
The Marginalized Memories of Westeros and the Liminality of the White Walkers

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In the post anthropocene era, George R.R. Martin's 'White walkers' in his epic saga *A Song of Ice and Fire*, belong to the threshold of values where Renaissance humanism of Vitruvian Man becomes a decentered cogito. Martin's 'White walkers' present the quality of ambiguity/disorientation that occurs in the middle stage of ritualistic conversion from human to post-human, when participants no longer hold their pre-ritual status but have not yet begun the transition to the status they will hold when the ritual is complete. They are between their previous way of structuring their identity, time, or community, and a new way, which the ritual establishes.

'White walkers' are 'the discarded forms' of our memories, which haunt us because they generate a tension between what has been repressed and what has been surmounted. That is why it is very difficult to kill the 'White walkers': only fire can purge the memory, so only fire can destroy the 'White walkers'. Another way to destroy them is weapon made of dragon glass, as Samuel Tarly discovers. Thus the 'White walkers' are a threat to the civilized world of Westeros. But they also reflect the memory of violence inside Westeros.

Michel Foucault in his essay, 'Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias' had said: '[W]e do not live in a sort of a vacuum, within which individuals and things can be located, or that may take on so

many different fleeting colors, but in a set of relationships that define positions which cannot be equated or in any way superimposed.’ (Foucault 331) In the poststructuralist discourse, the site of one’s identity has been continually revisited by critics and the simulation of singularity and stability interrupted, resulting in the vacuum to be filled with signifiers that celebrate the plurality of identity. Similarly the ‘White walkers’ occupy an ambiguous space which lacks closure through Cartesian philosophy, instead, in Derrida’s expression we have ‘difference as the affirmative elusion of presence.’ (‘Différance’ 3)

The marginalised status of the ‘White walkers’ create anxiety and the fear psychosis is built up in the very prologue of the series, in *A Game of Thrones*, where the ‘White walkers’ are ‘white shadow in the darkness’ (8). Their entry is marked by the alienating coldness and they are like ‘patterns’ of ‘moonlight’ (8). The physical dynamics retain the ability to terrify the readers and so is their sword, which is completely unlike to those forged by ‘homo sapiens’: ‘It [the sword] was alive with moonlight, translucent, a shard of crystal...a faint blue shimmer’ (8).

Violence is the principal coordinate in the ontological cartography of the ‘White walkers’ in Martin’s biosphere. The comprehensive impact of the racially ‘Other’ on Martin’s mind helps him to create an aesthetic sphere in his saga *Song of Ice and Fire* where he can encrypt the politics of margin taking violence as its cultural ethos. Their negotiation with the Anthropocene world is in the absence of placental presence and becoming the Heideggerian ‘unheimlich’. Repeatedly Heidegger connects angst with feeling uncanny. The German word for "uncanny" is ‘unheimlich,’ the literal meaning of which is "not-at-home." Heidegger deliberately trades on this literal meaning: he wants to stress that in angst we feel profoundly dislodged from our ordinary positions, connections, and orientations

in life. It is this angst that drives the ‘White walkers’ from their marginalised position to discourse with their victim in terms of Thanatos.

Plurality of descriptions marks the existence of the ‘White walkers’ as the embodiment of both the marginalized as well as demonized. Martin makes a brilliant attempt to expose the psychosis and anxiety associated with them in the chapter twenty four, where the Old Nan says:

Oh my sweet summer child ... What do you know of fear? Fear is for the winter, my little lord, when the snows fall a hundred feet deep and the ice wind comes howling out of the north, when the sun hides its face for years at a time, and little children are born and live and die all in darkness while the direwolves grow gaunt and hungry, and the white walkers move through the woods.... In that darkness, the Others came for the first time ... They were cold things, dead things, that hated iron and fire and the touch of the sun, and every creature with hot blood in its veins. They swept over holdfasts and cities and kingdoms, felled heroes and armies by the score, riding pale dead horses, and leading hosts of the slain. All the swords of men could not stay their advance, and even maidens and suckling babes, found no pity in them. They hunted the maids through the frozen forests, and fed their dead servants on the flesh of human children. (*Game of Thrones* 233)

She is unable to complete her anxiety-ridden lullaby, for Maester Luwin interrupts her. But what cannot be dismissed is the accumulation of fear psychosis which has begun from that moment and we are embraced by the phobia of the long winter, which will unleash this terrible force of darkness. Here Martin opens up the archetype of phobia to soak us in the ‘collective unconsciousness’ of Jungian psychology. Sigmund Freud proposes that literature and

other arts, like dreams and neurotic symptoms consist of the imagined or fantasized fulfilment of wishes that are either denied by reality or are prohibited by social standards of morality. Thus the creations of Others like ‘White walkers’, who are ostracized by society, are necessary to reflect the image of the Martin’s latent imagination.

However, Jung differs from Freud in viewing literature as a distinguished form of libidinal wish-fulfilment, paralleling the fantasies of neurotic personality. Instead, Jung regards ‘great literature as like the myths whose patterns recur in diverse culture, an expression of the archetype of the collective racial unconscious’. (The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious 43) The concept of ‘collective unconsciousness’ (43) constitutes a difference between Jungian and Freudian psychoanalysis, the latter denying its existence. Jung holds that beneath the ‘individual consciousness’ (43) which stores ‘repressed personal memories and desires’(43) lies a ‘collective unconsciousness’(43), which contains ‘memories from the history of mankind and recurrent life-experiences, such as birth, death, fear, anxiety’(43). These recurrent collective experiences are referred to in ‘primordial archetypal images, related to mythology and symbols to which all human beings have accesses’ (43). Steven F Walker presents the view that Jung’s work theorizes about myths and archetypes in relation to the unconscious, an inaccessible part of the mind. From Jung’s perspective, Walker writes, myths are the ‘Culturally elaborated representations of the contents of the deepest recess of human psyche: the word of the archetypes.’(4)

The ‘White walkers’ are the archetype of the post anthropocene being who produces the phobia. They inhabit the margins, both in terms of land and their position in the book itself. We find them in lands where there is always winter, something alien to human survival, their

glowing blue eyes and mummified appearance is enough to create them as the Other. Racially different from others, they are the most feared creatures, posing threat to decentre the power structure of the Westeros. They are the creatures of Night, yet they are not called ‘night’ walkers or ‘dark’ walkers, rather ‘white walkers’ showing their racial status to belong to a higher hegemonic system of the dominant rather than dominated and they have a king and a queen too. What Martin writes is still not finished and hence we can see that their system of governing is yet to be illustrated. They wear reflective armour that shifts colour with every step – an alternative version of the stealth armour worn by the children of the night. They are not only the Other, but superior in their skill of swordsmanship in comparison with the homo sapiens. Their movements are lightning fast and their language is outside the hegemony of the seven kingdoms and beyond. We also get to know that they are different from the ‘wights’. The White walker has the power to reanimate the bodies that are dead, and these reanimated forms are called ‘wights’. Old Nan calls them ‘hosts of the slain’ (*Game of Thrones* 233) ‘Wights’ are not as powerful as the ‘White walkers’, though they are also difficult to kill, they are the ‘dead servants’ of the ‘White walkers’.

‘Wights’ are culturally represented forms of an Old Norse ‘draugr’, a Zombi, a dead man whose body is not completely destroyed after death and that therefore became an animated corpse able to haunt the living by walking about, usually at night and in the mist. Thus Tormund says to Jon:

when the white mists rise up ... how do you fight a mist crow?
Shadows with teeth ... air so cold it hurts to breathe, like a knife
inside your chest ... you do not know, you cannot know ... can
your sword cut cold? (*Dance with Dragons*, 1061)

Such ‘draugr’ are frequently encountered in the Old Norse sagas: thus there is one named Agnarr in the Halfdanar Saga, Eystemssonar and another of the same name in Gulporis Saga. More pertinent to ‘wight’ is the ‘draugr’ called Ogmundr in Orvar Odds Saga, who like the ‘wight’ is invulnerable to iron weapons.

Now the intriguing thing about the existence of the ‘White walkers’ is that they are initially created by the Children of the Forest to protect them and the natural resources, like the ancient trees and hence they are made of natural phenomena that is ice. People of the Westeros founded their civilization by utilizing the natural resources and hence are perceived as threat by the Children of the Forest. The Children of the Forest were marginalized and ostracized. They created the ‘White walkers’ to restore authority back to them. Their land was gradually colonized by the First Men of Andals, as Nan tells Bran in her stories: ‘the First Men, who had taken these lands from the children of the forest’ (*Game of Thrones* 233). ‘White walkers’ functioned initially as a weapon of resistance. But with time the ‘White walkers’ get out of the control of the Children of the Forest and begin territorial expansion. The ‘White walkers’ are therefore the ancient Natives who have been ostracized outside the wall during the War for the Dawn, are now the ones who seek to take control, like they had eight thousand years before Robert’s Rebellion, when the longest winter fell on Martin’s world, lasting a whole generation, trying in a way to make the colonizers, colonized under the hegemony of the Night King and his Queen.

Thus I would like to conclude this study of ‘White walkers’ saying that Martin creates the archetype of marginalised entity and their telos to seize the centre of power from the kings of the Westeros.

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