Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research

journal.finfar.org

The Once and Future Hero: Understanding the Hero in Quest Fantasy

Eduardo Lima

Abstract: This paper examines the figure of the hero in Quest Fantasy novels, George R. R Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* and Robert Jordan's *The Wheel of Time*. It employs Frye's taxonomy for the categorization of genres and Bakhtin's seminal ideas on the Epic and the Novel as references to analyse the characterisation of the Quest Fantasy hero in selected Fantasy texts and compares them with two Heroic works, *Beowulf* and *The Poetic Edda*. This analysis is based on the premise that Fantasy fuses elements of the Epic and the novel in a dialogic tension that is manifest in the setting and in the characterisation of the hero. It starts by looking at the general understanding of the hero figure, especially in the Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse tradition. It then discusses how shifts in the way contemporary Western societies understand the world requires a new view of the hero. This is followed by an analysis of the narrative chronotope and its effects on the characterisation of the Quest Fantasy hero, from its beginnings to its journey into the adventurous world.

Biography and contact info: Eduardo Lima completed his doctoral studies at the department of Game Studies at Brunel University London. He has a BA and MA in English Studies and his main area of interest is in narratives in video games, literature, film, and popular culture. His research explores dialogical relationships between works in different media with a special focus on chronotopic and archetypal readings.

Introduction

This paper examines the figure of the hero in Quest Fantasy novels, George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* and Robert Jordan's *The Wheel of Time*. It employs Frye's taxonomy for the categorisation of genres and Bakhtin's seminal ideas on the Epic and the Novel (3−40) as references to analyse the Quest Fantasy hero in selected Fantasy texts and compares them with two Heroic works, *Beowulf* and *The Poetic Edda*. In this paper, I use the term *fantasy* with small *f* to refer to the abstract concept of the fantastic imagination and thinking (Coleridge), whereas *Fantasy* with capital *F* is used to refer to the genre (Mendlesohn). The discussion conducted in this paper is based on the premise that Fantasy, as a genre, fuses elements of the Epic and the novel in a dialogic tension that is manifest in the setting and in the characterisation of the hero. It starts by looking at the general

understanding of the hero figure, especially in the Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse tradition. It then discusses how shifts in the way contemporary Western societies understand the world requires a new view of the hero. This is followed by an analysis of the narrative chronotope[1] and its effects on the characterisation of the Quest Fantasy hero, from its beginnings to its journey into the adventurous world.

In spite of growing interest and scholarship in the field, Fantasy is still considered by some critics as childish or escapist and not "correct and proper taste" literature (Shippey 1–4) and a "low art form concerned with play and desire" (Casey 115). However, the debt of the genre in its current form to canonical Old English and Old Norse texts is quite well documented in literary criticism. Tolkien's essay *Beowulf, The Monsters and the Critics* still remains relevant to contemporary critics over 50 years after its publication and in it Tolkien rejects the kind of criticism on the poem that resembles the sort of criticism now directed towards Fantasy. By looking at two post-Tolkien works and comparing them with two major storylines of Old English and Old Norse literature this paper highlights the connections between old heroic narratives and contemporary Fantasy literature from a chronotopic point of view, hoping that looking at such connections can bring to the readers of both genres a new understanding of Fantasy and its relationships with other long established literary genres.

Quest Fantasy (Senior 190–199) is perhaps the best known of the Fantasy sub-genres as it has been made famous by the most prominent works of Fantasy such as *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien) and the *Chronicles of Narnia* (Lewis). In it, promising or aspiring heroes are presented with a great mission to be completed and around which the whole narrative takes place, this quest may be visible right from the beginning or make itself apparent slowly throughout the narrative. *The Wheel of Time* (Jordan) and *A Song of Ice and Fire* (Martin) were chosen to represent the genre in this article for their prominence as contemporary works as well as their different configurations.

From Achilles to Rand Al'Thor

Heroes can be seen as two-fold figures. Firstly, they are often the main protagonists of a given narrative. Secondly, they can be seen as archetypal figures. According to Frye archetypal hero figures are an "associative cluster and complex variable" (102) of meaning signifying abstract cognition of all heroes and, as such, intrinsically linked with human psyche (Campbell 337). Frye (33-34) classifies the literary genres on the basis of the nature of the hero. In *Myth*, "the protagonist is superior in kind to "us", and to the fictional environment" (Korpua 126), which often confers him some divine attributes. *Romance* is the genre where the hero is superior in degree others and to his environment as he belongs to a world where the natural laws are somehow suspended. Although he is still human, his actions are extraordinary and his "prodigies of courage and endurance, unnatural to us, are natural to him" (Frye 33). The *High mimetic* genre is that in which the hero is above other men but not to his natural environment. The hero "has authority, passions, and powers of expression far greater than ours, but what he does is subject both to social criticism and to the order of nature" (Frye 34); he is the hero of most epic and tragic narratives. The hero in Greek tragedy, such as Oedipus, tends to be highly mimetic. On the other hand, the *Low mimetic* genre is that usually found in comedy and realistic fiction in which the hero is equal to his society and his environment. Frye's division between high and low mimetic does not refer to a higher or lower degree of mimesis, as he himself admits. Rather, it denotes the degree of the heroic greatness. Finally, in the *Ironic* genre, the hero is inferior in some way to how the readers/audiences see themselves so "that we have the sense of looking down on a scene of bondage, frustration, or absurdity" (Frye 34).

---

[1]   Chronotope is the time and space as present and depicted in a narrative. According to Bakhtin, chronotope is 'the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature' (Bakhtin 84).

Frye's taxonomy is also chronological to a certain extent since it proposes a classification that moves from the crystallisation of the mythological demigod hero, as in Homer, into a more humane existence, such as that of Oedipus. This progress continues into the Roman Empire as Virgil invokes the form in the *Aeneid* to ground his work and his society in the world of "firsts" and "bests" which is characteristic of the past looking Epic (Bakhtin 13). The fall of the Roman Empire in the West creates the space for quasi-mythological heroes that bring together Christian, pagan Northern European traditions, such as Beowulf, and chivalric tales, such as King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table (Malory). The hero thus changes as he moves through time and space adapting to conform to the views of their society, while inheriting their existence and even form to those of previous and even far away cultures that come to influence both the society and author.

While useful, Frye's taxonomy is hardly definitive, especially where epic heroes are concerned. Since these tales are the expression of a society in which "religion is mythological and polytheistic, it is hardly possible to separate the mythical, romantic, and high mimetic strands completely" (Frye 34–35). Frye's statement is especially true in the case of Sigurd's tale since the main action is prefaced by the mythological tale of the source of Fafnir's hoard in 'The Lay of Regin' (Larrington 151–154). Sigurd's main heroic feat is the slaying of the dwarf turned dragon Fafnir, the brother of Sigurd's foster father Regin. Fafnir killed his father so as to be the sole proprietor of the treasure bestowed upon their family for the death of their brother Otter at the hands of the gods, the treasure itself is said to be cursed a fact which creates a sense of predestination to Sigurd's final fate associated with Nordic mythology.

Beowulf's case, however, is perhaps more complex for the poem itself has very strong Christian overtones throughout the text, praising the "glorious Almighty" "Lord of Life" already within the first 20 lines of the poem (*Beowulf* 3). While it is true to say that the poem has Christian connotations, the same cannot be said of the tale itself, as its subject belongs to a pre-Christian warrior society. These tales are thus poised in a space somewhere between myth and history, creating human heroes who, in spite of being fantastical, shaped the narrative of perceived reality of their society (Earl 273–278). Beowulf and Sigurd can thus be seen as mimetic characters – renowned warriors and great leaders in their own worlds. However, their main achievement lies in the realm of the fantastical, in the slaying of monsters, not men. This highlights one of the main aspects of the Epic, which is also present in Romance and Myth: the superior hero. The hero's superiority over other men is also a fairly common trope in Fantasy. The concept of the hero, especially in the highly fantastical and archetypal genre of Fantasy, is highly dependent on a society's and an author's own view of itself and of the world (Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy* 8). This is mirrored as such in the various subgenres available that create a dialogical relationship between the hero figure, the character itself as a person, the genre and the culture behind both reader and author. As such, while the hero archetype is somewhat universal every single particular hero and heroic narrative is different in their own right and in relation to the archetype.

The Wheel of Time's Rand Al'Thor is a good example of the hero's perceived superiority since he is The Dragon Reborn, the hero of prophecy, and a man capable of great feats of magic and swordsmanship. Beowulf, while not magical per se, does possess his own super human traits, namely his Herculean strength with which he grapples the monster Grendel, tearing its arm off (*Beowulf* 53–55) whereas Sigurd shares the super human strength of Beowulf, but is also endowed with an immunity to poison characteristic of the Volsungs (Larrington 142).

For all their fantastical traits, however, both Beowulf and Sigurd are rather lacking in personality traits. We first hear of the Geat hero as the 'Hygelac's Thane', almost as if he had no name. All we are told is that 'There was no one else like him alive./ In his day, he was the mightiest man on earth,/ high-born and powerful' (*Beowulf* 17). A description that is largely interchangeable with Sigurd's. Their identities as heroes precede any identity of the individuals. In Beowulf's case, his allegiance and nationality are expressed first, his position as hero second, his ancestry third (19),

and only then does he name himself as Beowulf (25). They are defined not by their individual traits, but by the judgment of other men, who consider them as superior. Bakhtin argues that the Epic hero,

> is entirely externalized in the most elementary, almost literal sense: everything in him is exposed and loudly expressed: his internal world and all his external characteristics, his appearance and his actions all lie in a single plane. His view of himself coincides completely with other's views of him (Bakhtin 34).

Not only is the hero superior and exemplar to other men, but also dependent on others for his very existence. The Bakhtinian Epic hero is therefore less a character and more a symbolic function himself. Earl (279) analyses this ambivalence of the hero and his society in the form of the ties between Lordship and its people/followers in the light of Freud's analysis of the psychology behind the "primal horde" which denotes that it is the followers' duty to follow and serve their leader. The followers are inspired by the leader's example but also know their own limitations and do not aspire to be equal to him whereas the leader's prerogative and duty is the freedom to set the example (Earl 273–279). This is perhaps best demonstrated by Beowulf's final fight with the dragon, where he feels the presence of his tragic fate yet continues as if compelled to the action (*Beowulf* 165). This compelling act is both personal and social. It is the hero's function to face the dragon as the enforcer of the heroic code and he cannot exist outside his role. Once completed, his death is the only possible outcome. He belongs and is contained to the world of the story told in the distanced epic past. As Earl points out,

> Beowulf himself, then, at the end of the poem, is a representation not of the ego but the superego – inspiring, but terrifying in his heroic freedom and superiority, revealing by his very existence our inadequacy, and punishing us for our inability to be like him (Earl 279).

In giving up the "I" for the plural "We," heroes like Beowulf and Sigurd create a highly symbolical identity whose fate in the narrative is to become a form of martyr of society, a sacrifice for social cohesion by glorifying the memory of the past. It is important to note that unlike the Fantasy hero, whose fate is often involved with the fate of the land itself, the Epic hero is linked to the fate of his society, not to the physical world. In both, however, we can find a sense of diminishing, a loss of vitality. In Fantasy, it is the world that diminishes, both socially and physically, whereas in Epic, human nature and society weaken while the physical world remains indifferently oppressive (Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays* 33).

Shifting shapes

Although the overview above is important as a background against which to analyse the figure of the hero as a whole, this reading of the Epic hero is, in many ways, a fantastical generalisation in itself and a feat of abstraction which finds no shortage of problems in the close examination of individual cases. First, it is important to consider the gradual historical disappearance of the Epic hero from fiction as linked to the gradual diminishing of the fantastic towards a greater amount of mimesis. This is the movement which Frye perceives as a shifting of the "narrative centre of gravity down" (34) towards low mimetic and ironic modes of literature. The nature of the Fantasy genre itself may be seen as a reaction to this shifting. Bakhtin (20–23) describes the breakdown of Epic distance in two terms, first the destructive power of familiarity through the closing in of distance by comic laughter and through the movement of perspective from the past to the incomplete and constantly rethought present. In Bakhtin's words,

> Familiarization of the world through laughter and popular speech is an extremely important and indispensable step in making possible free, scientifically knowable and artistically realistic creativity in European civilization. . . . The distanced images of the epic and the images of familiar contact can never meet on the same field of representation (Bakhtin 23–28).

Once entered the zone of the familiar, it is impossible to leave and the Epic is incapable of maintaining its complete meaning and symbolical value. The gap between fantasy and the mimesis of perceived reality becomes too apparent and immersion[2] is broken. Losing its link to the past of its own culture to satire and familiarity, an alternative is to move the Epic narrative to the plane of the past of others, such as in Cyropedia, where Xenophon sets the hero in a foreign land and barbaric past (Bakhtin 28). However, even this refuge crumbles as the process of scientific understanding develops in history, and with it a growing confidence in the mimetic property of the narrative of perceived reality slowly gains ground in the human psyche. Another agent in the downfall of the superior hero is the process of novelisation of narratives (Bakhtin 37–39), where the present and the growing understanding of the human being as both complex and incomplete, therefore resistant to a singleness of meaning or function, expands in prominence.

The process of the decline of the Epic hero and the rise of the realistic protagonist reached its culmination in the twentieth century, until finally confidence in the powers of mimetic narrative turned into disillusionment. The breakdown of the positivistic ideal of absolute mastery of the world through logic, and the goal of an absolutely mimetic narrative of the understanding of perceived reality finally meet their match in the unprecedented social traumas that constituted most of the past century. As the unbridgeable gap between consciousness and reality made itself more apparent, Western society eventually reached a breaking point where "we" no longer believed in heroes or stories (Joy and Ramsey xxxi).

This break in the belief of the human mastery of the world largely coincides with the World Wars (Garth) in which the wholesale slaughter of human beings on both sides of the conflict led to the reinvestigation of humanity's most basic beliefs and assumptions about the nature of reality, also around this time the rise of structuralism and the consequent deconstruction of it into post-structuralism acknowledge to a new degree the imperfection of human cognition and the impossibility of a truth (Leitch). This is also the period where the Anglo-American Fantasy genre flourished. As a genre, Fantasy constitutes of stories that are self-consciously false and heavily influenced by Epic and Romance. Thus, it also features the superior hero but, as a form of literature of its time, it is forced to use different methods of distancing itself in time and space from the "real world" to be capable of generating a highly fantastical narrative. These intrinsic differences in form generate some marked differences on characterization between the Epic and Fantasy.

The hero and the world

The time setting makes for a very important difference on the portrayal the Fantasy hero. As an archetype, the hero figure is by definition an abstract, idealised, complete and ultimately indefinite figure and, therefore, resistant to the concrete, realistic, incomplete and constantly redefined present. By placing the narrative time on the present, Fantasy generates a hostile environment to the idealised hero figure of the Epic (Bakhtin 28) and must consequently, generate different strategies to achieve archetypal meaning. In *Beowulf*, for instance, we come into contact with a hero that is already "great": he does not change throughout the narrative; he is wise before becoming king; he is adventurous even after reigning for fifty years. Even the time before his glory, when he was not

---

[2]   Immersion is the state of being absorbed into the narrative in such a way that it that the consciousness perceives it as a version of reality. Immersion is achieved through suspension of disbelief (Coleridge 314) and/or secondary belief (Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf* 3–73).

recognized as the hero he is, it was not his own failure to show his greatness, but society's failure to recognise it (*Beowulf* 149). This kind of characterisation is possible because it is done in hindsight.

Conversely, in the ever changing present of the novel, which Fantasy adopts and adapts, "the individual acquires the ideological and linguistic initiative necessary to change the nature of his own image" (Bakhtin 38). Such change in the hero's identity, otherwise known as character growth, is a necessary aspect to Fantasy protagonists. The Quest Fantasy hero cannot be born the Hero, he must become one. That, in great part, is his ultimate quest. Even then, due to the present tense of the narrative and consequent generation of a greater narrative zone of contact with the reader's own present, there will always be a "surplus of humanness" in relation to archetypal function that needs to be juggled by the author (Bakhtin 37). This process of becoming a hero and still retaining a strong sense of humanity is one of the reasons why most Quest Fantasy works deal with younger protagonists in a sort of coming of age narrative.

Part of the solution set for the problem of setting the narrative in the present time is the change of setting to a fantastical otherworld (Wolf), where the abstract and ideal are entwined in the very fabric of the plane of action (Swinfen 75). This location transfer alone, however, is not enough. The early stages of the main narrative must be higher in mimetic content that is familiar to the readers so as to facilitate narrative immersion, which means that there must be a greater emphasis on the beginning of the hero's journey, on the transfer from a position of comfort to the zone of adventure (Campbell 57). The desire of glory for glory's sake that the still unnamed Beowulf demonstrates in sailing out to slay the monstrous Grendel (*Beowulf* 15) on pure hearsay lacks the emotional depth called for by the higher mimetic format of the characterization induced by the greater zone of contact with the hero's inner world. As such, the form of the call of adventure in Quest Fantasy usually varies significantly from the one in the Heroic Germanic tales. Whereas in *Beowulf* and the Sigurd cycle in the *Edda* the heroes leave their zone of comfort and go out in search of their adventure and glory mostly out of their own volition, in Fantasy there seems to be a trend where it is usually the adventure that comes and disrupts the zone of comfort of the characters and forces them into adventure (Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*).

In *The Eye of the World* (Jordan), Two Rivers is the zone of absolute no adventure as "That sort of thing just did not happen in the Two Rivers" (14). In Jordan's particular route for a more idealised heroic figure, the hero and the fantastical land must be shown as one so as to link him to the idealised geographical plane. As a human character, Rand al'Thor must be at the same time a hero and one with his people. The hero must belong simultaneously to the high mimetic environment of his people and to the fantastical adventurous world. To create this connection with the reader's own conception of humanity and facilitate immersion the Fantasy writer must generate ambivalence in the hero's psyche. For instance, when Jordan's hero is first presented to us, he himself recognises that "listening to tales of adventures, even dreaming about them, was one thing; having them take place around you would be something else again" (Jordan 51). Yet, he still cannot hope but to want to listen and dream that "Still it must be different out there, beyond the Two Rivers, like living in the middle of a gleeman's tale. An adventure. One long adventure. A whole lifetime of it" (Jordan 39).

Jordan's characterisation, as much of his work, is highly self-conscious of such ambiguity. Rand's main trait is the stubbornness characteristic of his people which, in turn, is immediately translated into natural elements as "they could give mules lessons and teach stones" (Jordan 9). He is, or so we are told, "solid" (Jordan 60), and rooted in the secluded space of everyday experience from which adventure will necessarily unearth him (Jordan 214). This uprooting only happens after the greatly secluded space of the Two Rivers (Jordan 55), and the main protagonist's own home are invaded and disrupted by the monstrous Trollocs (Jordan 60−90). Home is, in many ways, the absolute zone of comfort and safety, where "it was possible to forget the chill beyond the walls. There was no false Dragon here. No wars or AesSedai. No men in black cloaks" (Jordan 65).

As we meet the hero, or heroes, as personalities in a stable comfortable and more mimetic environment before the entrance into proper miraculous adventure time, another problem arises from the change in the chronological mode when compared to the Epic. Since a hero is defined by action, to determine who the hero is in a plane where action is yet to occur becomes quite problematic. Heroic status, like greatness, is retroactively judged based upon results: we know that Beowulf is a hero because he has already slain the monsters and lived an exemplary life. That is not the case in most Quest Fantasy tales, where most of the action is yet to take place. Consequently, an explanation is needed to justify why the tales of these particular characters are worth heeding to and why they are special. Since the heroic act is still to be accomplished, an explanation for the uniqueness of the protagonist is crucial because without it the reader would be taken away from inside the world of secondary belief (Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf: Including Mythopoeia*) into a zone of pure authorial determinacy thus breaking immersion. Interestingly most of the methods utilised by Fantasy authors, even the more unorthodox ones, such as Martin, are already present in the heroic sequence of *The Poetic Edda*.

Foreseeing greatness

First and foremost there is the use of prophecy or the premonition of events. The prophecy is perhaps the simplest, it is a staple strategy of Romance and Fantasy and its use sometimes borders on overuse and trivialisation. In *The Poetic Edda*'s poems concerning Sigurd there is the aptly named poem of 'Gripir's Prophecy', where Sigurd is told by his prophetic uncle Gripir of the events that will come to unfold in his life (Larrington 143–150). These are tinged with the light of inescapable fate making it all the more poignant as even Sigurd's foreknowledge of the facts will not avert them from happening for, as the reader/listener already knows, these facts have already happened. While characteristic and straightforward in the past tense narrative of the Epic, the use of the prophecy on a narration as it unfolds is again problematic. As the narrative is still developing, it must not yet be completely fixed (Bakhtin 31). Thus we have in Fantasy the "obscure prophecy", the meaning of which cannot be properly discerned until after the action takes place. *The Wheel of Time* as a whole makes heavy use of this form of prophecy: The Karatheon Cycle, being its main proponent. As such, the obscure prophecy is intrinsically and seemingly contradictive and delivers its message in allegorical form. For example, the fortress of the Stone of Tear is to be taken by the prophesized hero; however for it to fall the hero must be wielding the "Sword That Cannot be Touched" which is, in turn, guarded inside the impenetrable fortress (Jordan 189–190).

A Song of Ice and Fire (Martin), however, veers away from this type of prophecy and focuses more on the less descriptive type of foretelling, the foreshadowing. The symbol of the Starks of Winterfell is the direwolf, a giant variation of the ordinary wolf and the hue of foreshadowing tinges the scene where they first meet one of these animals. Upon returning to the castle from an excursion further in the north, the Stark men find a dead direwolf and her surviving cubs. The mother had been killed by a broken antler lodged in its throat and this is a clear a bad omen for the Stark family. The event could be seen as an instance of pure authorial determinacy, but Martin avoids so by associating the animal with the fantastic land beyond the Wall. The reader is told that "There's not been a direwolf sighted south of the Wall in two hundred years" (Martin 16). The vision of the dead animal then gains the quality of a spell, which silences the whole party. However, the event only starts to show hints of its full significance later, when we are told that the sigil of king and his family, the Baratheons, which are coming to Winterfell on a royal visit, is the stag (Martin 36).

Prophesy and foretelling set the general outline of why the story to unfold is of interest enough to be singled out and told. However, foretelling alone still does not explain why these characters in particular are at the centre of the fantastical action. It does not explain what sets them

apart and singles them out for an adventurous narrative. Contemporary readers' highly mimetic understanding of the world requires further justification. The Fantasy texts analysed here utilise a strategy to justify a character's uniqueness that is already employed, or alluded to, in the poems of *The Poetic Edda*.

The strategy used in *A Song of Ice and Fire* is that of dynastic descent to the mythopoeic and Epic past of heroes and legends. Sigurd is a descendant of the Volsung clan whose origins lie in myth (Larrington 35–37), and as such, while he himself already belongs to an already absolute and warded off past of Epic, he also has a direct relation with the even more remote and fantastical mythological world inside the narrative. Similarly, all the characters of interest in *A Game of Thrones* belong to distinguished noble families most of which can trace their family lines to fabled figures of the Age of Heroes, Martin's own internalisation of the Epic past. The Starks can trace their descent to Brandon the Builder, who built the Wall; the Lannisters, whose crest is the golden lion, claim to come from the trickster Lann the Clever, who "stole gold from the sun to brighten his curly hair"; and Daenerys Targaryen, "the dragon's daughter" is "of the blood of Aegon the Conqueror and Maegor the Cruel and old Valyria before them" (Martin 733). The dynastic motif works especially well for Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* due to its higher mimetic value. A relation by blood is a more fitting motif for the kind of world he has built as it also creates a sense of social distancing from the average reader. The main protagonists are all nobles, which distinguishes them from ordinary individuals and helps with the transition into adventure time, which is by its nature extraordinary fantastic action.

As *The Wheel of Time*'s secondary world is much higher in magical abstraction this extra aristocratic layer of distancing could detract rather than enhance the reader's empathy. The point of contact with the reader's sphere of mimetic perceived narratives must be maximised from the beginning as his marvellous world in adventure time requires a greater fantastical imaginative effort from the part of the reader to achieve secondary belief. Some glimpses of the hero's uniqueness are given at the beginning of the narrative such as Rand's different physique to those around him, such as 'Gray eyes and the reddish tinge to his hair' (Jordan 3). His peculiar hair colour, alongside his surname Al'Thor and the association made with him and lightning, later on the story, create an allusion to the Norse thunder god Thor. However, this is not the principal strategy Jordan employs in his work to link the main hero to the internalized Epic past. The link in *The Wheel of Time* belongs to the more fantastical realm of reincarnation, which can be also found mentioned at the very end of the 'Poem of Helgi Hiorvardsson' (Larrington 131) and in the 'Second Poem of Helgi Hundingsbani' (Larrington 141) both preluding and foreshadowing Sigurd's death due to association with a Valkyrie. Rand Al'Thor is not related to the Age of Legends by the more mimetic and distancing bloodline, but through the fantastical superiority of his reincarnated soul: he is 'The Dragon *Reborn*' (my emphasis) (Jordan 782).

The aforementioned justifications for the hero narrative prevalent in the Quest Fantasy, while present in *The Poetic Edda*, are not an absolute necessity of the Epic per se. *Beowulf* in particular does not make prominent use of any of these techniques with the exception of a high degree of foreshadowing in the side plotlines that are introduced in the main narrative before each monster fight. As such, Fantasy's reliance on tropes seems to emerge from an attempt to achieve a form of epic unity of narrative action, high in fantastical idealisation and powerful mythic qualities while moving to a different narrative chronotope which focuses on the more immersive novelistic chronological field of narrative as quasi-simultaneous to action. That is not to say that these works observe the unity of action in the same manner of the Epic, with its single hero and linear quest.

In both *Beowulf* and Sigurd's tale in the *Edda*, there is a certain linearity of movement and a prevailing simplicity, not of the tale or poem as a whole, but of the general action. Readers follow the adventure of a single hero with a single objective and, more often than not, a single antagonist. *Beowulf* is comprised of three such movements: the fight against Grendel; the fight against

Grendel's dame; and the Dragon fight. Each one of them is interspersed with side narratives and flashbacks are given, highlighting the main narrative. This is much of the same narrative structure found in Quest Fantasy, with the difference that here there is usually a final quest and the adventures that happen on the way to the final confrontation are interspersed with areas of comfort or no-adventure. In Epic, however, there is an overall sense that the reader or listener is told only that which is deemed important to the tale. For example, Beowulf upon hearing of Grendel simply enlists fourteen of the best men he could find and sets on a quest (*Beowulf* 15) There is no mention of how he enlists them, where he enlists them from, who they are, what their names are, or why they decide to follow him. That kind of novelistic detail is expected in a Fantasy work and accounts in great part for their much larger length. Without such detailed information, the Fantasy work would probably fail in generating the necessary level of secondary belief and greater immersion.

The faces of a thousand heroes

Unlike the Epic tales here analysed which concern themselves with a single hero - or in the case of *The Poetic Edda*, a single hero at a time − Quest Fantasy works often have more than one protagonist who serve as narrative focus, and who act out simultaneously in different areas of the world. This gives Fantasy a sense of higher narrative complexity than the Epic as it weaves different narrative threads into one single text. Nevertheless, if we isolate the narrative threads of each of the main protagonists one would be left with a unity of action very close to that of Epic (James and Mendlesohn 3). This narrative interweaving of several heroic threads is especially true in the case of *A Song of Ice and Fire* where the balance of the threads is kept, not allowing for any of the characters to claim the position of main protagonist, or of The Hero. This is an aspect directly related to the higher mimetic nature of the world building, becoming very close to the characterisation of in Frye's terms low mimetic realistic novels. It goes as far as incorporating some of the maxims of the mimetic novel into its discourse: "Life is not a song" we are told, "You may learn that one day to your sorrow", "*There are no heroes*" and "*In life, the monsters win*" (emphasis in the original) (Martin 720).

Yet, there are still heroes in Martin's narrative and they often are presented with quests of their own and are superior to others, even if not necessarily superior to each other. What makes it seem like there are no heroes is the way in which Martin built his fantasy world, with a mimetic centre and fantastical edges, embodied in the Land Beyond the Wall and the continent of Essos. He can then play on the tension between idealised and realistic characterisation, what is superior in the idealised fantastical plane is a weakness in the mimetic realistic environment. This tension is perhaps best highlighted on the narrative thread of Eddard Stark, the Lord of Winterfell.

On first contact Eddard has much in common with the Beowulf of the second half of the poem: he is now the lord of his land, and his adventuring days of glory and youth are mostly behind him. As such, he is a hero/father figure compound which is at home in the heroic stronghold of the North, but that is not to say that the archetypal dimension is the whole of his characterisation. As mentioned earlier, Fantasy necessitates ambivalence in characterization so that the dialogic relation of mimesis and fantasy are internalised into the character itself. Ned Stark is, thus, almost in equal parts function and an individual. His final call to adventure comes in the form of the visit of the king who commands him to go South to become "The Hand of the King", a position akin to that of a Prime Minister (Martin 44). The heroic lord's overall reaction is strangely prophetic, "The only truths I know are here. The south is a nest of adders I would do better to avoid" (Martin 60). His Beowulf-like foreboding of his own death turns out to be precise (*Beowulf* 165). While not necessarily a metaphor for the dragon that kills the Geat hero lord, the serpentine politics of the mimetic King's Landing with all the betrayals, lies, power struggles and second intentions inherent to that mode of representation, conflict with his noble heroic ideals. The same ideals which made

him a superior heroic figure in the quasi epic North of Winterfell are shown to be naïve, insufficient and simply out of place when dealing with a more highly mimetic and thus realistic environment (Martin 341–342) eventually leading to his execution by beheading with his own sword (Martin 703). The successful completion of the quest, the eucatastrophe[3] characteristic of Fantasy, is not possible on the mimetic centre of the narrative. Ned Stark, as a representation of the epic hero, cannot succeed in his quest in the highly mimetic King's Landing.

It is no surprise then that the protagonists in *A Song of Ice and Fire* whose movement is towards the magical outer edges of the fantastic world are the ones who more closely resemble the archetypal hero figure, Jon Snow and Daenerys Targaryen. The more interesting of the two, for the purpose of this analysis, is the character of Jon Snow as he *seems* to be Martin's take on the more traditional Fantasy hero. Like Sigurd and the young Beowulf, Jon Snow is not called to adventure but actively seeks it out of a thirst for honour and glory, and to carve out a place for himself in his society (Martin 51). Due to the greater mimetic nature of the Fantasy narrative this need to make a reputation and the struggle for a place of belonging does not mark Jon out as a champion of his people but as a pariah who does not currently have a place of his own, which is a situation that the Beowulf poet hints at concerning his own hero (*Beowulf* 149). Jon's own bastard surname, Snow, associates him not with Winterfell itself but with the whole of the heroic North (Martin 17). It is then perhaps no surprise that, as a potential hero in the first book of the series, *A Game of Thrones*, his movement towards adventure is the inverse of Eddard Stark's. Instead of going to the more mimetic South, he moves towards the more fantastic lands further North (113), closer to the artificial division between the mimetic and the fantastic, The Wall, and the mythological lands beyond it. The contact with the fantastic, however, is not followed by a realisation of the ideal and elation, but by disappointment. The fabled brothers of the Night's Watch turn out to be a group consisting of "Sullen peasants, debtors, poachers, rapers, thieves, and bastards" (Martin 119).

Rand Al'Thor's movement from the stories he dreamt about into the zone of experiencing them first hand describes them as becoming "horribly real" (Jordan 94). His and his companions' own adventures in the first book, *The Eye of the World*, are also marked out from the very beginning as a journey North: "We take to the North Road, now. For your lives, follow my lead, keep up and keep together" (Jordan 147). However, their move towards adventure is not so much a choice but an absolute necessity. With the exception of his companion Egwene, the fantastical mode forcefully disrupts the mimetic environment and forces the heroes to flee for survival, effectively robbing them of any zone of comfort (Jordan 126). Interestingly, this difference between an unwilling hero and the more Epic-like hero eager for adventure is rooted on a similarity rather than on a difference as Rand shares with Beowulf and Sigurd a defined sense of self. Rand, as he is before adventure time has begun, has a clear sense of self similar to the Epic hero (Bakhtin 35). Anything the author, the world or anyone has to say about him at this point, he can say it himself. This is made possible by the enclosing of the narrative to the confining space of the pastoral mimetic land and its people and Rand's association with it. Therefore, the opening of the world by a call to adventure and the invasion of the fantastic monstrous Other is almost, instantaneously followed by a shattering of identity and belonging. In Rand's case the discovery that not only he is an outsider but also that he is adopted, leads to the ultimate question and the generator of the intrinsically psychological fantastical journey, "*who am I?*" (Jordan 88).

This breakdown of the narrative-of-self, and the consequent search for self-definition, also lies at the heart of Jon's desire for a place of belonging. However, in Jon's case, it makes for a marked different characterization from Epic heroes, such as Beowulf and Sigurd. Those are already defined and self-knowing, as complete figures they are flattened out; their post adventure and pre adventure selves are the same (Bakhtin 34–35). As such, they are, like Eddard Stark, hero/father

---

[3]   Eucatastrophe is a neologism coined by Tolkien from Greek ευ- "good" and καταστροφή "destruction". Esp. in a fictional narrative: a (sudden or unexpected) favourable turn of events; esp. a resolution of this type; a happy ending.

figure compounds, but unlike Eddard, they are complete inside their archetypal functions and hence do not need guidance of other mentor figures.

These mentor figures, while usually present in the heroic tale such as *Beowulf*'s Hrothgar, are displayed as equal to the hero, not superior to them, as can be seen when Beowulf chastises Hrothgar and reminds him of the heroic code that they should follow (*Beowulf* 97). For the self-seeking heroes of Quest Fantasy, who are about to move through the intrinsically psychological and dream like landscape of the marvellous world in adventure time, the guidance of the self-knowing fantastical archetype mentor figures becomes paramount. For Rand and Jon, who are led into the harsh, unforgiving, cold, noble and honourable fantastic North of Heroic Epic, it is crucial to find mentors in patriarchal figures of seemingly Epic stature to guide their first steps into adventure.

The Wheel of Time's Lan is king of a lost kingdom of the Borderlands, born to fight a losing battle against the impinging monstrosity and darkness of the Blight upon the world. He is the ultimate internalisation of the Epic hero of the North and the Borderlands notion that "what I do" is "why" and what "I am" (Jordan 722). Whereas Jon's mentor figure is a much more direct link to the heroic narrative of Beowulf whose name could be seen as a kenning meaning bear. As Beowulf, Jon's mentor has a remarkable fondness for wrestling and hand-to-hand combat due to his prodigious strength (*Beowulf* 171). The character in question is Lord Commander Mormont, the Old Bear of the Night's Watch, the failing order dedicated to keeping the Wall and protecting the realm from the lands beyond. We are told that, "Old as he was, the Lord Commander still had the strength of a bear" (Martin 197). These are the characters that, due to their already greater defined fantastical archetypal unity and sense of self, guide and validate the hero's journey through the fantastic landscape in search of their own self-definition.

Conclusion

The Quest Fantasy texts here analysed, and perhaps the genre as a whole, are a self-conscious search for the complete archetypal meaning of Epic in a novelistic and, therefore, completion-resistant mode. Fantasy thrives in the dialogic relationship between both archetypal meaning and novelistic mode. It has to carefully balance mimetic and fantastical impulses within both parts of its chronotope, the narrative time and the narrated space. It has to find a balance between the depiction of character as actor and actant (Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy* 86). As such, Fantasy's narrative world seems to be filled with dialectical images such as ice and fire, dark and light, male and female, West and East, North and South, which has led to much criticism of fantasy as simplistic (Attebery, "Structuralism" 86–87) Yet, in successful Fantasy narratives these are paired in such a way as to bring out the ambivalences inherent in each notion. For example, *The Wheel of Time*, Dragon is both the bringer of light and rebirth but also the bringer of shadow and destruction. In *A Song of Ice and Fire*, ice can burn stronger than fire, mercy can kill, and the noble ideals of the North are a weakness in the mimetic land of the South.

The two Fantasy works discussed in this paper seem to internalise much of the attributes of the Heroic Epic tales of the North, such as *Beowulf* and *The Poetic Edda*, and this is evident in their construction of the hero figures. A link between the heroes and this epic past of the fantastic world is made, either by dynastic link (in *A Song of Ice and Fire*), reincarnation (in *The Wheel of Time*) and or prophecy (in both) so as to justify why these heroes are of interest. While the topographical internalization leads to a Heroic Epic North region built into the fantastical world, which serves as a border with the monstrous and uncharted lands beyond. The North is a land filled with epic idealised meaning. As such, the North becomes the destination of validation of the fantastic quest for the hero-to-be. Its main proponents, the hero/father figures reminiscent of the Epic North serve as the guides and mentor figures to the hero in the process of becoming. The Fantasy hero, however, loses the self-assuredness and identity completeness characteristic of Epic, but gains in the process

the capacity for greater character growth and complexity, thus opening a new dialogue lane for the contemporary reader to engage with the distanced heroes of Epic and the heroic archetypal figure.

Works Cited

Attebery, Brian. *Strategies of Fantasy*. Indiana UP, 1992.

 ---. "Structuralism." *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, edited by Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn, Cambridge UP, 2012, pp. 81–90.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Translated by Michael Holquist, University of Texas Press, 1981.

Beowulf. Translated by Seamus Heaney, Faber and Faber, 2007.

Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. New World Library, 2008.

Casey, Jim. "Modernism and postmodernism". *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, edited by Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn, Cambridge UP, 2012, pp. 113–124.

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Major Works*, edited by Heather Jackson, Oxford UP, 2000.

Earl, James. "Beowulf and the origins of civilization". *Beowulf: A Critical Casebook*, edited by Eileen Joy and Mary K. Ramsey, West Virginia UP, 2006, pp. 259–285.

Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton UP, 2000.

Garth, John. T*olkien and the Great War: The Threshold of Middle-Earth*. HarperCollins Publishers, 2011.

Jordan, Robert. *The Eye Of The World*. Orbit, 1991.

Joy, Eileen, and Ramsey, Mary. *The Postmodern Beowulf: A Critical Casebook*. West Virginia UP, 2006.

Korpua, Jyrki. *Constructive Mythopoetics in J. R. R. Tolkien's Legendarium*. Dissertation, University of Oulu, 2015.

Larrington, Carolyne. *The Poetic Edda*.Translated by Carolyne Larrington, Oxford Paperbacks, 2008.

Leitch, Vincent. *Deconstructive Criticism: An Advanced Introduction*. Hutchinson, 1983.

Lewis, C. S. *Complete Chronicles of Narni*a. Zondervan, 2004.

Malory, Thomas. *Le Morte d'Arthur*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2003.

Martin, George. R. R. *A Game of Thrones*. Harper Voyager, 2011.

Mendlesohn,　Farah. *Rhetorics of Fantasy*. Wesleyan UP, 2008.

Senior, W. A. "Quest Fantasies". *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, edited by Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn, Cambridge UP, 2012, pp. 190–199.

Shippey, Tom. *The Road to Middle-Earth*. HarperCollins Publishers, 2005.

Swinfen, Ann. *In Defence of Fantasy: A Study of the Genre in English and American Literature Since 1945*. Routledge, 1984.

Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Lord of the Rings*. HarperCollins Publishers, 1994.

---. *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*. HarperCollins Publishers, 2006.

---. *Tree and Leaf*. London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009.

Virgil. *The Aeneid*. Edited by David West, Penguin Classics, 2003.

Wolf, Mark J. P. *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation*. Routledge, 2014.