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Grief Poignant as Joy: Dyscatastrophe and Eucatastrophe in *A Song of Ice and Fire*

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Abstract

Argues that though the series is incomplete at present, J.R.R. Tolkien's concept of eucatastrophe and its dark twin, dyscatastrophe, can illuminate what Martin may be trying to accomplish in this bleak and bloody series and provide the reader with a way to understand its value and potential.

Additional Keywords

Martin, George R.R. *A Song of Fire and Ice*; Tolkien, J.R.R. "On Fairy-stories"



GRIEF POIGNANT AS JOY:
DYS-CATASTROPHE AND
EUCATASTROPHE IN
A SONG OF ICE AND FIRE

SUSAN JOHNSTON

The baby has known the dragon intimately ever since he had an imagination. What the fairy tale provides for him is a St. George to kill the dragon.

G.K. Chesterton, "The Red Angel."

The consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending; or more correctly of the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous 'turn' [...] is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.

J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories."

WHEN J.R.R. TOLKIEN IDENTIFIED "the true form of fairy-tale, and its highest function," as *eucatastrophe*, "the joy of deliverance," he gave a local habitation and a name to the satisfaction of this "sudden joyous 'turn'" characteristic of epic fantasy ("On Fairy-Stories" [OFS] 75). But he named also its heart-breaking opposite, *dyscatastrophe*, that "sorrow and failure" (OFS 75) in which we see again "that man, each man and all men, and all their works shall die" (Tolkien, "*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*" ["Monsters"] 23). *Valar morghulis*, say George R.R. Martin's Bravosi; all men must die (*A Storm of Swords* [SoS] 308). By Tolkien's reading, then, and by Chesterton's, Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*, at least to date¹ is very far indeed from the eucatastrophic story which Tolkien proposed as the apotheosis of the genre in "On Fairy-stories," the essay which first laid out the generic demands of what he termed the fairy tale and we call fantasy. High-couraged and banner-waving St. Georges haunt Martin's Westeros, it is true, but this haunting is literal, for—from Joffrey's execution of

¹ Two further volumes are projected, provisionally titled *The Winds of Winter* [WoW] and *A Dream of Spring*; publication of WoW is projected as early as 2014, though given the 6-year gap between 2005's *A Feast for Crows* and 2011's *A Dance with Dragons* this forecast may be optimistic. I take up the implications of this for my argument below.

Ned Stark and Khal Drogo's fatal infection to the Red Wedding—they have fallen, one by one, to the dragons, and nothing remains but their shades. Even Jon's apparent but ambiguous fate at the close of *A Dance with Dragons* [*DwD*], "[w]hen the third dagger took him between the shoulder blades" and "he gave a grunt and fell face-first into the snow" (913), shadows forth not joy but sorrow.

I want to examine these moments of sorrow and failure, of dyscatastrophe, when defeat seems sure and the lowering clouds of winter overshadow the hearts of men, moving us to ask, with Yeats, "is there is any comfort to be found?" (l.41) or if we are presented here with a form of fantasy "how fallen! how changed" (Milton l.l.84). If it is so changed, I think, the first and clearest sign of this change is the death of Eddard Stark, whose point of view and story arc initially seem to promise salvation, of a kind at least, for a diminished and decaying realm, a counterweight of honor and duty to the king's disdain for the ordinary work of peace, order, and good government. His death, then, shocking to us as it is to his eldest daughter, Sansa (*A Game of Thrones* [*GoT*] 606-7; 620), is, in the Tolkienian view, more than a twist in the tale; it is a chill premonition of what Tolkien calls "universal final defeat" (OFS 75). Dark winds, dark wings, dark words: "Winter is coming," as the words of House Stark say (*GoT* 19-20), and the Lord of Winter will not be there to meet it. Not by accident is the coming of winter in these books associated with nightfall, with the darkening of the world. Yet I propose, in what follows, that it is through dyscatastrophe that George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* restores the sudden joyous turn of the eucatastrophe, and in so doing, rekindles the hope that Tolkien saw at the heart of fantasy. This illumination turns, as I will show, on a critique of chivalric honor and on its remaking in keeping with Tolkien's own.



Tolkien's term of art, *dyscatastrophe*, appears for the first time in "On Fairy-stories," the 1939 Andrew Lang Lecture revised and expanded for publication in 1947's *Essays Presented to Charles Williams*, but as Verlyn Flieger points out, it is the 1936 lecture, "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics," which more fully expresses the ineluctable sadness of the dyscatastrophic defeat (Flieger 11-13). There, Tolkien reads *Beowulf* as "a fusion that has occurred at a given point of contact between old and new" ("Monsters" 20; emphasis in original), between the "heroic temper" (21) of a pagan past, mired in earth and time, born to die, and the optimism of a newly embraced Christianity in which "[t]he tragedy of the great temporal defeat remains for a while poignant, but ceases to be finally important" (22). The *Beowulf* poet, then, in an antiquarian spirit (27), views that receding past as "at once [...] more ancient and remote, and in a sense darker" (21; emphasis in original). In taking up that ancient

dyscatastrophic theme I noted above, "that man, each man and all men, and all their works shall die" (23), Tolkien suggests that the poem recollects but does not inhabit despair. He sees, rather, only its echo:

Yet this theme plainly would not be so treated, but for the nearness of a pagan time. The shadow of its despair, if only as a mood, as an intense emotion of regret, is still there. The worth of defeated valour in this world is deeply felt. As the poet looks back into the past, surveying the history of kings and warriors in the old traditions, he sees that all glory (or as we might say 'culture' or 'civilization') ends in night. (23)

Tolkien's words are particularly apt to *A Song of Ice and Fire*, where seasons may last for years, and legends speak of a Long Night, endless cold and darkness stalked by famine and terror:

Thousands and thousands of years ago, a winter fell that was cold and hard and endless beyond all memory of man. There came a night that lasted a generation, and kings shivered and died in their castles even as the swineherds in their hovels. Women smothered their children rather than see them starve, and cried, and felt their tears freeze on their cheeks. [...] In that darkness, the Others came for the first time. [...] They were cold things, dead things, that hated iron and fire and the touch of the sun, and every creature with hot blood in its veins. They swept over holdfasts and cities and kingdoms, felled heroes and armies by the score, riding their pale dead horses and leading hosts of the slain. (*GoT* 202-3)

Unlike the past which for the *Beowulf* poet remains near enough inspire regret, Old Nan's Westerosi legends are stuff for the nursery and the fire-side (*GoT* 13; 104), and yet the central premise of the series is that the long night will come again, indeed is coming (cf. *GoT* 175), while the Others and their terrible undead servants stir again in the north (*GoT* 1-9). Truly all glory may end again in night.

This is the view which, in "On Fairy-stories," Tolkien would call dyscatastrophe; in that later work, as my epigraph recalls, the "sudden and miraculous grace" (75) of the eucatastrophe, the unlooked-for and undreamt-of deliverance, stands as the small lone counter to the towering burden of mortal life, and the joy of the eucatastrophe depends indeed on the existence of that potentially endless night. In "The Monsters and the Critics," three years earlier, however, the "paradox of defeat inevitable yet unacknowledged" (18) to which *Beowulf* as a whole is devoted achieves its significance precisely because in defeat it does not despair. Tolkien says,

[W]e may still, against [the *Beowulf* poet's] great scene, hung with tapestries woven of ancient tales of ruin, see the *hæled* walk. When we

have read his poem, as a poem, rather than as a collection of episodes, we perceive that he who wrote *hæleð under heofenum* may have meant in dictionary terms “heroes under heaven”, or “mighty men upon earth”, but he and his hearers were thinking of the *eormengrund*, the great earth, ringed with *garsecg*, the shoreless sea, beneath the sky’s inaccessible roof; whereon, as in a little circle of light about their halls, men with courage as their stay went forward to that battle with the hostile world and the offspring of the dark which ends for all, even the kings and champions, in defeat. (18)

For Flieger, this passage explicitly contrasts with that later passage in which Tolkien identifies the consolation of fairy-stories, but she notes, too, that “[a]lthough one speaks movingly of man’s defeat by ‘the offspring of the dark’ and the other celebrates ‘the joy of deliverance,’ each essay acknowledges that both light and dark are elements held in interdependent tension” (12). It is, after all, from the “little circle of light” (“Monsters” 18) that the heroes go out, into the darkness, knowing that any victory over it must be as ephemeral as their own lives; it is from the darkness that the “sudden joyous turn” of eucatastrophe turns away (Flieger 13; 29).

The death of Eddard Stark is indeed a sudden turn, a grievous one, but one in which the story as a whole reminds us that he is, like the old Kings of the North, what Tolkien calls “a mortal hemmed in a hostile world” (“Monsters” 22). The old gods of the North may have retreated (*GoT* 618; *DwD* 449), but “the monsters do not depart, whether the gods go or come” (“Monsters” 22), says Tolkien, and the shock of our recognition of this plain fact of the story-world, whether it is the *Beowulf*-poet’s or George R.R. Martin’s, matters profoundly, I suggest, for our understanding of epic fantasy. It does so, moreover, not least because our grasp of it as a fact of the story world is delayed, first by the eclipsing of young Arya Stark’s vision at Baelor’s Sept (*GoT* 608) and then by the intervention of Bran’s perspective (*GoT* 610-19). Yet this, Bran’s last chapter in *A Game of Thrones*, which obscures from the reader the realization of Ned’s death, also reveals it: Bran Stark, like the still younger Rickon, dreams of Ned in the crypts of Winterfell, in the last home of all the Kings of Winter (611), with “the long row of granite Starks on their stone thrones” (612). Indeed the glory of these kings does end in night. It reaches, as Tolkien says, “backward into a dark antiquity of sorrow” (“Monsters” 27), beyond even where Bran has explored, to “vaults even deeper and darker where the older kings were buried” (613), but forward as well, into the living present, where “memory made [Bran] shiver” (613) and Ned Stark’s waiting tomb lies open (613). Not for nothing does “[t]he darkness” of that tomb “spr[i]ng [...] snarling” (614); Ned’s death has made the dyscatastrophic past a clear and present danger once again.

Like Maester Luwin, we may believe that “dreams are only dreams” (*GoT* 615), we may mistrust even the dark words borne north by raven with news of Ned’s death (618-19), but that we do so is a testament to the now-familiar and eucatastrophic arc of epic fantasy. Boromir may die, but Aragorn will be crowned; Lupin, Tonks, and Fred may lie, all three, with the dead on the floor of the great hall at Hogwarts, but Harry, Ron, and Hermione walk free in the sunlight. In this sense we have learned to count on “the sudden and miraculous grace” of the eucatastrophic ending to recur—and in this instance we are denied it. Dragons can be killed, oh, yes, but while there may be a peculiar and retributive satisfaction in Joffrey’s choking out his life on the floor of his own hall (Martin, *SoS* 683-4), still there is no consolation, for so many St. Georges already lie dead.

A Game of Thrones ends not just with the death of Ned but, across the Narrow Sea, those of Khal Drogo and his unborn son (*GoT* 631-6), the prophesied “stallion who mounts the world” (411), and though in the midst of this grief and horror, “for the first time in hundreds of years, the night came alive with the music of dragons” (*GoT* 674), this music seems to herald not the return of the kings of winter and of men, but their defeat on the Field of Fire, when the Targaryens conquered Westeros with fire and blood. It might fairly be argued that the dyscatastrophic arcs of *A Song of Ice and Fire* represent not merely the defeat, final or otherwise, of the Lords of Winter, but the defeat of Tolkienian fantasy,² for whatever else the bloody aftermath of Ned’s untimely end portends, everyone is in danger, everywhere and all the time. Martin has remarked, “If I was a soldier going to war, I’d be pretty scared the night before a battle. It’s a scary thing. And I want my readers to feel that fear as they turn the page. I want them to feel that no one is safe” (Kirschling 2). This is not just the *possibility* of sorrow and failure, but its near certainty: Winterfell, home and long home of the Starks, fallen (*A Clash of Kings* [*CoK*] 498-506; 690-700); the youngest boys, Bran and Rickon, missing, imperiled, lost (*CoK* 728); Sansa, freed at last from the bridewell of King’s Landing and its homely threats of rape and battery, pinioned at The Eyrie she thought to find a refuge;³ Robb and his mother murdered at their cups, in a grotesque violation of guest-right (*SoS* 574-83). Nor are the Starks alone with their dead. Renly Baratheon, younger brother of murdered King

² Lobdell 2; for Lobdell, Tolkien’s “new *genre*” takes in the medieval romance and its cheerful children, the adventure story, the travel book and the nonsense poem, but is also a species of the pastoral.

³ For Sansa’s treatment at the hands of King Joffrey after her father’s imprisonment and execution, see, for example, *GoT* 621-627 and, especially, *CoK* 364-66; for her forced marriage to Tyrion Lannister, see *SoS* 316-326; for her arrival at The Eyrie and coerced engagement to the child Robert Arryn, see *SoS* 762-77.

Robert and contender for the throne of Westeros, has himself been murdered by a sorcerous shadow (*CoK* 377), and Book V, *A Dance With Dragons*, concludes with daggers in the night, both on the Wall, with the betrayal of Jon by men of the Night's Watch (913), and south of it, as Ser Kevan Lannister is brought down (957-9), leaving a child to rule. What Tolkien called "the petty wars of princes" ("Monsters" 33) have become a feast for crows indeed, for the books are haunted by the missing and the dead, as we see in the figure of the undead Lady Stoneheart, once Eddard's wife Catelyn (*SoS* 924; *A Feast for Crows* [*FfC*] 636-41) and in the House of Black and White, where Arya has taken refuge amongst a cult of assassins, the Faceless Men (*FfC* 96-8). We are, indeed, very far from that "joy, poignant as grief," in which, as Frodo remarks, the world is saved, even if not for him (*LotR* VI.9.1029).

Given this toll of the dead, well might we ask with Daenerys Stormborn for stories of "[b]utterflies and brothers [...] of the things that make you happy, the things that make you giggle, all your sweetest memories. Remind [us] that there is still good in the world" (*DwD* 672). Daenerys has lost her husband, Khal Drogo; her unborn son; and what little she has known of home; the slaves she freed starve and die around her, while others are simply enslaved again (*SoS* 806-8); even her dragons, her children, bring horror in their wake, the burnt bones of a child (*DwD* 45). Still, like Samwise Gamgee on the stairs of Cirith Ungol, she longs for stories. Yet where Sam has, by this point in the terrible journey into Mordor, let go of one aspect of "[t]he brave things in the old tales and songs," the idea of adventure as "a kind of a sport," he recognizes that such thrills are the least and smallest part of "the tales that really mattered" (*The Lord of the Rings* [*LotR*] IV.8.711). Sam says,

Folk seem to have been just landed in them, usually – their paths were laid that way, as you put it. But I expect they had lots of chances, like us, of turning back, only they didn't. And if they had, we shouldn't know, because they'd have been forgotten. We hear about those as just went on – and not all to a good end, mind you; at least not to what folk inside a story and not outside it call a good end. You know, coming home, and finding things all right, though not quite the same [...]. (IV.8.711)

For both Daenerys and Samwise, the stories and songs are part of the recollection of a good characterized in part by safety and security, by peace and order and, yes, joy, which both associate with home. Yet the difference between these passages is critical, too, for while Sam imagines home as only elsewhere, the good he and Frodo are risking everything to preserve, for Dany home is but half-remembered and wholly lost. She may hope, indeed, that "there is still good in the world" (*DwD* 672), but the dyscatastrophic arcs of her story repeatedly suggest that the good, if ever it existed, may have gone out of the world.

In this sense, the stories Daenerys calls for are like the old songs that mark Sansa's naiveté. Well does Cersei sneer, as King's Landing is under siege,

"Do you have any notion what happens when a city is sacked, Sansa? No, you wouldn't, would you? All you know of life you learned from singers, and there's such a dearth of good sacking songs."

"True knights would never harm women and children." The words rang hollow in her ears even as she said them.

"True knights." The queen seemed to find that wonderfully amusing. "No doubt you're right. So why don't you just eat your broth like a good girl and wait for Symeon Star-Eyes and Prince Aemon the Dragonknight to come rescue you, sweetling. I'm sure it won't be very long now." (*CoK* 616)

I quote this exchange at some length because I propose that it highlights defeat and failure, dycatastrophe, not merely as a critique of the "true form of fairy-tale" but of the ideal of chivalry at its heart. It is through Sansa Stark, of course, that this critique of chivalry is focused, Sansa, whose knowledge of kings and courts and princes is that of the old songs, where trouble and strife give way at last to the triumphant return of the king; Sansa, poor, foolish Sansa, who, like us, believes in Joffrey's mercy, believes her father Ned will go free (*GoT* 523). The true knight she imagines is medievalist, we may say, rather than medieval, or at least the origins of Sansa's dream of chivalry share much and more with the Man of La Mancha, founded like his on an appetite for romances. He is, in other words, both imagined and idealized, the creature both of the fantasy world and of the young woman's fantasies, whose modern incarnation Girouard traces to eighteenth-century antiquarians and, superlatively, to Sir Walter Scott's medievalist romances (180-2). Indeed Sansa's idea of chivalry, which Scott terms "that singular institution," is the romantic one he outlines in his "Essay on Chivalry" ("Chivalry" 4):

[I]t was peculiar to the institution of Chivalry, to blend military valour with the strongest passions which actuate the human mind, the feelings of devotion and those of love. [...] Of patriotism, considered as a distinct predilection to the interests of one kingdom, we find comparatively few traces in the institutions of knighthood. But the love of personal freedom, and the obligation to maintain and defend it in the persons of others as in their own, was a duty particularly incumbent on those who attained the honour of Chivalry. Generosity, gallantry, and an unblemished reputation, were no less necessary ingredients in the character of a perfect knight. ("Chivalry" 4-5)

“True knights,” conceived in such a way, would indeed, as Sansa hopes, “never harm women and children” (*CoK* 616); for “[a]mid the various duties of knighthood, that of protecting the female sex, respecting their persons, and redressing their wrongs, becoming the champion of their cause, and the chastiser of those by whom they were injured, was presented as one of the principal objects of the institution” (Scott, “Chivalry” 13). Yet for Scott, as for Sansa, these words do ring hollow, for “the devotion of the knights often degenerated into superstition,—their love into licentiousness,—their spirit of loyalty or of freedom into tyranny and turmoil,—their generosity and gallantry into hare-brained madness and absurdity” (“Chivalry” 5). Martin would agree; he has said that “[c]hivalry in the Middle Ages was among the most idealistic codes the human race has ever come up with for a warrior. These are men who were sworn to defend the weak. Then you look at the reality, and their brutality was extreme” (Hibberd).

Here it is worth recalling that Scott’s *Ivanhoe*, the most successful of his medievalist romances (Girouard 182), even as it instantiates the knightly ideal to a considerable degree in such figures as Wilfred of Ivanhoe and the Black Knight, asserts its hypocrisy through tyrannical villains like De Bracy, Front-de-Boeuf, and Brian de Bois-Guilbert, who have degenerated indeed into licentiousness, tyranny, and madness. Thus does Rowena, De Bracy’s victim, rebuke her jailor, saying “I know you not—and the insolent familiarity with which you apply to me the jargon of a troubadour, forms no apology for the violence of a robber” (Scott, *Ivanhoe* 240):

To heralds and to minstrels, then, leave thy praise, Sir Knight, [...] more suiting for their mouths than for thine own; and tell me which of them shall record in song, or in book of tourney, the memorable conquest of this night, a conquest obtained over an old man, followed by a few timid hinds; and its booty, an unfortunate maiden, transported against her will to the castle of a robber? (241)

Yet even while the forms of chivalry have, for Scott, been emptied of the virtues to which they pretend, something yet remains. The captives are rescued by the outlaws of the greenwood and the Black Knight (330-42), and Ivanhoe redeems the imprisoned Rebecca through trial by combat (488-90); the Black Knight is unmasked as Richard, he of the Lion-Heart, and the throne restored (492); the shadows of disorder and tyranny retreat under the clear light of chivalry, if only for a time.⁴

⁴ The shadow yet remains, of course, for Richard’s reign—rather like Robert Baratheon’s—was “wilfully careless, now too indulgent, and now allied to despotism” (*Ivanhoe* 496).

Here we may usefully recall Gandalf's words to Frodo at the outset of *The Lord of the Rings*, in that chapter aptly titled "The Shadow of the Past": "That is a chapter of ancient history which it might be good to recall; for there was sorrow then too, and gathering dark, but great valour, and great deeds that were not wholly vain" (*LotR* I.2.52). If Sansa's love for such grave, brave old songs betrays her into thinking Joffrey a lion-hearted prince rather than the scaly lizard we know him to be, if it leads her to lean on the bruised reed of Ser Dontos as, like the Florian she takes him for, "the greatest knight of all" (*CoK* 215) instead of Littlefinger's "perfect catspaw" (*SoS* 691), so too does our love for the old stories betray us. We have grown accustomed, in other words, to grace, to the joyous turn no longer sudden but entirely expected. A close reading of the use of the old songs in this great *Song* must wait, I think, on another occasion, but for now let me remark that just as music in these books teeters between the diegetic and extra-diegetic, the fictional and the metafictional, so too does the series' confrontation with the "true form of fairy-tale." I am proposing, in other words, that in defeat lies a kind of victory, and that it is more than what, with Martin himself, we might provisionally call *A Dream of Spring*. Nor do I mean by this to allude to my conviction that Jon Snow is not, in fact, quite as dead as the ending of *A Dance with Dragons* would suggest. Rather, I contend that in modern fantasy, when Tolkien's "sudden and miraculous grace," that eucatastrophic "joy of deliverance," can, in fact, "be counted on to recur" (*OFS* 75), when we have ceased to believe in the possibility of enduring sorrow and failure, Martin's inversion of the Tolkienian consolation becomes in fact critical to preserving that *evangelium* of the tale.

Evangelium, Tolkien's term for the glad tidings eucatastrophe brings, is ecclesial Latin; it means the good news, revealed; for such endings to function as evangelium, then, they must be not merely glad but revelatory, of "Joy beyond the walls of the world" (*OFS* 75). It is "a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth" (77). For Tolkien it is known that this underlying reality is the Christian story (77-8), in which God enters the world to redeem fallen man, that same tale which for the *Beowulf* poet made possible regret but not despair ("Monsters" 23).⁵ The hope that joy in the Christian sense engenders depends considerably on a concomitant sense of fallenness; it is only from this perspective of darkness, in which the longed-for salvation is in doubt, that the happy ending of the eucatastrophe can be "good news" in this profound sense (Flieger 30). I propose that the happy ending of fantasy has largely ceased to function in this eucatastrophic way, as a revelation. By restoring our belief in the possibility of defeat, Martin has restored to us not just our childlike acquaintance with dragons, but our fearful sense that they are circling overhead. Only when the

⁵Though characteristically Tolkien, this view is not unique to him, as Flieger notes (29).

likelihood of failure is restored can joy be again revealed; only when we are convinced, again, that “all men must die” can we turn to what must live.

And despite the antitypes noted above, I am proposing that what survives, what stands in *A Song of Ice and Fire* as the last lone bugle-call of victory, is honor. It should be clear from the foregoing that I do not mean the chivalric honor of song and story, that naïve structure of belief which leads Sansa repeatedly to betrayal; if chivalry survives, it cannot be as the gilded and perfumed horror which is a Joffrey or a Viserys. But nor do the books endorse that view of Cersei’s and Littlefinger’s, that honor and nobility are “all lies, forever and ever, everyone and everything” (*SoS* 691). Rather their view is closer to that of Qhorin Halfhand, ranger of the Night’s Watch, whose vow is to be “the fire that burns against the cold, the light that brings the dawn, the horn that wakes the sleepers, the shield that guards the realms of men,” who has “pledge[d] his life and honor to the Night’s Watch, for this night and all the nights to come” (*CoK* 711). Reciting this vow with Jon Snow, bastard son of Winterfell, the Halfhand tells him “[o]ur honor means no more than our lives, so long as the realm is safe” (*CoK* 712). For the honor of the Night’s Watch is in the safety of the realm, and while it lives, the light may flicker but not go out. Thus may Jon make of himself a liar, riding as a spy with the wildling invaders against the Night’s Watch and against the realm (*CoK* 712), for his pledge to guard the realm burns yet against the cold. And in this light, then, we may say that Cersei and Littlefinger’s rejection of honor depends, like Sansa’s embrace of it, on the notion that only the chivalric version of honor and nobility are possible. Just as Sansa’s chivalric perspective cannot brook the idea of honor ungirt in gilded armor—note, for example, her support for Joffrey, “her prince,” over the butcher’s boy (*GoT* 117; 118-31, esp. 130)—so the anti-chivalric perspective likewise flattens all notions of honor to the lies of chivalry, either rejecting them wholesale, like Sandor Clegane, who “spit[s] on [knights] and their vows” (*GoT* 253) or deploying them, as Littlefinger does the tale of Florian and Jonquil, as a weapon (*SoS* 691; see also *GoT* 429).

Here this confusion of perspectives begins to resemble what Jean Bethke Elshtain calls a determination “to collapse any distinction between realism and just war [...] assum[ing] that just war was and always had been a weapon fashioned by the powerful in order to justify any and all wars the powerful sought to fight, to oppress persons in other societies” (“Realism, Just War, and the Witness of Peace” [“Realism”] 465-66). By way of response, she details alternatives to just war theory. The first, pure war, takes disorder as the central fact of the human condition and contends that war is thus required for the imposition of order. Under such a view, as Elshtain notes, “the other, the foreigner, is *always* an enemy *in situ* or actual” (“Realism” 468), and as war is the primary mode of encountering the inimical other, it is likewise the primary mode

of encounter between states: "In pure war, we find a world of war as politics, politics as war, a world that squeezes out persuasion" ("Realism" 468).

Central to Elshtain's account of the pure war perspective is the flattening out of the other to the status of the enemy, both of order and of the state. Yet she notes that the perspective of what she terms "pure peace" ("Realism" 470) is likewise haunted by the specter of absolute otherness. This is so because pacifism, in its pure form, contends against its opposite, war, which it takes as uniform, always "threatening disorder," "human beastiality," "discordance" as against peace's "healing order," "human benevolence," and "harmony" ("Realism" 471). Not only does this disregard, for example, the chilling possibility of an unjust peace, its absolutization of order necessarily absolutizes disorder and therefore difference and dissent: "As in pure war, difference itself is a block to the end of peace" ("Realism" 471). Even as such a view erases any and all distinctions between wars, it renders any and all engagements with the notion of the other as racist, even genocidal, for as Elshtain notes, it "presumes cultural and political homogeneity as a precondition for peace" ("The Problem With Peace" 447). Pacifism, then, is governed at last by the ground of its own construction in philosophies of pure war and the ubiquity of the enemy. I am contending that just as the counter-narratives of pure war and pure peace, for Elshtain, flatten out not only critical distinctions between, for example, a defensive war and one of conquest, neither the chivalric perspective nor its anti-chivalric opposite can brook an idea of honor beyond mere pipe-dreams; both collapse any distinction between the masque of honor, "silk ribbons tied round the sword," (*SoS* 385) and its terrifying opposite, the waste wreaked by such monsters as Gregor Clegane, rapist and murderer of Elia of Dorne at least (esp. *SoS* 798-802). Neither conception has room for Qhorin Halfhand nor, perhaps, for Jon Snow and his tattered honor; neither can accommodate a figure like Yoren, marred by "a twisted shoulder and a sour smell, his hair and beard [...] matted and greasy and full of lice, his clothing old, patched, and seldom washed" (*GoT* 100), though he defends the boys under his care from Ser Amory Lorch and the Queen's men with his life (*CoK* 67-9; 166-71). The old man, despised as "a stinking old black bird" (*CoK* 106), like the Halfhand and, indeed, Ned Stark, joins the ranks of fallen heroes, and heroes I propose they are, though the chivalric and the anti-chivalric perspective would scorn the term. Elaine Scarry reminds us that "[e]ven in the midst of the collective savagery and stupidity of war, the idiom of 'heroism,' 'sacrifice,' 'dedication,' 'devotion,' and 'bravery' conventionally invoked to describe the soldier's individual act of consent over his own body is neither inappropriate nor false" (112). It is through such an act of consent that Yoren lays down his life in defense of the unknown bastard, Gendry, and the traitor's child, Arya Stark (*CoK* 67; 220). This is so, too,

in *Beowulf*, whose poet, Tolkien reminds us, “saw clearly: the wages of heroism is death” (“Monsters” 26).

In this vein it is interesting to remark how nearly Tolkien’s description of those *hæleð under heofenum*—heroes under heaven—resembles the battle of the Night’s Watch at the Fist of the First Men. Lord Commander Mormont has led a great ranging of the Night’s Watch beyond the Wall which divides Westeros from the fell and fearsome winterlands. Mormont seeks answers—to the disappearance of his rangers, to the massing of the free folk, to the “dead men [that] come hunting in the night” (*GoT* 654), but there, at the ancient hill-fort called The Fist, the dead find him (*SoS* 14). Besieged on that high hill by creatures out of Old Nan’s tales, ravening wights and ice-pale riders, Mormont and a few survivors cut their way out (*SoS* 205). Far in the south, meanwhile, Melisandre, the red priestess, has revealed a vision in the hearthfire: “[T]he sparks in the air seemed to circle, to become a ring of torches, and I was looking *through* the fire down on some high hill in a forest. The cinders had become men in black behind the torches, and there were shapes moving through the snow” (*SoS* 414). And behind the torches, “a power fell and evil and strong beyond measure” (*SoS* 413), the wights and their cold masters, the Others, against whom the Night’s Watch stands alone “to guard the realms of men” (*SoS* 373; emphasis in original). The hopeless stand of the Night’s Watch would, for Flieger, I think, be the perfect expression of Tolkienian dyscatastrophe, that “[l]ike humanity itself, light is perishable, finally to be overcome by the dark. The heroes, those ‘mighty men upon earth,’ with courage (not hope or faith) as their stay, must leave the precarious little circle of light to go out into the darkness, to battle with the embodiments of that darkness—the monsters—and ultimately to lose” (Flieger 17).

That the foe is inhuman makes George R. R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* fantasy, of course, but this does not make it insignificant. Indeed, much of the tragedy of these books lies in the Westerosi’s absorption in the clashes of kings, while beyond the wall winter is coming, and with it “the night that never ends” (*SoS* 414). Tolkien reminds us that

It is just because the main foes in *Beowulf* are inhuman that the story is larger and more significant than [an] imaginary poem of a great king’s fall. It glimpses the cosmic and moves with the thought of all men concerning the fate of human life and efforts; it stands amid but above the petty wars of princes, and surpasses the dates and limits of historical periods, however important. At the beginning, and during its process, and most of all at the end, we look down as if from a visionary height upon the house of man in the valley of the world. A light starts—*lixte se leoma ofer landa*

*fela*⁶—and there is a sound of music; but the outer darkness and its hostile offspring lie ever in wait for the torches to fail and the voices to cease. (“Monsters” 33)

At the same time, the “petty wars of princes”—the treasons and treacheries small and large, from Sansa’s betrayal first of Arya (*GoT* 130-1) and then her father (*CoK* 43) to the daggers in the dark which mark the mutinies of the Night’s Watch (*SoS* 378-80; *DwD* 913)—the all-too-human foes, remind us that, as Flieger says, “[t]he monsters are within us as well as outside us” (18). The red priestess, Melisandre, burns enemies real and imagined to keep the dark at bay (*DwD* 134-6); the indomitable heroes who escape the ringing dark of the Fist bring night to the lesser gloom of Craster’s Keep (*SoS* 378-80). Thus do we assent to Tolkien’s reminder that “the fortress must fall through treachery as well as by assault”; not for nothing does “Grendel ha[ve] a perverted human shape” (“Monsters” 46n23).



Even while the dyscatastrophic endings of *A Song of Ice and Fire* signal the end of chivalry, as I have shown, something yet survives. I suggest that what survives is a quite different notion of honor, unwed to Sansa’s silken ribbons and soft songs, but one which outlives therefore the moment when “the songs wither, / and the world worsens” (Tolkien, “The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth” [“Homecoming”] 128-9). In this sense Tolkien’s idea of the dyscatastrophic finds expression beyond “The Monsters and the Critics,” in the 1953 dialogue poem “The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son,” his commentary on the Anglo-Saxon fragment *The Battle of Maldon*, and the apparatus, foreword and afterword, with which it was published.⁷ In “The Monsters and the Critics,” Tolkien had called the oath of Beorhtwold (Byrhtwold), the loyal retainer, a “doctrinal expression” of “the exaltation of undefeated will” (“Monsters” 18), that is, of the heroic temper, which in “The Homecoming” he translates as

Heart shall be bolder, harder be purpose,
more proud the spirit as our power lessens!
Mind shall not falter nor mood waver,
though doom shall come and dark conquer. (“Homecoming” 141)

⁶ “[I]ts light shone over many lands” (*Beowulf* l.311); Shippey notes Tolkien’s “[t]he light of it shines far over the land” (*LotR* III.5.507) as a direct translation of this line (94).

⁷ I am indebted to George Clark’s “J.R.R. Tolkien and the True Hero” for drawing my attention to this piece.

"The Homecoming," however, is less a commentary on the heroic oath as Beorhtwold pronounces it than on earlier lines, those which lay the ground for both the tragedy of Beorhtnoth and Beorhtwold's vow: "then the earl in his overmastering pride actually yielded ground to the enemy, as he should not have done" (*Battle of Maldon* 1.89-90; qtd. "Homecoming" 143). For Tolkien these lines point to a flaw, a "defect of character" of the earl Beorhtnoth ("Homecoming" 146): "this element of pride, in the form of the desire for honour and glory, in life and after death, [which] tends to grow, to become a chief motive, driving a man beyond the bleak heroic necessity to excess—to chivalry" ("Homecoming" 144).

It is clear that for Tolkien, at least two notions of honor are at work in the dyscatastrophic tale. George Clark proposes that the thrust of his critical work is to "ultimately separate *Beowulf* and *Maldon* from the heroic tradition and make those works critiques of heroic society" (40); this critique turns, as Clark has shown, on "the desire for the *lof* [honor] and *dom* [glory] that heroic songs confer and preserve" (49). In calling Beorhtnoth "chivalrous rather than strictly heroic" ("Homecoming" 146), Clark argues, Tolkien means that "he sought honor for his valor rather than exercising his valor only and strictly in the service of his duty" (Clark 49); the "excess," then, of which Tolkien accuses Beorhtnoth is chivalry's concern for reputation, for fame, for name. So, indeed, says Tidwald in "Homecoming," as he and his young companion bear the fallen earl from the battlefield:

Alas, my friend, our lord was at fault,
or so in Maldon this morning men were saying.
Too proud, too princely! But his pride's cheated,
and his pryncedom has passed, so we'll praise his valour.
He let them cross the causeway, so keen was he
to give minstrels matter for mighty songs. ("Homecoming" 137)

The dream of chivalry, in other words, of personal glory and honor—reputation—has led in the end to the failure of honor. Tolkien remarks that Beorhtnoth was "responsible for all the men under him, not to throw away their lives except with one object, the defence of the realm from an implacable foe. [...] It was heroic for him and his men to fight, to annihilation if necessary, in the attempt to destroy or hold off the invaders. It was wholly unfitting that he should treat a desperate battle with this sole real object as a sporting match, to the ruin of his purpose and duty" ("Homecoming" 146; see also Clark 49-50).

Over and against this chivalric idea of honor, and the "ruin" it entails, Tolkien has counterposed Samwise Gamgee, whose loyalty to Frodo echoes Beorhtwold and Offa's vow to live or die by their lord (Clark 46). I will not rehearse Clark's argument at length here, but I will remark that in Sam, as in—for example—Qhorin Halfhand, we see the re-articulation of honor in counter-

chivalric terms. The reciprocal loyalty between retainer and warlord, that “oath-bound fidelity” (Reynolds 19) which characterized vassalage (Reynolds 18-22; Bloch 145-62; Hill 1-18), at least as it is simultaneously honored and dishonored in both Tolkien and Martin, must be seen both in terms of its unalienating function, which renders the stranger kin,⁸ and in terms of its orientation toward the good. John Hill reminds us that “[a] retainer need not always be loyal, especially to an unworthy lord” (3; see also 74-92), and it is this sense of the “constructable” (and “re-constructable”) “nature of loyalty and changeable issues of honor” (Hill 4) which invites us to see an ideal of honor in George R.R. Martin’s *Song of Ice and Fire*. This ideal is honor seen covenantally, as a lived and difficult fidelity not just to the vow—though this readier faithfulness is part of it—but to that larger structure of the good of which the vow is but a part. Thus, for example, the Reeds’ oath of fealty to the Stark in Winterfell insists “[g]rant mercy to our weak, help to our helpless, and justice to all, and we shall never fail you” (*CoK* 248). Here we might think again of Jon Snow’s vow to the Night’s Watch, understood not merely as an oath of fidelity to his sworn brothers, which makes them brothers, but as one which re-forms him as “the shield that guards the realms of men” (*GoT* 436). This vow is instructive in two ways. First, it calls him to forsake the chivalric notion of life and honor that the realm may survive, and thus to give up the small goods of the world in faithfulness to the greater good. Second, and linked to this idea of the greater good, Jon swears, as do all of the black brothers, to “take no wife, hold no lands, father no children” (*GoT* 435-6), not because these things are bad in themselves, but because he must be reforged as “the sword in the darkness [...] the fire that burns against the cold, the light that brings the dawn” (*GoT* 436). This remaking, I may say, is central to the very idea and nature of the vow. That the “life and honor” so pledged (*GoT* 436) will call him to forsake lesser loyalties, to House Stark, for example (*GoT* 653), or to his wildling lover Ygritte (*SoS* 470; 622-3), or even to his new brothers (*DwD* 715) points, I think, to a larger notion of honor than the tribal loyalties of, for example, the Lannisters or the Freys will admit. Tyrion Lannister, of course, who “never bet[s] against [his] family” (*GoT* 283), who recognizes himself as his own father, Tywin, “writ small” (*SoS* 880) but who kills that father nonetheless (880), troubles these notions of Lannisters and loyalty, it is true, but his character is too complex for examination here, although much of his complexity turns

⁸ Bloch emphasizes this element of kinship (e.g. 190), finding a “sort of cosy domestic flavor” (236) in the vocabulary of early vassalage. Covenant theologian Frank Moore Cross makes a similar point: “[O]ften it has been asserted that the language of ‘brotherhood’ and ‘fatherhood’, ‘love’, and ‘loyalty’ is ‘covenant terminology,’” [but] this is “to turn things upside down. The language of covenant, kinship-in-law, is taken from the language of kinship, kinship-in-flesh” (qtd. in Hahn 265).

precisely on this question of what distinctions may be made between honor and loyalty, tribalism and allegiance. I will address this point in detail on a future occasion.

In this vein it is worth noting the complicated conversion, if I may call it that, that Jaime Lannister, Kingslayer, breaker of boys, undertakes. His defenestration of the seven-year-old Bran, as he himself notes “with loathing” (*GoT* 71), is marked by the basest of fidelities, undertaken for love of and out of loyalty to his vile twin, Cersei; well does he agree with Catelyn Stark that his honor “as a Lannister” is shit (*CoK* 597), though he swears on it still. Yet in his lengthy interview with his gaoler, Catelyn, as Jaime recounts the deaths by torture of Lord Rickard and Brandon Stark at the hands of mad King Aerys (*CoK* 599-600)—the deaths that led to Robert’s Rebellion and the ascent of Robert Baratheon to the troubled Iron Throne—we see him groping toward an ideal of honor in which the obligation of the vow will cut two ways. “After,” Jaime recalls to Catelyn, “Gerold Hightower himself took me aside and said to me, ‘You swore a vow to guard the king, not to judge him.’ That was the White Bull, loyal to the end and a better man than me, all agree” (*CoK* 600). In this view, the pretty oaths of the Kingsguard are rendered base by the baseness of their object, the mad king Aerys, whom Jaime senses ought to have been worthy of the oath so sworn, and whose imagined worthiness alone could make that oath a thing of gold. This is clear, too, in Catelyn Stark’s answer to Brienne’s oath of fealty: “I vow that you shall always have a place by my hearth and meat and mead at my table, and pledge to ask no service of you that might bring you into dishonor” (*CoK* 422).

It is significant that Jaime’s conversion is provoked in large part by his encounters with the quixotic Brienne of Tarth, for whom honor is indeed a golden thing, “a rare and precious gift” (*SoS* 129), and whose sworn word is a holy thing (*SoS* 507). Yet it is her stubborn honor, in the end, which recalls Jaime Lannister to his own vow to return Sansa Stark to her family, oathbreaker though he is (*SoS* 237). It is Brienne’s implacable honesty, indeed the knightly virtues which for Jaime are mere “*feeble pieties*” (*SoS* 130; italics in original), worn as awkwardly and falsely as her leather and mail, mere pretense to knighthood (*SoS* 18), which recalls him to her rescue (*SoS* 505-13). It’s worth remarking that at the end of Jaime Lannister’s return in Brienne’s company to King’s Landing and to his evil twin, Cersei, Cersei notes with revulsion “you’re *changed*” (*SoS* 701)—as indeed he is. Ensnared in the chambers of the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard, poring over the White Book which records the “name and deeds” of every knight who ever served (*SoS* 751), to find his own life “a rather scant and mingy thing” (*SoS* 753), he reflects that “[t]he world was simpler in those days [...] and men as well as swords were made of finer steel” (*SoS* 753; italics in original). His reflections here help to underline the significance of that blade of Valyrian steel, Oathkeeper, that Jaime gives Brienne (*SoS* 827-9), for in alluding to the white

brothers as swords, reforged like the black fraternity on the Wall, he foregrounds the link between the gift of Oathkeeper to Brienne and Jaime's own remaking, of his self, his honor, and his story in the White Book of the brotherhood.

Oathkeeper is the sword that will let Brienne and Jaime both, as Jaime snarls, "make good our stupid vows" (*SoS* 828), the vows to the now-dead Catelyn to restore her missing daughters, vows which are, it is plain, stronger than death.⁹ It is in the White Book that he records he was "[r]eturned safely to King's Landing by Brienne, the Maid of Tarth" (*SoS* 829) whom he rewarded with this perilous quest to recover Sansa and Arya and the chance to keep both their honors bright, indeed to find Jaime's honor (*FfC* 633). He writes in *The Book of the Brothers*, and "[w]hen he was done, more than three-quarters of his page still remained to be filled between the gold lion on the crimson shield on top and the blank white shield at the bottom. Ser Gerold Hightower had begun his history, and Ser Barristan Selmy had continued it, but the rest Jaime Lannister would need to write for himself. He could write whatever he chose, henceforth" (*SoS* 829). In this context, of the sword of honor forged and reforged, of the tale unfinished, it is fitting that the small, pale sign of Jaime's recollection of his honor is in the unmaking of Cersei's letter, pleading for his help, as she stands accused of treason and infidelity. He returns no answer: "A snowflake landed on the letter. As it melted, the ink began to blur. Jaime rolled the parchment up again, as tight as one hand would allow, and handed it to Peck. 'No,' he said. 'Put this in the fire'" (*FfC* 671). He betrays her, in fact, as once he betrayed King Aerys, though less bloodily, and in our conviction that he is right to do the one we arrive, I propose, at last at the conviction that he was right to do the other. He has indeed found his honor, rejecting the self-serving and murderous Cersei to bring some semblance of order to the realm.¹⁰

Little enough this may be, in view of Jaime Lannister's career, but I am suggesting that the honor of such figures as Jon Snow and Jaime Lannister stands in the series as the answer to the question the death of Eddard Stark and others asks of us. Verlyn Flieger reminds us that "[f]or the true lover of fairy-story, to read of the turn is to experience it, and to undergo a change of mood from

⁹ Catelyn Stark has, of course, become the revenant Lady Stoneheart, recalled from her death at the Red Wedding by Beric Dondarrion to wreak her vengeance on the Freys for their violation of guest-right.

¹⁰ It's worth noting that Jaime Lannister's brief appearance in *DwD* (632-46) concludes with his disappearance; Brienne, who in *FfC* narrowly escapes execution by "[t]he thing that had been Catelyn Stark" (640), has come for Jaime, ostensibly to lead him to either Sansa or Arya Stark (*DwD* 646). The resolution of this arc waits upon the next volume of the series, but I do not read this scene, despite Brienne's apparent lie that Jaime must come alone or "the Hound will kill her" (646), as a betrayal of either her oath to Catelyn, or of Jaime to Catelyn, though here I may betray a naiveté at least equal to Sansa's.

despair to joy, from dark to light [.] This is *metanoia*, reversal, a reversal of the direction of the mind. The same word means ‘repentance.’ The turn, then, is a kind of conversion, and what we feel at the turn of a fairy-story is, to however small a degree, a conversion experience” (29). In this sense Jaime’s conversion reveals to us the ways in which George R.R. Martin exploits dyscatastrophe and its lowering defeat to permit eucatastrophe and its restoration of hope. At the outset of this great tale, Jaime is “bright as beaten gold” (*GoT* 32), “the Lion of Lannister” (*GoT* 42)—and Kingslayer (*GoT* 42), oathbreaker (*SoS* 243), monster (*SoS* 17)—he is remade only once he is broken, his sword hand cut off (*SoS* 342-3). In this breaking and remaking, though, he abandons at last his disgraced honor only to regain it, as a covenantal bond to the good and not just to a person. Good in this sense recalls Samwise’s idea of home, of the Shire, a peaceful place which permits the small domestic flourishing of creatures and of creation; it is a realm made soft and fertile once again. In the defense of such an end, as I have shown above, life means no more than what the court calls honor, but a truer honor does survive. It is covenantal, in that it is a bond of kinship, of sworn brotherhood, but its binding is not the tribal loyalty of House against House, each against each: “Peace means peace for all,” Jon Snow reminds his brothers (*DwD* 711). In this way has honor become what Cormac McCarthy calls “the thing that even death cannot undo” (210); it lives, as Jaime’s oath to Catelyn does, beyond the grave.



But what does it mean to speak of such ends in a series not yet ended? I noted above that Martin projects at least two more volumes before the close of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, and unless and until those volumes are completed the small eucatastrophes I have identified here must remain unresolved chords in the greater movements of the series. As such, the final narrative trajectory may indeed overwhelm these small victories with sorrows and failures still greater and yet to come. And although George R.R. Martin has reiterated his enormous admiration for J.R.R. Tolkien (Hibberd; Shindler; Brown), he has also said that Tolkien would “be appalled” by his work (Wilken). He has said, too, that Tolkien inspired his approach to character deaths (Hibberd), but also that, at some level, he feels that Tolkien “cheated” by bringing back Gandalf and Frodo (Wilken). He elaborates elsewhere:

Much as I admire Tolkien, I once again always felt like Gandalf should have stayed dead. That was such an incredible sequence in *Fellowship of the Ring* when he faces the Balrog on the Khazad-dûm and he falls into the gulf, and his last words are, “Fly, you fools.”

What power that had, how that grabbed me. And then he comes back as Gandalf the White, and if anything he's sort of improved. I never liked Gandalf the White as much as Gandalf the Grey, and I never liked him coming back. I think it would have been an even stronger story if Tolkien had left him dead. (Hodgman)

As Martin has noted elsewhere, however, his rearticulation of eucatastrophe and dyscatastrophe are less a critique of Tolkien, whose work, for Martin, is the "great landmark [...] that looms all over fantasy like a mountain" but of a host of "Tolkien imitators who were delivering Tolkien-like books but who didn't seem to capture any of the power of Tolkien" (Ippolito). Indeed, he is deliberately turning those tropes, things Tolkien "did very well [but which] in lesser hands, the hands of his imitators, have become terrible weights on the field of fantasy" (Shindler) on their heads: "You can't tell the bad people because they're ugly or the good people because they're pretty and I deliberately turned some of these conventions on their head. Yeah, the Night's Watch, they're a bunch of scum but they're heroic scum and yet they wear black" (Ippolito).

It is important, I think, that Martin calls these scum "heroic," for as I have tried to show, eucatastrophe, however fragile it may be, depends both on such heroism and on our awareness of its cost. He has described himself as "a believer in the now unfashionable 'heroic' school, which says that history is shaped by individual men and women and the choices that they make, by deeds glorious and terrible" (Gevers); I contend that it is only when we can no longer see deeds as glorious and terrible, when our sense of the hero imperiled is gone, that sorrow and failure can prevail. Victory has a price, yes, as indeed does defeat, but no defeat which considers the battle worth the fighting, even though it is lost, can be in Tolkien's sense the universal, final defeat. Martin may just possibly agree:

I was very satisfied with the end of the *Lord of the Rings*, let us say. Talking about predictability here—I had a sense, even as a kid, that the ring was going to go in the volcano. They weren't going to let Sauron take over the world. But he surprised me in that Frodo couldn't do it. Bringing in Gollum the way he did was an amazing part of the ending, and then came the scouring of the Shire. And when I was 13 years old, reading this, I didn't understand the scouring of the Shire. They won—why are there all these other pages? But I reread these books every few years, and every time my appreciation for what Tolkien did there grows. It was this kind of sad elegy on the price of victory. I think the scouring of the Shire is one of the essential parts of Tolkien's narrative now, and gives it depth and resonance, and I hope that I will be able to provide an ending that's similar to all of that. (Brown)

In the end the dyscatastrophes of the books, those so-frequent moments of sorrow and of failure, do not, as Tolkien contended, betoken universal final defeat, but indeed a kind of victory; we rediscover, whatever the final end might be, the power of the eucatastrophe because what survives, against all the odds, the gold of honor that glimmers against a darkness not quite unrelieved, appears to us again as “a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur.” We are, in the end, as we thought we could not be again, surprised by joy.



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