did he maintain a standing army? What did he do in times of flood and famine? And what about all the-

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<sup>18</sup> In this article I will be interested only in examining certain postmodern aspect of Martin's series as in opposition to more traditional high/epic medieval fantasy. For a critical evaluation of the postmodern aspects of fantasy and science fiction in general see Kathryn Hume's *Postmodernism in Popular Literary Fantasy* (1997), Jim Casey's *Modernism and Postmodernism* (2012), and Piotr Stasiewicz's *Między światami: Intertekstualność i postmodernizm w literaturze fantasy* (2016). Also, in this paper I will refer only to the book version of *A Song of Ice and Fire* and refrain from comments on its TV adaptation, though the transmediality of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, as well as the fandom culture that has evolved around it are fascinating topics.

<sup>19</sup> M. Gilmore, *George R.R. Martin: The Rolling Stone Interview*, "The Rolling Stone", 23 April 2014, <http://www.rollingstone.com/tv/news/george-r-r-martin-the-rolling-stone-interview-20140423> [06.08.2017]

<sup>20</sup> Still, Martin does not claim that the entirety of Tolkien's work is dominated by idealism and over-simplification, and he recalls the episode of the scouring of the Shire as a case in point (M. Gilmore, *George R.R. Martin*, n/p).

se orcs? By the end of the war, Sauron is gone but all of the orcs aren't gone – they're in the mountains. Did Aragorn pursue a policy of systematic genocide and kill them? Even the little baby orcs, in their little orc cradles?<sup>21</sup>

In other words, while Tolkien was satisfied with presenting Aragorn's long-awaited ascension to the throne that healed the kingdom, Martin would have been more interested in exploring the practical aspects of Aragorn's royal reign, which would present the hero as a more realistic rather than mythic character. It is worth noting that Martin's comment is doubly postmodern, since it ironically questions the idealism of his predecessor and then bestows some humanity on the orcs—characters which in fantasy fiction typically serve as mindless enemies whose only destiny is to be killed by good protagonists.

Given Martin's objection to some tropes of high/epic fantasy and its prevailing idealism, it is not surprising that in his own work the author plays with the readers' knowledge of these tendencies. This is visible from the very beginning, as the first volume moves from fantasy to realism and then returns to fantasy at the end of the story. In the first chapters of *A Game of Thrones*, readers learn about the Wall which protects the lands of men from the vicious creatures known as the Others. Then in Winterfell, the Starks find a litter of direwolf pups whose number miraculously matches the number of Eddard Stark's children. Yet from that point on, the volume focuses on various political intrigues; fantastic elements hover somewhere in the background of the narrative, which might surprise readers convinced that they are going to deal with another work built on staple fantastic tropes. Because fantasy is suppressed for most of *A Game of Thrones*, it is doubly surprising when by the end of the volume Daenerys Targaryen miraculously emerges from her husband's funeral pyre with three young dragons. Though elements of fantasy (dragons, dark magic, resurrections, psychic powers) reappear throughout subsequent volumes, the balance is undoubtedly tipped in favor of realism, since most of the narrative focuses on the civil war in Westeros and Daenerys's path to queenship. Yet, given that the Others will be the ultimate threat to the fictional realm, it can be assumed that in the final volume the fantastic will again dominate the narrative. If that happens, the series will return to the patterns of high/epic fantasy, since the grand battle between good and evil is one of its primary tropes—and Martin's readers, having got used to the series' realism, will be surprised once again.

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<sup>21</sup> M. Gilmore, *George R.R. Martin*, n/p.

In order to further shock his readers, Martin deliberately violates their expectations about the development of the plot by having many of the significant characters hurt and killed early in the story (with no hope of some miraculous resurrection in the near future).<sup>22</sup> Martin rightly argues: “The moment the reader begins to believe that a character is protected by the magical cloak of authorial immunity, tension goes out the window.”<sup>23</sup> One of the first disturbing episodes, appearing early in the first volume, presents Jamie Lannister having sex with his twin sister, Queen Cersei. To make matters worse, when the pair is discovered by young Bran Stark, Jamie mercilessly pushes the boy out of the window. Though Bran survives, he becomes paralyzed and his dreams of being a knight are shattered (ironically, much later Jamie’s right hand is cut off by enemies, which also terminates his career as a knight). Since heroes of fantasy fiction are often characterized by their strength, agility, and power in combat, they are seldom burdened with a grave illness—the idealism of many fantasy novels neglects such down-to-earth problems. Consequently, Bran’s fate warns readers that *A Game of Thrones* is not exactly the type of Tolkienesque fantasy they might be already familiar with. Reading *A Game of Thrones* becomes both unsettling and estranging.

Two of the series’ most shocking events are probably the death of Eddard Stark (in *A Game of Thrones*) and the massacre at the Red Wedding (in *A Storm of Swords*). Eddard Stark, a noble and just lord who seems a typical protagonist of high/epic fantasy, is by the end of the volume falsely accused, imprisoned, and beheaded. His death, even more than Bran’s paralysis, is a liminal experience for the readers since, expecting that such a virtuous and significant character cannot be removed from the narrative, they probably assume that he will be somehow rescued from his plight.<sup>24</sup> Through Eddard’s death Martin again advises his readers to abandon their expectations, because in the fictional Westeros, like in real life, nobody is safe. Even so, the episode of the Red Wed-

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<sup>22</sup> A few of these characters do get revived by the intervention of a priest. However, only one of them—Catelyn Stark—is a central figure to the plot, and she does not reclaim her previous position, because she becomes a zombie-like being intent on revenge. Thus, her return is nowhere near what readers of Tolkien, who remember the resurrection of Gandalf, might expect.

<sup>23</sup> M. Gilmore, *George R.R. Martin*, n/p.

<sup>24</sup> Whether or not it was done deliberately, it is ironic that in the TV adaptation of the series Eddard Stark is played by Sean Bean—the actor who played Boromir in Peter Jackson’s screen adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* and was also killed by enemies shortly after the beginning of the quest. Fans of both works have quickly noticed this coincidence and responded with numerous memes—an interesting phenomenon of fandom work and participatory culture.



ding is still one of the most disturbing events, because several of the leading characters are unexpectedly butchered during a feast. The Red Wedding permanently dispels the veneer of idealism. Yet, since suffering and death are omnipresent, the heroes' struggle to survive becomes more meaningful and poignant.

As far as narration is concerned, each volume of the series is related by several characters located in various areas of the fictional world. The (in)effectiveness of such a technique is a topic for a separate debate, since some readers might praise the panorama of experiences, while others might find the constant shifts troublesome to follow. What should be noted is that though these shifts between point-of-view characters offer a variety of perspectives, they are still parts of third-person limited narration. Thus, while readers get a temporary glimpse into the mindsets of various protagonists, none of these protagonists is omniscient, so the end effect is a narrative of fragmented truths. As Kathryn Hume writes, "Fantasy puts worlds under erasure, turns the universe into a pluriverse, and deliberately rouses anxieties."<sup>25</sup> Martin skillfully uses this plurality of voices and withholds crucial information to elicit his readers' anxiety. And since his world and characters are not static, i.e. they do not cease to develop once they are removed from the focus of narration, the protagonists often find themselves in surprising or unfavorable circumstances, because theirs—and the readers'—is a limited and incomplete knowledge of the circumstances. Thus, *A Song of Ice and Fire* negates what Thomas Honegger writes about medieval fantasy fiction:

the self-presentation of the Middle Ages as an ordered and coherent civilisation contrasts with the disjuncture, isolation and incoherence experienced in modern society. Fantasy partakes in this "medieval dream of order" and presents its readers the vision of a harmonious and hierarchical society.<sup>26</sup>

While Martin's Westeros is undoubtedly hierarchical, it is by no means harmonious. On the contrary, when various lords voice their claims for the Iron Throne, the realm is gradually thrown into the chaos of war, in which pacts and promises are broken and truth is distorted by manipulation. The fictional world is on the verge of a fall: political, moral, and religious. In fact, it seems that the

<sup>25</sup> K. Hume, *Postmodernism in Popular Literary Fantasy*, in: *The Dark Fantastic: Selected Essays from the Ninth International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts*, ed. C. W. Sullivan III, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1997, p. 179.

<sup>26</sup> T. Honegger, *(Heroic) Fantasy and the Middle Ages – Strange Bedfellows or an Ideal Cast?*, "Itinéraires" 2010, <http://itineraires.revues.org/1817> [03.08.2017]

more a character is virtuous or innocent (Eddard, his children Robb and Sansa, Daenerys), the more they are subjected to suffering, until they learn to question other people and the world—or they perish. This is what happens to Eddard who, guided by his own sense of morality, is unable to predict Queen Cersei's intrigues and, in the end, is beheaded by her son. This is also what happens to Robb Stark who, having broken his promise to marry Lord Frey's daughter, never suspects that his host might kill him during a wedding feast. While Sansa and Daenerys survive their harsh ordeals (both lose their families and former social position through betrayal), their naive assumptions about the power of honor and morality are replaced by a more grim outlook on life.

Moreover, Martin's world is one of moral relativism. None of the characters can be easily classified as entirely good or bad, since the former are forced to do horrible things to fulfill their duties, while the latter are capable of mercy and kindness. Unless the characters are ready to struggle for their own happiness, they cannot expect that fate or divine providence will reward them for their virtue and punish the wrongdoers. Contrary to the idealism of traditional high/epic fantasy, in Westeros life is simply unfair and good intentions do not mean much. All of this is well illustrated by the fate of Jamie Lannister, who is known as the Kingslayer and widely despised since he treacherously murdered the king he had sworn to protect. Few people know that if Jamie had not murdered the king, the king would have destroyed the capital city and murdered its inhabitants. In addition, Jamie pushed young Bran out of the window to protect his relationship with his sister—apparently the only person whom he truly cares about. Yet Jamie is but one among many characters who are forced to choose the lesser evil, and then deal with the consequences of their actions; readers will find it difficult to unanimously condemn or praise these characters. As Rebekah M. Fowler argues, this is exactly what postmodern readers want instead of the *deus ex machina* solutions appearing in formulaic high/epic fantasy:

even as a postmodern audience delights in the innocence of a chivalrous and courtly past and may long for such simple and positive outcomes to life's complications, this audience is also skeptical of solutions that are too easy, that magic can resolve quickly, and of situations that require simple binary choices.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> R. M. Fowler, *Sansa's Songs: The Allegory of Medieval Romance in George R.R. Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire Series*, in: *George R.R. Martin's "A Song of Ice and Fire" and the Medieval Literary Tradition*, ed. B. Błaszczewicz, Warszawa: WUW, 2014, p. 72.

There are no simple and easily available solutions in Martin's fiction. His Westeros is a fragmented, ambiguous, and morally relative world, in which absolute truth is substituted with a plurality of voices. Such a world is inarguably characteristic of postmodern fiction.<sup>28</sup>

Postmodernism is also characterized by discourses on postcolonialism, feminism, and gender, as well as by questions about the individual's identity and the experiences of trauma. All of these issues are present in *A Song of Ice and Fire*, and are as prominent as the standard trope of high/epic fantasy: the quest to save the world. Issues of postcolonialism are addressed by Martin in Daenerys's struggle to liberate the inhabitants of Slaver's Bay. Inarguably, the series can be praised for its critique of slavery and its demand for universal freedom. Yet on the other hand, it is still a young white girl that becomes the savior for the brown-skinned people who, after their liberation, willingly begin to serve her—this imagery clearly resonates with notion of “the white man's burden” (though it should be pointed out that one of Daenerys's advisors is a young woman of color). As far as feminism and gender are concerned, though the series often presents women as violated by men and oppressed by the patriarchal society, it also features some complex female characters who transgress the boundaries of typical medieval high/epic fantasy, in which women appear as damsels in distress, objects of romantic love or “rewards” for the brave hero. Responding to the demands of postmodern readers, Martin shows the ineffectiveness of heroines who follow the rules of patriarchal society, and instead elevates those that manage to reinvent their identity and emerge as strong and independent. The heroines which follow the requirements of the patriarchal society are exemplified by Cersei, Catelyn Stark, and Sansa. The ambitious and power-hungry Queen Cersei has little idea how to be a good ruler and, once she obtains royal power, commits several mistakes. Most of them are due to the fact that Cersei wishes to emulate masculine leadership, apparently forgetting that the patriarchal society will never disregard her gender.<sup>29</sup> Her only idea of female leadership is using sex as a tool for gaining power and control, for which she is eventually humiliated and punished. Contrary to Cersei, Catelyn Stark never seeks political power: she is completely devoted to her roles of a wife and mother—the only roles which a woman should pursue according to Westerosi

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<sup>28</sup> This might change at the end of the series if Martin decides to bring some healing and peace into his world.

<sup>29</sup> Sh. R. Carroll, ‘*You Ought to be in Skirts and Me in Mail*’: *Gender and History in George R.R. Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire*, in: *George R.R. Martin's "A Song of Ice and Fire" and the Medieval Literary Tradition*, ed. B. Łaszkiewicz, Warszawa: WUW, 2014, p. 252.

standards. Yet Catelyn also fails, killed at the Red Wedding, because her motherly feelings make her act in ways which undermine the position of her husband and son.<sup>30</sup> Sansa, who starts as an “*idealized* romance lady”<sup>31</sup> that believes in courtly culture and wants nothing more than a handsome knight as her husband, is eventually forced to realize her own naivety and face the harsh reality of life.<sup>32</sup> Though Sansa is still constrained by the actions of her male companions, Martin has clearly set her on a path to self-development.

Other female characters who struggle for empowerment in the patriarchal Westeros are Arya Stark (Sansa’s younger sister who wishes to become a warrior), Asha Greyjoy (a commander of her own fleet who leads men to battle), and Daenerys Targaryen. Daenerys is a powerful woman in several ways: she is a sovereign queen who wields formidable military power and is loved by her people—all of which she achieved through her perseverance, wit, and kindness. Shiloh R. Carroll argues that “Medievalist fantasy has a tendency to conform to traditional gender roles and favor masculine activities over feminine ones. Even women who break out of their gender roles and become knights, assassins, or mages are frequently shown wielding male power rather than finding power in femininity.”<sup>33</sup> This is certainly true about Cersei, but not about Daenerys. The latter manifests an entirely different type of leadership than Cersei, because she exemplifies the nurturing side of femininity: to her people and followers, Daenerys is the mother, protector, and savior. Perhaps she will also be the mythic savior of Westeros prophesized by Melisandre, in which case *A Song of Ice and Fire* would be one of those rare works of high/epic fantasy which bestow such a leading role on a woman. If all of these female characters are taken into consideration, it seems that they are the most successful once they reject the roles given to them by the courtly culture and patriarchal society, and instead pursue the reinvention of their identity, which is in line with contemporary feminist politics. Caroline Spector aptly summarizes Martin’s achievement:

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<sup>30</sup> When she imprisons Tyrion Lannister who, as she assumes, is responsible for Bran’s injury, she undermines her husband’s position in the capital, whereas her decision to free Jamie (so that he might in return save her daughters) creates animosity between King Robb and his people.

<sup>31</sup> R. M. Fowler, *Sansa’s Song*, p. 73.

<sup>32</sup> Analyzing Eddard and Sansa Stark, Fowler writes: “Ned Stark serves as the medieval romance hero and Sansa as the lady in need of a valiant knight to rescue her. Together, they represent Romance, or the romance genre, that is interrogated by postmodern irony, even as it is used by it to show how archetypal readings must inevitably fail.” (*Sansa’s Song*, p. 78) These characters allow Martin to subvert the structures of medieval romance.

<sup>33</sup> Sh. R. Carroll, *You Ought to be in Skirts*, p. 247.

In the midst of what appears to be a traditional male-power fantasy about war and politics, he [Martin] serves up a grim, realistic, and harrowing depiction of what happens when women aren't fully empowered in a society. In doing so, by creating such diverse and fully rendered female characters and thrusting them into the grim and bitter world, Martin has created a subversively feminist tale.<sup>34</sup>

Part of this subversion is also the character of Brienne of Tarth, a female knight who fits neither the world of men nor that of women, and is ridiculed by both. It is through her unyielding determination to follow her dream that Martin indirectly—since this character can be analyzed also through the medieval motif of cross-dressing women—touches upon the questions of gender equality and social expectations towards both sexes. Still, because Brienne seems unable to connect with her femininity and, like Cersei, attempts to usurp a masculine role in a male-oriented society, her efforts seem doomed to fail. Nonetheless, male characters also struggle with questions of identity in Martin's world. In fact, the motif of losing, discovering, and re-discovering one's identity plays a key role in the development of several male heroes: Tyrion Lannister, the dwarf despised by society and guilty of patricide, seeks love and acceptance; Jon Snow, the bastard son of Eddard Stark, is tormented by his status of an illegitimate child; Jamie, when deprived of his right-hand, has to reevaluate his world—and readers have yet to see if their struggles end successfully. Many of these characters would not appear in Tolkienesque fantasy, because their physical appearance, mental abilities or sexual preferences mark them as “the Other”, who does not fit the idealism of high/epic fantasy or the requirements placed on “the hero” by myths and sagas from which the genre derives many of its elements. Yet Martin presents a whole panorama of socially excluded individuals whose narratives are of interest to postmodern readers; apart from the already mentioned “misfits”, there are Hodor (mentally impaired), Varys (the eunuch), and Sam Tarly (obese and cowardly) to name but a few. As Brent Hartinger notes:

A Song of Ice and Fire is set in a quasi-medieval setting where prejudices about these and other minorities couldn't be much more brutal or bigoted. But the sensibility of the series is decidedly modern. Outsiders are *not* stereotyped or ignored. On the contrary, these characters are brought front and center, their perspectives presented as no less important than those of the more traditional ones.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>34</sup> C. Spector, *Power and Feminism in Westeros*, in: *Beyond the Wall: Exploring George R.R. Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire, From A Game of Thrones to A Dance with Dragons*, ed. J. Lowder, Dallas, Texas: BenBella Books, 2012, p. 187.

<sup>35</sup> B. Hartinger, *A Different Kind of Other: The Role of Freaks and Outcasts in A Song of Ice*

Needless to say, all of these characters suffer from trauma induced by various events: violence, rape, death of family members, mutilation, etc.<sup>36</sup> To emphasize these tragic experiences and to continue shocking his readers, Martin often describes such events vividly, resorting to grotesque and macabre imagery which is absent from Tolkienesque fantasy.<sup>37</sup>

Taking into account the series' fragmented narration, the moral relativism of its fictional world, its numerous scenes of violence and sexuality, and its acknowledgment of the broadly defined "otherness," it becomes clear that *A Song of Ice and Fire* reflects postmodern tendencies and concerns. Still, as it was mentioned in the beginning, Martin's blending of the Middle Ages with postmodern sensibility is not a singular phenomenon since some other medieval fantasy narratives preceding Martin's also diverged from formulaic patterns and idealism. For instance, Poul Anderson's *Broken Sword* (1954) is a dark and violent story featuring an incestuous relationship between siblings, which leads to their ultimate downfall. The protagonist of Stephen Donaldson's *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant* (1977-2013) is a leper who, once he is transported to a fantastic world, rapes a young girl and then refuses to believe in the world's existence so as not to shoulder responsibility for its fate. Thus, Thomas Covenant is one of the most prominent anti-heroes of high/epic fantasy. The heroes of Tanith Lee's *Death's Master* (1979) include a lesbian queen who needs to sleep with a dead man in order to save her kingdom, her son who can easily switch between genders and falls in love with a male childhood friend, and a black-skinned Lord Death. In Orson Scott Card's *Hart's Hope* (1983), the conqueror publicly marries and rapes a twelve-year-old princess in order to secure his reign. Years later, her desire for revenge becomes the reason for the conqueror's downfall and the kingdom's torment. Card creates a very gritty medieval world and does not shy away from describing cruelty, rape, nudity and vulgarity. For instance, at one point in the story other prisoners save the protagonist, Orem, from freezing to death by spitting and urinating on him, which forces the boy to move around his cage. While Robert Jordan's *Wheel of Time* series (1990–

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*and Fire*, in: *Beyond the Wall: Exploring George R.R. Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire, From A Game of Thrones to A Dance with Dragons*, ed. J. Lowder, Dallas: BenBella Books, 2012, pp. 154-155.

<sup>36</sup> M. Cole, *Art Imitates War: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in A Song of Ice and Fire*, in: *Beyond the Wall: Exploring George R.R. Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire, From A Game of Thrones to A Dance with Dragons*, ed. J. Lowder, Dallas, Texas: BenBella Books, 2012, pp. 73-87.

<sup>37</sup> For instance, Tyrion murders his father in the privy, Jamie is forced to carry his severed hand, and he and Cersei are shown having sex near the corpse of their firstborn son.

2013) is far less gritty, it also includes elements foreshadowing Martin's work. For instance, Jordan shifts the focus of the narrative between various characters, thus producing a multi-threaded and fragmented story. He also presents some complex female characters who, even though the fantastic world is inspired by Arthurian legends, become powerful monarchs, wield formidable magical powers (in which case they get eternally young faces), and are not burdened with motherhood as their primary role in the society. Jordan also allows his male protagonist to be in a successful romantic relationship with three females who agree to share the man they all love—an instance of polygamy that seldom happens in fantasy. A thorough diachronic study of these and other works (starting with William Morris and ending with Martin) would undoubtedly reveal some interesting points about the development of high/epic fantasy set in quasi-medieval worlds.

All in all, George R.R. Martin is a writer knowledgeable of the genre he has chosen to write in, and *A Song of Ice and Fire* clearly reflects many post-modern conventions and attitudes. Thus, one cannot disagree with Anna Czarnowus when she writes that “undoubtedly the cycle speaks to us with a modern voice from behind its medievalized costume.”<sup>38</sup> The postmodern dimensions of Martin's work should not be surprising since scholars of fantasy literature have already acknowledged the genre's affinity with postmodernism. Jim Casey, for instance, argues that “fantasy, by its very nature, challenges the dominant political and conceptual ideologies in a manner similar to that of postmodernism.”<sup>39</sup> Piotr Stasiewicz adds<sup>40</sup> that some critics view fantasy as inevitably postmodernist, because it generates artificial worlds from a range of elements taken from various sources and because the genre has gradually adopted the mechanisms of mainstream literature. Consequently, Stasiewicz regards the works published after the year 2000, e.g. those of R Scott Bakker, Steven Erikson, and Brandon Sanderson,<sup>41</sup> as a new phase in the genre's development (noticeably dominated by American writers). In my opinion, George R.R. Martin's name should be added to this list, because his work is a new stage in the development of medieval-inspired high/epic fantasy fiction. To paraphrase Umberto Eco, *A Song of Ice and Fire* is yet another dream of the Middle Ages—a post-

<sup>38</sup> A. Czarnowus, *The Other Worlds of George R.R. Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire*, in: *George R.R. Martin's "A Song of Ice and Fire" and the Medieval Literary Tradition*, ed. B. Łaszkiewicz, Warszawa: WUW, 2014, p. 112.

<sup>39</sup> J. Casey, *Modernism and Postmodernism*, p. 115.

<sup>40</sup> P. Stasiewicz, *Między światami*, pp. 366-368.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 368.

modern dream of a writer who is done with the nostalgic idealism of his predecessors.

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