



## Deconstructing Ethical Metanarratives in George R.R. Martin's *A Game of Thrones*

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### Abstract

*Ethics is one of the dominant metanarratives that have been accepted blindly since the dawn of civilization. This paper will show how this sociocultural foundation exists in the fictional medieval world of George R.R. Martin's novel A Game of Thrones through tragic journeys of multiple characters enduring downfall due to their failed inability to reconcile their old ideologies with new perspectives. Ethical metanarratives, such as concepts of good and evil, will be critiqued from the point of view of the post-modernist methodology of deconstruction, which is an effective instrument used for dismantling hierarchies within binary systems and forces readers to critically examine centuries-old dogmatic beliefs through new glasses. The main finding of this research is to provide how universalist tendencies on ethics should be regularly questioned in society if one needs to avoid traps of injustice in the face of changing times.*

**Keywords:** Post-modernism, Deconstruction, Metanarratives, *A Game of Thrones*.

Some beliefs and ideals have always garnered more Universalist mass approval simply because of how it coincides with our familiarity with everyday experiences. Any phenomenon that comes across as unthinkable and does not match with the collective consciousness is mechanically scrutinised and tagged undesirable by all. Murder, incest and betrayal, for instance, are common atrocious acts that are criticised in our modern society. This is because society tends to enforce only those guiding beliefs—also largely referred to as ‘metanarrative’ or ‘grand narrative’—that ubiquitously appeals to the values of dominant strata of the population and confers such partisan opinions with undue legitimate power to make sure its supremacy is unchallenged at length. Thus, post-modernist creed comes into the play as it opens a discussion on ways to inspect such old ideals. In this respect, it asks questions on whether murder can be justified if it is about safeguarding one's wellbeing? If betrayal is valid if it is to assert one's survival from future harm? If incest is indeed revolting as often conceived when it is another offshoot of lust and meets the same carnal and psychological desires that non-blood relationships do?

Moral ambiguities have always existed within the overarching ethical metanarratives, which have been followed blindly since the dawn of civilization. In the fictional medieval world of George R.R. Martin's novel, *A Game of Thrones* (1996), ethics too play a significant



role and is critiqued in the following sections from standpoint of the post-modernist methodology of deconstruction, which is an effective tool for dismantling hierarchies of binary systems and forcing readers to examine centuries-old dogmatic moral and social codes through new glasses. One of the main reasons why Martin's *A Game of Thrones*—the first book of the epic fantasy series “A Song of Ice and Fire”—is popular and have sold 90 million copies worldwide (Flood) is not because it simply narrates a fantasy story on royal families and their intricate relationships and integrations of magical realist elements such as showing dragons and zombies-like creatures posing threats on humanity, but because it projects discounted binaries that have always existed within our daily lives and compel us to reevaluate these dichotomies *de novo*. In the next section, the research will thus briefly discuss the definitions of terms ‘metanarrative’ and ‘deconstruction’, the dominant ethical metanarratives that are endemic in Martin's *A Game of Thrones* and how such totalising ideals are deconstructed in this novel.

### Defining ‘Metanarrative’ and ‘Deconstruction’

To begin with, ‘metanarrative’, also referred to as ‘meta-narrative’ or ‘grand narrative’, stands for any single, overriding narrative that has greater social acceptability over other lesser narratives. To put it another way, it is the foremost operational narrative which caters to “a framework in which all other cultural narratives find their ground and acquire their meaning and legitimacy” (Winqvist and Taylor 165). The term was first coined by **Jean-François Lyotard in his book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge in which he criticised any “ideological forms of knowledge” or “narrative knowledge”*** (Encyclopedia of Marxism) *that condoned to possess the only basis of truth. Few examples of metanarratives include religions like Hinduism, “Christianity, Islam and Buddhism”* (Encyclopedia of Marxism), *western philosophical paradigms such as “the Enlightenment, Capitalism”* (Winqvist and Taylor 165), “democracy”, “Greek fatalism”, “bourgeois progressivism”, “Marxist utopianism” (“Grand Narrative”), natural and social science discourses like literature and linguistics, “modern science” (Winqvist and Taylor 293), “politics, medicine, ethics, law, economics” and can even extend to “organization of ‘disciplinary societies’” like “family” (Winqvist and Taylor 373), “class, race, and sexuality” (Aguirre). These aforementioned institutes and theoretical principles primarily propagate their narratives to be universal, authentic and indisputable forms of authority and thus occupy most of the social space.

Lyotard's post-modernist approach—adopted by theorists from other academic disciplines as well—was based on the ethos of “incredulity toward metanarratives” (Lyotard xxiv). This can be largely understood as cancelling any form of “authoritarian universalizing narratives that are no longer viable” (“Grand Narrative”) and recommends developing scepticism of such systems or schemes that profess to be “in possession of ultimate truth, or criteria for determining what counts as ultimate truth” (Sim 3). Such style of scepticism is referred to in philosophy as ‘anti-foundationalism’, whereby the legitimacy of totalitarian metanarratives is probed by “asking such questions as ‘What guarantees the truth of your foundation (that is, starting point) in its turn?’” (Sim 3). This attempt of questioning of metanarratives also brought Lyotard to introduce a contrasting practice called ‘little narrative’



“(or micronarratives, *petits récits*): localized representations of restricted domains, none of which has a claim to universal truth status” (“Grand Narrative”).

Even though Lyotard defined little narratives in the context of the political field where “local intervention appears like a viable solution” (Winqvist and Taylor 230) to dissent on regional issues compared to wide-scale national authoritarian policies, this approach mainly allows the expression of “differences and complexity” (Winqvist and Taylor 231) existing in the society where manifold incompatibilities of opinions, values and ideologies are acknowledged rather than brushed aside for their lack of universality. Moreover, the celebration of little narratives does not imply “replacement of grand narratives” (Winqvist and Taylor 231), rather it is showed as an effective strategic solution to keep peremptory advances of social structures in check. The other method for leveling metanarrative is through the creative process of deconstruction.

Deconstruction is “a form of philosophical and literary analysis” (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica) that is applied in post-modernism to unmask “repressive and arbitrary hierarchies” (Winqvist and Taylor 85) that prevails within binary systems. Binary systems—also referred to as ‘binary opposition’—denote a pair of a word which is opposing and exclusionary to each other, such as speech versus writing, virtue versus vice, male versus female, heterosexual versus homosexual, white versus black, mind versus matter and so on and so forth. In every “system of thought” or culture, there exists traditionally-accepted logocentric tendency where individuals knowingly or unknowingly incline towards one of the binary couplets or dichotomous constructs more than other, which typically leads to empowering of “the singular and definitive over the multiple and indeterminate” (Sim 226) and perpetuate discrimination and inequality towards the subordinate grouping in society.

The term ‘binary opposition’ was first introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure to validate how “language is a system based on oppositional relations” (Winqvist and Taylor 36). For instance, word ‘good’ depends for its meaning in its differing word ‘bad’. Saussure believed this meaning of words or ‘signifiers’ can be implied in its entirety when we first hear them since it was assumed that connotations were inherently “present to us in our minds” (Sim 316). This supposition that the presence of meaning exists when communicating with others invited criticism from Jacques Derrida, who called it a “metaphysics of presence” that relied heavily on a certainty that language is formed with “stability of words and meanings” (Sim 222). Deconstruction, as a post-structuralist methodology, was initiated by Derrida to uncover such “textual unconscious” (Sim 222) in literary works via a creative process of ‘*difference*’, created from the French verb *differer* that implies both ‘to differ’ and ‘to defer’” (Sim 229), which highlighted how “*metaphysics of presence*” is an often nothing but an “illusion” and that “*difference* always intrudes into communication to avert the establishment of ‘presence’ or completeness of meaning” (Sim 6).

Derrida expanded the usage of metaphysics of presence to base another theory called ‘logocentrism’, which described how “the history of Western philosophy” (Sim 316), as well oriental traditions, were marked by similar illusory “metaphysical certainty” in the society and idealized certain “pre-existent reality” (Sim 226) more when facing “binary polarities”



(Winqvist and Taylor 232). ‘Logocentrism’ is a Greek word which can be “best encapsulated in the biblical phrase ‘in the beginning was the Word [the *logos*]’ and depicts how cultures frequently tend to return to the impression of ‘being’ and “concomitant faith in God, the Self, and the Order of Universe”—ideals that are typically believed to be truthful and superior—which then further transmits in other forms of rational “systems of thoughts”, which too “continually strives to go back to origins, find centres, fix points of reference, certify truths, verify an author’s intentions, or locate a text’s core meaning” (Sim 226). Derrida believed that this fixation with “originary intention” was so deeply rooted in “Western thinking, as well as in language” that it became significant to question such conventions that deemed certain facets to be more valued than other and were later promoting discrimination towards those who believed the contrary (Sim 226).

Deconstruction, therefore, permitted a scope through which “to expose, reverse and dismantle binary oppositions with their hierarchies of values” which too had a predisposition to support one ideology or concept at expense of the other (Sim 222). Deconstruction further allowed deliberation of the grand narratives that considered it to be greater and only legitimate source of truth, automatically negating lesser narratives based on rights it obtained since the time of its being. For instance, institutes like monarchy find “their right to rule depends not on their relationship with the people, but on their relationship with the divine” (Strathern). By contending such metanarratives that spin around claims of rightfulness and universality, deconstruction becomes an active political, philosophical and literary tool that emphasises “inconsistencies, inequalities, or hierarchies which are expounded or glossed over either by a text, by a whole discourse, or even by an entire system of beliefs” (Sim 222).

### **Discussion**

This section discusses the common ethical metanarratives that are central in George R.R. Martin’s *A Game of Thrones* in order to elaborate how deconstruction is a vital tool in this day and age and is applied often to evade any unforeseen repercussions that come along with believing in seemingly innocuous yet totalizing ideologies. Ethics is one of the key important metanarratives that is specifically dealt with in this section in a bid to recognize how modern society is undergoing a wave of post-modernist skepticism whereby moral ideals are questioned and deconstructed than accepted at face value.

#### **Ethics**

Ethics is an intricate concept to explain as it covers diverse connotations to each person who deals with it. In academic discipline, it denotes “any system or theory of moral values or principles” (Singer). In short, it denotes to morally correct or incorrect actions that individuals adopt to maximize happiness and prosperity in their lives. However, most ethical metanarratives never point out the ultimate source of authority which decides what are the “standards of right and wrong that prescribe what humans ought to do, usually in terms of rights, obligations, benefits to society, fairness, or specific virtues” (Velasquez, Andre and Shanks). For few, this source could be founded on their personal experience that revolves around what is right and wrong and for others, it could emanate from their religious organization, their faith in governing law system of their country or the conventional norms



accepted in society which predominantly describes how they outline their ethics values. Moral and social codes, such as justice, chivalry, naivety, scrupulousness, valour and rightfulness, are subjected to diverse interpretations and yet several subsidiaries of the ethical metanarratives are approved without much deliberation based on its universal appeal. For instance, any individual that carries virtuous traits such as honesty is often regarded with reverence, while those who lie and fall to the vice side are quickly condemned for their appalling decisions.

This attitude to engage in extremes came because of modernism, whereby invariable principles such as good versus evil were usually delineated into distinct classes, and any contest regarding the blurred lines between them was understood as insignificant. During the advent of post-modernism was when the false sense of optimism was finally discarded, moral ambiguity was recognized and nihilism and corruptibility were explored as common realities of the ending years of twentieth century. It was the outcome of the era being dominated by technology that now translated into “atomic bomb”, “materialism” which suggested “consumer culture of insidious influence”, modern suburbia instigated feelings of void and “alienation” and the idea of “civilization”— which had already been nullified after the First World War—was once again pushed to the fringes as the western culture witnessed the Second World War that further disillusioned their confidence in government or any authorial figures (Matz 129). Deviating from the principles of modernism became paramount as the post-modernist era experienced an extreme loss in all types of ideological beliefs that they held prized until that time.

Writers such as George R.R. Martin are ostensible about their growing disenchantment with modernist ethical idealisms that are strongly reflected in the novel, *A Game of Thrones* (1996), which is widely identified for its “rich world building, narrative twists and turns, and gritty descriptions of the human struggle for power” (Brown) and vengeance while equally containing explicit gory details on war, death, filial loss, vicious murders, betrayals and intense scenes of sexual brutality. Readers can perceive Martin’s embitterment towards moral prescriptions through journeys of multiple characters undergoing tragic downfall even if they act scrupulous. For instance, Eddard ‘Ned’ Stark is one of the finest, upstanding characters in *A Game of Thrones* who succumbs to death due to his very virtues. Being a valiant and loyal patriarch of the northern states of the Seven Kingdoms, Ned is initially invited to stand by his duty to his king and beloved friend, Robert Baratheon, to assist as the new ‘Hand of the King’ after the former advisor, Jon Arryn, dies under mysterious circumstances. After Ned is appointed, he begins his investigation of Jon Arryn’s death and during its course finds out that Robert’s wife, Queen Cersei, is involved in an incestuous relationship with her twin brother, Jamie Lannister. Moreover, he figures out that Joffrey, Tommen and Myrcella, Robert’s children, are not the rightful heirs to the throne as presumed by all. However, Ned’s puts the final nail in his coffin when, in an act of sheer inanity, he reveals to Cersei about being aware of her secret in hopes that she may seek forgiveness and apologise for her infidelity.



In turn, Cersei instructs her cousin to keep serving wine to Robert during a hunting spree that sufficiently inebriates him to be gored by a boar, eventually causing him to succumb to his wounds before Ned could divulge her truth. Ned once again shows his gullibility by encouraging Petyr Baelish—a former friend of his wife—to join the rebellion against Joffrey’s right to the throne to also find Petyr exposing his plans to the Queen. Ned is subsequently charged with treason and imprisoned; however, later he is offered a deal to secure his daughters’ lives if he publicly confesses his crime. Ned accepts the offer and lies to all but is beheaded by Joffrey’s headsman towards the end. Martin’s denouement to Ned’s character is often known to stagger readers as it subverts the usual fantasy trope, which often expands on the plot of peace and prosperity disrupting at first to be later established by the protagonist in whom he/she conquers the evil through their explicit act of bravery and goodness. This is one of most conventional formulae applied in fantasy stories whereby the protagonist (usually a white male character) succeeds in overriding the wicked as they carry essential traits of righteousness, generosity and supreme valour that by some odd means qualifies them to thrive in their schemes, irrespective of how ominous and unfavourable the situation could pan out in reality.

Such examples can be noticed in works of Martin’s contemporaries like Christopher Paolini’s “The Inheritance Cycle”, where the main protagonist, Eragon, is a good-hearted teenager who succeeds in overpowering the sinful King Galbatorix with the help of his dragon, Saphira. In Robert Jordan’s “Wheel of Time”, there are three youngsters, Rand al’Thor, Matrim Cauthon and Perrin Aybara, who fight against the Dark One’s Forces to only imprison him in the end. While in J.K Rowling’s “Harry Potter” series, the young Potter is the chosen kid who kills the Dark Lord Voldemort using the magical powers he learned from a wizardry school. As noted in these fantasy novels, it is normally a sympathetic youngster who suffers plenty of setbacks in their quest, yet none of these events is big enough to stop them from defeating the evil force since they are fundamentally guaranteed invincibility and happily-ever-after in the climax of the novel all due to their apparent good-heartedness. However, Martin’s uniqueness in writing can be seen in the manner he subverts such hackneyed fantasy motifs by fashioning storylines that are utterly unpredictable and show characters that suffer heart-rending defeats regardless of their good or bad action, such as the unforeseeable killing of Ned Stark who succumbs to death despite walking down the right path.

By unravelling Ned’s tragic downfall, Martin reflects importance of deconstructing ethical metanarratives that imposes persistent reliance on ideologies than encouraging nature of enquiry of its apparent authenticity. Ned’s quixotic beliefs on morality are what led him to act merciful towards the Queen, even when he was aware that her egoistical character and irrefutable love for her children would push her to any extreme to defend and protect them. He refused to observe the dangerous consequences of blindly following his idealistic tendencies and continued with his old ideologies of scrupulousness without realising the undercurrent realities of the era he lived in, which ultimately triggered Robert’s demise, his incarceration and the decisive failure of the Stark family. However, the author does not



establish that virtues are ineffectual and wickedness is the sole *modus operandi* through which to sustain one's place in today's corrupted world. By exposing and dismantling perils of single narratives, Martin mostly verifies the importance of probing validity of stereotypical ethics to preserve one's place in the world where traits like Ned's honesty is shown to cost him his life while Queen's guile and Joffrey's sadism is rewarded with them, at last, securing their right to the throne.

It is not mere virtues that are exposed as problematic in Martin's *A Game of Thrones*. Readers are also introduced to how vice is often illustrated and perceived in the society through a glimpse into the lives of the soldiers of the Night's Watch, Martin's fictional military order that is responsible for manning the Wall which barricades the north and rest of the Seven Kingdoms from an invasion of wildlings and supernatural villainous beings. In this subplot, the author reflects the journey of Ned's illegitimate son, Jon Snow, who joins the Night's Watch after being inspired by his uncle but receives a rude awakening when he realises the prestigious organisation is no more respected. Instead, it is a dwindling force that functions as an exiled colony for unwanted social outcasts like "sullen peasants, debtors, poachers, rapers, thieves, and bastards" (Martin 128) alike. Nevertheless, it is this band of degenerates that prove their allegiance to the kingdom in the end by undergoing hunting missions to cease the looming assaults of the 'Others' (heinous zombie-like creatures who were previously humans before being transformed into immortal beings). Among them, subsidiary characters such as Samwell (a stout scholar who is ridiculed for his weight and cowardliness), Grenn (a burly yet slow-witted orphan) and Pyp (a singer wrongly accused of thieving), who were often ostracized due to their apparent lack of mettle and social status, were people who turned to be most empathetic towards Jon during his times of hardship—particularly when he contemplated abandoning his duties to join his step-brother Robb's army to battle against the Queen's family—and likewise succeeded by displaying their loyalty and hard-work and securing high-ranking positions within the Watch.

Jon equally undergoes a notable transformation as he turns more receptive to his peers by training them at swordsmanship and later inspiring them to find a place in the world. By evolving into a practical, strong leader, Jon sheds his bigoted realities on knighthood and classism and develops more acceptance towards the discriminated subordinate grouping in society. It is his capability to question the legitimacy of his learnt ideologies and rethink the values on what qualifies virtues and vice that assists him later in surviving among the Watch's delinquents. Thus, Martin using grey characters, like Jon's and the brothers of Night's Watch, explains to the readers of the typical ethical deficiencies which cannot be critiqued at face value to judge someone's true merit and instead encourages to develop more receptibility of such morally ambiguous traits. Questioning the authenticity of ethics are important, be it ideals of virtues or vice, so that such indisputable behaviours could be reviewed and properly deconstructed in time before its universalising perceptions blind one from seeing the actuality of life.

However, as aforementioned, Martin does not publicise that the evil characters like Queen Cersei, Joffrey or even the others (villainous immortal beings) are superior and have a



good fortune due to their Machiavellian manoeuvres and viciousness. Alternately, he reinforces the presence of opposing construct in the binary couplet that is often unheeded and treated as negligible, which more than usually results in negative upshots for those who are oblivious to its occurrence. An apt example of this can be observed in the novel's prologue where Ser Royce's unfortunate death at the cruel hands of Others is vividly portrayed after he haughtily disregards the cautions of his experienced rangers. What is indeed interesting is how Martin, despite painting others as fearful and alien beings, depicts their brutal mannerisms similar to disdain reflected amongst his human characters. A resemblance can be observed in how Ser Royce mocks Gared over his ill-fated accident and how Others later ridicule Ser Royce as they brutally slash him to death:

Gared pulled back his hood, giving Ser Waymar a good long at the stumps where his ears had been. "Two ears, three toes, and the little finger off my left hand. I got off light. We found my brother frozen at his watch, with a smile on his face." Ser Waymar shrugged. "You ought to dress more warmly, Gared ... Royce went to his knees, shrieking, and covered his eyes. Blood welled between his fingers. The watchers moved forward together, as if some signal had been given. Swords rose and fell, all in a deathly silence. It was cold butchery. The pale blades sliced through ringmail as if it were silk. Will closed his eyes. Far beneath him, he heard their voices and laughter sharp as icicles. (Martin 15-21)

As Gerard Collin explains in "The Postmodernization of the Ghost Figure in Twentieth Century North American Fictions", this is due to the prevalent "spirit of normalization" whereby objects of fear have begun materializing into "nearly humans" and produce an "ever-decreasing gap between ourselves and which we have long perceived as other". Although Gerard Collins concentrates on ghostly characters in the post-modern era, one can equate the same analogy of "dubiety regarding the phantoms"—in our case the humanoid monsters called the Others—reducing with time as "uncertainty about former adversaries is increasingly giving way to an understanding of multiplicity in supposed others" (Collin).

By accepting the multiplicity amongst beings, Martin establishes a post-modern universe where chaos is being embraced as normal and characters like the Others are reflected as "mirrors to ourselves and yet exterior to us at the same time" (Collin). Therefore, the common dichotomy such as good and evil, which were once deemed as two separate foundational truths, are now being accepted as interchangeable realities, and ambiguity is being acknowledged as the defining status quo of the ongoing era. Through showing the tragic downfalls of characters who chase romantic ideals of yesteryears and attempt to recreate the lost power structures, Martin establishes the necessity for accepting the new perspectives of old ideologies than resorting them to ensure their survival is not affected throughout the ups and downs of changing times.

### **Conclusion**

As observed through examples in *A Game of Thrones*, deconstruction, therefore, poses to be a significant exercise in educating us on what happens when we believe in





generalizing ideals without reflecting on opposing binary groups that exist and burgeon in society at the same time. By showing the journeys of characters who were strictly good and virtuous, Martin redefines the catastrophic repercussions of believing in single, totalising narratives. Similarly, he demonstrates need for unboxing people from social classification that deem them evil based on their acquired lifestyle and circumstances. Through highlighting this discriminatory practice of blindly assuming “traditionally informed, organized and ranked Western thinking” (Sim 222) without careful deliberation—where one concept is unseeingly supported more than other, such as virtues are regarded more with deference compared to vice deeds without realizing they are often two sides of the same coin—Martin enables readers to cultivate a strong rejection of imposing metanarratives and denunciate binary-way of thinking. He, thus, encourages readers to celebrate deviations in ethics as part of natural occurrences and not pursue ways to formalize norms based on their universal sensibilities but on how they simultaneously accommodate contradictory realities in society.

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