

# (Dis)ability in A Song of Ice and Fire: The Lion, the Wolf, and the Kraken

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## Abstract

George R. R. Martin is irrevocably one of the greatest fantasy novelists of all time, and his crown jewel is definitely *A Song of Ice and Fire*. The way he creates and develops his characters is considered to be a revolutionary novelty in literature. Men, women, rich, poor, middle-class, young, old, heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, educated, uneducated, maesters, knights, ladies, women warriors, and so on – each has their own place within the *Song*. What this paper will focus on, however, is the representation of disability.

It could be said that most of the characters in the series has some kind of disability, whether physical, mental, or emotional. For practical reasons, three of the more prominent disabled characters will be described and analysed in this paper: Tyrion Lannister, Bran Stark, and Theon Greyjoy. There are some similarities between their experiences and life stories: they all feel isolated and resentful due to their disability, they struggle with the oppression of their environment, they completely shatter every possible prejudice about disabled people, and their path to (self-)acceptance is filled with trials and tribulations.

On the other hand, there are many differences that make their arcs unique: the kind of disability they are inflicted with, the period in life when they got it, the environment they grew up in, different personality types, and so on. Both the similarities and differences serve as a proof of Martin's incredibly progressive and inclusive writing on disability, as well as many other important issues and aspects of life.

**Keywords:** George R. R. Martin, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, disability, ability, fantasy



## Introduction

George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* is certainly one of the most popular and praised series of novels ever made. Fire-breathing dragons in the east, ice-cold Others and their army of the dead lurking north of the Wall, and the chaos, conflicts, wars, tears, but also new friendships, romances, and identities are all included in this work of art. This multi-dimensional novel collects various genres, such as fantasy, horror, historical drama, romance, comedy and tragedy, into one magnificent song. It is an encyclopaedia of humanity, containing every aspect of life in the complex characters it represents. A human soul in conflict with itself is the central idea Martin wanted to portray through a range of personalities, behaviours, circumstances, and destinies. This comprehensive approach to the human psyche has undoubtedly more quality than a one-sided, monotone perspective present in some other novels. The idea that most people are not entirely good or entirely bad, but rather have more complex and undefined personality is what the *Song* is all about.

A very interesting issue woven into the novel's essence is a person's disability, both physical and emotional, and the way it can become a source for a new ability of people inflicted with it. In other words, Martin greatly challenges the view of disability as being only a limitation or a term with negative connotations and offers a completely new perspective on it. Similarly, the aim of this paper is to try to break the stigma and the stereotypes regarding disabled people through the beautiful and complex representations of the lion, the wolf, and the kraken.

There are three main parts of this paper. The first deals with Tyrion Lannister, a sharp-witted and sharp-tongued little person. The second part is dedicated to young Bran Stark's life, who loved to climb, before and after his fall from the tower. Lastly, the third part is focused on Theon Greyjoy, an arrogant, hedonistic youth, who is maimed and brutally tortured by his captor Ramsay Bolton.

It is plain to see that each of these characters possesses a different kind of disability, inflicted upon them at a different period of life in different environments and circumstances, and thus they cope and live with it differently. However, they also share many similarities, such as the traumas and struggles their disabilities have caused and the subsequent healing, transformation, and new opportunities in their completely changed lives.

## 1. The Lion

### 1.1. “A very small man can cast a very large shadow”<sup>1</sup>

Tyrian Lannister is one of the most prominent and complex characters of Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Due to his witty quips, exceptional intelligence and humour, and unique kind of bravery and kindness, he is the fans’ favourite, both in the show and the novels. Yet, his appearance, seemingly, stands out from these virtues and makes for an unusual comparison in the ability of the mind and the inability of the body, which is one of the primary notions of medievalism (Kozinsky). Unfortunately, looks are the first thing that people notice, and so it is in Jon Snow’s first point-of-view (POV) chapter when he sees Tyrian for the first time:

Tyrian Lannister, the youngest of Lord Tywin’s brood and by far the ugliest. All that the gods had given to Cersei and Jaime, they had denied Tyrian. He was a dwarf, half his brother’s height, struggling to keep pace on stunted legs. His head was too large for his body, with a brute’s squashed-in face beneath a swollen shelf of brow. One green eye and one black one peered out from under a lank fall of hair so blond it seemed white. Jon watched him with fascination. (Martin, *A Game of Thrones* 51)

It is visible that Tyrian’s body limits him in a way that he is seen as a god(s)-forsaken “creature” who is “struggling to keep pace on stunted legs” to his prettier and more elegant siblings. He is almost described as a zoo animal that causes fascination in others. For many years, characters like Tyrian “have typically been treated as objects of scorn, ridicule, or pity—not just in most literature, but in the Western civilization that this literature has reflected” (Hartinger 93). They were either presented stereotypically, or were completely left out (Hartinger; Monk). In contrast, Martin does not embrace this approach, but rather offers “an overall critique of ableist discourse” (Massie and Mayer 46). The term ableist refers to a characteristic of “treating people unfairly because they have a disability” (*Cambridge Dictionary*). Therefore, Tyrian is not intended to be perceived as a disfigured “imp,” but rather as a multidimensional character who represents a “fulcrum of balance between ice and fire” (Monk 10):

1. he is clever, bookish, and rational, but he also dreams of dragons,

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<sup>1</sup> Martin, *A Clash of Kings* 132

2. he can be cruel to people that wrong him, yet he is unequivocally loving to those worthy of his love,
3. he shows a strong, confident attitude during tumultuous events, but also a vulnerable side and deeply troubling past traumas when it comes to his private life,
4. he is a man of hedonistic pleasures who loves to drink and have sex, but he is also interested in history and politics and wants a relationship beyond just sexual intimacy (Monk).

While today “popular entertainment focuses overwhelmingly on the slender, the heterosexual, the average-heighted, the conventionally-abled, and the traditionally gendered” (Hartinger 95), Martin creates completely new, unprecedented heroes in his story, Tyrion being the most prominent one. Furthermore, Massie and Mayer argue that Tyrion, as probably “the most complex and well-crafted of Martin’s creations, actually points up the ‘crippled’ and vulnerable nature of the ableist fantasy, rather than being thwarted by physical disability” (53). In other words, his character shatters any prejudiced and superficial attitudes towards disabled people.

It can also be said that Tyrion’s condition does not just imply physical malleability, but also a representation of social roles, both in medieval and contemporary culture (Massie and Mayer). In European courts, dwarfs were mostly jesters, “fools,” and/or servants, similar to the role of Moon Boy, Patchface, and Butterbumps in the *Song*. This role enables them to express their opinions and even mock highborn lords and ladies, which is otherwise punishable by death for anyone else (Massie and Mayer). Tyrion himself confirms this belief during the first conversation with Jon Snow: “‘Did I offend you?’ Lannister said. ‘Sorry. Dwarfs don’t have to be tactful. Generations of capering fools in motley have won me the right to dress badly and say any damn thing that comes into my head’” (Martin, *A Game of Thrones* 56). Martin, on the other hand, not only depicts him as a balanced individual, but also “seems to use Tyrion more as a representation of the Ice and Fire world itself: an uneasy mix of Stark pessimistic idealism, Lannister cynical cunning, and Baratheon excess” (Massie and Mayer 55).

## 1.2. “Cripples and bastards and broken things”<sup>2</sup>

It is important to note that Tyrion’s dwarfism is the only congenital disability presented in the *Song*: “While other characters *become* disabled, Tyrion *is* disabled; there is no time of his existence where he was otherwise than he is now” (Massie and Mayer 54). This type of disability is much stronger in shaping one’s identity than the one acquired later in life (Massie and Mayer 55). There is no trauma from loss as in the case of Bran Stark or Theon Greyjoy, but instead there is pain every time people react to his appearance, whether it is pity, disgust, mockery, or something else (Massie and Mayer 55). He suffered this kind of treatment since he was born, and he was and still is blamed, mostly by his father and sister, for killing his mother. This, of course, is nothing but a distorted version of his mother’s death at childbirth, of which he cannot be accused in any way, but he repeatedly is. If he were prettier to look at, or of a bigger stature, he would have been treated entirely differently, which is visible in his father Tywin’s attitude towards Jaime, who is everything his brother is not.

Among many other instances, this one is a very telling sign of what Tywin, the fierce lion, thinks of his youngest son. With his clever plan to trap Stannis’ ships on the Blackwater and his other contributions to the city, Tyrion gathers enough courage to ask his father to name him heir to Casterly Rock, an ancient seat of House Lannister. Jaime is a member of the Kingsguard and, even though Cersei is older, the male comes before the female, therefore Tyrion has all the rights to inherit it. However, Tywin refuses him brusquely, and when Tyrion asks him why, he responds:

Why? You ask that? You, who killed your mother to come into the world? You are an ill-made, spiteful little creature full of envy, lust, and low cunning. Men's laws give you the right to bear my name and display my colors since I cannot prove that you are not mine. And to teach me humility, the gods have condemned me to watch you waddle about wearing that proud lion that was my father's sigil and his father's before him. But neither gods nor men will ever compel me to let you turn Casterly Rock into your whorehouse. Go, now. Speak no more of your rights to Casterly Rock. (Martin, *A Storm of Swords* 65)

In the beginning of *A Game of Thrones*, Tyrion shares some advice with Jon Snow on his coping with the hardships he endured because of his disability: “Never forget what you are, for surely the world will not. Make it your strength. Then it can never be your weakness. Armor yourself in it, and it will never be used to hurt you” (Martin 57). According to him, instead of hiding and being

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<sup>2</sup> Martin, *A Game of Thrones* 244

ashamed of your disability, you should accept and even take the mocking nicknames and slurs as your own because then they lose power over you. However, this might not always be the way he deals with his traumas, as will be shown in the following chapter.

Nevertheless, he as a disabled person develops empathy toward people “crippled” in some way or another, which is rarely present in the novels (Massie and Mayer 56). According to Hartinger, “the experience of being a freak or a misfit seems to make a person more sensitive to the plight of others” (93). His conversations and, eventually, development of friendship with Jon Snow help both of them realize how similar they are. Jon is, allegedly, a bastard in a literal sense, while Tyrion often feels like one: ““All dwarfs are bastards in their father’s eyes”” (Martin, *A Game of Thrones* 57). He may be a true-born son of Tywin Lannister, but his father never treated him as such.

After Tyrion shares some wise and mind-provoking insights with Jon, the boy sees him in a different light, both literally and figuratively: “the light from within threw his shadow clear across the yard, and for just a moment Tyrion Lannister stood tall as a king” (Martin, *A Game of Thrones* 57). According to Monk, this foreshadowing scene poses a question on Tyrion’s fate: “can he meet the challenges of his own nature as well as those that the chaotic world he lives in throws at him?” (7). As to that, we have yet to see.

Also, when he finds out that Bran is alive but crippled from his fall, he makes a special saddle design and promises him that ““on horseback [he] will be as tall as any of them”” (Martin, *A Game of Thrones* 244). When Robb Stark, who mistrusts every Lannister, asks him why he is helping his little brother, Tyrion responds: ““I have a tender spot in my heart for cripples and bastards and broken things”” (Martin, *A Game of Thrones* 244). Tyrion wants to make “Jon and Bran more independent individuals – something they can achieve only when they not only accept their condition but even embrace it” (Massie and Mayer 56).

The following quote shows Tyrion’s altruistic willingness to help Bran, but also serves as a perfect example of the personalities of the three disabled characters that this thesis focuses on: Bran’s desperate denial of his state, Tyrion’s sarcastic humour and subtle contempt for his father, and Theon’s easy smiles and carelessness in the beginning of the novel:

“With the right horse and the right saddle, even a cripple can ride.” The word was a knife through Bran’s heart. He felt tears come unbidden to his eyes. “I’m not a cripple!” “Then I

am not a dwarf,” the dwarf said with a twist of his mouth. “My father will rejoice to hear it.” Greyjoy laughed. (Martin, *A Game of Thrones* 243)

### 1.3. “I loved a maid as fair as summer with sunlight in her hair”<sup>3</sup>

Generally, sexuality is considered to be a taboo topic when talking about disability (Massie and Mayer 56). What is more, attraction to amputees and little people is often considered to be abnormal and pathological (Massie and Mayer 57). In contrast, Martin greatly focuses on the depiction of Tyrion’s sexual and romantic life, sometimes in great detail, which makes for an immensely progressive and open-minded view on the disabled (Hartinger 97):

She reached down to the hem of her thin roughspun gown and pulled it up over her head in one smooth motion, tossing it aside. There was nothing underneath but Shae. “If he don’t put down that candle, m’lord will burn his fingers.” Tyrion put down the candle, took her hand in his, and pulled her gently to him. She bent to kiss him. Her mouth tasted of honey and cloves, and her fingers were deft and practiced as they found the fastenings of his clothes. When he entered her, she welcomed him with whispered endearments and small, shuddering gasps of pleasure. Tyrion suspected her delight was feigned, but she did it so well that it did not matter. *That much truth he did not crave.* (Martin, *A Game of Thrones* 680)

Furthermore, while in traditional medievalist fantasies hedonistic lifestyle is reserved for “normal” or “able” characters, Martin puts Tyrion in the midst of these pleasures (Massie and Mayer 57). He is a regular costumer of many brothels of King’s Landing and he openly talks about his overall sexual life, without feeling embarrassed or uncomfortable (Massie and Mayer 57).

However, Tyrion’s sexual and romantic life is deeply influenced by the past traumas he endured. Namely, when he was younger, he fell in love with Tysha, a crofter’s daughter. They spent many days together and decided to get married in secret. When his father hears about this, resentful of him as he is, he commands Jaime to lie to Tyrion and persuade him Tysha is, in fact, a prostitute whom he arranged for Tyrion. Afterwards, Tywin gives the girl to his guards and forces Tyrion to watch them rape her and, on top of that, to rape her himself. What Tyrion initially learns from this story is that no woman but a prostitute would wish to be with him, which leaves him emotionally

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<sup>3</sup> Martin, *A Clash of Kings*, 397

crippled as well (Massie and Mayer 58). Thus, Tyrion believes himself to be “incapable of forging a healthy relationship and employs a long line of prostitutes to service him sexually” (Hartinger 97).

When Jaime frees Tyrion from imprisonment after being accused of murdering Joffrey, he cannot help but confess to him that Tysha really was just a crofter’s daughter. Consequently, Tyrion completely breaks because almost all his life he believed that his dwarfism will never inspire true love or affection. This belief mostly stemmed from his father’s cruel “life lessons” and unrealistic contempt for Tyrion due to his wife’s death. Therefore, in this case Tyrion takes up the antagonist narrative and decides to be the monster they think he is (Massie and Mayer 58). He angrily tells Jaime that he killed his son and sneaks into his father’s bedchamber to confront him before fleeing.

To make it worse, he finds his beloved Shae lying in Tywin’s bed. He kills her first, then finds his father in the privy, and shoots him with a crossbow. After he does it, the following, quite legendary dialogue ensues: “‘You shot me.’ ‘You always were quick to grasp a situation, my lord, that must be why you are the Hand of the king.’ ‘You, you are no...no son of mine.’ ‘Now that’s where you’re wrong, father. Why, I believe I’m you writ small’” (Martin, *A Storm of Swords* 1073). By committing patricide, “Tyrion remains prisoner of his father’s manipulation with whom he identifies in the same moment he kills him” (Massie and Mayer 58). Also, Tyrion’s aunt and Tywin’s sister Genna Lannister, offers a very interesting insight to Jaime regarding their physical difference and mental similarity:

“Jaime,” she said, tugging on his ear, “sweetling, I have known you since you were a babe at Joanna’s breast. You smile like Gerion and fight like Tyg, and there’s some of Kevan in you, else you would not wear that cloak...but *Tyrion* is Tywin’s son, not you. I said so once to your father’s face, and he would not speak to me for half a year.” (Martin, *A Feast for Crows* 568)

His subsequent crossing of the narrow sea gives him the opportunity to move on from his dark past, yet his demons still continue to haunt him. This is the exact conflict Martin wanted and managed to portray in his characters, especially Tyrion. Even though he manages to survive every peril so far, the road to redemption is long and unpredictable. He embarks on a pursuit of peace, happiness and satisfaction, though it is doubtful he will ever be the same as before. During this pursuit, “his soul must be remade, and he himself reborn” (Monk 15).

## 2. The Wolf

### 2.1. “Bran the Broken”<sup>4</sup>

It is quite common in *A Song of Ice and Fire* that characters endure unjust suffering and are left crippled physically and/or emotionally. Sad to say, children are no exception to this cruel kind of fate, which is best seen in Brandon “Bran” Stark, the youngest POV character of the series. His disability is depicted as a “sudden loss, . . . where Martin at a swoop deprives [him] of the ability upon which [his] identity hinges” (Massie and Mayer 52).

In the beginning, he is a good-hearted, content, and courageous boy whose main hobby is climbing the high walls and towers of Winterfell: “The rooftops of Winterfell were Bran’s second home. His mother often said that Bran could climb before he could walk” (Martin, *A Game of Thrones* 79). He liked “going places that no one else could go, and seeing the grey sprawl of Winterfell in a way that no one else ever saw it” (Martin, *A Game of Thrones* 81). However, in this chapter, one can almost immediately sense that something will go awry. For example, Bran recollects a story Old Nan told him once “about a bad little boy who climbed too high and was struck down by lightning, and how afterward the crows came to peck out his eyes” (Martin, *A Game of Thrones* 80). This was supposed to serve as a warning, but Bran assures her and everyone else that he never falls. Furthermore, when Bran begins to climb the infamous broken tower of Winterfell, the name of which is another foreshadowing of what is to come, his direwolf howls. In the *Song*, direwolves have repeatedly proved that they possess a sixth sense for danger, be they dangerous situations or dangerous people themselves. Unfortunately, Bran does not realize this, but confidently continues his climb to the top, or, more precisely, to his doom. While climbing, he sees what he is not supposed to see, and he is mercilessly thrown from the tower by Jaime Lannister. Afterwards, Cersei tells him that what he did was much too rash and that Bran could have been cowed to keep his silence about their incestuous relationship, which makes this event even more tragic.

When he awakens, he is broken both physically and mentally – as a boy of seven he ends up paralyzed only because he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. His life changes tremendously and he struggles with his “broken” identity: “when he woke up he was broken and the world was changed” (Martin, *A Game of Thrones* 239). Also, the fact that he needs to be carried in a basket on

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<sup>4</sup> Martin, *A Game of Thrones* 580



Hodor's back and that many people stare at him, either curiously, mockingly, or piteously, makes Bran deeply resentful and sullen at times. Nevertheless, he does not shut himself in his room, but gathers courage to move on:

“Men will look at you,” Maester Luwin had warned him the first time they had strapped the wicker basket around Hodor's chest. “They will look, and they will talk, and some will mock you.” *Let them mock*, Bran thought. No one mocked him in his bedchamber, but he would not live his life in bed. (Martin, *A Game of Thrones* 571)

With this behaviour, he “is the opposite of a sweetly moral Victorian victim” (Massie and Mayer 53). Instead, he is represented in a darker and more realistic way, which is another instance of Martin's revolutionary writing on disability – he refuses to sentimentalize a disabled child, which has been a tradition in literature for a long time (Massie and Mayer 53).

## 2.2. “You will never walk again, Bran, but you will fly”<sup>5</sup>

One may argue that it would be a mercy if Bran did not survive the fall, yet he did, with a broken spine and broken dreams (Massie and Mayer 51). The tragedy wrapped around this innocent, good-hearted boy is further emphasized by his mother Catelyn's grief: “and her boy lying there broken, the sweetest of her children, the gentlest, Bran who loved to laugh and climb and dreamt of knighthood, all gone now, she would never hear him laugh again” (Martin, *A Game of Thrones* 131). Also, in some of the more traditional novels, this would have been the end of a hero's life. Yet “this is literally just the beginning of Bran's story: he is thrown off that ledge in only his second point-of-view chapter” (Hartinger 95).

While in a coma, he experiences half-dreams and half-hallucinations about a three-eyed crow, which urges him to fly, and learns that he can “warg,” or slip into and control bodies of other beings, both non-human and human. Suddenly, he realizes that “flying,” which is a metaphor for being able to see all the dimensions of time and space, is even better than climbing: “The sky opened up above. Bran soared. It was better than climbing. It was better than anything. The world grew small beneath him” (Martin, *A Game of Thrones* 163). This “allows him, paradoxically, to move more freely: to cross two borders, the first one . . . between humans and animals, the second . . . between mind and

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<sup>5</sup> Martin, *A Dance with Dragons* 207

body” (Massie and Mayer 53). In other words, Bran does not just experience loss from this event, but also gains a new, far more significant and unusual ability than any other he or anyone around him possess (Silverman 66). He realizes that he cannot climb physically but can, metaphorically, into realms yet unknown to him.

However, there are downsides of Bran’s acquirement of these immensely strong and even dangerous abilities: Bran becomes a sort of an “abuser of the more disabled” (Massie and Mayer 54), which is seen in his behaviour towards Hodor, his faithful friend and servant:

After they were gone, he slipped inside Hodor’s skin and followed them. The big stable boy no longer fought him as he had the first time, back in the lake tower during the storm. Like a dog that has had all the fight whipped out of him, Hodor would curl up and hide whenever Bran reached out to him. His hiding place was deep inside, a pit where even Bran could not touch him. *No one wants to hurt you, Hodor*, he said silently to the child-man whose flesh he’d taken. *I just want to be strong again. I’ll give it back, the way I always do.* (Martin, *A Dance with Dragons* 528)

He does not do this to Hodor intentionally, yet his powers have a darkness to them. His mentor himself, Brynden Rivers, confirms this, when he teaches Bran the ways of the greenseers and skinchangers: “Never fear the darkness, Bran. . . . The strongest trees are rooted in the dark places of the earth. Darkness will be your cloak, your shield, your mother’s milk. Darkness will make you strong” (Martin, *A Dance with Dragons* 523). This is obviously not what Bran thought would become of his long journey to the mysterious wizard who will “fix” his legs. Further, he dreads the fact that one day he will replace Brynden Rivers:

Bad enough that he was broken, with his useless legs. Was he doomed to lose the rest too, to spend all of his years with a weirwood growing in him and through him? Lord Brynden drew his life from the tree . . . *I was going to be a knight*, Bran remembered. *I used to run and climb and fight*. It seemed a thousand years ago. What was he now? Only Bran the broken boy, Brandon of House Stark, prince of a lost kingdom, lord of a burned castle, heir to ruins. He had thought the three-eyed crow would be a sorcerer, a wise old wizard who could fix his legs, but that was some stupid child’s dream, he realized now. (Martin, *A Dance with Dragons* 529-530)

The way of life of the three-eyed crow does not seem appealing to Bran in any way, but he still sees the significance of his rare, natural, shamanistic gift: “*A thousand eyes, a hundred skins,*

*wisdom deep as the roots of ancient trees. That was as good as being a knight. Almost as good, anyway*” (Martin, *A Dance with Dragons* 530).

It could be said that Bran is not just a skinchanger of bodies, but also “in turn a child victim, a cripple, a magical being endowed with supernatural powers, and an abuser” (Massie and Mayer 54). He has both light and darkness in him and it will be interesting to see which aspect of his personality he will decide to embrace in the end. All in all, just like with Tyrion, Martin elaborately portrays the diversity of one’s character and how life experiences can further transform it, both positively and negatively.

### 3. The Kraken

#### 3.1. “He was smiling”<sup>6</sup>

If someone can be described as an embodiment of youthful arrogance and carelessness, it is definitely Theon Greyjoy. In the first novel, he is described as “a lean, dark youth of nineteen who found everything amusing” (Martin, *A Game of Thrones* 15). His easy smile and self-confidence bordering with sheer arrogance are the main features that most people know and remember him by.

Also, because of his good looks he is coveted by many girls whom he mostly objectifies: “he had never required a woman to be clever” (Martin, *A Clash of Kings* 168). At first glance, he seems a perfectly content adolescent, charming ladies and shooting arrows being his favourite hobbies.

However, after Martin gives him a POV chapter in *A Clash of Kings*, there is much to be discovered about Theon. It seems as though his self-centeredness is a ploy, a mask to conceal his deep-rooted insecurities and fears of abandonment. As a young boy, Eddard Stark took him away from the Iron Islands to be his “ward” in Winterfell. A ward is a more polite term for a hostage, which he had to be to ensure his father Balon would not raise any more rebellions. If he does, Theon would pay the price with his life. Although he was given every comfort in Winterfell and grew up with the Stark children, he always felt out of place there and yearned for his home, while the threat of losing his life loomed over him (Kozinsky 182). This eventually leads him to take the first chance he gets to go to Pyke, turn his cloak, and betray his friend Robb, whom he was the closest with in Winterfell.

Robb’s mother Catelyn has a bad feeling about Theon from the start and she proves to be right about her doubts once again: “‘I’ll say again, I would sooner you sent someone else to Pyke, and kept Theon close to you.’ ‘Who better to treat with Balon Greyjoy than his son?’ ‘Jason Mallister,’ offered Catelyn. ‘Tytos Blackwood. Stevron Frey. Anyone...but not Theon’” (Martin, *A Clash of Kings* 115).

#### 3.2. “Reek, my name is Reek, it rhymes with weak”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Martin, *A Game of Thrones* 407

<sup>7</sup> Martin, *A Dance with Dragons* 305

Theon's strong wish to belong somewhere and to prove himself to his iron-like father leads him to conquer Winterfell and become its prince. Needless to say, his reign does not last. Instead, he is captured by Ramsay Snow, Roose Bolton's natural son, infamous for his cruelty and savagery. What ensues afterwards is deeply disturbing and troubling: "Theon is tortured with flaying until he asks that the flayed parts of his body be cut off. When we meet Reek, the identity Ramsay gives Theon, he has already given up three fingers and two toes" (Kozinsky 183). Ramsay also breaks his teeth and shatters his pretty smile, which can be viewed as a symbolic transformation of his identity: "'Him? Can it be? Stark's ward. Smiling, always smiling.' 'He smiles less often now,' Lord Ramsay confessed. 'I may have broken some of his pretty white teeth'" (Martin, *A Dance with Dragons* 193). His trademark is both literally and figuratively shattered.

No one can deny that Theon has committed many crimes: he betrayed his friend and liege lord; he murdered and hanged the bodies of two miller boys to disguise them as Bran and Rickon; he also murdered people in Winterfell whom he had known all his life, and so on. And yet, the horrors that he experiences while being a captive at the Dreadfort are far worse than he deserves (Kozinsky 183). He is a victim of Ramsay's sadism and wickedness not because he wants him punished for what he did, but because he simply enjoys torturing people for sport. In addition, on several occasions Theon feels deep and even painful regret for what he did, but Ramsay does not care about his redemption: "There were things too hurtful to remember, thoughts almost as painful as Ramsay's flaying knife" (Martin, *A Dance with Dragons* 495).

After his last POV chapter in *A Clash of Kings*, Theon does not get one until *A Dance With Dragons*, where he is introduced as Reek. Ramsay subdues him to his will and makes him his creature:

When that other man had come this way, he had been mounted on a courser, swift and spirited. Reek rode a brokendown stot, all skin and bone and ribs, and he rode her slowly for fear he might fall off. The other man had been a good rider, but Reek was uneasy on horseback. It had been so long. He was no rider. He was not even a man. He was Lord Ramsay's creature, lower than a dog, a worm in human skin. (Martin, *A Dance with Dragons* 295)

And yet, "the ghost of his past self still nags at him the way that his phantom pains do" (Kozinsky 183). Deep down, he is still Theon, even though he is physically and mentally tortured and chased away into a dark corner of his consciousness. Furthermore, even though he is not allowed to bathe, eat, or sleep properly, he still shows an unbelievably strong character: "*I must not let him drive*

*me mad. He can take my fingers and my toes, he can put out my eyes and slice my ears off, but he cannot take my wits unless I let him”* (Martin, *A Dance with Dragons* 191).

### **3.3. “The gods are not done with me”<sup>8</sup>**

Theon often wonders why he lives, while some significantly braver and more honourable men had died. From being a high-born, carefree, physically able and attractive young man, he has become a shell of his former self, a white-haired, half-starved, maimed servant. Still, one who is familiar with Martin’s character development can presume that Theon has yet a role to play in the grand scheme of things. He took the first step; he gathered up all the courage he has had left to escape Ramsay’s clutches, while bringing Jeyne Poole, disguised as Arya Stark, with him (Kozinsky 183). He took the risk, knowing what would happen if he were to be caught by Ramsay’s men and dogs.

It is undeniable that Theon is deeply marked and traumatized by all the terrors he endured during his captivity and it is quite impossible for him to go back to the way things were before. However, it is often said that only through trauma and pain one can hope to grow, which can be seen in Theon’s story. He made mistakes, he paid dearly for them, and now he has a chance to redeem himself, whether through death as an absolution of his burdened history, or through his determination to live and move on despite everything he has been through. Therefore, his disabled body has given him the opportunity to develop the ability of his mind and behaviour.

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<sup>8</sup> Martin, *A Dance with Dragons* 712

## Conclusion

George Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* offers a brightly new and refreshing view on the connection between disability and ability of many of his characters. Tyrion Lannister, an incredibly quick-witted and funny little person, lives with his disability and all the woes that come with it since the day he was born. He has been shunned by the society he lives in and even by his family members, all except his brother Jaime, who loved him and supported him throughout his life. Prejudices and stereotypes concerning his disability encircled him daily, even though he has proven himself to be more than capable to run the city, to talk about important and intellectual concerns, to love, to joke, to innovate... An unfortunate sequence of events causes him to murder his father and escape across the narrow sea to try and find a new path and purpose in his life. He is not able to go back in time, but he can go forward, towards redemption.

In contrast, Bran Stark was born healthy and without disabilities, with great love for climbing and his head full of dreams of being a knight of the Kingsguard. Unfortunately, his dreams and his legs are shattered by a fall from the tower by the hands of Jaime Lannister. Afterwards he is sad, angry, and frustrated when he observes people around him fighting with swords, horse-riding, even walking, while he has to be carried on Hodor's back or in his hands. However, he has a greater purpose – he possesses a very rare gift of a skinchanger and a greenseer. He can slip into bodies of animals, humans, and even weirwood trees, and he can see into the past and the future. Although these gifts are incredibly dangerous and his mentor seems a dangerous man himself, Bran has the opportunity to “fly” instead of climb and he is no more Bran the Broken. Instead, he sees the importance of his abilities and overcomes the burdens of his disability.

Lastly, Theon Greyjoy goes from being a handsome, hedonistic, seemingly confident archer and horse-rider to a physically and mentally broken man. The fact that he was separated from his home and family at an early age and has spent all his life in search for a new one caused him to rashly and recklessly embark on a journey to glory and renown. After some grievous mistakes, he ends up captured by Ramsay Snow, who mercilessly tortures him and thus creates a new man, called Reek. At first glance, Reek seems to have lost all the features Theon once possessed, but it is hard to completely forget one's true nature. Therefore, there is still hope for Theon to redeem himself and to use these unfortunate and traumatic experiences as an opportunity to grow and develop into a better person.

All in all, through these three characters Martin poses an interesting connection between disability and ability, between pain and relief, between darkness and light, in a way that no one has before. The unique masterpiece that is *A Song of Ice and Fire* and its representation of disability is one of the greatest treasures literature has to offer.



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