

Contemporary Fantasy: An Analysis of Rage and Law



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Abstract

With the rise of self-published books, the market has seen a boom of authors creating new worlds to get lost in and explore. Two notable fantasy series taking advantage of the fantasy genre's raised interest are *The Burning* and *First Law Trilogy*. They are both set in the Secondary World with multiple characters and cultures that draw and bend the fantasy genre in exciting forms. I have sought to analyze and map the differences and similarities the two series use to entertain their readers. By having used the theoretical apparatuses such as Tolkien's sub-creation and Campbell's monomyth, my goal has been to see the different changes present in their genre, world-building, and character development. Through a detailed analysis, I found that both of them developed and changed Tolkien's version of fantasy into a darker and more depressing narrative that, while entertaining and engaging in places, subverts and distances themselves from Tolkien's much more idealistic descriptions and character development. The two series are gritty, dark, and different from many modern fairy tales, one way to develop and improve the genre.

Keywords

Joe Abercrombie, *First Law Trilogy*, Evan Winter, *The Burning*, J. R. R. Tolkien, Sub-creation, Genre of Fantasy, Joseph Campbell, and Hero's Journey.

Introduction

“Fantasy has had some problems with being too repetitive, in my opinion. I try to read what other people are doing—and say ‘How can I add to this rather than just recycle it? How can I stand on Tolkien’s shoulders rather than stand tied to his kneecaps?’”—Brandon Sanderson

Because of a growing interest in the fantasy genre in recent decades and years, fantasy has grown both as a literary genre but also as a genre in other mediums such as big Hollywood movies like Peter Jackson *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001-2003) or significant TV-series such as HBO’s *Game of Thrones* (2011-2017), which has led to many companies to recognize the public’s interest of seeing their favorite fantasy books on the big screen. With more and more book series used as an underlying manuscript for storytelling on a television screen, it will be of particular interest to figure out what makes fantasy series popular and exciting to the public, mainly when they chose fantasy as one of the most used groundworks for publishing.

“Fantasy is escapist, and that is its glory. If a soldier is imprisoned by the enemy, don't we consider it his duty to escape?... If we value the freedom of mind and soul, if we're partisans of liberty, then it's our plain duty to escape, and to take as many people with us as we can!”—J. R. R. Tolkien

Therefore, with Tolkien’s quote in mind, this thesis's purpose will be a comparative analysis of two different contemporary works of fantasy fiction. The chosen series are *The Burning* by Evan Winter and *The First Law Trilogy* by Joe Abercrombie. The purpose will be to analyze and define the characteristics of themes for modern fantasy stories’ narrative structure, world-building, and characters. This analysis will lead to the eventual discussion of where the series’ manages to pull from the real world or other works of fiction. Both works are modern in presentation and no more than a couple of years old and portray an unbelievable story that must be believable for it to succeed. Fantasy authors draw on different inspirations for their world-building, narrative structure, characters, and even language, which is why this paper will focus on those mentioned aspects while analyzing the series. Everything can be drawn on as inspiration, but the author’s will and perspective create something new from something old. The paper will also discuss many of the popular new genres that have become more prominent in the last decade as more contemporary books try to explore works different from the more classical and modern trends.

Despite *Lord of the Rings* not being a contemporary series, it has such reach, world-building, and fantasy weight that discussing or analyzing fantasy genres that every fantasy writer uses it for something. Therefore, throughout this paper, there will be references to Tolkien’s influences in contemporary works of fantasy fiction because writing and reading fantasy without Tolkien would be a bizarre but exciting experience, if somewhat lacking and weird. By many, Tolkien is considered the father of high fantasy because of his depth, scope, and world-building of his expensive world (Parker 2020). Writing a thesis on the subject of fantasy, without

mentioning the one series to rule them all, would be a grave error, as much future fantasy series draws on themes and ideas set up by Tolkien himself.

To illuminate my thesis, I have chosen to use a couple of different theories that can be used to demonstrate similar and different characteristics of the different epic fantasy series. The first theory will be a general introduction to John Frow's *Genre* to specify what makes a fantasy series epic and differs from similar but different genres. Furthermore, this will transfer into a focus on the subject of 'The Hero's Journey' coined by Joseph Campbell, but used in the generation of literature and film. In *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, Campbell posits three critical phenomena: Departure, Initiation, and Return. These three motives are generally universally used throughout fantasy texts—and other mediums of storytelling. They depict and extrapolate the reasons why characters, worlds, and themes appear as they do. Through their use, it becomes clear what is specifically of interest in the text and, therefore, what the readers themselves are interested in as specific debates, thoughts, and opinions.

Finally, I will include Tolkien's theory of 'Sub-creation' to depict the different worlds of the fantasy series. 'Sub-creation' is the embodiment of the world-building in stories where the world is imagined. A world is created by a god, accident, Big Bang, magic, or something else, and everything of importance is then extrapolated in a way that makes sense to the reader. The world has a history, notable figures, landmarks, wars, and races. Tolkien himself offers the similarity to our world's myths and legends as a form of world-building or sub-creation. The world is affected by everything from reality and history to the author's ideas. A world that is purely made up but believable will include the reader more with a deep but short story about made-up trees than a story about real trees because there is a level of mystery.

In this thesis, I will explore the concept of genre and analyze popular and contemporary fantasy series characteristics, which has become of widespread interest in contemporary media. I will include fantasy series such as *The Burning* by Evan Winter and *The First Law Trilogy* by Joe Abercrombie to analyze the characteristics of genre, theme, and the different fantasy aspects such as magical systems, world-building, and storylines. The theoretic approach will include The Hero's Journey, sub-creation, and John Frow's genre to compare the specific similarities and differences between the different fantasy series to discuss how the genre has evolved transformed lately.

"It's the questions we can't answer that teach us the most. They teach us how to think. If you give a man an answer, all he gains is a little fact. But give him a question and he'll look for his own answers."—Patrick Rothfuss, *The Wise Man's Fear*.

Problem Statement

The problem statement is as follows: by analyzing the similarities and differences of the characteristic styles in the popular contemporary fantasy series *The Burning* and *The First Law Trilogy*—using the theories mentioned earlier—I will explore how the series have appropriated and developed the fantasy genre.

Theory

As stated earlier, there will mainly be three theories used to explore the texts of interest: The Hero's Journey, which seeks to explore the plot and storyline and the characters; and sub-creation, which seeks to explain the myths and the world itself of a specific imaginary or real world. However, first I must explore and explain what makes a fantasy series: fantasy. With that goal, I will first explore the concept of the genre by Frow.

The Genre of Fantasy

Genre is a broad subject with many years of debate. Multiple theorists have come with a definition that light the debate on the genre in different ways. For example, Aristoteles categorized texts into the epic, the tragedy, the comedy, dithyrambic poetry, and phallic songs. Or Plato with his literature genres of poetry, drama, and prose. The genre is often based around the content and quantity of the specific genre, such as a romance is notable for having a higher rate of romantic feelings and relationships than, for example, science-fiction, thereby marking it as what it is *not*. In one case, the difference between a book being described as a novel or novella is dependant on its length. Therefore, the genre can be categorized as something by describing what it is not (Frow 2015).

Alec Worley speaks about how the fantasy genre is one part of the fantastic genre, and the other two are science fiction and horror with one clear distinction: it has no unifying definition to call its own (Worley 2005, 3). Another writer, Rosemary Jackson, sees the fantasy genre in the light of phycological analysis, seeing the genre as a means of expressing the unconscious, similar to Sigmund Freud's thoughts (Jackson 1981). Tzvetan Todorov seeks a deeper understanding of the fantasy genre itself or calls it the fantastic. When analyzing the genre, it is imperative to look at multiple fantastic instances because one finds similarities among the genre. Studying the *First Law Trilogy* genre is an entirely different undertaking than analyzing the book in of itself.

Therefore, Frow says that "Genre is a key means by which we categorize the many forms of literature and culture, but it is also much more than that: in talk and writing, in music and images, in film and television, genres actively generate and shape our knowledge of the world" (Frow 2015). By looking at that one quote, the three major points of Frows argument are that

1. We categories forms of literature
2. Based on the culture/content
3. Genre generates and shapes our understanding of the world

If we take the first part of that quote, categorizing the different forms of literature will make the genre a simple taxonomy—the classification of things according to the similarities and differences into a system (Frow 2015).

If one seeks on, for example, amazon.com, multiple genres appear, such as crime, fantasy, romance, science fiction, with many different sub-genres that mix or specify a more in-depth focus. There are numerous fantasy sub-genres: Alternative History, Anthurian, Assassins, Christian, Comic/Absurd, Coming of Age, Dark, Dragons, Epic/High, Gaslamp, Historical, Military, Myths & Legends, Urban, Romantic, Superheroes, and Sword and Sorcery. Many fantasy books inhabit and use many different sub-genres. These are just a few of the different genres one would find in films, books, TV-series, talk, and writing. The fantasy genre uses and incorporates genres from other forms of literature and uses them in a setting useful to the story it needs. Thereby, the genre is used, changed, and reinvented to a new setting. A stale genre that remains the same would be less surprising to an audience and thereby decrease the work's popularity. A changing genre can grasp new audiences and hook them by using themes from other established genres. Frow argues a different genre than “just” categorizing the themes in a book into a couple of specific genres. His focus is on the changes happening to the world of genres (Ibid.)

What makes fantasy, fantasy then? There are many ways to describe and define the fantasy genre, and one description is in the simplest term: make-believe. The genre can be argued to have no clear rules, except for the rule of the impossible. The genre is known for doing the impossible, breaking the normality, and exploring otherworldly supernatural scenarios. Instead of focusing on our known and quantifiable world (although fantasy can be set in our world, as well, which is known as Urban Fantasy), this genre's focus is used to, for example, explore the unknown ideas/worlds of humanity. One common factor of most fantasy books is the central human main character, or side character able to be the focal point of the plot—to tell the reader what is taking place (Jackson 1981).

However, not every single fantasy series/novel has humans in it, although the vast majority do. *Goblin Emperor* explores the world of goblins and elves who live in a shaky alliance, with goblins being the lower working class and elves being that world's nobility. The premise then asks the reader: what if a mix of the two races were to rule, a so-called bastard? While the novel itself has no humans appearing, it *does* have what we know as human agency, albeit in the form of a half-goblin. The novel is fantastic in the sense that both elves and goblins appear—two emphatically made-up races. Goblins originate in European folklore from around the 14th century, while elves originate from Germanic and Nordic folklore—especially Norse Mythology in which two entire realms are inhabited by elves (Dökkálfar and Ljósálfar). While humans are often critical, they are not necessarily pivotal in the fantasy genre.

Exploring further in the analysis of genre becomes moot without a specific definition of what fantasy is, and while some researchers have everything from broad to non-sensical. Todorov settles on three important conditions:

“First, the text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described. Second, this hesitation may also be experienced by a character; thus the reader's role is so to speak entrusted to a character, and at the same time the hesitation is represented, it becomes one of the themes of the work—in the case of naive reading, the actual reader identifies himself with the character. Third, the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as "poetic" interpretations. These three requirements do not have an equal value. The first and the third actually constitute the genre; the second may not be fulfilled. Nonetheless, most examples satisfy all three conditions.” (Todorov 1973, 33).

The first condition, related to what Todorov defines as a hesitation, is the hesitation between acceptance and explanation of the magical events in the text. What Todorov argues is similar in a sense to the gothic term ‘Supernatural’ in which there are two roads for authors to explore their works: accepted supernatural—the supernatural is never explained, and the reader is meant to believe it is part of reality—or explained supernatural—where the supernatural is explained and proven to be understood (Hughes 2013). The gothic term is again similar to the understanding most fantasy authors think of when writing contemporary novels. These terms being the soft and hard magic systems. While Todorov seeks to make a theoretical approach, the magic system approach is more focused on guiding new authors towards making magic real in their texts. For example, the soft magic systems would be Gandalf using magic in *Lord of the Rings* or the White Walkers of *Game of Thrones*. Both use magic that is vague or never explained, making is examples of soft magic/accepted supernatural/natural explanation. Two examples of a rigid magic system/supernatural explanation would be Sympathy in the *Name of the Wind* and Allomancy in the *Mistborn Trilogy*, which both are categorized, analyzed, and detailed explained in what it does and how it is used. Most notably, these magic systems appear on a scale with examples that fall somewhere between two points, such as *Harry Potter* or *The Wheel of Time*, which uses authentic examples of definitely soft and hard magic systems.

Brandon Sanderson, the author of the *Mistborn Trilogy* and the one who popularized the terms soft and hard magic systems (Johnson 2020), wrote his Three Laws of Magic:

1. An author’s ability to solve conflict with magic is directly proportional to how well the reader understands said magic.
2. Limitations of a magic system are more interesting than its capabilities. Limitations > Power
3. Expand on what you have already, before you add something new.

Sanderson is quick to comment that they are not universal laws and are simply ways for him to think about the magic in general. The first of Sanderson's Laws concerning how well described the magic of a world is. Are they well described with multiple laws that govern how one uses said magic, meaning the magic is more rigid than soft, or are the magic detailed as 'Fire roared from his staff,' meaning it tends more towards the soft side of magic similar to Gandalf (Sanderson 2007).

The second relates specifically to the difference between how powerful or incapable a person is when they wield their magic. Sanderson says the limitations are more important because they create a struggle that the characters must overcome. The limitations often take two roads. One road is the weakness of magic/character, with the most known example of Superman and his weakness for kryptonite. This road is generally one of the more boring weaknesses as if none has any kryptonite; Superman wins easily. The other road takes use of costs. It costs something for the user to wield their magic, making it part of a simple bartering system. However, this can create some exciting costs, such as *Wheel of Time*, where men who wield magic go insane the more they use it, or as in the *Grave of the Empires* series, where the magic system is a literal barter from a god called Lady Merchant. The individual who takes the barter gets one power but one terrible cost—for example, Skymages making flight possible but slowly lose one's memories (Sanderson 2012).

The third Law means to make the magic that is already there and present more detailed and in-depth. This can be done through extrapolation, such as how the magic changes the world related to ours. If one can create money/food/soldiers out of thin air, what does that mean for the world's politics, warfare, trade, and social norms? Interconnection is another way to make the magic deeper. If the magic tends towards being used and helpful to thieves, make the culture and naming of the magic more interconnected with thieves. Tying powers thematically to specific groups/ideas or thoughts would deepen the worldbuilding. Another way and the last one Sanderson mentions is streamlining, where different cultures have thought of using the same magic differently for different outcomes such as a warlike society using fire magic for burning and war, while a peaceful religious culture might use it for simple things like boiling water or using fire as proof of their gods (Sanderson 2013).

Sub-creation

J. R. R. Tolkien, the author of *Lord of the Rings* and *the Hobbit*, wrote a paper on the subject of fairy stories that were initially presented as a lecture at the University of St. Andrew in 1939 and later became a revised publicized essay. In the beginning, he explores the term ‘fairy-stories,’ what the term means because, according to him, the three recognized definitions are either too broad or narrow in terms of genre. The essay brings to life the clear and distinctive thoughts Tolkien had on the term fairy stories, genre, and the importance of fantasy and mythology. At the beginning of the paper, he describes fairy-stories as multiple genres that can be used for either satire, adventure, morality, and, most importantly to this subject, fantasy. If used in a satirical sense, though, the one thing that cannot be made fun of is the magic, such as in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Tolkien n. d.).

Starting with the concept of what a fairy is, Tolkien explores the different definitions. Accordingly, Tolkien returns to the root of “Fäerie,” to which he means the land of fairies where other supernatural beings also inhabit and make a homeworld. One of the most important notes on the land of Fäerie is that it must be real in the sense that it is real for the inhabitants of the world. It cannot be made-up by a single individual, such as a dream. It has to be *real*. The inhabitants have to be able to go *there* and explore. The world of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* is an instance where the world is not real because it is a dream scenario made up by Alice, filled with talking animals, changing the height of bodies, a baby that changes to a pig, and a cat with a Cheshire smile, which has transcended popular culture, to mention just a few of the interesting fantasy elements that appear. However, according to Tolkien, for the simple logic that its setting is a dream dreamt by a child, it does not count as a fairy story/fantasy. If the story had ended without Alice waking up and realizing it was a dream, however? It could probably have been described as a subgenre of fantasy, as long as there was no dream scenario. As Tolkien explains: “since the fairy-story deals with “marvels,” it cannot tolerate any frame or machinery suggesting that the whole story in which they occur is a figment or illusion” (Tolkien n.d., 7)

Additionally, any reader who explores two stories that explore similar ideas, backgrounds, or folk-lore motives should seek to distance themselves from the same origin point. If two stories are similar in some sense, such as worldbuilding, characters, or narrative, the reader should not explore further into where the different authors got their ideas from as that would break the immersion of their work (Tolkien n.d., 9). No two works are the same. The small things are essential when two works are somewhat similar. Such as *Lord of the Rings* are not the same fairy story as *Wheel of Time*, although the two works of fiction both following a fellowship of wildly different people and races, where one is a simple farmer, setting out to destroy the evil dark lord, which has happened multiple times since. The two books have similarities, but their different worlds, plot, characters, and atmosphere make the two series vastly different. “It is precisely the colouring, the atmosphere, the unclassifiable individual details of a story, and above all the general purport that informs with life the

undissected bones of the plot, that really count.” (Tolkien n.d., 9). The critical part of stories is its effect on the reader instead of the stylistic approach by the author. Everyone uses a recycled theme, world, pattern, or idea as the analysis based on The Hero’s Journey will explore, but more than figuring out the origin of the idea behind the author’s creation is the effect the work itself produces.

Tolkien uses a soup metaphor by Webbe Dasente to explain why he believes that scholars, readers, etc., should not seek where the ideas and sources that created the world originate from similar stories. Instead, the reader should console themselves with eating the soup, “We must be satisfied with the soup that is set before us, and not desire to see the bones of the ox out of which it has been boiled.” (Tolkien, n.d., 9), and while he originally meant something else by ‘soup’ and ‘bones,’ Tolkiens use of the metaphor explains it well: “By “the soup” I mean the story as its author or teller serves it up, and by “the bones” its sources or material—even when (by rare luck) those can be with certainty discovered. But I do not, of course, forbid criticism of the soup as soup” (Tolkien n.d., 9). Interesting is that many critics have since used Tolkien’s work to figure out which bones he used in his soup.

By reading an author’s work, by eating the soup, by experiencing the story, a reader enters what Tolkien coined “sub-creator” who can make real the “willing suspension of belief” (Tolkien n.d., 18) in a reader, which Tolkien explains so well himself:

“He [sub-creator] makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is “true”: it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from outside. If you are obliged, by kindness or circumstance, to stay, then disbelief must be suspended (or stifled), otherwise listening and looking would become intolerable. But this suspension of disbelief is a substitute for the genuine thing, a subterfuge we use when condescending to games or make-believe, or when trying (more or less willingly) to find what virtue we can in the work of an art that has for us failed.” (Tolkien n.d., 18)

Therefore, the Primary World is the world in which we live, while the Secondary World is the made-up world that can give the reader a “Secondary Belief” if the author's skill is significant enough to make the unbelievable believable. Talking trees, sentient fire, magic wizards, and talking animals are just some of the ideas a Secondary World can inhabit. Truthfully, the author's imagination is what sets the limit of the story, and their ability to write is what limits or releases the reader's secondary belief. Something unbelievable can become believable as long as the reader is willing to suspend their belief.

On the subject of children's' ability to submerge themselves in a Secondary World is often, according to Tolkien, dependent on the individual child and their interest. He comments that most children will usually

try something once but are quick to dislike or do something else instead. They are less able to discuss why they dislike something and are reasonably fast to seek other avenues of enjoyment rather than sit and talk about why that is. According to Andrew Lang, the one Tolkien addressed in this paper/lecture, one of the most important questions a child often ask when listening to fairy-tales are “Is it true?”, which Tolkien replies: “‘If you have built your little world well, yes: it is true in that world.’ That is enough for the artist (or the artist part of the artist)” (Tolkien n.d., 35)

Tolkien argues that fairy stories' genre enables and provides a way for the reader to recover, escape reality and console them. Recover, as one might think, does not mean the healing of the body, as that in itself would be a motif of the genre, but instead, it means a way for the reader to see things more clearly and from a distance. Take a step back and revel in a new way to see an issue or idea. It is the re-gaining of a view to helping an individual see something such as “We should look at green again, and be startled anew (but not blinded) by blue and yellow and red. We should meet the centaur and the dragon, and then perhaps suddenly behold, like the ancient shepherds, sheep, and dogs, and horses— and wolves.” (Tolkien n.d., 28).

Escape and consolation are two terms, closely connected, that Tolkien mentions are also a hallmark that the genre provides. He distances himself from the negativity of “escapist literature.” Although true that the fantasy genre provides some of the clearest escape from the Primary World, it is, according to him, often a heroic and useful way to deal with issues and compares it with a man escaping from prison (which albeit considered unacceptable for society, is often understood as a possible avenue for an inmate). The escape allows, figuratively, the reader's imprisoned mind to ponder things not related to their situation/surroundings, whether that be walls, jailers, or the sometimes dull and stressful life of human existence (Tolkien n.d., 29). There are multitudes forms of escape and, according to Tolkien, the most known and sought after is the escape from death itself, as seen in multiple works of fantasy and science-fiction. It is a part of the human consciousness to explore the what-if scenarios, and no barrier has barred that door better than death. The experimentation of postponing, halting, death in fairy stories and other works is done in hundreds of ways (Tolkien n.d., 33). Men and women write fantasy, and through the ages, we have explored immortality in many different ways: vampires, elves, Frankenstein's Monster, Dorian Grey, multiple gods, and religious icons, wizards, to mention just some of the fictional races/characters that inhabit our writing from as far back as we have written stories to now. Although fairy-stories, or fantasy, are not the only genre that incorporates life's never-ending, it is one of the genres that use it more often, with arguably only religious texts having a more prevalent exploration of life after death. With all these different ways of exploring escape from death, the fairy-stories have explored long-lived life as Wolverine, never aging as Dorian Grey, living forever (barring physical death) like the elves. Other avenues can be done through cheating death such as resurrection, getting a second life (famous in gaming scenarios), uploading consciousness to a computer, a weapon or artifact granting immortality, or as in Harry Potter—imprinting your soul into the backside of another human being. However,

it is debatable how much living that is. Death is sometimes seen more like a revolving door that turns and turns, but where some characters can return after their death—it is a specific and often used motif in the fantasy genre and one of the escapes that Tolkien argues as essential.

However, the most critical aspect of Tolkien is the consolation, which takes its roles in the form of endings—specifically happy ones—as he almost asserts that every fairy story must have one to be complete. He calls these happy endings a eucatastrophe. Tolkien coins eucatastrophe, eu meaning good as a device for having a good catastrophe happening with the end of the book—a happy end, or more correctly, “the sudden joyous ‘turn’ (for there is no true end to any fairy-tale)” (Tolkien n.d., 33). The term does not erase the horribleness of a story but instead embraces it and makes the reader joyful at the unexpected turn of events. The eucatastrophe's opposite is the dyscatastrophe, which inhabits the grief, sorrow, failure, and evil triumph of a scene. When eucatastrophe triumphs over the dyscatastrophe, that is the specific moment that Tolkien finds of such consolation to the reader. He says, “however wild its events, however fantastic or terrible the adventures, it can give to child or man that hears it, when the “turn” comes, a catch of the breath, a beat and lifting of the heart, near to (or indeed accompanied by) tears, as keen as that given by any form of literary art, and having a peculiar quality.” (Tolkien n.d., 34).

No story told has achieved as great a success as the ‘Christian Story.’ The religion with the most believers in the world is Christian, and within it, there are many marvels for which Tolkien theory can apply. It is a mythical story with God, prophets, disasters, floods, resurrection, life, death, magic, turning water to wine that use eucatastrophe and dyscatastrophe to make the reader joyful when the ‘turn’ happens and makes them believe in something that is, technically, hard to prove. According to Tolkien himself, the greatest eucatastrophe is the Birth of Christ because it is the ‘happy joys turn’ of humanity’s story. “The Resurrection is the Eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation. This story begins and ends in joy. It has pre-eminently the “inner consistency of reality.” There is no tale ever told that men would rather find was true, and none which so many skeptical men have accepted as true on its own merits. For the Art of it has the supremely convincing tone of Primary Art, that is, of Creation.” (Tolkien n.d., 35).

Through the terms discussed here and popularized by Tolkien, we can discern the world that sub-creators build, how they are used, and what effect they are turned to create a believable, thoughtful, and joyful world. A world that offers recovery, escape, and consolation to whichever author writes well enough to make it believable. Moreover, the reader of a Secondary World becomes impacted by eucatastrophe and dyscatastrophe, making them believe that the Secondary World is some sense real: “in the “Eucatastrophe” we see in a brief vision that the answer may be greater—it may be a far—off gleam or echo of evangelium in the real world.” (Tolkien n.d., 35), as Tolkien believed it to be.

The notions of Primary World, Secondary World, eucatastrophe, and dyscastrophe are great tools to analyze the specific world-building taking place in a fantasy story—or any fictional story—as it allows the

examiner to focus on what parts of the Secondary World originate from the Primary World. The essay tells what specific turns are taking to making the impact of eucatastrophe as robust as possible, and it brings to attention the level of detail Tolkien made and used in his work. Lastly, it is a paper in defense of fantasy, as the genre was still considered lesser literature having few to none attractive traits. This stance has luckily lessened somewhat since Tolkien, partly because of him and his Secondary World (Hall 2005, 1).

The Hero's Journey

As already written, the last theory apparatus wielded in this thesis is Joseph Campbell's The Hero's Journey, aka the monomyth, detailed in *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* (1949). Since then, Campbell has furthered his research and published multiple works in similar fields. However, this thesis will concentrate on the specific journey of the respective series's main character(s). While the book also handles the pattern of a fantasy world's creation and eventual destruction, I will set aside that theory of the Cosmogonic Cycle and focus on sub-creation instead to handle the world-building. I choose this approach because there would then be a theory for handling and focusing on the characters and the story in one theory and another for handling the world. *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* is the 46th most influenced and best nonfiction book of all time (Time 2011), which is one part of why the theory's presentation herein.

This structural approach to plot and character development is Campbell's experimentation into the mythology realm as it argues that every story ever made is based on a straightforward structure just retold, reskinned, and replaced with different truths. The system is based on "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered, and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man" (Campbell 2008, 23).

Campbell focuses on three different stages that inhabit every fantasy series, the hero's Departure, Initiation, and Return. These instances are then broken down into multiple ways for which the hero can act within a given narrative order. The hero's Departure unfolds into five possible ways for the hero to tackle his/her quest, while the hero's Initiation and Return have six different methods of unfolding the narrative. Campbell describes a wheel in which the hero has different stages in which specific narrative choices are taken and used to force the hero to end and Return. The wheel then has three main stages and 17 sub-stages, which will be explained and detailed next to understand what is needed in this paper to give a clear answer to the problem statement. While Initiation and Return have more sub-stages than Departure, Initiation alone will usually fill most of the narrative as most of the development and questing occurs.



The Hero's Journey by Campbell and drawn by Karl Bimshas.

Departure

Departure inhabits The Call to Adventure, Refusal of the Call, Supernatural Aid, The Crossing of the First Threshold, The Belly of the Whale, and the first part on the Hero's Journey. Departure is often used to set up a quest in which the hero is forced/chosen to act based on the information that he/she receives. What Campbell calls the 'Call to Adventure' is the first sub-stage in the hero's departure. It begins with all things, a character, an average person, living in ignorance of something or someone. He lives in the world but is not entirely accepted as being it in. It can be something simple like his hair-color being different, indicating he might have a different family based on genetics, or something more convoluted that is not shown until much later in the book through plot twist or other literary techniques. It becomes clear that something must happen, something must change, and change is often through the Call to Adventure. The character is called away on some mission or objective by one or multiple people, letters, soldiers, bandits, animals, or an event that propels his story forward towards new and exciting adventures (Campbell 2008, 42).

The Refusal of the Call can be done differently, just as the previous stage could happen. It can be the hero's inherent doubt about how colossal the objective is and how unprepared he feels him/herself to be. It can be the wondering questions that the hero asks themselves, such as why now or why they were chosen. It can be the prevalent fear that inhabits them of the unknown or of leaving what is known and safe, even if the hero feels themselves as adrift in their initial world/home. Realizing that the hero fears the journey and their initial reaction is a refusal makes the hero more human (Campbell 2008, 49).

An excellent example of this is when Frodo from *Lord of the Rings* accepts to destroy the One Ring in Mount Doom's fires. The reader experiences his fears, anxieties, and doubt about his ability to achieve it, his strength to bear it, and his ignorance of the knowledge required to travel so far through the dangers. His initial reaction is that everyone else would be better suited to this task, but in the end, he accepts, nay, he offers to do it, accepting his destiny. However, that is just one of the possible avenues for the Refusal, and the eventual acceptance, of the Call.

The next stage is the Supernatural Aid. This stage is relatively quick and easy, although it eventually can set up the story's/character's success/victory if the aid given is essential enough—this is more traditional in older fairy tales. The modern fantasy series incorporates an often-elderly figure that gives an item, knowledge, toolset, and kind word of encouragement that helps the hero in their darkest hour (Campbell 2008, 57-60). A similar example from *Lord of the Rings* would be Frodo receiving Sting, or the Phial of Galadriel, in the first book, or when Sam receives a seed of a Mallorn tree from Galadriel, which he later planted the Shire as the only tree to ever sprout outside of Lórien in Middle-Earth.

The Crossing of the First Threshold, the second-to-last Departure stage, is where the hero has accepted his destiny and journeys forth traveling towards his quest. He leaves what is known and safe for the unknown

and dangerous. It has been accepted previously and been prepared for in previous sub-stages, but this is where the journey begins (Campbell 2008, 64-65). In *Lord of the Rings*, Frodo and Sam leave the shire and cross the Shire and the unknown boundary. They venture forth with trepidation.

The Belly of the Whale marks the point of no return for the hero and breaks his ties to the known world completely. He cannot return and must therefore continue forth. The hero sees the unknown world. The hero accepts a form of metamorphosis, a rebirth, after leaving the known world. Instead of looking at the unknown, they see inside themselves and change—a rebirth of the spirit into a heroic version that can bear the quest. The hero does not *actually* die and get reborn, unless that in itself is part of the world’s unknown magic-system (Campbell 2008, 74-77), as that sometimes allow it—such as *The Night Angel Trilogy*, where a young orphan boy becomes accepted as an apprentice to an assassin that then trains and sends him out on missions, from which the boy often dies. Death does not hold as tightly in this world as it does in our Primary World.

Initiation

Initiation has the Road of Trials, the Meeting with the Goddess, Woman as the Temptress, Atonement with the Father, Apotheosis, and the Ultimate Boon, and is the second of the three main stages. Initiation often includes the most significant chunk of any novel. The previously mentioned sub-stages can be absorbed in any number of different ways for the story to develop. This stage does take into account what happened in the previous stage because without a plot that develops naturally and believably, the world and story fall apart. The first sub-stage, the Road of Trials, is while the hero is still exploring the unknown world, he knows nothing or very little yet. He slowly learns more and more and can often face danger in the form of small trials that help the hero grow and learn. There might not be any presentable or obvious danger of which the hero is aware, or it might be that the hero needs to gather allies and overcome previously mentioned trials. It depends on the world, story, and characters. The hero slowly learns to respect the unknown world and slowly feel more connected to this unknown one than the old known one (Campbell 2008, 81-90). In *Lord of the Rings*, this takes the form of the nine Ringwraiths pursuit of Frodo and his friends as they try to reach the Buckleberry Ferry and the “safety” of Bree. It is here they find one of their allies—a man called Strider.

The Meeting with the Goddess is a stage that is not as momentous or important narratively as it is a meeting between someone female and the hero/heroine. The two can be romantically interested or not, but most notable is that they will recognize something interested in each other, whether they be human or some supernatural fairy creature (Campbell 2008, 99-100). The meeting between Frodo and Arwen (or Glorfindel in the book) could be an example of this substage.

Directly opposite stage from the Meeting with the Goddess is the sub-stage Woman as the Temptress, which albeit does not have to be about a woman. The Woman can be merely metaphorical, and it can instead be an object that the hero finds tempting and debates within him/herself if it is worth abandoning the quest to

achieve the object. The object can be everything from physical to abstract. This sub-stage leaves two choices for the hero, the abandonment or the continuation of the quest. Both choices have been made before, but the former will have unforeseen circumstances, and the latter will reconfirm his commitment to the quest above all else (Campbell 2008, 101). Frodo's relationship with the ring is an example of this; the ring seeks him to use the ring, and instead, when the Fellowship is made in Rivendell, he reaffirms his decision to help destroy it.

Atonement with the Father is once again a metaphor, this specific one meaning that the hero will at some point rebel against whomever they recognize as a father figure or someone with power over them. This rebellion will be necessary and forthcoming for the hero to learn later to stand on their own two feet. They cannot do so in the shadow of their father. Rebellion is the only path forward, and so the hero rebels to claim that right and gain valuable experience (Campbell 2008, 107-125). A possible rebellion is Frodo's disagreement with Gandalf at the pass Caradhras, who urges the Fellowship through the Mines of Moria instead of traversing the mountain, the storm, and Saruman, although Gandalf is more knowledgeable on the subject. This rebellion eventually leads to the death of Gandalf the Grey. The Atonement comes through while in the Mines, where Frodo and Gandalf talk about Gollum, justice, and fate.

After overcoming both temptations of the woman and the father's power, the hero enters into a new form of enlightenment where he has received the needed information/knowledge and gains access to more formidable Trials. This stage is called Apotheosis and shows off the experience gained and sets him up for the more formidable challenges after overcoming previous challenges. While this does not necessarily mean that the hero becomes a god or, as it can be understood in Latin, "making divine," it shows the hero's improvement (Campbell 2008, 127-147). In the *Lord of the Rings*, this happens for Frodo during the battle in King Durin's grave chamber. For instance, Frodo fights, as does the entire Fellowship, but Frodo is the only one gravely wounded by the cave troll. However, Frodo wore a mithril shirt—a specifically mined material in Moria and was given to him by Bilbo Baggins—that saved his life and made him appear somewhat divine to have achieved victory with the previously given tools.

The Ultimate Boon is the last of the Initiation sub-stages and often finishes that main stage. This sub-stage is the ultimate climax and should, if done correctly, be the most thrilling for the reader as the risk and the reward are both high. After completing the quest, battling the villain, or overcoming the trials, the hero is rewarded with something beneficial to him/her, such as monetary gain, skills, magical items, weapons, castles, and kingdoms. While the reward can be an actual prize, it might just as well be gratitude, honor, happiness, or some such. It depends on the quest, author, world, and story (Campbell 2008, 148-165). In *Fellowship of the Ring*, this appears when the Fellowship leaves Moria with their lives (except Gandalf) and a reward for their hardship from Galadriel to each of the members, becoming used and helpful to them. Frodo gains the Phial of

Galadriel, which becomes essential, especially in the third movie/book. However, the overarching Ultimate Boon of the story is when the One Ring falls into Mount Doom and is destroyed in the third movie/book.

Return

The Return has the sub-stages known as Refusal of the Call, The Magic Flight, Rescue from Without, The Crossing of the Return Threshold, Master of Two Worlds, and Freedom to Live. As every story has a beginning, middle, and end, so does Campbell's theory. The narrative is over and completed in this stage. These sub-stages govern the story's closing, although the narrative might pick up again or continue in another story, such as a continuation of retelling. Refusal of the Call is the reversal of the sub-stage with the same name in the Departure category. Instead of being separated or dissimilar to others, people around the hero now feels elated at finally completing their quest. The hero often feels relief at having lived through the ordeal and has a tinge of fear or nervousness about returning to the ordinary world. By returning to the ordinary world, the hero will possibly also be leaving knowledge, feelings, and personality changes that they gained on their journey. Therefore, the hero who felt misplaced in the ordinary world is reluctant to return, which becomes Refusal of the Call. As is often the case in tragedies and mythological stories, the story can end here as the hero now must remain and dies in the supernatural world. Campbell explains, "[the hero] fabled to have taken up residence forever [...] to have died while in the supernal ecstasy" (Campbell 2008).

However, if the Refusal does not appear or the hero ascends beyond it, the hero can lead to other sub-stages in Campbell's hypothesis. The Magic Flight is one of these, and it leads explicitly to escaping someplace with the object of the Ultimate Boon. The Magic Flight can take two paths depending on the guardian of the Boon. Campbell explains, "If the hero in his triumph wins the blessing of the goddess or the god and is then explicitly commissioned to return to the world with some elixir for the restoration of society, the final stage of his adventure is supported by all the powers of his supernatural patron. On the other hand, if the trophy has been attained against the opposition of its guardian, or if the hero's wish to return to the world has been resented by the gods or demons, then the last stage of the mythological round becomes a lively, often comical, pursuit. This flight may be complicated by marvels of magical obstruction and evasion." (Campbell 2008, 170). This stage's usual goal is the return of the hero and the object now in his possession, which can be used to the benefit of all.

Rescue from Without is the brave rescue of the hero's life if the fight has somehow left him tired, wounded, or dead. The rescue party can be someone known or unknown. The party can be the final nail that wins everything by the end, as they will be the tipping point between the hero winning or losing his quest. "The hero may have to be brought back from his supernatural adventure by assistance from without. That is to say, the world may have to come and get him." (Campbell 2008, 178). In the *Fellowship of the Ring*, Sam rescues Frodo from drowning and gives moral support as Frodo is desperate and miserable. This rescue once

again happens in *Return of the King* where Gandalf, and the eagles Gwaihir, Landroval, and Meneldor, rescue Frodo and Sam from Mount Doom's slope after its eruption.

The Crossing of the Return Threshold is similar in name to the Crossing of the First Threshold in Departure. However, the hero in Return Threshold has now become shaped by the quest and his lived experiences. He moves from the dangers of the world to the protection and relative safety of the ordinary world. With this move, he realizes that the two worlds are not two worlds, but instead one combined understanding of myth and symbol. Sharing the wisdom gained by his experience is part of this sub-stage as the hero seeks to teach and incorporate what he learned into a new real human life (Campbell 2008, 188-189).

The second-to-last sub-stage, called Master of Two Worlds, is generally straightforward. The returning hero has mastered 'both worlds,' feels comfortable in them, and enjoys excellent renown in both worlds. The old world's inhabitants feel indebted to the hero, and the hero can now quickly travel between either world or transfer between them. Nietzsche would call the hero for the Cosmic Dancer—"does not rest heavily in a single spot, but gaily, lightly, turns and leaps from one position to another." (Campbell 2008, 196). In *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, Campbell notes this mastery does not have to be only the material world; it could also be religious, symbolic, or spiritual, meaning that it is much broader than merely nations, kingdoms, or land. However, quick to clarify is that the different worlds are the same, just different sides of the same coin, whether spiritual, symbolic, religious, or material.

Freedom to Live, the very last of Campbell's sub-stages, grants the hero the normalcy of living in something similar to living in the moment. The hero neither fears the future nor regrets his past actions but now lives happily or grudgingly accepts who he is. He does not fear death or mistakes in the same sense and has become trustworthy in his decisions. Whichever threats he may now face, they will not be feared. Campbell explains it thus with a quote from Bhagavad Gita: "Do without attachment the work you have to do.... Surrendering all action unto Me, with mind intent on the Self, freeing yourself from longing and selfishness, fight—unperturbed by grief." (Campbell 2008, 206).

Analysis

As stated earlier, I would focus on Evan Winter's works with *The Burning* and Joe Abercrombie with his *First Law Trilogy*. Both works would be compared based on the earlier mentioned theory apparatus and a quick comparison to Tolkien's Secondary World. By drawing on specific examples from the two series and comparing them, I will argue that both are reworking the fantasy genre in new and exciting ways.

With these primary literature pieces, I seek to gain two different genres with certain similarities and differences with *Lord of the Rings* to figure out since Tolkien's work is still used as a go-to for every fantasy author. It is undoubtedly challenging to show Tolkien as anything but a pillar of fantasy, but with the chosen literature, I hope to analyze how the genres have evolved and diversified itself to tell new and fascinating stories in the genre of fantasy through the two mentioned series.

The Burning

One of the chosen fantasy series, as earlier stated, would be *The Burning* series by Evan Winter, which at the writing of this paper, has released two books, with a third and a fourth on the way, and set to complete his book series. The first book, *The Rage of Dragons*, was initially self-published, which has become easier to do since Amazon released a self-publish feature in 2009 and other similar websites/companies self-publishing viable for inspired authors followed suit (Locklear 2018).

Orbit and picked up *the Rage of Dragons* for a four-book deal, of which two books have so far been released to the public. Orbit released its edition on March 10, 2020. The series is known for its fast-paced action, barreling towards the next exciting action sequence, of which there are many (. It accomplishes this without sacrificing the world-building or the characters. Hundreds of fantasy series are copied in some sense from *Lord of the Rings* and the same Medieval English/Nordic setting with castles, nobles, culture, etc. This series is a breath of fresh air as it delves into a deep world inspired by African history that is almost entirely unexplored by any contemporary fantasy author.

The story is told only from the view-point of a young Tau Solarin and enables a deepfelt connection to Tau's tumultuous emotions. While the world is grim, it does not rise to grimdark fantasy, such as the *First Law Trilogy*. This series holds a level of "goodness" to it, but without having the feel of everything-will-be-okay. It keeps the reader on their toes as we both cheer and condemn Tau's quest for revenge. The series is a coming-of-age story similar to many of the fantasy series of the 70s and 80s, but with a deeply influenced African-inspired setting. The setting is set in something similar to the Bronze age; as iron and trees are rare, most of the tools and weapons are made of bronze. The lack of wood makes bows, doors, and wooden furniture a costly tool only seen from the nobles' richest. Most fighting is done through either swords and spears made of bronze or by the Omehi magic, which is interesting in its application to the world.

The prologue begins with Queen Taifa, 186 cycles before the actual story of Tau begins. The prologue showcases how his people arrived on Xidda following their defeat, retreat, and run from the Cull on their original continent. The Cull is their ancient enemy, but after being driven to flee from their continent, they arrive on Xidda by ship, where the Cull is unable to follow, to find the new continent filled with Xiddeen fighting to defend their homes. Through war, death, dragons, and 186 years, the Omehi can carve out a small portion of the continent to settle and live in a warrior society where the powerful Nobles rule the Lessers. During this prologue, much information is given such as who they are and what they are doing here, but it is all fractured and without context, making the reader continue reading to understand what the terms mean. Breadcrumbs are given, and the reader is encouraged to follow.

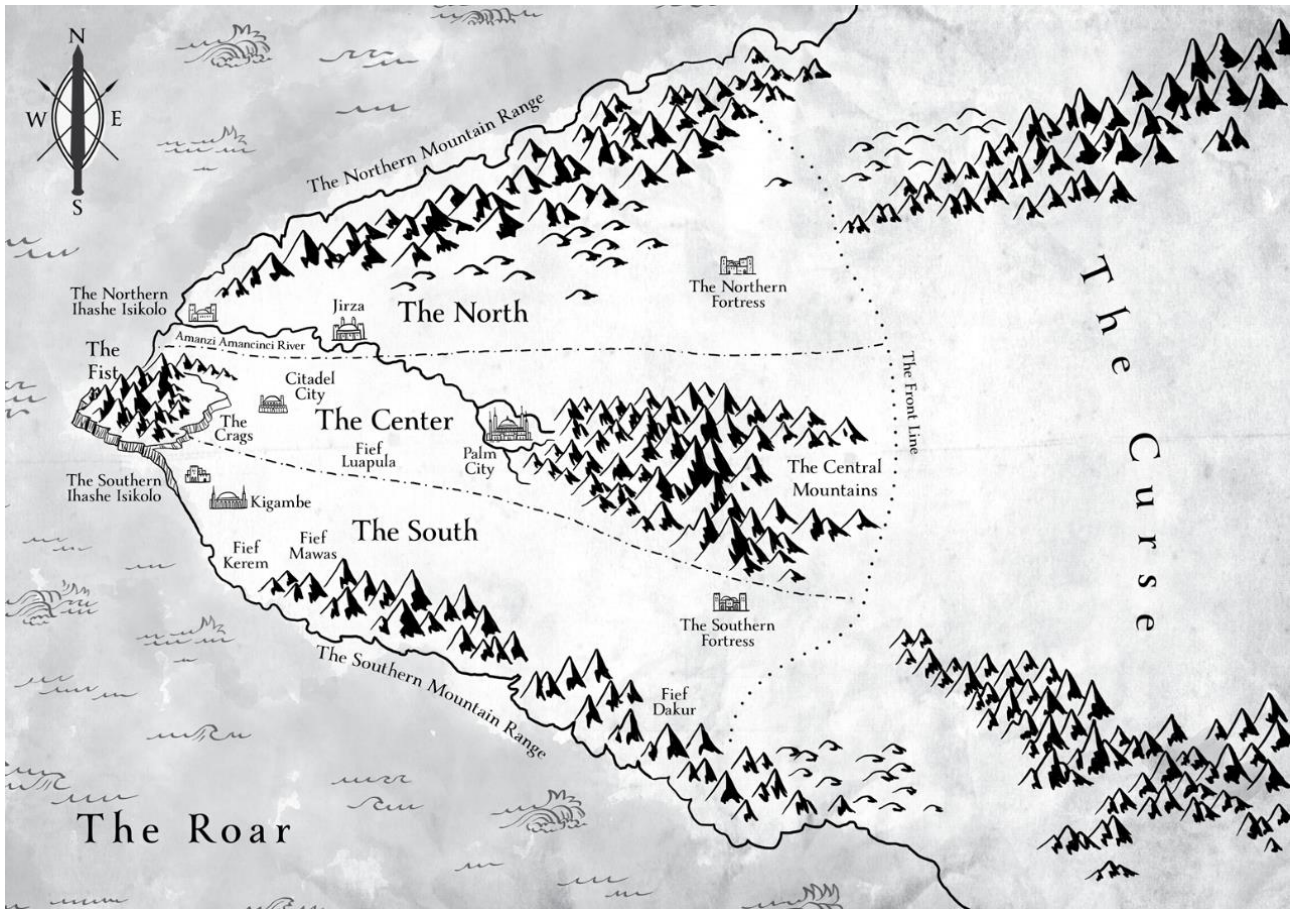
“I wanted to explore the hidden obstacles that are placed in front of people that often go unrecognized by those affected by them — and probably more to a greater degree those not affected by them. I wanted to have a story that examined the actual effects of that kind of pressure on a person.”—Evan Winter.

According to Amazon, the books themselves are specified as Dragon and Mythical Creatures Fantasy, one of the most often used magical animals ever created (Higgypop 2017). Another sub-genre is Military Fantasy, as the hero is a soldier. Lastly, they have identified it as belonging to the Black and African American Fantasy Fiction. All these genres, and more, will be analyzed and discussed during the next chapter—as well as the sub-creation of Winter’s world.

Uhmlaba the Secondary World

The Secondary World—called Uhmlaba—is set in this world’s bronze-age with bronze swords and working tools. With two known continents, that of Xidda and Osonte. Not much is known about Osonte, except it was the original continent of the Omehi people.

The Xidda continent is at the end of the second book, only partly revealed by the inclusion of a map that shows the entirety of the Omehi territory by the drawer Tim Paul. The western shore of Xidda is mountainous, surrounded by water on three sides and the Curse, to the east, where the natives originate. The peninsula is defended by water, mountains or fortresses from which the armies of the Omehi defend. The Xiddeen do have very simple boats, able to strike around and land at the Fist although many people do not survive that journey.

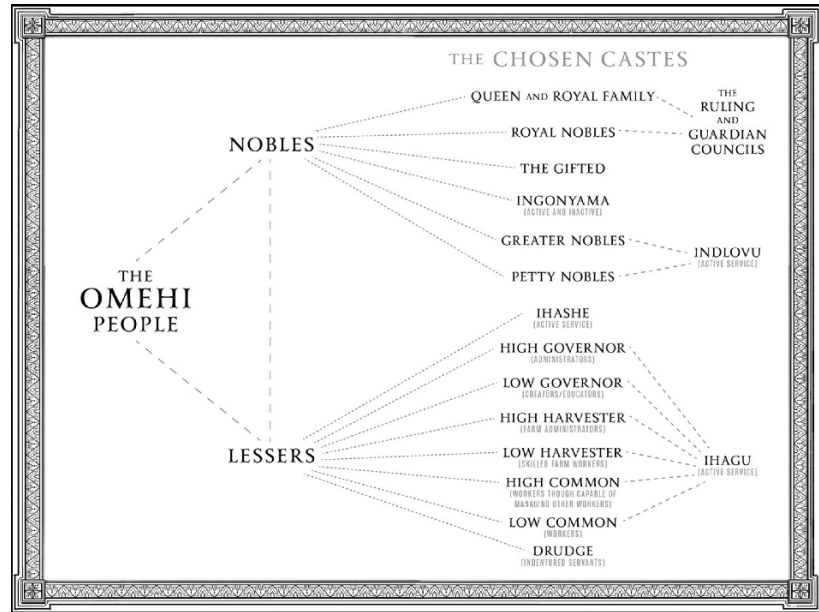


The Xidda continent, drawn by Tim Paul (Winter 2019).

The first of the sub-genres that Winter had in mind was a strict Military Fantasy. The Omehi people are made of two combined cultures, forced together by the necessity of war: Nobles and Lessers. During the prologue, Winter gives the reader part of the backstory of the Omehi people viewed from Queen Taifa—the only viewpoint character that is not Tau in the first book. From their original continent, they fled in big wooden ships, “She [Queen Taifa] could see the two and a half thousand ships of her people, most of them cannibalized for parts, lying on the beach like the half-eaten quarry of some greater predator.” (Winter 2019, 396-398¹). Their ships that they arrived on are worn, meaning that they had plenty of wood on their continent and lacking strong natural wood for wooden items. They had to cannibalize the ships they arrived on. “out of arrows. It’s all that kept the savages off him, and Goddess knows, the wood in this forsaken land is too brittle to make more” (Winter 2019, 196-197). Without lasting wood, they use their ships as the only source of usable wood for furniture, doors, walls, and of course, arrows. Because of the cannibalization, they have no more ships a little less than two hundred years later—during the age of Tau.

¹ References from the primary texts (Winter and Abercrombie’s works) are locations and not pages, as the epub-file format use that for more precise references.

In this age, after almost two hundred years of battle, the military ranks and tactics are still used as in their original role. The ranks are the same. The structure is the same. The status of their military society is fashioned from either Ihagu² (generally considered cannon fodder of the Lesser castes with no military status), Ihashe (elite fighters of the Lesser castes), Indlovu (average soldiers of the Nobles), and Ingonyama (the elite fighters of the Nobles) often teamed up with an Enrager—term for one of the magic wielders able to further empower the strongest of the Nobles (Winter 2019).



The Omehi castes (Winter 2019).

Everything revolves around their military, with the Nobles taking up the most critical roles and positions. The Lessers are often overlooked, abused, and disvalued as weak and useless unless they are Ihashe. The Omehi are ruled by a queen called Taifa during the Xidda Peninsula discovery, and during Tau's time, a new young queen called Tsiora is in power. The queen is never married in the usual sense of the word, "It wasn't forbidden, but queens did not marry. They were wedded to their people and loved none more than the Goddess, so the saying went. Instead, queens took great care in the selection of their champions. The queen's champion was more than a military leader. He was also the seed for the next generation of royalty and, in ideal circumstances, a true partner." (Winter 2019, 1412-1415). The Guardian Council helps the queen govern and rule their people. They help the Champion prepare tactics in war and can, in some cases, overrule either queen or champion by overcoming some checks and balances on their power.

During the Omehi people's long voyage over the sea, the dragons guided their journey. It was dragons that led them to the only available land they could live—and barely, farm. "We're lucky the dragons led us here," Tsiory said. 'It was a gamble, hoping they'd find land before we starved. Even if we could take to the water again, without them leading us, we'd have no hope.' (Winter 2019, 216-218). The dragons must be intelligent if they can scout and help the Omehi, but as more and more is learned about dragons and the magic of the Omehi, the more feared and dangerous they appear. As they do in Tolkien's Secondary World, the dragons do not slumber in some forgotten and abandoned cave. They are not hundreds of kilometers long.

² More on the origin of the language later onwards in this chapter

They do not talk or communicate as in the Secondary World of *Inheritance*. They do not let people fly on their backs. Instead, in Winters Secondary World, they fly, burn, and bite everyone and everything they possibly can, the only exception of that are the magics of the Omehi, which offsets the dragons' will to kill the people. This shows that the series uses a retelling of the more traditional western dragons and makes the Dragon and Mythical Creatures Fantasy genre. The dragons are a significant part of the story as past sins/crimes continuing against the dragons are seen as the only way to survive in this neverending war.

“We were only to follow them [dragons],” he [Tsiry the Champion] said. “If we use the dragons, we’ll destroy this land. If we use the dragons, the Cull will find us.” [...]

“Can you hold this land for me, my champion?” she [Queen Taifa] asked, hating herself for making this seem his fault, his shortcoming.

“I cannot.”

“Then,” she said, turning to him, “the dragons will.” (Winter 2019, 168-173)

While dragons are a common theme in fantasy, it is not the only type of genre used. Multiple genres can be used to describe it, such as High Fantasy, Magic Fantasy, Myths and Legends, and Coming of Age Fantasy. These are just some of the tools the series use to catch the reader's eye. Only by being in a fictional Secondary World, this one is subscribed to as a high fantasy according to Brian Stableford definition (Stableford 2005, 198). Ninety-five percent of the book is from one main character's viewpoint, with only the brief prologue of another character that lived long ago. This makes Tau the promising main character who does not have any special skills or heritage; it is a particular drive that is unshakable. He is young and has an interest in combat—more on Tau's journey in the next chapter. For now, it is enough to know that enough of the story revolves around him and his Coming of Age—another often used sub-genre of fantasy, particular to the teenage audience.

Another creature that does not appear in the Primary World is that Winter does not name in either of his current books. That will probably change in the third book as the *Fires of Vengeance* sets up a need. So far, the creatures are described as “lizards as tall as a Lesser's shoulders that, from muzzled head to barbed tail's end, were the length of two men. The creatures flicked their tongues at the air, smelling blood in the night, and their eyes glowed, reflecting what little light there was. The Xiddeen riding the beasts held spears that were much longer than the ones they used in hand-to-hand combat.” (Winter 2019, 6229-6232).

One of the most often used tropes in fantasy is, of course, magic. Throughout the history of fantasy, there have been multiple ways to use different kinds of magic. Magic is also present in *the Burning* series, and it takes a very hard approach based on Sanderson's First Law. The magic is based on religion in a sense as they—one girl in every thousand can draw on some magic—draw their power from The Goddess, who then

grants her magic wielders a shroud. This shroud is what gives their Gifted—as the girls are called—their power. Based on their shroud's power, they can draw on more power and use it longer. When they activate their gifts, they are sent to the realm of Isihogo, which is a “colorless, mist-filled prison world where time flows differently” (Winter 2019, 7445-7446), a world infested with demons willing to devour anyone they see as soon as they use their magic. This is why the users are granted shrouds to hide their being in the world while using their magics in the ordinary Secondary World. The supernatural Secondary World could then be described as Isihogo. If Gifted stay too long, uses their magic too much, or lose their shroud, they are almost instantly devoured and killed by the demons, making it a hefty cost, according to Sanderson's Second Law.

For Sanderson's Third Law, Winter uses some of the ways to make the magic deeper. One of those is through extrapolation and streamlining. The Omehi are warlike and fight for their lives every year. Everything is related to the war, and the magic is used for that purpose only. They do not heal, and they do not do anything relating to politics unless one agree with Carl von Clausewitz that “War is merely the continuation of politics with other means.” They do not build houses, art, or create anything new. There are no benefits to their use of magic except for the benefit of war and death. The different Gifted have, as stated earlier, different shrouds and gifts that allow them to do different kinds of magic, but they are all used for the benefit of their war.

Edifier is the lowest of the Gifted, traveling faster than others through Isihogo, which are during the first two books only used to pass messages between their war scales regarding enemy movement or news that most often relates to war, disasters, and combat. An Enervator can forcefully push groups of people's souls into Isihogo for them to be quickly devoured by demons. If, for example, 50 enemy soldiers try to attack a defended hill, an Enervator can push them all into Isihogo if they are in her line of sight and close enough. The soldiers will then be trapped there, and their souls/minds will be busy defending their souls instead of their bodies in the ordinary Secondary World. A quick note is that while Gifted can die a soul and body death if a demon kills them, a regular soldier who cannot access any gifts will be returned to their body once the demons kill them. An Enrager can force the power of Isihogo into the body of a Greater or Royal Noble to make them bigger, stronger, faster, and more resilient against wounds. The Noble able to hold that power without dying are called Ingonyama³.

The last kind of magic Winter's Secondary World deals with is the powers of the Entreaters. They are the strongest, the fewest numbered, and the most valued in the entire society. Even more so than the Nobles, although the Entreaters have little to no more power than others of the Gifted. An Entreater is, in the simplest definition of the word, able to bind the will of someone, or more importantly, something else. To bind a dragon, the most potent magical creature in the books, they must gather 16 Gifted and use their shrouds to manage the dragon while they hide in their shrouds. Once the weakest of the Entreater's shroud fails, she is then devoured

³ The meaning behind some of these worlds will be explained soon.

by the demons in Isihogo. Every time they call a dragon, they sacrifice one Gifted every few spans to keep the dragon under their will. “Exhausted, and with the shroud that masked her soul’s light collapsing, Queen Taifa Omehia sacrificed one more Gifted, released the dragon, and folded back into herself.” (Winter 2019, 426-427). The costs that Branderson talks about are relevant and dire in *the Burning*. The world is brutal, cold, and survival of the fittest rules barely, although every time someone fights, someone dies, whether through killing or using their gifts. The population of both sides—Omehi and Xiddeen—dwindle, and there can be no peace. While the story itself is very dark, and many characters are killed throughout, in a similar style to *A Song of Ice and Fire*, it does not broach the grimdark level, which will be explored further in the *First Law Trilogy*.

Many unfamiliar words are written in the English language and used to describe certain ranks, militaries, and holy names through reading. Words such as Ihagu, Ihashe, and Ingonyama are just some of the words based on Xhosa's South African language. Most of the words that are not instantly recognizable when reading the book will be explained in the book after a while, such as those just mentioned are different army divisions. When translated from Xhosa into English, the meaning behind the words shows the disregard and condensation that the lower classes have to put up with. While the usual everyday English reader will not understand the meaning behind some of the words because of language barriers, the further analysis gives credence to making the Secondary World more believable and lived-in than having just attached the names in English directly. Ihagu means ‘pig’ in Xhosa. Ihashe is translated into ‘mare.’ Indlovu is ‘elephant,’ while Ingonyama is ‘lion’ and inkokeli is ‘leader’ in Xhosa. There are significant differences in the meaning between the different factions. The Lessers are named after less-than-fearsome animals, while the Nobles get the lion and the elephant as the symbol of their faction, as well as powerful skills “The Ingonyama shattered a man’s skull with his sword pommel, and in the same swing, he split another from collarbone to waist. Grabbing a third heathen by the arm, he threw him ten strides.” (Winter 2019, 269-270). While the first two are seen as a negative compared to the lion, the characters from those first two groups can gain some modicum of respect later in the first book because of Tau⁴.

Winter said: “I lived outside [in Zambia] and in my imagination, and there was something so special about the large open spaces, feeling of total safety, and the freedom to explore and experience everything around me. Zambia provides the secondary world in which the story takes place, while the rest of Earth offers the basis for Uhmlaba’s conflicts and their inevitable fallout.” (Winter 2019, 7540-7542). There are precise moments where the culture and Secondary World makes it clear where his inspirations come from. He draws and uses Black & African American Fantasy to tell his own story of what he finds attractive. Uhmlaba means ‘the world.’

⁴ More on Tau in the next chapter

The last primary fantasy genre I will discuss represented in the series is one of the things Tolkien liked more than most: Myths and Legends. The genre plays an essential role in Uhmlaba as the Omehi are religious and believe in a goddess that created everything in the Secondary World. Some of the religious aspects come through interaction, such as the gifts and how to use them. Most of it comes through a single conversation between Tau and his friend Zuri. “‘Everything began with Ananthi when She spun the universe out of Her desire for more. She created the sun, stars, Uhmlaba, and all that is between them.’” (Winter 2019, 3661-3662). Uhmlaba’s origin comes from the Goddess Ananthi—meaning endless or infinite—and while there is a whole story that explains the beginning of the end in their Secondary World. Long story short, a man called Ukufa—meaning death—an immortal as all the first humans were, challenged Ananthi for him being “less than his betters” (Winter 2019, 3673). He gathered a group against Ananthi and attacked. Only Omehi and a few other races of men helped Ananthi, but they were too late.

The land shattered, broke, became barren in patches, and the lands were sundered. The last few of the Omehi and their allies attacked Ukufa and his evil horde. The Omehi would have lost if it were not for Ananthi as she used the last of her strength “Using all She was, Ananthi wrapped herself around Ukufa and his corrupted, trapping them. She used the energy of Her being to form a prison, an impenetrable new realm.” (Ibid., 3683-3684). Ukufa, growing weaker as the prison/Ananthi manifested around him, forced Uhmlaba and what was to become Isihogo—which is translated to hell—together and with that, took immortality from everyone, except those bound to him. With his last words, he made a promise:

“immortality to those calling to him, immortality in exchange for their souls and service. The cowards accepted, swearing to kill us all. They swore they would eliminate Ananthi’s Chosen and, in so doing, destroy Ananthi, allowing Ukufa to escape the prison. In this way, the weakest among us became the strongest, for though they can be killed, they do not die from age or sickness.” [told Zuri].

“You’re describing the Cull,” said Tau.

“I am.” (Ibid., 3689-3693).

Ananthi died by leaving Uhmlaba and making herself into a prison to house Ukufa and his demons. In Isihogo, her essence remains, so to use magic, one’s soul must be there to use in Uhmlaba. That is how the Gifted draws on their powers and wield them for war. However, it is not just the Gifted that can go to Isihogo. Every man, woman, or child, even giftless, can go there and leave safely as long as they meditate, prepare and leave quickly or the demons will find them eventually. By drawing on Isihogo or their gifts, they begin to light up and draw every demon towards them. Only the Gifted can then remain because of their shrouds. The demons remain there, locked by the will of Ananthi, and while they cannot kill humans, “the corrupted, the demons, attack all living souls, seeking vengeance for their imprisonment. They can do no physical harm, so long as

the soul they seek to destroy does not draw energy from Isihogo. Drawing energy from the underworld makes you corporeal there.” (Ibid. 3709-3711).

It is a brutal myth that everyone believes is made up or make-believe. That is generally what every Lesser believes; only a few like the Gifted, the queen, and some of the Nobles trust it. They do have that religion, but after so long, few believe what they should believe. “The Cull are a tale, meant to frighten children into doing their prayers” (Ibid., 3694). They believe the world was born from Ananthi but have only stories passed from mouth to mouth through the ages as proof. In the present, the Cull is believed to be a myth and legend rather than actual men fighting for Ukufa. Some of the Omehi people believe it was some other disaster they fled or that the Cull is already dead as if they culled themselves. “[the Cull are] silver-skinned immortals. He’d never seen them. He knew no man, woman, or child who’d ever seen them. They were fairy tales to hide the real evil, the evil on the stage in front of him.” (Ibid., 2046-2047). The only description of the Cull through the entire two books, name them only as silver-skinned, except two stories. The first story was the one told by Zuri previously discussed.

In the second book, the reader hears the second story of the origins of the Omehi journey to Xidda and the Cull’s attack. The story is told by Queen Tsiora—not to be confused with Taifa, who is 200 years dead—and her handmaiden to Tau. In the beginning, immediately after the sealing of Ukufa, the Cull was at their weakest. They grew slowly in power, and by uniting with Ukufa in Isihogo, they become immortal and eventually grew strong enough. Meanwhile, Omohi becomes sluggish and forgetful over the generations of no attack from the Cull. That changed when they attacked the Ndola—a Primary World city in Zambia that mainly exports copper and cobalt, meaning that its Secondary World imitation might be known for those same qualities. The Ndola was, in any case, a peaceful people with no tools for fighting. The other nations thought the Cull only wanted Ndola for their resources, and so did nothing. Similar to Primary World history, many would do nothing in the hope that the war will not come to them (Winter 2020, 3973-3985).

When the Cull comes for the Omehi, Ananthi intervenes somehow, and it is not explained how since she should be pure essence at the moment to keep Ukufa locked away. In any case, she grants her Guardians—dragons—to the Omehi, who use them to defend themselves. Strictly speaking, it is not said how they are used, but the reader is led to believe that the dragons willingly help them at this moment rather than being controlled by the Gifted, as is the case on the Xidda peninsula. During these battles between the two, the Omohi battle cry originates: “Where we fight, the world burns!” (Ibid., 1687).

However, even the dragons are not enough to stop the onslaught of the Cull. So while many other races of men and their nations had fallen, the Omohi sought help where ever they could. Moreover, they turned to the race of men called Nobles. The Nobles had but one gift rather than the multitude of the Omohi. The Nobles were passively connected to the Goddess in Isihogo, so they always had that passive connection when they grew up and more substantial. They grew stronger, faster, and more significant than any other race of men,

and that knowledge gave them a belief in themselves and the impossible. They would not help or defend anyone but themselves “‘Blood will show,’ they said, ‘and no woman or man has blood as strong as ours.’” (Ibid., 4000).

The Omohi offered everything they could, but all were denied until they offered up enraging, and the queen at the time made a plan. The queen is unknown but said to have been one of the strongest Gifted ever to live. She made a bet with the Nobles. She would enslave the entire Omehi people if their champion could beat her champion. If her champion won, though, she would become their queen. While at first, they were suspicious once she said they could choose her champion for her, but allow her a night with him, they agreed. “They sent out one of their weaker men, a rabble-rouser who had been imprisoned for speaking out against Noble culture. They mocked him and our monarch both” (Ibid., 4014-4015).

Nevertheless, when the duel was to take place, and the queen enraged her champion, he won: “The rabble-rouser, the reject, the man so weak his people cast him out, fought in the twilight of a day’s end until his opponent, Noble’s champion, dressed in armor as black as night, fell. He was the greatest warrior the Nobles had ever known, and he died on Osonte’s sands, his red blood staining the black leather armor that could not save him from the power of an Omehian queen.” (Ibid., 4021-4023). Then and there, the Nobles swore to the queen, as they knew that without the Omehi’s magic, they would never be the strongest since even the weakest among them became the strongest with the Omehi’s help. The queen eventually came to love her champion, and the two gave birth to a girl.

Their joy was short-lived as the Cull advanced kept coming. The Nobles' original homeland fell as well, making the Omehi—and the many Nobles who lived among them—the last people who resisted the Cull on their continent. The queen summoned her gifts and burned everything she could except the few places left where the new Omehi was. For days her shroud lasted longer than anyone before or since, and when her shroud finally fell, the demons tore her to shreds, but the dragon continued burning the Cull because it by then was half mad with rage and thoughts of destruction. “Where we fight, the world burns” (Ibid., 4030). The new young queen built ships and left Oronte behind. With the last of their people, their giant fleet sailed away into the unknown, where they eventually and with great difficulty found Xidda. This second story appears to be based on legends passed down from queen to queen. They have sought to keep information clear, and having Queen Tsiora telling the story to Tau means that either she thinks him more important to her than any other Lesser since few people know the story; therefore, she trusts him.

While ending in a eucatastrophe, the embedded story goes through despair, hope, horror, and turning stages multiple occurrences. While this specific nested story ends happily with her people having escaped, it does notify the reader that it is *not* only that. The reader is aware of what will happen when they find new land. Their people will be attacked, thousands will die to survive, the queen’s champion will die, and Queen Taifa will, like her mother before her against the Cull, burn the ground on which the Hedeni (degenerate term for

the Xeddeni meaning ‘heathen’) stand, spreading the area for the Omohi to settle on in sweat, blood, fire, and death. It does put a quick end to the euphoric feeling that the story is meant to have left the reader with, but then again, having these turns of euphoria and horror one after the other is what fantasy is known for, according to Tolkien’s sub-creation theory. Generally speaking, the myths and legends passed down embedded in the story could be argued to be tending more towards the dycatastrophe side because there has not been the final turn of Ananthi or Ukufa being victories. It is clear that Ananthi winning would give the story a eucatastrophe ending and give the ending a more Tolkien feel to it. If instead, Ukufa would be the final victor between the two, then the story would be less Tolkien and tend more towards the grimdark genre when seen in the light of the narrative.

In *Fires of Vengeance*, there is an exciting picture being drawn by the author of a rebellion against the queen. In essence, the queen herself holds the executive branch and is the highest head of the judicial branch of the three powers of government. While the Ruling Council governs the legislative, made up of Royal Nobles and at their head Abasi Odili. While the queen controls most of the nation, it is not that strictly cut. The Nobles have power over the queen, both through marriage and heritage. However, this unbalanced balance is upset when Odili makes a rebellion, tries to kill the queen, fails though, and places the queen's sister as the new ruler. Their rule is fraught with political persecution and executions of political enemies. The rebellion makes Queen Taifa hold all three branches of their government, which in itself should be a dangerous thing, but in the series, Winter portrays it as the only way for survival for her nation. This rebellion leads to the fighting between monarchy and a new totalitarian regime. The scenes are generally favored as presenting the monarchy and the rightful ascension as the orderly and best good for the people, while the rebels' regime is seen as forceful, egocentric, and dangerous. Interestingly, though, is that Winter pivots the viewpoint to Odili and the rebellious Queen Esi. From their viewpoint Taifa and Tau and the forces under their command are described as “drenched in blood,” “scarred, wicked face she [Esi] saw so much hate and rage,” and “a graceless rasp that took her mind to the sounds of bones cracked and crunched in the mouth of a glutton.” (Winter 2020, 6304-6324).

Throughout the books, there are examples of the already mentioned war and death, but those are not the only examples of immorality. The castes are an issue and automatically grant power to the Nobles and higher classes instead of lifting everyone. Instead, the chosen few are granted birth power and fortune, while the lower classes are being segregated, enslaved, and forced into a war. The majority are without a voice, which is part of what Winter explores in his fantasy world. He does not shy away from the harsh and brutal truths that have happened in our Primary World. Instead, he explores those issues in a Secondary World and tries to show what happens when someone has gotten enough of a society that breaks bones instead of healing. What would a nation do if enough people cannot get the help they need either because of trauma, lack of need, or purposeful disregard for a human person. Winter explores those issues through Tau’s story, which is why his story is crucial because he experiences oppression and depression that impact him continuously like gravity.

Many presented genres, such as the Black and African fantasy genre, come through by the specific naming of groups, units, and gods. It enables a specific group to feel more connected to characters that look and sound like themselves. They can see themselves more clearly in specific characters that inhabit their traits. The exciting thing about it in these books is that that message is not what the author is trying to argue. He writes books that he wished he could have read when he was younger and for his son, who is currently growing up, values having a character that looks like him in fantasy (Greene 2019).

Another well-realized genre present in the narrative is the fighting and military strategies they incorporate. War and death are prevalent throughout the book, making it a darker story than other fantasy series, but without going to the grimdark places of *A Song of Ice and Fire* and *First Law Trilogy*, which is the other series I will look at. Dragons are burning people, bronze swords are used to slash people, horses and lizards are trampling people, and spears are used to stab them.

In essence, though, the most present genre in the first two books is a coming of age story based in a sprawlingly well-realized, lived in High Fantasy world. While loosely based on our own real cultures, mainly from African culture where the author grew up (Greene 2019), the cultures present are a welcome new addition to the fantasy genre where the usual linear thinking of European medieval history are usually the norm. Our Primary World culture is diverse and expansive, so it is good to have diverse authors with diverse stories that are new and exciting. With the success of *the Rage of Dragons* that was so popular that it got picked up by a publisher after initially being self-published, there is some sense in simply not writing a new take on the Tolkien world.

The question remains of how the series will end, and while that can not be answered yet, as the two last books are not published yet, they can be speculated on based on the presented themes and genre. As each of the individual books published so far does end having achieved a eucatastrophe, we can speculate that the ending of the series will be in the same sense a happy ending, as the next chapter will now set out to prove.

Tau's Journey of Revenge

The two first books follow a young man, named Tau Solarin, from his early teenage years to young adult life in a society obsessed with a rigid caste system of which Tau is the lowest of the low. He is part of the dark-skinned Omehi people, locked in a mostly eternal war against indigenous people called Xeddeni.

This chapter will focus on Tau specifically, instead of the world, except in the sense when the world has an impact on Tau's journey. In this series, the Hero's Journey has a challenging and difficult relationship with justice, hatred, revenge, and war as Tau has deep and personal issues, and he has not been able to get help. As with any fantasy story, Tau begins in the ordinary world. He lives in a relatively quiet village with his father, has a love interest called Zuri, and he and his best friend, Jabari, trains sword fighting with each other. The enemy Xeddeni and Omehi people are often fighting, and while fighting often is not happening in Tau's village,

it is not unheard of. The battle rages often and brutally, but it is part of the ordinary world as it is part of their livelihood. Everything revolves around the war; for example, the castes are based on who fights and how well they do. The drudge is comparable to slaves from our Primary World history. Every Lesser can become a drudge if they do not join either Ihashe or Ihagu when they come of age. It is necessary to fight for their people, or their people will not even recognize them as people. They cannot cut or shave their hair and look any other castes in the eye; it leads to a beating if they do. Jabari is a Petty Noble, which makes him one of the ruling classes, but he is among the lowest possible Noble. Tau is technically High Common through his mother's line, but everyone besides himself, Jabari, Zuri, or his father, considers him of Low Common because of his dad's blood. Therefore, he is looked down upon by everyone, disliked by his sister, and he isn't welcome in his mother's house—Tau's mother and father do not live together. He feels separated and different from half of his family, society, and culture, although that separation worsens as the story continues, which is why he later accepts the Call to Adventure during the testing.

Tau's Refusal of the Call happens quickly in the first book. In chapter two, after helping another village defend themselves from Xeddeni, Tau realizes that the Xeddeni have both fighting men *and* women, and the latter Tau is not interested in killing even to defend his homeland. "He would not kill women and men in a war with no end. He would not be part of the madness. Tau had a way out and, by the Goddess, he'd take it. He thrust a lethal blow at an illusory enemy, imagining it to be the life he'd been expected to lead. 'I'm done with killing!' he said." (Ibid., 1001-1004). He seeks a way not to fight as killing has scared him. However, as with most stories, when the plot calls for action, it gets its way. He is frightened, nervous, and mourning for the woman he killed in defense of the village. Those feelings have made him seek another way. He wants to stay in his village and marry Zuri. He does not want to be a warrior, but not fighting means you'll be a dredge in their culture. He plans to do well in his testing/initiation, become an Ihashe, and then injure himself to get an honorable discharge. Tau is believable and seems like a well-rounded character that the reader feels connected to, as war and killing is not necessary the sanest action for a human to do.

His plan does not succeed, but he does try to talk Zuri into believing it, thinking it possible for the two of them to be together romantically even while he is a dredge. The Supernatural Aid does not come to Tau. While he has gotten sword training by his father, it is not impactful enough to warrant Supernatural Aid. No help comes in to help him make his decision better. He is not granted help in the sense that Campbell warrants are needed to help the young hero, which is why Tau's story takes a turn for the worse when he is forced, beaten, and bloodied into accepting his quest. Not until later, when he joins the Ihashe and gets a trainer and a prominent new father figure in the form of Jayyed.

While somewhat defined earlier on, the Call to Adventure is even more noted explicitly during Tau's testing to see if he can become an Ihashe, the strongest Lesser soldiers. During his initiation, he fights a Noble who tries to kill Tau in a fit of rage. Tau wins and is almost executed for his impudence against his 'betters.'

Instead, Tau's father gets his hand cut off for his son's impudence and is then executed instead, when Tau tries to stop them. This horror propels Tau forward on his hero's journey for vengeance against the four who killed Aren. Kellan for cutting off his father's hand, Odili for ordering it, Lekan—the brother of Jabari—for agreeing to Aren's death, and Dejen for delivering the final blow by the command of Odili (Ibid.). Hatred born. Call to Adventure accepted. The journey soon to begin.

The Crossing of the First Threshold has already begun. He wants vengeance, and there is only one way for a lesser to get that lawfully: blood duels between warriors. Returning home after the testing, Tau punches Lekan for his part in killing his father and is immediately banished from their village. He has now crossed the threshold, and he has no home left to return to as he is unwelcome and a criminal. With rage in his heart, he accepts his path and turns towards it, but first, he wants to find an escape from his rage.

With his father dead, nowhere he feels at home, a girlfriend who is to become Gifted, and with a hasty plan, he sneaks in during the night at the castle where Lekan and Jabari live. His idea is to threaten Lekan, hoping that he will live the rest of his life scared and afraid, thereby releasing some of the pent-up rage Tau is feeling. The coming scene functions as the last thing before Departure turns to Initiation. The Belly of the Whale is the last of the five sub-stages that Tau experiences. His plan, while stupid but understandable to the reader, does not go as planned. Actions differ from thoughts, and when he confronts Lekan, he accidentally ends up killing him and fleeing. "He felt hopeless, helpless, but that wouldn't do. He breathed deep, taking the time to work his way back to calm, just like his father had always taught. That done, he took the first steps to Kigambe. He'd finish what he'd started. [...] There were three men left to kill" (Ibid., 1927-1937). By accepting his horrible mistake, he sets out for Kigambe and leaves the ordinary world for the supernatural one. He travels from Departure to Initiation. His journey has begun.

The Road of Trials begins in Kigambe, as does the second Act, where he will be fighting other Lessers to compete on who will enter the Ihashe military academy. The testing is dangerous as Tau is mostly weaker, smaller, and not as tall as everyone else. He is one of the smallest and weakest challengers, with less training than others, but that does not stop him or his actions. He uses everything at his disposal to win enough fights to join the Ihashe. In one of his matches, he willingly makes another challenger hit him on his head, forcing that person to lose on a technicality as hitting enemies on the head is too dangerous and shows they are not in control. During Tau's last fight, he faces the most significant challenger present. Instead of giving up or concede he gives it everything he got. He gets thrown around, beaten up, but he keeps fighting and throwing insults to make his enemy lose his cool. The draw eventually ends up in a draw, although Tau is unconscious by the end. The only draw/loss the big guy called Uduak ends up having. Tau is accepted into the Ihashe academy in the Jayed scale.

The Road of Trials does not end there, however. Tau returns to this stage multiple times. Through training, matches with his fellow classmates, teamwork and tactics, being enervated (forced into Isihogo), or

only spending his time wisely, he learns and gain whatever knowledge he can to pass each trial set for him. He starts among the weakest of his teammates, not being able to beat one, but he grows over time. He puts in more work, effort, and sheer will than everyone, and slowly over months; he improves enough to beat one and then another. He takes personal training from Jayyed, their trainer, and trains even in his spare time. He wakes up, eats, trains, eats, trains, and sleeps, repeat. His life has turned into a training montage for his goal of achieving his quest. He begins training with two swords.

During his training to enter the Queen's Melee—a tournament where the top students from both Ihashe or Indlovu fight to be the most formidable unit and warrior to gain a dragon-scaled blade. Only the strongest can receive one of these famous blades from the queen. After one of these Queen's Melee fights, Tau has a Meeting with the Goddess. The Meeting takes place in Citadel City. In something of a *deus ex machina* moment, he recognizes Zuri during his team's celebration of their accomplishment at winning their first battle in the Melee. Zuri appears, Tau runs after her, and they can reconnect after months of missing each other. They talk about what had happened since they last saw each other. Zuri is now a Gifted in training (Ibid.).

A couple of days after their meeting, Tau fights Uduak—for the first time with a real sword in each hand—to a draw for the first time. Tau's Trial is progressing. Uduak becomes scared of him during their fight, but eventually, they decide on friendship. Tau has begun gathering allies and friends. He is assembling a team that can help him achieve his quest, and although the others are somewhat afraid of him and his abilities to grow and take punishment, they begin to adore Tau. By the end of their training, he has become friends with them all, and he can win solo against three of his friends at the same time. They bond, and he begins giving lessons to his fellow recruits to improve their capabilities.

The Road of Trials cannot be a success every time, even if Tau uses many sweat and tears. Enter Woman as the Temptress. She is not some literal woman who comes to tempt Tau. Instead, his meeting with Isihogo transforms him and launches him into almost giving up. As mentioned earlier in the last chapter, Tau figures out a way to train faster, harder, and more insanelly than any other Omehi before him. Zuri helps him figure out a way to enter Isihogo during one of their Meetings with the Goddess. Like everyone else, Tau has always been able to enter that other realm—like everyone—but he has not known. With Zuri's help, he enters one time and can fight the demons. This other realm slows down time when one is present in it so that Tau can train faster than those who are not in it. "The noise accosted him first, the eerie gusting of wind that blew grit into his face and exposed skin. Tau felt it, heard it, and, snapping his eyes open, he saw the permanent twilight of Isihogo. He was still in the circle in Citadel City, but it was a twisted version of the place. The colors were muted, the sky colorless, the ground soft, like loose mulch, and the underworld's mists swirled around him." (Ibid., 3813-3816).

However, the training method comes with some significant drawbacks that he will have to wield without killing his teammates and friends along the way. Every time he enters Isihogo, he will have to die a spiritual

death. His mind will, eventually, be ripped apart by demons every single time he goes there. He can feel every death, getting limbs torn off, being eaten alive, being stabbed and skewered multiple times every single time.

“Tau threw himself back, but he’d underestimated the demon’s reach. Its claws raked across his stomach, tearing him almost in two. Tau fell to the murky ground and felt his insides spilling out. He looked down and cried out in pain and horror. His intestines were exposed to the air, ropes upon ropes of them. He reached down to try to push them back. The pain was indescribable, and then the demon was on him. He tried to swing his swords but had lost them when he fell. He tried to beat the beast back, but it ignored him as it feasted. The thing on all fours, recovered from the sword strike, joined the feasting, and Tau lost his mind to pain. (Ibid., 3841-3847).

On the upside, he can spar against these demons faster than in Uhmlaba but never kill them as they are immortal. He becomes more and more demonic the further he trains, the more haggard and afraid. He fears to train, but the temptation to give up is in the end discarded in disgust. He picks up the new training tool he has discovered, and with no avenue left, but forward, he accepts his journey and gets killed again, and again, and again, in a never-ending cycle every free moment.

“He came back to the world in sections. He sensed a leg, his mouth, the beating of his heart, his eyes. His own body was disjointed, a thing apart, hard to reconcile and impossible, in those early breaths, to control. Moving from Uhmlaba to Isihogo was always hard. It incapacitated men inexperienced with it. Dying to demons was infinitely worse. Tau opened his eyes. He was on the ground at the edge of the practice yards, moaning, rocking. No time had passed, but he had been to the underworld, fought there, almost taken its power into himself and come close to a true death. His nerves were on fire, his limbs trembled, and his mind was misery. He tried to sit, couldn’t, and lay still, waiting for the shock to pass, the loamy ground warm against his cheek and lips. He’d soiled himself. It was in this state of suffering and degradation that Tau knew he’d been given everything he wanted. The Goddess had answered his prayers. She’d shown him how to make one span worth a hundred, one cycle worth a lifetime. Her gift was a generous one. If accepted, it would make him the greatest warrior in Omehi history, and all he had to do was fight and die to Isihogo’s demons over and over and over again.” (Ibid., 4467-4477).

Atonement with the Father is a stage with lasting consequences for the hero as the hero is forced to either overcome or reconcile with the father figure. This stage leads to some form of confrontation that will eventually help him gain the Ultimate Boon or quest reward or set him back and seek another road to accomplish his goals. In *Rage of Dragons*, this comes multiple times with meetings between Tau and Jayyed, his sword trainer. They talk about tactics, options, and the bad decisions that Tau often takes on his journey to become the strongest. Jayyed is to mentor Tau whichever way he can, but Tau is not often good at listening to

advice. During the chapter ‘Duel,’ Tau recognizes Kellan, the young warrior who cut off his father’s hand, “‘Your name, Initiate?’ Kellan asked him. ‘Death,’ said Tau, moving to kill the man who helped murder his father. Kellan was surprised, Tau could see that, and it made the next breath even more astonishing. Kellan drew his sword and blocked Tau’s first and second strike in less time than it took to blink.” (Ibid., 4134-4137). This situation happens before Tau has gotten a hold of his Isihogo training method, and he is quickly outperformed and pushed on the defensive, which makes him angrier as he wants revenge. In the end, before Kellan can kill Tau, he is saved by Jayyed, who can deescalate the situation and make sure no one gets more hurt. “Scale Jayyed came to Tau’s defense, and Jayyed was there too. He got to Tau first, took him by the neck, and yanked him back and off his feet. ‘Enough!’ he roared. ‘Enough, damn you all. Enough!’” (Ibid., 4166-4168).

During their retreat home to their quarters, Tau and Jayyed get into one of their arguments. Tau wants revenge and cannot agree with Jayyed’s point that the law is on Kellan’s side. “‘Under orders! Under direct orders by the chairman of the Guardian Council and perfectly in his right to kill him. Can’t you see? Okar did everything he could to follow orders and still spare him.’” (Ibid., 4210-4213). Tau is unwilling to accept Jayyed’s more experienced eyes of the events, and his atonement with Jayyed does not come. Jayyed tries multiple ways of letting Tau see reality, but Tau is steadfast and unwilling to accept Jayyed’s points as valid because he partly thinks of himself better than his station. Instead, Tau challenges him to a duel, and they fight the following day:

“‘You won’t help your people if you don’t know your place.’ [Jayyed said]

‘I don’t think I like the place they’ve set for me.’ [Tau]

‘It’s based on what you are.’

‘They don’t know what I am,’ Tau said, ‘but I can show you.’

Jayyed knew what was coming and he stopped marching. He faced Tau, looking down at him, letting the boy have his moment.

‘Fight me, tomorrow,’ Tau said. ‘Come to the practice yards before dawn.’” (Ibid., 4318-4323).

The duel ends in a draw, during which Jayyed talks to Tau always about his family and own sad story. His grandparents died in a raid by the Xeddeni. His wife died in a raid. His daughter hated Jayyed for not being there. His daughter was gifted and left him alone without saying goodbye. Now she burns Xeddeni. Tau is cold to everything and wants to prove himself the best at this point.

“It was over, but all Tau felt was pain. He looked down. The point of Jayyed’s sword was dug deep into his side, drawing blood. Had they fought with sharpened blades, Jayyed would have gutted him.

‘Can’t win.’ Jayyed coughed. ‘Not as we are. Cross-caste fighters, if we can even find and train enough of them, only prolong the inevitable.... There’s only one way we survive... just one.... Peace.’” (Ibid., 4368-4373).

There is no real atonement, so while the duel ends in a draw, it can be argued that it functions as a compromise with the Father. They often war and debate, but it never turns bloody except this one duel. Instead, they clash ideologically, with Tau believing that Lessers deserve better than being ignored and killed, or more specifically, him only. He is not trying to be, or want to be, a center point for a Lesser rebellion. Jayyed instead tries to cool Tau’s temper and make him sweeter as he sees the metaphorical devil growing in Tau and his inability to be compassionate. Jayyed’s goal is to create a new form of a warrior, able to hold off the Xeddeni long enough to make a lasting peace between Omohi and Xeddeni, and he sees Tau as his best bet to do that if he can keep Tau alive long enough and temper his feelings about revenge. However, they are mostly respectful to each other, and Tau tries to change Jayyed’s perspective multiple times. However, none can turn the other to their opinion.

That is, not until chapter ‘Rout’ that they atone with each other and help the other with their goals. During this chapter, the Xeddeni have sailed around the continent and landed behind enemy lines. They attacked the Omohi people and armies and pushed into a mountainous region known as the Fist. There, Jayyed Scale has to rescue a group of people: the queen’s brother, Kellan, and Zuri among them. The rescuees are walled off close behind enemy lines. Scale Jayyed can save Kellan and Zuri because Tau abandons his revenge, finally listening to Jayyed completely, and so doing saves Zuri, Kellan, and many others. He has to save both of them or none of them, and he chooses to save instead of taking his revenge. The cost is high, however, as a bunch of the scale is killed, and Jayyed takes a mortal wound, and his final words are to Tau:

“‘ I thought... I thought it was possible. Peace.’

Tau was back to the day his father died. ‘Fight, Umqondisi. Keep fighting. We’ll get you to the Crag and a Sah priest will make this right.’

“Take it... Ta...” Jayyed shoved something into Tau’s hand. It was his guardian dagger.
[...]

‘Get the scale... out.’ Jayyed pressed Tau’s fingers closed around the rare weapon.” (Ibid., 6402-6408).

Jayyed dies and, in so doing, passes leadership of the scale to Tau, symbolized by the passing of his dragon-scaled dagger. It is a memorable moment for the reader, as the tension that has grown considerably

between the two is finally released, and Tau has now willingly put others ahead of his revenge. The Atonement with the Father is done, albeit sadly in how it achieves it.

Apotheosis is one of the most present sub-stages presented in the second act. During the Queen's Melee, they advance to new and more challenging opponents every time they win a battle. The individual fights that Tau is in, whether training or for real, always increase the danger. While the Xeddeni invades and attacks the Omehi, it is the most significant jump from non-apotheosis to apotheosis. He fights like a demon, fast and furious. He fights like a savage, brutally and cunning. Enemies flee from him after having seen what he can do. One Xiddeen, a viewpoint character enraged by a shaman (the Xiddeen form of Gifted), flees after seeing him dispatch half a scale of people.

"The invader yelled to Daaso again, the string of words unintelligible, their meaning unmistakable. It was a challenge. It was a call to fight, to settle their spear feud.

Daaso felt the magic flowing through her. It made her skin hard as stone, amplifying her strength and speed, making her bigger and heavier than three small men, and Daaso, headtaker of tribe Taonga, who feared no man under all the gods, readjusted her spear grip, breathed deep through her nose, turned, and ran.

Daaso was safe. She kept running. Daaso Headtaker feared no man, but she knew the truth. Two Swords was not a man." (Ibid., 6384-6390).

However, the best instance of Apotheosis in the first book is Tau's battle with Dejen in chapter sixteen 'Enraged.' During the Xeddeni invasion of the Fist, a large number of Nobles and councilors attack the queen's castle in the hope to depose her and situate their leader in her place. They are angry about the queen's question of possible surrender or peace treaty with the Xeddeni, and want to kill her to escape that possibility.

After losing Jayyed, the scale comes to the Queen's Guard's salvation. A few individuals such as Odili and Dejen have broken through the Guards' defenses and are hunting the queen. Tau, and Jabari now one of the few Nobles actively trying to save the queen, have pursued the queen before Odili and Dejen get to her. They catch up to them, a Gifted and two other Indlovu trying to break down a door the queen has barricaded herself behind. Tau kills one Indlovu quickly, and then Dejen attacks him while he is enraged by a Gifted. The sequence portrays Tau's skill and improvement since he first saw Dejen and Odili, back when they killed his father. He has grown stronger, faster, and found a steadier standing after the loss inflicted on him.

"Tau sprang to his feet and threw himself out of the way of a lancing thrust from Dejen. He recentered, swayed around Dejen's follow-up, moved in, and stabbed up as hard as he could. He hit the Ingonyama's bronze plates and had to drop and roll to avoid being clubbed by the man's shield. He came up, flung himself at Dejen, and sliced for his belly. He felt his sharp bronze

scrape across plate, leather, and skin. The attack would have cut a normal man in two, but the KaEid's power had hardened Dejen's flesh to stone. Tau sprang away and out of reach. The Enraged Ingonyama looked down. The leathers around his stomach were torn to tatters and a thin trickle of blood leaked from one of the scratches." (Ibid., 6922-6927).

He has been granted friendship and love, and while he is still furious and angry, he can stay steady under pressure even when insulted, something he would not have been able to do before, since every time he attacked relentlessly when people insulted him.

"'You killed my father,' Tau told him.

'You do this because a Lesser is dead?' Dejen spat, the words muddled by his mangled mouth. 'He was worth nothing. You. Are. Nothing!' [...]

'Perhaps,' Tau whispered, feeling the man's lifeblood pulse from the wound, through his fingers, and down his hand, 'but you are dead.'" (Ibid., 6976-6980).

The fighting continues after saving the queen, and Tau and his allies have to defend the castle against Xeddeni while defending inside the castle's walls against Odili and his rebels. Apotheosis continues to the most prominent example when Zuri calls a dragon alone to burn both Xeddeni and Odili's rebels and give the queen a chance for negotiation before they are overrun. Sadly, every time a dragon is called, a Gifted dies, which Tau is unwilling to do, so he joins Zuri in Isihogo and attacks as many demons as possible Zuri a chance to escape. At that moment, he is described as something like a god, meaning he is powerful, fast, dangerous, above mere mortals, and while he gets wounded and beaten, he shines with light. It is a typical representation of Apotheosis, as Campbell describes it.

"He whirled and spun, thrust and swung, moving as fast as he was able, striking with as much power as he could muster. His blades burned the beasts and they shrank back from his blows. Tau felt triumph. Tau felt power. Tau felt he could kill these demons with his gift-infused swords, and if that was what would save Zuri, then it was what he would do. He sliced the arm from one demon, chopped the legs out from another. He laughed. This was what it was to be a god." (Ibid., 7218-7222).

While Tau cannot save Zuri in the end, he gives her enough time with the dragon for the queen to negotiate. The Xeddeni leave but will return in a month to scour the Omehi from the lands. Odili flees to another city and builds up his base there, which is the second book's central narrative. The Omehi rebellion, war, and the last target of Tau's revenge, Odili, eventually lead to the end of the first half of the fantasy book series and will be continued in future storylines.

The Ultimate Boon, which is granted/taken/used after the hero has completed a severe challenge in his quest. In *Rage of Dragons*, this takes two blades capable of cutting through every other material and dark as

the night and are granted to him by the queen. He is to be her champion, defend and protect her, while they lead their people to a suitable position from which they can survive. The queen needs Tau for several reasons: one, he is the best fighter, having beaten Dejen, while enraged; two, he has the loyalty of the Lessers, which has given them spirit and a belief that they are better than the Nobles say, and three, she trusts Tau as he is one of the few who defended her. Tau, first unwilling to help, is eventually persuaded because she will grant him his final revenge against Odili, champion, and give him two dragon-steel blades. “The black blade was belted at his side. It had no scabbard and was dark enough to have been shaped from obsidian. But, even from a distance, there was something alien about the weapon. It drank in the light, and no matter how hard he looked, Tau was unable to make out any details on its surface. It was as if the weapon hid in plain sight, like he could see its outline rather than its whole.” (Ibid., 1419-1422).

The Return only has a single instance of Rescue from Without present, as the last chapter, after the fighting has concluded, has left Tau in a devastating mood. The loss of Zuri, as well as many of his friends, has left him in mourning. He has not taken care of himself and spends most of his time in bed, depressed. “He was standing beside his bed. His head had stubble. His face as well. He wore a loose tunic that could not hide the whipcord muscle beneath. He had on ash-gray breeches and was barefoot [...] He faced her, his dark eyes and scarred face frightening in their intensity. Tsiora felt the need to step back.” (Ibid., 7356-7378).

Tsiora tries to rescue Tau from his despair by forcing him to stand for something better and stronger. For the protection of the queendom, to help restore the balance.

“‘To accomplish what must be done, to reunite Noble and Lesser, we need a man like you. We need a man who faced Indlovu, Ingonyama, Xiddeen, demons, and dragons to be our champion. We need a hero to help us rebuild what has been broken.’

‘I’m no hero.’

‘You are to the Lessers. You are to the people who still fight for us.’

‘I am no hero.’

Tsiora made her voice hard. “Then be a weapon.” (Ibid., 7383-7387).

In the end, he accepts and joins her for the sole reason of revenge, however. After his journey, he still considers his revenge the only acceptable outcome for his life.

The second book, *Fires of Vengeance*, picks up immediately after the first one ended and focuses once again on the main character Tau on his quest for vengeance against the last remaining man who ordered the death of his father. It picks up immediately afterward and once again follows Campbell’s structure on the Hero’s Journey. In this book, Departure takes the form of something similar to the previous book, but with the

Xeddeni presence diminished except right at the beginning, where they deal with the Xeddeni attack's aftermath Citadel City. The first chapter is a summary in the form of a conversation between Jabari, who was burned so harshly by a dragon that he cannot move, and Tau. The story begins when the queen calls to Tau to begin assembling for war against Odili and his rebels, now styling Queen Tsiora's sister Queen Esi and the one true queen (Winter 2020, 116-303).

As I have already walked through and analyzed the Hero's Journey in the first book, I will summarize many of the second book stages, as it is mainly a very similar experience, with only a few subtle differences about specific information the line in which the stages appear. The Call to Adventure, which happened in the first book and still is not completed totally—Tau is still seeking Odili; the last Nobel needed to die according to Tau—so the Call still happens then and is still the overall Quest. A secondary Quest is given in the first few chapters of *Fires of Vengeance*—that of killing the Warlord Achack of the Xedeni; by killing him, Tau can guarantee peace, Xiddeen will be left leaderless and without clear structures, once the peace treaty is completed. Meanwhile, Tau defends the queen against another Nobel rebellion and an assassin's attempt, but he ends up with a poisoned dart in his legs (Ibid., 415-909).

Supernatural Aid could be multiple things during these first few chapters, but the most likely one is the healing of his leg from which the poison is spreading. At first, the healer recommends cutting the leg off to save the body, but after a thorough discussion in which Tau disagrees, the healer accepts bleeding of the leg, which enable Tau to walk or run, albeit he is in much pain, but that is not worse than being torn limp from limp by demons (Ibid., 910-1161). The Crossing of the First Threshold also takes place in the second book. Tau felt different and started on his journey; he has now become the queen's champion. He has not achieved a settled and happy home yet, as in the previous book, the only stage that appeared during Return was Rescue from Without, so he has not Mastered Two Worlds or The Freedom To Live. He is still adrift, angry, and furious at both the world and Odili. He still seeks his death, and during *Fires of Vengeance*, the main quest for Tau—and others such as the queen—in the fall of Odili and his rebels.

The Crossing of the First Threshold appears in chapter two, 'How' and 'Shadows.' In this chapter, Tau faces a situation after returning from having caught the assassins while mounted on a horse for the first time—or clings to the horse while it gallops—to catch them. He travels far from Citadel City, but when he returns to Citadel and is stabling his horse, a demon appears fully in Uhmlaba. "It wasn't tall. Which was to say, the demon matched him in height. It was heavier than he was, though, and had thick yellowish skin that was bumped and mottled like a toad's flesh. It stared at him with reflective eyes the size of fists and had the circular mouth of a suckerfish. Howling from that too-small orifice, it flexed the six clawed fingers on the ends of its short arms and ran at him." (Ibid., 1410-1412).

The first time a demon has fully manifested in Uhmlaba, as they are considered to be imprisoned in Isihogo, this causes great headache for Tau as he now has to explain to those below his command to be on the

lookout for demons. Considering his pressure, his friends, soldiers, and believers think he is losing his mind. The balancing act is something Tau has to deal with during other moments in the book, but the Crossing of the First Threshold is that moment with the demon. Instead of being a literal threshold, as in the first book, it has become a figurative barrier that Tau must deal with. With those decisions made, he accepts the quest.

“Tau was thinking about the demon. He wanted to tell the queen and worried that Hadith [Tau’s sword brother] was right and that telling her might brand him a madman, and he could see no way that helped him or her. Hadith, Tau thought, was usually right, and with that in mind, Tau gave him what he wanted.

‘We will return with the sun, my queen,’ Tau said loud enough for the courtyard to hear, ‘and when you see me again, the warlord will be dead.’” (Ibid., 1520-1524).

The Belly of the Whale is a stage that is also present in the secondary book, as well. As previously mentioned, it is a moment specked with danger as the hero leaves the ordinary world, the relatively ‘safety’ of Citadel City to do as his queen has commanded, which is a journey filled with more danger, death, and destruction. They journey to the coast where the Xeddeen is retreating in the hope of overcoming and killing the warlord. This ends Tau’s Departure stage and continues with a somewhat similar Initiation as the first book in the series.

Initiation follows Tau on his mission to gather the needed allies and friends to victory over Odili and give them enough time to allow that. By killing the warlord, the first Road of Trials is in their way. After a fashion, he passes, but the death of the warlord leaves the warlord’s son distraught. Multiple Trials occur, more fighting with demons, and now having to train his friends from Scale Jayyed (they are still called that in honor of their old trainer) and new allies, such as the queen’s handmaidens. He trains them all to go to Isihogo and fight demons, thereby having begun the process of making a full scale into master fighters, able to train faster, recognize fighting techniques, and overcome any obstacles put in their path, as long as they keep their sanity.

However, the warlord’s son eventually seeks revenge against Tau for killing his father by killing his old home village to the man, woman, or child. Woman as Temptress appear as Tau, now once again racked by guilt about his actions that lead to the death of someone he knows, do almost give up once again, as the madness quickly sets in. Once again, his answer is the vengeance he seeks, now against the son of a warlord.

Similar to *the Rage of Dragons*, there are no significant Return sub-stages, as the story is unfinished, and the reader is left to wonder if Tau will ever become Master of Two Worlds. The only appearance is the Rescue From Without, once again appearing in the form of queen Tsiora. After the showdown between Odili and Tau, she once again brought him back, this time with a kiss and a consoling shoulder. Together they brace themselves from the information they are about to receive, which sets up the third installment. A Shaman of the Xiddeen reveals the information. The reason for Tau’s strength, his ability to go to the demonic realm and

train, has been used by the Cull forever, and they have now found their continent. It was not shown until the end of the second book and set up the next installment to fight between Omehi, Xiddeen, and the Cull. It is important to note that this series is not yet complete, so every new entry reveals more of the world-building, characters, and themes.

The Burning is a revenge tale but told with moments of a few happy and memorable moments that can enforce the character development that Tau goes through. He has anger and hatred in his heart, but he slowly can find friends and family along the way, making the reader feel for him. With the coming of the Cull and a possible alliance with the Xeddeni, it becomes interesting to figure out whether Tau will be able to forgive the warlord's son for the murder of Tau's village or whether fighting will be Omehi vs. Xeddeni vs. the Cull. Time will tell, but that is pure speculation on this point, however, according to Tolkien, if *the Burning* were a modern fantasy series, the answer would be yes: Tau would forgive so that their people unite against the greater evil.

First Law Trilogy

The First Law Trilogy written by Joe Abercrombie, published by Gollancz and Pyr, between 2006-2008 covers three books named: *The Blade Itself*, *Before They Are Hanged*, and *Last Argument of Kings*. The series does continue in a few stand-alone novels and has since 2019 begun a new trilogy set in the same Secondary World, but a few centuries later at the dawning of this world's revolutionary age. However, these newer books will not be analyzed, as they are currently unfinished. The titles of the books themselves are taken from historical quotes from our Primary World. *The Blade Itself* is a quote from Homer "The blade itself incites to deeds of violence." *Before They Are Hanged* is taken from Heinrich Heine "we should forgive our enemies, but not before they are hanged," while the *Last Argument of Kings* was inscribed by Louis XIV on his cannons: "Ultima Ratio Regum," meaning "the last argument of kings." Already it is clear that Abercrombie has gotten inspiration from the Primary World history in which he writes his stories, and as will be portrayed in this part of the analysis, he tries to subvert every inspiration and author. The series is known for its anti-Tolkien tropes, and it works to subvert every fan of Tolkien. The books are considered to be prime examples of the 'grimdark' genre, with many brutal scenes, a cruel but believable world, morally ambiguous characters, and a plot that often takes the road less traveled.

The Blade Itself follows a broad band of bumbling characters from mainly The North and The Union, two antagonistic opposite countries. The viewpoints are from Logan Nine-fingers, a northern barbarian renowned for his skills with the sword; Sand dan Glokta, a tortured torturer feared for his skills to gather a truth in the Union; Jezal dan Luthar, a somewhat-known duelist with troubles of the heart from the Union; and Bayaz, the Magus. Other characters appear, but these four are the most central to the story told. The second and third book does incorporate more viewpoint characters, but the epitome of character understanding comes through the already mentioned characters, as they are the most fleshed out and *different*, and spends the most time making the reader understand them as the horrible, but realistic "heroes" they are. Abercrombie is not interested in the more Tolkienist views, except in subverting the reader's expectations.

However, though glaringly different in many avenues to famous modern authors, Abercrombie has to use some of the same tropes to subvert those tropes, focusing on this chapter. I will analyze those tropes through the already established tools and lists of sub-creation and the Hero's Journey.

Circle of the Secondary World

Joe Abercrombie's work with his first trilogy was his take on classical fantasy with a twist, or as Abercrombie explains it: "my take on someone else's story" (Greene 2020). He went for a path that honored what Tolkien did with his great work, but with an intense grittiness, with a refreshing take, on the genre, somewhat similar to G. R. R. Martin's *Song of Ice and Fire*. In a sense, Abercrombie takes the well-realized world of Tolkien and deconstructs the characters, magic, and plot, and changes the dynamic of those individual

traits into a new evolution of the fantasy genre that is somewhat similar to Martin's work, but with a much more *Lord of the Rings* storyline. Abercrombie thinks the 'traditional knight in shining armor slaying dragons' is overused, which is why he explores gritty, selfish, and manipulative characters to explore the genre as a whole (Greene 2020).

The Secondary World of the *First Law Trilogy* is called the Circle of the World and is set in something similar to the latter of the medieval period. The first couple of books had no map because Abercrombie preferred reading about the places in his world rather than simply drawing a map for the reader. That led to well-spoken, well-realized, and descriptive places where the different areas are worded differently to create a big, breathing, thoughtful world of politics, war, characters, cultures, and cities.

A map was later introduced in future standalone novels set in the same world. The Secondary World is known to the inhabitants as the Circle of the World and encompasses three continents and four large islands. The continents are divided into Northern, Western, and Southern, each with different cultures, origins, characters, and rules. The recently unified Kingdom of the North, from the Northern Continent, is ruled by King Bethod and controls most of that continent. The North is mostly a lawless warrior culture brought up fighting since childhood and has much in common with Vikings and old Scandinavian customs. The Union, on the other hand, are ruled by a High King who "governs" Midderland (the most central island), a third of the



Circle of the World (Whitehead 2016).

Northern Continent, a third of the Western, a single city on the Southern Continent, as well as another city on one of the other biggest islands.

The series can be explored as a deconstruction of Lord of the Rings to focus on plot, sub-creation, and character. Like Tolkien, Abercrombie's Secondary World has a central west and east, just as Tolkien uses "Men of the West," meaning the kingdoms of Gondor and the old/new Arnor, and "Men of the East" meaning Easterlings from the kingdom of Rhûn. Already Abercrombie has inverted his world from Tolkien's, where the significant plot instances and character originates from the North to the South. In the first three books, there are no major viewpoint characters from the west or the east. However, the second book, *Before They Are Hanged*, is an exploration and questing of the Old Empire in the west.

"It was my take on Lord of the Rings, but bringing in all my weird preoccupations about how people work, the nature of violence. It is a reaction against the shiny and optimistic heroic fantasy I read as a teenager. In trying to do the opposite, it becomes quite pessimistic and grim." (Flood 2019). Exactly this description 'grim' has become something of a hallmark for Abercrombie's books as his wording and gallows humor often struck a chord with himself and readers. He has since styled himself LordGrimdark on Twitter and has embraced the grimdark title. What does grimdark mean, though, in the fantasy sphere?

"'Grimdark' has become the standard way of referring to fantasies that turn their backs on the more uplifting, Pre-Raphaelite visions of idealized medievalia, and instead stress how nasty, brutish, short and, er, dark life back then 'really' was. I put 'really' in inverted commas there, since Grimdark usually has very little to do with actual historical re-imagining and everything to do with a sense that our present world is a cynical disillusioned ultraviolent place. The word was coined from the tagline to the *Warhammer 40,000* series of novels and games: 'In the grim darkness of the far future there is only war'" (Roberts n. d.).

One could transcribe *The Burning* as grimdark in a sense because Winter's work also portrays the world as cynical and ultraviolent with death and mayhem and tons of short and brutal descriptions. However, there is a clear and distinct difference in the way Abercrombie and Winter write dark stories. While Winter portrays some of his characters as dark, moody, and selfish, Abercrombie takes his character descriptions to a higher level with no redeeming qualities what so ever, which for many can be harmful, but which also has proven to be a popular way of writing fantasy (Marling n.d.).

Winter has Zuri, the queen, or some of Tau's sword brothers that can somewhat sake and temper Tau's rage for revenge, Abercrombie has no clearly lawfully good characters. The alignment system could describe every character in the series, but it would leave one slot absent as there would not be a lawful good character that honors the law to the letter while being universally kind and selfless. Everyone in Abercrombie's world has a target, underlying will, or some hidden agenda that they are willing to kill for. Teresa Frohock, another

published author, defines grimdark as “a story where the protagonist faces a supernatural threat, but s/he isn't helpless against their adversary. Rather than run from the supernatural threat, the grimdark protagonist actively seeks to subvert or control it. In grimdark, the characters exhibit amoral [read: darker] tendencies, which replace the element of helplessness as the primary focus of the dread/horror.” (Frohock 2018). More on the grimdark tendencies of character in the next chapter.

For now, though, the descriptions are markedly amoral and graphic in their tone, with the displays of brutality taking place. The series has a wide range of viewpoint characters, with some more flawed than others. One of those most flawed is Sand dan Glokta, the torturer from the Union. He was tortured during an old war with the Gurkish Empire and tortured his people in pursuit of the truth since the end of the war. However, the ‘truth’ is not necessarily the actual truth in this very dark Secondary World. Descriptions of certain people's actions are different depending on the activity they do. Because of Glokta being tortured, he now lives with many disabilities, such as being crippled, appearing decades older than he is, left leg prone to spasm and soul-shaking pain, eats only porridge because of only a few remaining teeth, cannot get up, and out of bed without help, and he walks with a permanent hunch and a cane. His life is miserable, and Abercrombie is prone to describe that often and in detail (Abercrombie 2012,). For example, during his travels down a staircase:

“The agony was unspeakable, a searing spasm up his left side from foot to jaw. He squeezed his watering eyes tight shut, clamped his right hand over his mouth so hard that the knuckles clicked. His remaining teeth grated against each other as he locked his jaws together, but a high-pitched, jagged moan still whistled from him. *Am I screaming or laughing? How do I tell the difference?* He breathed in heaving gasps, through his nose, snot bubbling out onto his hand, his twisted body shaking with the effort of staying upright.” (Abercrombie 2012, 186-189)

While the agony that was inflicted on him has left him scarred and crippled, it has also forced him into a profession in which he has a lot of experience and no qualms of doing it. In the second book, his actions even lead to the fall of Dagoska and the massacre of the entire city. He is seen cutting off extremities, falsifying evidence, and manipulating people into whichever orders his superiors have given him, no matter the consequences. The grimdark is ominously present during Glokta's scenes as every chapter either has descriptions of pain, torture, war, death, or depression. In the chapter Teeth and Fingers, there is a present scene in which Glokta tortures a man he knows is innocent on Sult's orders. To go more into detail, he cuts off the tips of the man's fingers bit by bit “Bang! The cleaver took off the top of Teufel's ring finger, and a little disc out of his middle finger which rolled a short way and dropped off onto the floor.” (Ibid., 896-897).

The only redeeming characteristic of Glokta in this grimdark Secondary World is his willingness to help a friend's sister after she comes to a new city where she feels alone and insulated against everyone. He takes her under his protection, and he has a lot of reach and protection in his capacity as Inquisitor.

Now while the books are grim and dark, there is a brawling open and somewhat unexplored Secondary World with magic, creatures, cultures, and nations to inspect. It is a High Fantasy world, as there are no discernable similarities between the Primary and Secondary World, and the map clearly shown has no landmarks or continents related to our Primary ones. However, there are instances where the Primary World has affected the author in his writing, how it is portrayed, as he has stated that he drew on specific cultural ideas and themes for his Secondary World. The most prominent cultures being Scandinavian and western European cultures. These cultures are not an accurate depiction of our Primary World but are only used to the degree that they are of inspiration to the author, and there are no inspectable discernable similarities between the Primary and Secondary World.

The Secondary World draws on Scandinavian Viking culture mixed under a recently crowned and unified King Bethod. Their new government/society is divided into different clans, depending on their place of birth and loyalty, with their chieftains leading that originate from the pre-Bethod era. The society is build up around the clans, which offers a heavyweight of warriors and warrior culture as their wars led to suspicion, feuds, and revenge killings. The people are generally tall, healthy, and bearded in styles similar to Vikings and Celts of our Primary World, and they speak the Northern Tongue. As they call themselves Northmen, the most known are called Named Men, and they are known to everyone as their battle glory and deeds are recognized as the right kind of zealotry. Fighting, battle, and war are encouraged. During times of war, which is always, the chieftains have a war dedicated group of people called Carls, which can be Named Men themselves. They are often heavily armored and experienced. Below Carls are the standard infantry, lightly armored, old or very young, called Thralls. In that sense, the inspiration from actual Viking society is clear, as our Primary World had chieftains, followed by jarls, then carls and thralls and the poor, respectively. There are no significant religious aspects or gods that they follow except to say the dead have “Gone Back to the Mud” (Ibid, 5403), and their belief that witches and people with magic are relatively common. Instead, if it can be so-called, their religion is to follow The Old Ways, in which a person follows their chieftain loyally, to fight, not to hurt innocent women or children, and to settle disputes with a Duel in the Circle (Ibid.).

The South, known as the Gurkish Empire, is similar to the Middle-Eastern empires, such as the Ottoman Empire. The Gurkish Empire—very similar sounding to Turkish—rules most of the Southern continent, except Dagoska, a Union trading city. The country has a centralized multi-state where the Emperor rules state and government and every other state and government on that continent. In the *First Law Trilogy*, the Emperor is called Uthman-ul-Dosht and rules from the city of Shaffa. However, the Prophet Khalul is the real power behind the throne, having lived for centuries and is undying. Over centuries he has nurtured and built the religion and the Empire out on very religious ideals that make the majority fantastic and believe that Khalul speaks with God’s voice, similar to the Pope. Khalul uses the people for one point only, the destruction of

Bayaz. They speak the Kantic, and the men dress in long, often white robes with skull-caps in the Primary World Islamic style—or Kantic style as it is called in the series and long dark beards. The women wear long silk dresses. The military is built up around soldiers and slave soldiers—Gurkish Empire has a booming slave trade, taking slaves of rebellious states that try to break from the Empire. The Empire has an elite force of troops known as the Hundred Words, who are all Eaters—a term used to describe cannibals, who inherit magic as long as they eat human flesh. Their magics can be shapeshifting, illusions, or access the Higher Art, as Bayaz and other Maguss do, but without the needed years of training (Ibid.). The Empire is a very fatalistic state run by a warmonger as Emporer and an insane cannibalistic Prophet.

The Union is a kingdom similar to Western Europe. It is described and held up as the pinnacle of justice and stability in a world that is not.

The East, which is also a continent that is not used a lot in Abercrombie's world, is similar to the Italian Renaissance, with many sometimes warring city-states. They are not explored in the *First Law Trilogy*, so not much is known except that the city-states generally associate with the Union. Although not very important since their Old Empire's fall, the West is somewhat reminiscent of the Fall of the Western Roman Empire or ancient Greece, as they were the bedrock of civilization and have since fallen into ruin after their Master Juvens demise thousands of years ago. The few cities remaining populated are in chaos and falling into disrepair as the continent is embroiled in an always-consuming war to have a single individual once again crowned Emporer. Much of the second book takes place within its hard defined borders.

The series draws on much history as the series has made its Secondary World history like the previously mentioned Primary World ideas, which are incorporated flawlessly into an origin story for the world. Historical Fantasy has a significant role in the story and plot as thousands of years ago still shape the present in politics and war—the most prominent historical evaluation, which scholars from the present-day Union somewhat doubt. Before the Union, during the Old Time, Almighty Euz, the Father of the World, had four sons, which he granted one of his magics. Juvens, the eldest son, was given the High Art, the ability to change the world by drawing on The Other Side, which is the real secondary world's demonic inversion. The second son, Kaneidas, was granted the ability to shape extraordinary items called Art of Making. The third son, Bedesh, was granted the Art of Spirit Talking, which allows one to speak and command spirits. The fourth son, Glustrod, was granted nothing, and in his hatred and despair, he called to The Other Side, and in their jealousy of the world, they gave him power, blood, and the Seed (Abercrombie 2012).

Long story short, Glustrod became jealous of his siblings, especially Juvens, his disciples Bayaz and Khalul, and his Empire. He made war on them, called demons and demon-bloods (descendants of demons with some demonic powers) with the Seed—a magical nuclear battery able to amplify the draw from The Other Side—to his banner and conquered the Empire. Glustrod, wanting more power, drew more on the Seed and was at the end consumed by it and cursed the capital of the Old Empire, and he died of it. The Seed was then

locked away on an island to the far west by the three remaining brothers. Many years later, Kanedias, who had not helped Juvens during the War of the Glustrod, later killed Juvens. The third brother, Bedesh, died sometime before, but it remains a mystery of how or why. Thus the last brother Kanedias returned home to Makers House, which lay in what would later be known as Adua, the Union's capital. For the death of Juvens, Bayaz and Juvens other eleven disciples made war on Kanedias, except for Khalul, who blamed Bayaz for Juvens' death. Two disciples die before Bayaz throws Kanedias to his death from the roof of the Makers House. During the next 600 years, the Union emerges from one of the Midderland's many kingdoms and gathers the reminder around them.

Khalul goes south and begins building the Gurkish Empire brick by brick and creates the Eaters—men and women who eat the flesh of men and are so granted abilities from The Other Side. Any fantasy genre without magic is possible, but the fantastic is somewhat diminished compared to other series that incorporate it. *The First Law* has multiple interesting forms of magic, as already described by the four brothers. Some individuals across the continents have the power to draw on The Other Side and use the High Art of Juvens. It takes years of training and patience as the Art is complicated and dangerous to the untrained—for many decades, the High Art has diminished in power, and the wielders grow weaker in power. The Art of Making is lost, but the original works of Kanedias are still functioning, meaning that all his advanced tools are still as dangerous as when they were made. Spirit Talking is almost dead. The spirits are disappearing or dying, and the only Spirit Talker left in the world is known as Logen Ninefingers, the last of his kind. Demon-bloods of Glustrod are also growing weaker, and throughout the series, only a single individual has enough blood to be considered a demon-blood, Ferro Maljinn.

Another important aspect of *The First Law* is the balance between tradition and change. Every man, woman, or child balances their want of change with the stability of tradition. The Northmen want, mostly, to return to the Old Ways of having many clans with no kings, while the Gurkish Empire wants Dagoska and the death of Bayaz while still keeping their traditions acceptable and easy to follow. The balance is hard to accept because the world is as chaotic as it is. Instead of honoring traditions slowly but safely change for the better, most people cling to their traditions while forcing other people to change for their own beliefs and ideas. The conflict that springs from this need to change everyone who is not like oneself enables the continual warfare and suspicion present against each other. When Logen and Ferro first meet, they have only vaguely heard of the other nationality as both their nations have geared themselves up for war and disinformation to keep their soldiers in line and targeted towards their enemies. It takes an entire book for them to lower their barriers, to talk civilly without insult, even though neither one has ever talked with another from the opposite's culture before.

Good vs. evil is another common and often used genre/trope in almost every single fantasy novel. The fight between the heroic magician against the evil dark lord who often sits in a castle/tower/base is often

overused and obvious, which means the often used genre is transparent in how it ends. The task is clearly understood and often hard to achieve. Abercrombie solves this issue by having many deeply flawed people present throughout the story. Are all the viewpoint characters flawed? One, as already noted, tortures people for a living. Another is known as the Bloody-Nine for his skill at killing more people than any others. The king of the Union is a bumbling fool who has problems staying awake or taking care of himself. The king's most trusted advisor, an Arch Lector Sult, uses every tool at his disposal to force, browbeat, and uniformly intimidate everyone into his opinion of everyone else's ideal position for the betterment of himself. The multitude of flawed characters makes it hard for readers to define whom they should cheer for and who has a good personality, as everyone seems evil or wrong. Even those who do not seem evil are still flawed; for example, Jezal, who is portrayed as an honestly good knight, is lazy, selfish, and naïve. Only one character has a positively good personality or is at least portrayed that way throughout most of the series: Bayaz, the Magus.

Man vs. himself is a typical theme of some fantasy series. Present in this series is Glokta and Logen, whom each has demons for themselves to wrestle with. Glokta tortures people and flames at the world while hating himself for it and having no idea why he does it. He often asks himself multiple times during a chapter, but he never finds one. He also fights against his own body, which is failing after having been tortured. He is growing weak and tired often but is, during the series, always successful at overcoming his deficiencies.

Logen is also a character dealing with conflict and inner struggles. Having lived a long life for a Northman, he finds himself in peril during the first chapter of *The Blade Itself*. He is always struggling with his past, where he was a renowned warrior of the North and is known for having killed more men than anyone. “He [Logen] looked down at his hands, pink and clean on the stone. ‘There are few men with more blood on their hands than me. None, that I know of. The Bloody-Nine they call me, my enemies, and there’s a lot of ’em. Always more enemies, and fewer friends. Blood gets you nothing but more blood. It follows me now, always, like my shadow, and like my shadow I can never be free of it. I should never be free of it. I’ve earned it. I’ve deserved it. I’ve sought it out. Such is my punishment.’” (Abercrombie 2012, 2626-2629).

Every character is complex, flawed, and dealing with multiple issues, whether inner struggles, nature, society, destiny or supernatural. Every character is flawed and destined to heartache and despair in this very dark world. Most of them have inner struggles, such as Glokta or Logen, while struggles with nature appear in the form of the northern climate, animals out to kill them, or rain and landslides during a pitched battle. Society often struggles as the North tries to define who they are, while the Union is tittering on the brink of war, and the Gurkish Empire tries to expand while subjugating their people to slavery. The supernatural struggles appear with magic, as some characters have to use or defend against magic attacks and creatures, which are more directly and presently dangerous in the moment as the main plot revolves around finding one of the supernatural, magical artifacts that will allow the main characters to be victorious. The only struggle that characters do not have a strictly inner debate or struggle with is destiny. Destiny never appears in any of the

three books, and there is no clear indication that there is some omnipresent god able to control the destiny of everyone involved. However, Ferro is saved in the first book by a Magi called Yulwei. During their journey, these two talk about their lot in life, their responsibilities, and what they are meant to do. “Yulwei gave a long sigh. ‘I know, Ferro, I know, but fate has chosen you for saving. Be grateful for it, if you know how.’” (Ibid., 5240-5241). Yulwei mentions here one of the only few times fate has a direct impact on the story. Ferro believes that she has been saved by some cosmic purpose that has left her to kill the Gurkish Emporer and the Prophet Khalul. When they travel to the Union, for Ferro knows not yet what, she is disappointed when it is “only” Bayaz ordered Yulwei to save her. He is not precisely the destiny she had expected and is frustrated by his advances to help them find some lost artifact. She struggles with her destiny/choices and reluctantly accepts their quest.

Most fantasy series have some goal: whether to deliver the One Ring to the fires of Mount Doom or revenge against Tau’s father's killers. The objective that every hero must explore, challenge, and overcome to be successful can be called the quest. As already mentioned, the world is a dangerous place full of terrors, horrors, blood, and war. To stop the war, save the Union, and the world, one of the quests—for there are multiple quests, but none more important than this one—revolves around finding the Seed, which is the magical battery able to nuclear charge a Magus’ power. To even find and hold the most powerful artifact in the world will take a group of focused, powerful, and insane people to get it from its guardian at the end of the world. This quest will be explored further in the following chapter.

From Tolkien’s sub-creation point of view, the issue would be the lack of eucatastrophe that is somewhat forgotten in the row of dyscatastrophe present almost non-stop. That does not mean that happy or the turning joyous-moments are not there; they are. They are very few and often tinged with melancholy. For example, Logen once has to say goodbye to his cooking pot, which, albeit it does not seem as much, is a sad situation for the reader because Logen has had it for ages. Logen feels more for losing his cooking pot than he does for his friends at the beginning of the book.

“He had no idea how long he had lain on the river bank. Even if a couple of the boys had got away, the Shanka would be hunting them, hunting them down in the forests. They were nothing but corpses now, for sure, scattered across the high valleys. All Logen could do was make for the mountains, and try to save his own sorry life. You have to be realistic. Have to be, however much it hurts.

‘It’s just you and me now,’ said Logen as he stuffed the pot into his pack and threw it over his shoulder. He started to limp off, as fast as he could. Uphill, towards the river, towards the mountains.

Just the two of them. Him and the pot.

They were the only survivors.” (Ibid., 154-160).

“When he’d made it thirty strides or so Logen turned around and looked back. The pot was sitting forlornly by the lake, already filling up with rainwater. They had been through a lot together, him and that pot.

‘Fare you well, old friend.’

The pot did not reply” (Ibid., 1617-1620).

Both moments portray a dyscatastrophe for Logen as he abandons something each time. The first time he has to leave his friends for dead, only saving the pot, which also counts as a tiny eucatastrophe, because of the connection he has to it, but it is still a far cry from a genuinely momentous joyous moment. The second time, he has to abandon the cooking pot. Both times he talks to the pot, showing that his mood is melancholy.

The more grimdark a fantasy series is, the more instances of dyscatastrophe appear contradictory to eucatastrophe. That does not mean that the eucatastrophe does not appear at all, but the happy moments are often small and insignificant to the primary plot, as noted in the next chapter. For the reader, a joyous moment is, depending on their insight and experience, Logen cultural shock at the Union's diversity when he and Bayaz visit their capital. He notes the sprawling city as enormous and walks around with his mouth hanging open, watching, seeing, and noting the city's defensive capabilities. During their walk, Bayaz and Logen are having costumes made, and they go to a theatrical outfitter, which is quite comedic, as the Magus, which none in the Union believe is a Magus, dresses as a Magus, and Logen gets a barbarian costume, which is neither comfortable nor well-tailored against the elements as it is a prop:

“‘I need a magnificent robe, suitable for a Magus, or a great sorcerer, or some such. Something of the arcane about it, certainly. Then we’ll have something similar, if less impressive, for an apprentice. Finally we need something for a mighty warrior, a prince of the distant North. Something with fur, I imagine.’ [Bayaz said]” (Ibid., 4773-4775).

“Logen folded his arms across his old coat. ‘You think I’m going to wear that?’

The shopkeeper swallowed nervously. ‘You must forgive my friend,’ said Bayaz. ‘He is an actor after the new fashion. He believes in losing himself entirely in his role.’

‘Is that so?’ squeaked the man, looking Logen up and down. ‘Northmen are . . . I suppose . . . topical.’

‘Absolutely. I do declare, Master Ninefingers is the very best at what he does.’ The old wizard nudged Logen in the ribs. ‘The very best. I have seen it.’

‘If you say so.’ The shopkeeper looked far from convinced.” (Ibid., 4792-4798).

In summary, the grimdark genre of Abercrombie's work is speckled with instances of genre and themes that incorporate new ways of telling a narrative where the focus is on the dark tendencies to horrify the reader. There are definite anti-Tolkien vibes throughout it, as the dyscatastrophe outperforms the quantity and quality of the eucatastrophe. With a significant focus on high fantasy, magic, world-building, and plot, the world amplifies the reader's impact and interaction with the characters and begins rooting for extremely flawed individuals, as will be analyzed further with the Hero's Journey.

The Antiheroes' Journey

The Hero's Journey, which is the analytic tool used for most of this chapter, will focus on Logen Ninefingers and Bayaz, as their storylines are diagonal to each other, but their reactions differ significantly from the other. Both are presented in the first couple of chapters of the first book, and they are the two most unified characters during their journey—not in personality or belief, but shared unified goal/quest. There are other main characters present, which have just as impactful a story as Bayaz and Logen, but it is not until the third book, for some individuals, that the storylines interact and merge.

Logen Ninefingers, aka Bloody-Nine, as somewhat noted earlier, is a renowned and feared killer in the North. He has killed more men than anyone else, and as the book tends to point out, there is only one thing to say about him:

“Say one thing for Logen Ninefingers, say he's a survivor” (Ibid., 120). Or “Say one thing for Logen Ninefingers, say that he needs to piss.” (Ibid., 5376). Or “say one thing for Logen Ninefingers, and one thing only, say he's a killer.” (Ibid., 9462-9463). He describes himself down to one sentence multiple times as if the essence of who he is can be summed up into one sentence to make himself and others understand him. However, he is a complicated individual with a sad past that he is trying to make up for by doing good. He describes himself as a “killer, in pain, stealthy, fighter, unlucky, lover, touch with the women, reluctant, the bastard that never learns, he is finished, turning a friend into an enemy, never listens, and a cunt” (Ibid.). The last time he thinks or talks about in the second to the last paragraph in the third book is nothing as he passes out from jumping into cold, freezing water. Moreover, in his own eyes, he is sadly the most astonishing thing he thinks about himself. After a tumultuous journey filled with betrayal, danger, love, sadness, loss, and hope, he is left feeling nothing.

Bayaz, on the other hand, is a thousand-year-old Magus, aka the First of the Magi, as he was initially the first disciple of Juvens, a son of a god. In *The Blade Itself*, he has lived in isolation in the North in a library where he has studied. At first, he is presented as joking, decisive, pragmatic, kind-hearted, and a man used to give orders. “Bayaz smiled. A broad, white, beaming smile. His face lit up with friendly creases, but a hardness lingered around his eyes, deep-set and glistening green. A stony hardness. Logen grinned back, but he reckoned

already that he wouldn't want to make an enemy of this man." (Ibid., 1711-1713). He is kind to children and has the same opinion as Logen about Bethod and his crown.

However, before coming to that point, he travels, and according to Campbell, as with all stories that have a beginning, middle, and end, so too does *The First Law Trilogy* have a beginning, middle, and end, albeit very different from a more traditional and not as dark story. Departure can be read and understood in multiple ways as the story is intricate, dark, and multiple viewpoint characters. In the first chapter, "The Survivors," Logen is recovering from a recent attack of magical semi-intelligent creatures called Shanka that forced him to jump into the water for safety and survival. Although it has been bloody, most of his men are presumed dead, and he only flees the attack with his loved cooking pot; it is typical for him and the world because he is used to the brutality of the place. That is why this is not the Call to Adventure for Logen because it is business as usual. One would think the Shanka and their attack would be vital to Logen, but not because he is used to it. The Call to Adventure instead comes in the form of a conversation with spirits. Logen, born with one of the three Arts, can call on spirits to converse or battle depending on the objective. After recovering from the attack and jumping into the water, he seeks guidance from the spirits, which are on the decline because of the world's disappearing magic. The three spirits that appear are described only by "voices like the thousand sounds of the forest." (Ibid., 557). They tell him of a man looking for him as spirits can be everywhere, even if they are not as numerous.

"The spirit leaned forwards. 'We heard there is a man seeking for you in the moors to the south.'

'A powerful man,' said the one in the centre.

'A Magus of the Old Time,' the one on the left. [...]

'What will you do, Ninefingers?'

Logen considered a moment. 'I will go south and find this Magus, and ask him what he wants from me.'" (Ibid., 571-581).

Thus, the Call to Adventure has been accepted, at least the beginning of it. Sometimes, as in *The Burning*, the hero does not want the call, as they have multiple reasons for stay-at-home. However, for Logen, there is no doubt, fear, duty, or inadequacy in where he has to go. After the North's brutality and life, he is especially interested in seeing what Bayaz wants to talk about.

Bayaz gives Supernatural Aid after Logen arrives at his library. Firstly, he grants Logen a sword of the Master Maker, an ancient but straightforward looking sword. Secondly, he protects Logen from the King of the North when he arrives demanding favors from both Logen and Bayaz. Thirdly, Bayaz had given aid to Logen once before, long ago, when Logen was a sworn man of Bethod. After Logen and Bethod became

enemies, Bayaz secretly intervened and saved Logen from his execution; this is something that Logen does not know yet (Ibid.).

The Crossing of the First Threshold is, after having confronted Bethod, Bayaz and Logen leave the library and set out to the Union to gather a crew... Or fellowship. Logen does not know the purpose of their quest as he explains:

“‘All my life I’ve sought to know things. What’s on the other side of the mountains? What are my enemies thinking? What weapons will they use against me? What friends can I trust?’ Logen shrugged. ‘Knowledge may be the root of power, but each new thing I’ve learned has left me worse off.’ [...] ‘Whatever it is you want from me I will try to do, but I don’t want to know until it’s time. I’m sick of making my own decisions. They’re never the right ones. Ignorance is the sweetest medicine, my father used to say. I don’t want to know.’” (Ibid., 3710-3715).

Logen prefers his ignorance, but it is an acceptance of the quest, purpose unknown. His decision follows the Hero’s Journey but subverts it as his Crossing of the First Threshold is not a proper Crossing because he remains rooted in his known world. He travels to the unknown, but he does so with the knowledge and the goal unknown. It is a subversion of the journey, where it is meant for the hero to finally accept the goal and his future challenges. Logen does that and, at the same time, does not. The chapter continues and gives a more traditional correct guardian, according to Campbell. In their path is the challenge, a well-prepared, organized group of Named Men sent by Bethod. The ambush, meant to arrest them all, fails as Logen attacks them promptly and then flee with Bayaz. They are cornered shortly after, though, and Bayaz makes the very ground the enemies are on, shaking the earth, trees, and air. They pass the First Threshold and continue shaken towards the center of civilization, the Union.

The Belly of the Whale begins with the arrival in the capital of the Union. Logen enters the Belly of the Whale when arriving at Adua, where he has entirely accepted the quest and is willing to do what needs to be done. His metamorphosis has begun when he notices the city’s wonder and the sheer scale of what the Union is. No small secluded clans are fighting for dominance over a hill, nor any men or women killing each other over some slight in a duel. He realizes Bethod never will win a war against such numerous, well-equipped, and creative people. The Union has plumbing, which Logen finds amazing when watching the springs. They have the world’s most oversized navy, with tens of ships moored in the bay. Moreover, most numerous of all, are the people:

“Hundreds of thousands. Logen struggled to understand it. Hundreds . . . of thousands. Could there be so many people in the world? He stared at the city, all around him, wondering, rubbing his aching eyes. What might a hundred thousand people look like?

An hour later he knew.

Only in battle had Logen ever been so squashed, hemmed, pressed by other people. It was like a battle, here on the docks—the cries, the anger, the crush, the fear and confusion. A battle in which no mercy was shown, and which had no end and no winners.” (Ibid., 4675-4680).

The cultural shock has begun to change him, but it also begins to temper him as he sees things that are not as dissimilar as he remembers of the North. People ignore the poor. They are tense and mistrustful of outsiders, especially northerners. The soldiers are dirty and ragged, “‘What are these?’ Logen whispered to Bayaz. ‘Law-breakers?’ The Magus chuckled. ‘Soldiers.’ Logen stared at them—filthy, coughing, limping, some without boots.” (Ibid., 4745-4747). However, he is in the Belly, and the change is happening, as he notices himself, as well:

“Logen leaned against the parapet, squinted into the morning sun, and took in the view. He’d done the same, it felt long ago now, from the balcony of his room at the library. The two views could hardly have been more different. Sunrise over the jagged carpet of buildings on the one hand, hot and glaring bright and full of distant noise. The cold and misty valley on the other, soft and empty and still as death. He remembered that morning, remembered how he’d felt like a different man. He certainly felt a different man now. A stupid man. Small, scared, ugly, and confused.” (Ibid., 5250-5254).

The change within him beginning, the only thing left of noting is the goal of their quest. Moreover, while Bayaz still has not told the scope of it, he does inform them they are going “‘The edge of the World, my boy, the edge of the World!’ Bayaz’ eyes twinkled. ‘And back, of course . . . I hope.’” (Ibid., 9153-9154).

With his leaving of the known world and having begun his metamorphosis, he has a single instance of Initiation and the Road of Trials during *The First Blade*. The books are speckled with instances of Trials in some form. For example, once Bayaz and Logen have begun assembling their team: Ferro (Devil-Blood archer), Quai (apprentice Magus), Jezal (young nobleman), and Longfoot (navigator), Ferro is mysteriously gone, and Logen seeks her. He finds her being questioned by Practicals—a clandestine group under the Union's Inquisitors to seek and question treasonous and political dissenters—and rounded up. His Trial is to save Ferro and get her on the ship with the rest of the crew. They succeed by killing seven Practicals and wounding eight others, which is a horrific achievement that has not been done before on Union soil. Never have two outsiders killed so many of their secret police. Logen is heavily wounded by the Practicals during their fight to flee, and they are, in the end, only successful thanks to the Bloody-Nine appearing. The Bloody-Nine—Logen alter-ego—his berserker state, where he feels no pain, fatigue, or fear. He can kill suddenly and quickly with great precision and giving no mercy. He loses himself in this state multiple times, and it is another of Logen’s Trials that he often must contend with. During his time as the Bloody-Nine, he is violent, manic, and without any compassion. It is a state Logen often tries very hard to control and never appears, but the more wounded, stressed, or needed it is, the easier it is to achieve, as seen during the transformation of Logen in the fighting:

“... there was blood on him, but that was good. There was always blood. But he was kneeling, and that was wrong. The Bloody-Nine kneels to no man. His fingers sought out the cracks between the stones of the fireplace, prising between them like old tree roots, pulling him up. His leg hurt and he smiled. Pain was the fuel that made the fires burn. Something moved in front of him. Masked men. Enemies.

Corpses, then.” (Ibid., 9479-9485).

The first book comes with an end, having only just entered into the Initiation phase, and the second book, *Before They Are Hanged*, continues the stage for Logen’s (and the other’s) journey now solely in the realm of the Initiation of Logen. During their travels, Logen must unify a very diverse, mistrustful group of individuals. Ferro is hostile and mistrustful of everyone. Quai is observative and, therefore untrustworthy: “Damn apprentice. She didn’t trust him a finger’s breadth. His eyes flickered over to her, lingered an insulting moment, then darted off. As if he knew something about Ferro that she did not know herself.” (Ibid., 11189-11190). Jezal, although a captain in the Union and a nobleman, is clueless and naïve: Damn Union boy with his stiff back, sitting in his saddle like a King sits on his throne, as though being born with a good-shaped face was an achievement to be endlessly proud of.” (Ibid., 11191-11192).

Ferro describes Logen as “He sat in his saddle slumped over like some great sack of rice. Slow-moving, scratching, sniffing, chewing like a big cow. Trying to look like he had no killing in him, no mad fury, no devil. She knew better. [...] He was a devil wearing a cow’s skin, and she was not fooled.” (Ibid., 11194-11197). Longfoot is the second most hated group member because he is always happy, talkative, and excited about their journey, “Always talking, always smiling, always laughing. Ferro hated talk, and smiles, and laughter, each one more than the last. Stupid little man with his stupid tales. Underneath all his lies he was plotting, watching, she could feel it. That left the First of the Magi, and she trusted him least of all.” (Ibid., 11197-11200). Bayaz, being mysterious and non-informative about the real objective, is the most untrustworthy of them all.

There is quite the acceptance of the comparison between *Lord of the Rings* and the *First Law Trilogy*. For one, they are a group on a quest. Secondly, they are very diverse, if not in their race, then in personality. Third, each member has some semblance to specific characteristics of Tolkien’s characters. Bayaz is a wizard similar to Gandalf. Ferro has excellent eyesight and a bow similar to Legolas. While seemingly good, Quai has secrets that will not be presented until the end of the story; he has qualities similar to Boromir as they both try to force their views and decisions on others. Jezal is a stunted, naïve version of Aragorn. Longfoot is similar to the Hobbits Merry and Pippin as nothing gives him care in the world. That leaves Logen, who similarly entertain the most diverse characteristics from *Lord of the Rings*. He is similar to Gimli, as he fights close-quarters with great ferocity and aggressiveness. He does not like being thrown or held to as the closeness is a danger. He shares similar traits with Sam as well, though, as he seeks to bring the company as close together as possible and make them trust each other by telling stories, singing, and making

food and talking respectfully to everyone (Ibid. & Tolkien 1698). Another Trial is given to Logen, which he is somewhat successful at as they reach their objective in the end and they begin trusting others with their lives and fates.

Another Trial arrives on the heels of Bayaz becoming unconscious. Bandits have been following their trail across the Old Empire on their way to the Edge of the World. Bayaz irreversibly makes the air shimmer, and the world tilts. Too much magic has he used, and he is now unconscious, and Logen is thrust into command of the quest as the only person the others can agree on accepting (Abercrombie 2012). He leads them around a river, helps against another bandit attack, and continues the journey towards Aulcus and the Edge of the World beyond.

When they arrive at the dead city of Aulcus, the Old Empire's capital, they are beset by Shanka, the evil semi-intelligent creatures that are also in the North. The battle forces Ferro and Logen to separate from the rest of their party and must take a detour while the rest of the party continues. During their diversion, they defend against more Shanka, kill a couple, and can breakthrough. The two camp alone the night before they can reunite with Bayaz and the others. During that night, the Meeting with the Goddess occurs. Between Ferro and Logen. After having journeyed far and saved each other multiple times, they grew close together and developed a relationship. It is short and not very lasting as their personalities, in the end, are too far a divide to reach across, but they part on good terms at the end of the quest if Logen is melancholy at the end of it (Ibid).

After having overcome the multiple Trials multiple times, there is but one final, straightforward Trial. They have to get the Seed from a spirit on the island of Shabulyan. They arrive on the island ready, Logen drinks and blows alcohol on fire to summon the spirit—who is this time described as “A voice like the wind through the rocks, like the stones falling from the cliffs, like the sea draining through the gravel. The spirit loomed over them in their shallow cave among the stones, a moving pile of grey rock as tall as two men, casting no shadow.” (Ibid., 19675-19677). The island spirit gives them the Seed—the Ultimate Boon—and everyone feels elevated at the completion.

However, it is quickly revealed that the Seed they have been given is nothing more than a stone. A stone was given to the spirit for safekeeping by Kanedias, the Master Maker. None know where he put the original Seed. Having journeyed so far, they are left to return empty-handed and in anger. The scenes are a subversion of Campbell's stages, as the Ultimate Boon is useless, and there is no boon given after completing all the Trials. Having gained nothing, they begin the Return without having experienced the Atonement with the Father, Apotheosis, or Woman as Temptress: “he [Logen] found to his surprise that he was almost unable to keep the smile from his face. After all, success or failure in this mad venture had never really meant anything to him. All that mattered was that he was on his way home.” (Ibid., 19755-19756).

In the third and final book, the *Last Argument of Kings*, the sullen and unsuccessful heroes Return to Adua in the Union. It is a Return, except almost none of the sub-stages are used in their Return. They do not Refuse the Call because they do not have the Seed to even hoard and keep to themselves, so they can not do that. Neither is The Magic Flight an escape because they do not have to flee since there are no Trials left, and they once again do not have the Ultimate Boon. Rescue from Without does not happen either, since no one comes to get them; they turn their feet around and begin the long journey home.

As the only sub-stage used in the Return stage, the Crossing of the Return Threshold makes it a sudden and quite obvious shift because a Return journey often uses many steps to transfer the usually successful party from a dangerous unknown world to the known world seems sudden and poorly orchestrated. However, from one book to the next, Abercrombie makes the unsuccessful travel party appear home in Adua without any sub-stages' fanfare. Instead, The Crossing of the Return Threshold is suddenly at their destination to their known world. With nothing left to find, they split up. Logen returns home to the North to settle his score with King Bethod. Bayaz and Jezal seek to find an heir to the dying High King of the Union, whose sons have all been mysteriously murdered or killed in the war while they been gone. Ferro having no way to return to the South because of a mounting war, remains in Adua. Longfoot disappears. The party divided and leaving to their agendas are heartbreaking, such as the camaraderie that Logen and Jezal achieved, or romantically angry as Logen and Ferro.

Logen, returning to the North, joins a Union delegation of soldiers heading north to join the main army to attack Bethod. During the travel, multiple Road of Trials begins again. They are ambushed but survive. The following night he tracks them to their camp and kills them all in their sleep. When Logen arrives at the army camp, he finds many old comrades in arms before the series began. Some tearful reunions happen, as well as many previous enemies making their hatred of Logen known. More war happens, Union wins some battles now that Logen is there to help. A siege takes place over seven days, during which Logen and 300 Northmen hold a tiny, decrepit wall against the entirety of Bethod army. They hold on for the entire seven days and are saved by the Union coming to their defense. Bethod's army routed flees to the capital in the North, Carleon.

The Trials, which should have been already completed, are numerous and often impossible for Logen. Since their quest was finished in the previous book, he should now have helped bring the Boon back to help the world or be the Master of Two Worlds, but instead, he is still struggling with his metamorphosis. He has not mastered Bloody-Nine, or accepted his nature or his past, nor has he chosen to help the world for the good of the world. Instead, he is out to simply kill Bethod and hope the world fixes itself by it, which has not helped before. While he was on the quest with Bayaz, the reader read his improvement and on his station in life, but, instead, the reader now sees him returning to his old habits: killing friends, murdering enemies, scoundrel to everyone, and being the Bloody-Nine saving and ruining the day. All this put together culminates in the Apotheosis of Logen.

The Atonement with the Father arrives in the form of the final confrontation between Logen and Bethod. After Bethod returns to Carleon, the Gurkish invade Adua, thereby making the Union fight on two frontiers. The Union forces in the North, now recalled to help fight the Gurkhid, get ordered to return promptly. Logen and the Union commanders, now shuffling to take a walled city in a day, “‘Give me tomorrow,’ said Logen. ‘Give me just that and maybe I can settle things. Then I’ll come south with you if I’m still alive, and bring who I can. That’s my word. We’ll help you with the Gurkish.’” (Ibid., 25787-25789). If Bethod wins, the Union will leave the North, which Bethod does not yet know they would have to do automatically, but if Logen wins: “‘I win, you open the gates and belong to me. My prisoner.” (Ibid., 25839-25840).

The duel between Bethod and Logen is to be fought between Logen and Fenris the Feared, Bethod’s new champion, who is thousand of years old, served Glustrod (the fourth son) in the Old Time and is halfway marked in language from The Other Side, which cannot be harmed. Wounds took and limp cut off heals themselves with no loss of blood or fatigue. The only way to kill him is for Logen to hit him in a spot where none of The Other Side markings are present; the problem is that those places are armored. When he emerges because of the wounds taken, even the Bloody-Nine are laughing, getting more wounded. Master of Two worlds could technically happen because Logen and Bloody-Nine, for the first time, are one: “‘Yes!’ he hissed, and Logen laughed, and the Bloody-Nine laughed, together.” (Ibid., 26439-26440) and “Ninefingers lurched forwards like a drunken man, swaying, wild, sword dangling from his bloody fist. His dead eyes glittered, wet and staring, pupils swollen to two black pits. His mad laughter cut, and grated, and hacked around the circle. West [Union commander] felt himself edging back, mouth dry. All the crowd edged back. They no longer knew who scared them more: Fenris the Feared, or the Bloody-Nine.” (Ibid., 26446-26449).

They can barely hold Fenris off, but it does not matter as wounds are no matter. The two find their loophole and kill him: “The giant’s painted side could not be harmed. Great Glustrod had made it so, long years ago, in the Old Time, when the words were written upon the Feared’s skin. But Glustrod wrote on one half only. Slowly, now, softly, gently, the point of the Maker’s sword crossed the divide and into the unmarked half of him, dug into his innards, spitted him like meat made ready for the fire. The giant made a great, high shriek, and the last strength melted from his hands.” (Ibid., 26574-26578).

Finally granted their Atonement with the Father and Logen brutalizes Bethod to his death immediately, still halfway between Logen and the Bloody-Nine, but now somehow able to somewhat control the rage, as he does not immediately attack everyone around him but focus solely on Bethod.

“‘You’re made of death, Bloody-Nine! You’re made of—’ [Bethod said]

Logen’s fist crunched into his jaw and he took a flopping step back. Logen’s other hand smashed into his cheek and he reeled against the parapet, a long string of bloody drool running from his split mouth. Logen caught the back of his head and jerked his knee up into Bethod’s

face, felt his nose crunch flat against it. Logen tangled his fingers in Bethod's hair, gripped it tight, pulled his head up high, and rammed it down into the stones.

'Die!' he hissed.

Bethod jerked, gurgled, Logen lifted his head and drove it down again, and again. The golden ring flew off his broken skull, bounced across the rooftop with a merry jingling." (Ibid., 26600-26606).

He kills the King and is thereby, by the North's crowned King himself, which was something he did not think of happening. Bethod is gone, and Logen got his revenge, but the world is not changed. Neither is he. He is still the same bastard he always was and has not changed, and with no clue where to go and what to do with a crown on his head. He commands, barter, and forces his Northmen to go south and save the Union against Gurkhid.

The Gurkhid, having pushed the few Union troops that remained in the Union back to Adua, laying siege to the city, have begun to breach in multiple places. Without the army sent to the North, they are losing badly on multiple fronts. King Jezal, newly crowned and bastard son of the old king, valiantly defends the city both by brawn and mind. He does not know enough, though, as the walls are breached multiple places, and right when it looks darkest, the army from the North and King Logen arrive behind Gurkhid lines and attacks them from behind in the best of eucatastrophe:

"'There! To the east!' [...]"

One of the officers lowered an eye-glass. 'Cavalry! Union Cavalry!'

'Are you sure?'

'The Army!'

'Late to the party,' muttered Varuz, 'but no less welcome for that.'

'Hurrah for Marshal West!'

'We are delivered!'" (Ibid., 28615-28622).

However, even though the eucatastrophe is meant to symbolize an overcoming of struggles and the victory of good, the book continues onwards with a drawn-out and protracted battle scene, even with the incoming reinforcements. Instead of wrapping up the story and achieving the finishing touches, the story continues and eventually declines into dyscatastrophe again with Logen tearing through friends, enemies, and allies similar to and the appearance of Bayaz in control of the Seed. The Seed, which had always been in the

Maker's House in Adua, was found by Ferro, Bayaz, and Quai, the latter who turned out to be the daughter of Kanedias out to get the Seed herself to open The Other Side up.

The situation worsens further when The Hundred Words, the disciples of Khalul, appear in the city and are unstoppable. Except for Bayaz, now in control of the Seed and the power it brings. Mad with power, he quickly wipes out the Hundred Words and about a third of the city, filled with people. Wounded men, buildings, and Gurkhid are thrown around, while Bayaz laughs and screams: “‘Yes!’ She could hear his delighted laughter, over the noise of the storm. ‘I am greater than Juvens! I am greater than Euz himself!’” (Ibid., 29690-29691).

The aftermath reveals that Bayaz has been behind many of the plots for seeking war and control over the Union. He might have killed Juvens and started the feud between him and Kanedias, all to make himself more powerful, which would make the Prophet Khalul right, even though he and his Hundred Words eat flesh, and are themselves guilty of having manipulated people with religion as a motivator for control over a people. Bayaz himself have used banks and monetary debt as a motivator to get hooks into the nobles and common folk alike. He ordered the assassination of the old King of the Union and his family, then blamed it on Gurkhid to get Jezal on the throne. He is why Bethod did not kill Logen when he had the chance before the series began because Bayaz ordered it. With that information, the reader becomes finally aware of the capacity for mayhem and death Bayaz has. Instead of being a friendly, trustworthy Magus, who is always willing to give advice and friendship, it becomes clear he is an enigmatic conman out to control every aspect of history in the world. It shows he has gained the Freedom to Live, or has always had that, but have only been hiding his actions so the repercussions to his plans and actions will not hit him.

“Bayaz’ green eyes were hard as stones. That hardness that Logen had noticed from the very start, and had somehow forgotten. Somehow grown to overlook. ‘I entirely understand your feelings. Healing is for the young. As one gets older, one finds one has less and less patience with the wounded.’ He raised his eyebrows as he turned back towards the horrible view. ‘I am very old.’” (Ibid., 29968-29971). It is evident by the end, Bayaz will keep orchestrating and manipulating everyone behind the scenes. He is the spider in a web he created.

Bayaz, an exploration of extreme capitalism and Orwellian in a fantasy world, as a man already in significant power, is a warning for readers of the society of mass-surveillance, manipulation, and the power of money. The Union is tight-wired as a tool for Bayaz to manipulate and force individuals into avenues acceptable for him. It is a trope that is often present in fantasy, the good vs. evil, but there are no outstandingly good characters in Abercrombie's series, which are often the ideal standard in modern fantasy.

Logen, meanwhile, the king of killers, not able to accept the outcome, seeks guidance from Jezal, his travel companion turned friend, turned king: “Tell me something, then. Am I . . .’ He struggled to find the right

words. ‘Am I . . . an evil man?’ ‘You?’ Jezal stared at him, confused. ‘You’re the best man I know.’” (Ibid., 30047-30049). It is quite an endorsement when the King of a nation considers someone the best man he knows, even if he thinks himself evil: “Looks as if I’ll never be a better man, but I can try not to be a worse. I can try that much, at least.” (Ibid., 30885-30886).

In the end, the multiple characters were mostly better off before the series began than when it ended. Multiple story arcs played out, but all of them ends in a dyscatastrophe. Jezal, now king, is left in a loveless marriage, alone, and are forced, beaten, and manipulated into following Bayaz’s plans. Ferro, who helped Bayaz with the Seed, was transformed into an insane half-demon half-human monster, seeking the Gurkhid Emporer's death. Glokta, the torturer, is left in debt to Bayaz’s bank, left to manipulate, force the queen into becoming pregnant, and torture people on Bayaz’s behalf, still in constant pain every moment of his life. The only cheerful ending for him is his marriage to someone he loves. Furthermore, Logen, the only one who has actively sought to become better throughout the entire book and do something good, returns home to the North only to be usurped immediately by friends and allies, which leave him no choice but to flee and jump from a cliff into the river, ending his story just as it began. Wet. Cold. Alone. And having to deal with his previous actions.

Abercrombie seems to explore ‘What happens when the fantastical becomes the norm?’, how can the fantasy genre keep being surprising and supernatural, when the experience of reading it has many of the same story arcs and themes. His answer seems to be a subversion, such as Rosemary Jackson argued. The new and exciting, the bending of established rules, and the creation of the new impossible are avenues to explore in keeping the fairy-tales of the fantasy alive and growing, which in the case of *First Law Trilogy*, subverts most of their expectations and leaves them with a new understanding of the supernatural.

There are multiple comparisons between the tropes, story, and characters of the *Lord of the Rings*, but in *First Law*, those tropes, for the most part, reversed, subverted, or changed into a new and particular excruciating read. Instead of the story having a brighter and more humane eucatastrophe, most of those moments are either non-existent or quickly overruled by dyscatastrophe, as if Abercrombie himself enjoys the suffering of his characters. The people involved are flawed, broken, and hopeless for much of the plot, and even when they succeed, they are often left feeling worse or having done actions directly counter to what they were trying to achieve. There are no in-the-nick-of-time reinforcements, kind wizards, heroic journeys, helpful Samaritans, healing magics, brilliant kings, or uplifting endings. While this series can be described as escapist literature, it is not an escape that is worth spending much time in, but the reader spends every moment cheering for the flawed characters as they wish for them to escape their predicament and seek an understanding of why the world is as it is. However, the outcome will leave most readers wishing for more as the ending leaves one praying for a more eucatastrophe ending.

Conclusion

I can conclude that my two chosen texts, while both fantasy incorporates similar and thought-provoking ideas and themes present in many contemporary fantasy genres. The characteristics of popular fantasy genres are based on my chosen work on the path to darker stories that concern the depravity, disregard, and despair of human life, which, although relatively harsh and sad, is a development of more modern genres, which are in constant need to be developed and explored instead of writing the same story with the same ideas.

While Tolkien discouraged finding the ideas and themes behind the Secondary Worlds, it is clear that both Abercrombie and Winter draw heavily from the Primary World, like all genres most, as that is where experience and ideas spring. However, both seek a darker tone than is often encouraged in fantasy as Tolkien wants to show the world's marvel. They, while darker and grim, show a subverted marvel compared to Tolkien. They show the grittiness and flawed characters, not to place them on a pedestal or hold them up in the light as the personification of good, but instead to reveal the failures of humanity. We must be wary.

Both series incorporate cultures and societies based in our Primary World, such as Viking exploration, African heritage, and western capitalism. Both use multiple fantasy genres and magic systems to explore the supernatural in their worlds. They are bold, existential, and gives a new meaning to the fantasy genre.

There are, however, differences between the two, such as *The Burning* following the Hero's Journey more accurate than *First Law*. *The Burning* follows the right stages and with a perfect story arc for the hero. *First Law* does not do that. While, Departure functions as intended and Initiation, for the most part, the Ultimate Boon and the Return are all mixed up and subverted. It creates an interesting new story arc where the reader's expectation becomes subverted, and a completely new story arc is explored. A failed quest, while possible, is far from the usual norm.

Both Secondary Worlds are expansive, broad, and detailed. The life on the pages are present, and the character develops in a humane, if furious, way. Winter's world has more eucatastrophe moments and is more similar to Tolkien's ideal of fantasy while still being less than ideal in Tau's pursuit of revenge. It usually is in poor judgment for the hero to want revenge, as usually, the hero comes to accept and forgive the villain as that is the morally right thing to do. Instead, Tau subverts that expectation by brutally and angrily seeking revenge no matter the cost. The reader can still understand his actions as a character because there are other perfectly good qualities to him, such as camaraderie, love, and his nation's defense in perilous times.

Abercrombie takes the famous heroic characters of other fantasy series, such as Gandalf and Aragorn, for example, and puts them in a similarly well-realized Secondary World and then seeks to subvert as many of the reader's expectations as possible. The result is antiheroes that are interesting to read while flawed and

despicable, both as a warning and a form of escape. The series draws on tropes and genres present and used in modern fantasy but is met with our contemporary world's grimdark views.

Both series have developed a harsher and darker genre than the strictly white vs. dark avenues. Instead, they take a greyer, to the side of the dark, to tell a contemporary story that at times feels less than an escape and more like a nightmare, but a nightmare that important ideas, warnings, and themes can be drawn from. In essence, they have developed a darker and grittier narrative and genre compared to the more modern Tolkien ideal.

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