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THE CONCEPT OF POWER IN FANTASY LITERATURE
(Martin, Rowling, Tolkien)

Abstract

The article given below deals with the concept of power in 3 voluminous fantasy sagas. Its aim is to show how exactly the three well-known authors (G.R.R. Martin, J.K. Rowling and J.R.R. Tolkien) regard the phenomenon of power, find out how the personal qualities of a ruler influence his ability to rule, reveal the similarities and differences between the views of the three writers in this respect. It is worth noting that the similarities greatly outnumber the differences, as the research has shown. The topic of power being one of the central themes of all three of them, comparative analysis has been chosen as the method of this particular research. There are plenty of works published concerning the three texts separately (they are acknowledged and duly cited where necessary), but the novelty of this article is that it analyzes and compares these novels in a parallel, simultaneous way.'

Keywords: Martin, Rowling, Power, Tolkien,

Introduction

One could try to explain the essence of power in a variety of ways. To put it simply, power is what we need if we intend to make any real and significant change in the world around us. John Acton, a famous English politician and historian, wrote a letter to the Anglican bishop, Creighton, in which he states an opinion that later turned into an authentic aphorism, probably the very first one to come to our mind as soon as we mention Lord Acton:

“Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men.”¹

¹) <https://oll.libertyfund.org/quotes/214>

Time and our historical experience have greatly contributed to the formation of this stereotype. Both in the past and in the present, we can find a multitude of examples of the abuse of power, mainly on the part of politicians, whereas we would definitely lack arguments if we wanted to prove the opposite, because such cases are rather rare and occur only as sporadic exceptions to the rule.

It was not by accident that we mentioned politicians here. One cannot speak about power and avoid mentioning politics. At the end of the previous century, Michael Dobbs created his famous trilogy “The House of Cards”, where he openly described the foul play that occurs in politics when it comes to the rivalry for power. The main character, Francis Urquhart has no scruples when striving for the position of Prime minister, intending to outlive Thatcher as a political figure.

Generally, literature explores the theme in a wide variety of ways. In fact, it all starts with what we mean by the notion: whether it is power over death, over other people or the thirst to dominate the entire world. Quite often this topic goes hand-in-hand with the eternal opposition of “Good Vs Evil.” Some of the literary masterpieces exploring Power as their central theme are: “Macbeth” by Shakespeare, “1984” and Animal Farm by George Orwell, “The Hunger Games” series by Suzanne Collins. This list alone might fill several pages but the named examples should suffice to emphasize how important power is within literature, not to say anything about a multitude of cases when masterpieces were banned from publication because the government of a specific country deemed the book inappropriate or dangerous for their own firm position of power. The USSR is rich in such examples.

In the hope that nowadays there is no need for the genre of fantasy to prove its worth as an integral part of literature as a whole, let us start analyzing the three sagas as intended.

This article is a part of a PhD thesis dedicated to three magnum opuses in the genre of Fantasy. We should consider a significant circumstance: one of the three texts being analyzed here is unfinished. This unavoidably leads to speculation on how the saga by George Martin might end. However, in this article, we will try to avoid any conclusions based on such questionable statements and stay true to the material we have. Owing to this peculiar circumstance, the vast majority of scholars are reluctant to start scrutinizing this saga just yet, which is both a problem (having scarce material to refer to) and an advantage (the work is fresh and there is a lot to say about it)

Let us see how the three fantasy authors in question (Rowling, Martin and Tolkien) approach the subject of power. In all these cases, the motif of striving for power is present, obviously varying in terms of intensity, ways of depiction and, to some extent, the writers' attitudes. However, power never loses the feature of a universal attractor for certain characters. The distinctive feature of this genre in this respect is that here the power to obtain is world-scale, whereas in "the rest" of literature it is more often limited, confined to one city, country or territory.

1. "Harry Potter"

Harry Potter has no craving for power. He has to keep strong in order to survive. It is indisputably clear for the reader that Harry's physical survival is not the point here. Simply, if Voldemort were to gain dominance over the world, it would mean the ultimate triumph of the Evil and there would be no going back.

Voldemort, the main antagonist, seeks all the possible kinds of power. He wants to rule the Wizarding World. His plans for his realm are very clear and precise. It is what we would define as a textbook case of dictatorship. Voldemort expects and demands total and unconditional obedience from his subjects. He divides them into two categories, based on the criterion of Purity of Blood. He gives all the privileges to Purebloods (meaning those born to a wizard and a witch), whereas the Mudbloods (those with non-magical background, children of Muggle parents.) are regarded as infinitely inferior to them, whose sole purpose is to serve their masters and do their bidding. What we see here is one more characteristic of this system: racial discrimination. Hitler firmly believed that there was one Superior Race. J.K.Rowling might very well have gotten the inspiration from there. To the best of my knowledge, she has never denied such an influence. Thus, it certainly cannot be excluded. I would support this statement with a high degree of certainty, as there are undeniable similarities between the ideas of Voldemort, Grindelwald and Hitler about the concept of an ideal world.

Having mentioned Grindelwald, who appears in the final book, I think it is necessary to say that The Deathly Hallows, after which the last novel of the series is named, all symbolize absolute power. It is only natural to assume that no one would argue how powerful a person is if he/she can bring people back from the Dead and possesses the Almighty Wand, not to say anything about the Invisibility Cloak.

But total power is not enough for Voldemort. It has to be eternal as well. So immortality is a *sine qua non* in his plans. Hence his interest in the Philosopher's Stone. This necessity for immortality is encoded in the villain's name. "Voldemort" could be translated from French as "Escape from Death."

There is no denying that Voldemort is immensely powerful. He is feared so much that even when considered defeated, only the chosen few dare refer to him by his name. The more cautious use a couple of euphemism and still have some curious respect for the taboo name. they say You-Know-Who or "He Who Must not Be Named" instead

The ambitions of Argus Filch are much smaller in scale. However, he would be delighted to increase his influence and whatever power he happens to have, he abuses it. He leaves intact the hooks in his study, dreaming that someday the cruel methods of punishment will be back in use at Hogwarts. Evidently, he enjoyed using them when he had the chance and was allowed to. By the way, the education and upbringing is a common topic in the Critical Realism as well. It is a well-known fact that in all ages and countries there were (and still are) supporters of corporal punishment, as an efficient method, a tool to use with "problematic" or disobedient children. Let us remember the secondary school experience of Akaki Tsereteli or how the Tatkaridze couple treated their subjects. Filch's ideas would probably find approval and faithful support from Mr. and Ms. Murdstones as well.

One of the most complicated and sophisticated antagonists in Rowling's saga is no doubt Dolores Umbridge. It would be no exaggeration to say that she impersonates the abuse of power as such. It is perfectly understandable why the readers and the viewers of "Harry Potter" (books and movies) hate her far more than the main villain, Voldemort, regardless of the fact that one might consider Dolores to be a character of only secondary importance. (She makes her first appearance in the fifth book of the series, then she is absent for a considerable period, only to reappear in a single scene in the final book.). The power she was granted from the Ministry awoke her inner monster and let it loose. It was a perfect opportunity for Dolores to implement the sadistic practices she has always been inclined to. If it were not for the official authorization, she would never have dared to bring her atrocious intentions to life, thus staying latent quite like Argus Filch.

One might have thought that Dolores Umbridge is an exemplary employee of the ministry, simply following orders from her superiors, but this supposition would be erroneous, as it is only

too clear that she draws immense pleasure from what she does. For instance, there was not any explicit order from the ministry to torture Harry, but there was no prohibition either. Umbridge's power is absolute, no restrictions are valid, she is free to decide and act as she pleases, so she makes Harry write the same line again and again with his blood.

It would not come amiss to say a few words here concerning the details of portrayal, the features that contribute to the completeness of her literary image. She wears pink clothes, her study is decorated with images of kittens, she tries to appear polite, prefers soft and puffy items. All this might mislead one into thinking that Dolores is a lovely, fragile and inoffensive woman, but as soon as she is shielded with impunity, she shows her true colours.

Nonetheless, those who tend to read more attentively should detect the clues which Rowling gives with her specific linguistic choices. Dolores speaks in a sugared tone (not sweet), has a girlish voice (note the negative connotation of the suffix *-ish*). Her name itself speaks volumes about her character. "Dolores" is the plural form of the word "pain" in Spanish. As for her surname, let us remember the expression "to take umbrage", which means "to be offended or insulted". You cannot help noticing that these two sound similar. It is an indicator of how much Dolores enjoys inflicting pain on her students and insulting them. Then we have to bear in mind the diabolic reputation and negative associations which cats have in general. Her exclusive position at Hogwarts is another interesting detail to consider. As we know, she is "the High Inquisitor". It is highly likely that Rowling wanted her readers to connect Umbridge with the ruthless Spanish Inquisition, even if only on the subconscious level.

On the other hand, we have the evident example of Albus Dumbledore, who is the proof that power does not necessarily have to trigger negative associations. It all comes down to whether the one who wields the power is good or evil. In good hands power brings peace and prosperity to everyone within its reach. The problem is that Dumbledore represents a very rare exception. The opposite statement would have far more examples in favour. It is true for both literature and our real life. Only a few could taste power and resist the temptation of abusing it. In the books, the Malfoys clearly want to be powerful in order to carry out their evil plans. (Draco, however, does see the light in the end, which means he was not completely blinded by his thirst for power and finally chose the right side).

When the saga starts. Cornelius Fudge is seen as a kind, benevolent character. However, his kindness fades when he feels his position of power is in danger. In order to avoid losing it,

Cornelius chooses the route of voluntary blindness, turning a blind eye to the obvious events unfolding around him. Part of the reason might be the fact that it is Dumbledore who tries to make him see the reality. Fudge sees Dumbledore as a rival and won't take any of his warnings into consideration. The only explanation is unjustified panic and his personal insecurity. Fudge did not realize that Dumbledore simply was not interested in replacing him. Ironically, at the end of this storyline Fudge is forced to say farewell to his power precisely because he so stubbornly refused to face the reality. His successor is a third person, who had never been mentioned in the novels previously.

There is an interesting statement commonly attributed to Abraham Lincoln. *"If you want to test a man's character, give him power."*² Literature offers us a multitude of examples in this respect and the genre of Fantasy is not an exception. What matters is not only the way one uses power but also the things he/she is capable of doing in order to get it.

For this and many other reasons, the statue we see in book 7 of the series is of interest. It is described as follows:

*"A gigantic statue of black stone dominated the scene. It was rather frightening, this vast sculpture of a witch and wizard sitting on ornately carved thrones...Engraved in foot-high letters at the base of the statue were the words MAGIC IS MIGHT...Harry looked more closely and realised that what he had thought were decoratively carved thrones were actually mounds of carved humans: hundreds and hundreds of naked bodies, men, women, and children, all with rather stupid, ugly faces, twisted and pressed together to support the weight of the handsomely robed wizards."*³

This statue replaced the Fountain of Magical Brethren, which in itself is a very eloquent event, as it reminds us about an undisputed fact: Power is not easy or comfortable to share. Tyrants cannot put up with co-rulers, they tend to ignore other people's opinions and regard them as mere pawns. Closely related to this idea is also the concept of The Superior Race. Rowling expresses this opposition through the example of Purebloods vs. Mudbloods, which is considered the worst possible insult in her alternative world. The author states in an interview:

"I wanted Harry to leave our world and find exactly the same problems in the Wizarding world. So you have the intent to impose a hierarchy, you have bigotry, and this notion of purity, which is this great fallacy, but it crops up all over the world. People like to think themselves

² <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2016/04/14/adversity/>

³ <http://www.passuneb.com/elibrary/ebooks/Harry%20Potter%20and%20The%20Deathly%20Hallows.pdf>

superior and that if they can pride themselves in nothing else they can pride themselves on perceived purity. So yeah that follows a parallel [to Nazism]"⁴

In real life, on the other hand, there was the case of Hitler, who had ideas quite similar to those of Voldemort, concerning the freedom of expressing one's views and the racial superiority as well. So, not only Magic is Might, but also the principle "Might is Right applies more often than one would like to see that happen.

2. "Lord of the Rings"

Power is also the main theme in Lord of the Rings. The twenty rings are the sheer temptation symbolizing the promise of Absolute Power. Boromir, who yields to the temptation, dies trying to gain power. Sauron is so confident, he does not even see any rivals because he regards them all as inferior to him. Saruman is powerful but he cannot satiate his thirst for more, which marks the beginning of his downfall. Frodo's ability to resist temptation and repeatedly reject power makes him unique. That is how Sauron's expectations are defeated. He could never imagine anyone having power and not using it by choice.

There is one character, who, to my mind, deserves special attention. Smeagol, also known as Gollum is willing to go to any length for the sake of the omnipotent ring. He is under its spell without even being aware of it. In a broader sense, Gollum is an example of what the thirst for power can do to a person. What's more, we cannot say that he is a victim of his own ambitions, because these ambitions are not even his anymore. It's the Ring that has a Will of its own, which it imposes on the characters, corrupting their souls. This is the case when Power is not just a tool for controlling everything, it is a destructive force on its own. We have all heard the cliché phrase that Power requires sacrifice, but Tolkien pushes this idea to its limits, if not a little further beyond it. In the end, everyone deserts Gollum, they despise and shun him.

3. "A Song of Ice and Fire"

⁴ <http://www.the-leaky-cauldron.org/features/essays/issue27/nazi-germany/>

“A Song of Ice and Fire” is the richest one of the three texts when it comes to power games. Like the history of the real world, the game of thrones in Westeros is no less bloody and plotting has become an integral part of routine there. A good man does not necessarily mean a good king. The matter of Royal succession is a moot question, which concerns King’s Landing, Highgarden, Dorne, Casterley Rock, etc. Who is the rightful heir? Who deserves the throne? Is the throne yours if you take it by force, proving your claim on the battlefield? Can it be morally justified if one kills a terrible king he had sworn to protect? All these questions have to do with the Moral Code. But one could hardly expect honesty in such affairs.

If a claimant to the throne has never actually sat on it, we could only speculate on what kind of a ruler he would turn out, given the chance. Renly would serve as a good example. He was a good warrior, a bright mind and plenty of loyal supporters. However, we can only guess how he could have ruled, because he was killed by treason before he ever actually became king. His brother, Robert fought for the throne and conquered it, but lost all the interest at once. Consequently, he was useless as a ruler.

Joffrey is the case where the readers know in advance what kind of a ruler he will turn out to be. They are absolutely right. The firstborn son of the Lannister siblings uses his power as a tool to hone his skills, sophisticate his methods of torture and make his sadistic fantasies come true. He reckons he has the right to do so and get away with anything. We should not forget that he is in the dark about the identity of his true parents.

Tommen’s example proves that who sits on the throne might be absolutely irrelevant. What matters is, who the puppeteer is. During his short reign, he cannot get rid of the influence of his mother Cersei and his wife Margaery Tyrell, who are incessantly fighting to gain dominance over him.

The Targaryens consider that all the Baratheons are usurpers. They are prepared to do whatever it takes to recuperate the Iron throne. Considering that Daenerys is the only character to whom the author refers with an affectionate nickname, we can conclude, his sympathy is on her side. The storyline is yet unfinished in the books, but if it is anything like what we were shown by HBO, then the genes prevail and this road leads the country to a total catastrophe as well. Thus, no king or queen is automatically good, no matter how loved or rightful they are. No predictions are valid in this respect and we cannot talk about anybody’s reign before it starts.

We cannot fail to mention a claimant to the throne who definitely stands out. Stannis Baratheon has one additional advantage. With this character George Martin introduces a new type – King anointed by God Himself. He is believed to be the Messiah, the Saviour of his people. This belief is inspired by the sermons of the Red Woman. The miracles of R'hlor strengthen it even further.

Alongside those who have the right to the throne by blood, the game of thrones has a lot of other participants. In a conversation with Sansa Stark, Petyr Baelish explains the rule of thumb as follows:

“In King’s Landing, there are two sorts of people. The players and the pieces.”⁵

Needless to say, Baelish himself could have no ambition of occupying the Iron Throne. Still, his cunning has put him where he is now. He has the title of Lord to his name, and a number of privileges of which he could not have dreamed, considering his background. He succeeded in achieving all his reasonable goals owing to the fact that he is an expert when it comes to manipulating people by using their weaknesses. Baelish is a *knowledgeable* player and enjoys the game of thrones. He instructs Sansa:

“„Always keep your foes confused. If they are never certain who you are or what you want, they cannot know what you are like to do next. Sometimes the best way to baffle them is to make moves that have no purpose, or even seem to work against you. Remember that, Sansa, when you come to play the game.”
“What . . . what game?”
“The only game. The game of thrones.”⁶

Apart from reflecting on the advantages and downsides of secular power, George Martin also analyzes the option of theocracy. It is shown through the storyline of the Sparrows. From the point of view of ideology, the High Sparrow resembles the famous Italian preacher of the Middle Ages, Girolamo Savonarola: he rejects and despises all the forms of luxury, does not acknowledge the superiority of the secular rulers and at the same time, he sees himself suitable for the position of what we would call a Moral Vigilante. High Sparrow is severe to the sinners.

⁵ A Storm of Swords, chapter 68

⁶ A Storm of Swords, chapter 61

Frankly speaking, there is nothing utterly unacceptable about High Sparrow's behavior in the books so far. I would like to avoid speculating on how the storyline ends in the books. It would be erroneous also to draw conclusions from what we saw in the screen version, given the deliberate changes in the latter. It should suffice to say that theocracy is the only system, the failure of which we have not witnessed so far. Still, it seems too far-fetched to expect Martin to idealize this system over others.

Alongside those thirsty for power, there are a few characters who do not crave for it at all. For these few the state, the realm comes first. Serving the realm is not a simple mission to accomplish. Varys the eunuch is particularly good at it. When he visits Ned Stark in the dungeons, Varys says:

*"I serve the realm. my good lord, how ever could you doubt that? I serve the realm and the realm needs peace."*⁷

Given the immediate context of this particular dialogue, I think it is safe to say that few readers take these words literally, or seriously, for that matter. They tend to think this phrase shows vanity on his part, or that he simply lied. In book 5 we discover Varys was not exaggerating. He is involved in a conspiracy aimed at bringing to the throne who he sincerely thinks deserves it. His methods may not be very decent, but Varys remains true to whom he sees as the rightful heir to the throne and the best ruler truly concerned with the fate of his people. In the film, the eunuch does not succeed in his mission, but he dies trying.

On the other hand, there is Ned Stark, the readers' favourite, the Hand of the King, a valiant, just and righteous man, too honest to take part in all the intricate plots around him. He is conscientious and finds it difficult to realize that others are not similarly straightforward. When Jaime asked him why he had not seized the throne himself, Ned's indignation is so great, he does not even consider the question worth answering. In order to serve your country you have to survive and that is precisely what Ned failed to do. Probably the most quoted words of Queen Cersei came true for Ned in the end:

*„When you play the game of thrones, you win or you die. There is no middle ground."*⁸

This quote is noteworthy for two reasons. The first is that it says "when" not "if", emphasizing the fact that taking part in the game is not optional. The second reason is that it is

⁷ A Game of Thrones, chapter 58

⁸ A Game of Thrones, chapter 45

about survival. One could argue that its morality is dubious, to say the least, but it IS important to keep alive. Unlike Varys, Cersei does not care about the country at all, but the disguise is perfect for her selfish ends that can justify any means.

In my opinion, professor Maria Steinmann is right to say that the main function of the Iron Throne is to attract everybody and still remain vacant. In this respect, the finale of the series presented an interesting solution, when the throne burns to ashes. George Martin reminded the readers once again the simple truth that many of us tend to forget: Power is fugacious.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, in these three texts we can clearly see how the respective authors treat the topic of power. We can conclude that they agree on the following:

1. Power can be as destructive as it is tempting. Abuse of power corrupts the soul and destroys those on whom it is exercised, as illustrated in books 5-7 of Harry Potter, the examples of Gollum by Tolkien or by the characters on the Iron Throne by Martin. However. In good hands, such as Dumbledore's, power can save lives.
2. The genre of Fantasy broadens the scale of the notion of power, making it equal to the dominance over the whole world, with a few exceptions, (Argus Filch, to give an example. He would be perfectly satisfied with Hogwarts as his realm.)
3. Absolute power is never a positive phenomenon.
4. Personal qualities of a power-holder do play a decisive role in determining him as a ruler, as we can see in Westeros
5. The personal qualities of a ruler are, no doubt, very important. Still, not every good person is necessarily a good king, because the throne requires a delicate balance.
6. If one finds in himself the sufficient strength to renounce to power based on his free, personal choice when it is at a hand's reach from him, (Ned Stark, Frodo or Harry Potter are examples of such altruistic altruist, disinterested characters), then the Good will triumph over the Evil.

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Author’s biographical data

The author of this article started studying at TSU in 2010. In 2014 he obtained the honours diploma of the English Language Bachelor, then, in 2017, he completed his Master’s studies. Currently, he is a PhD student working on his thesis, which involves a deep comparative analysis of the three voluminous fantasy sagas.