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# Disability in Game of Thrones: Fantastical diversity or narrative prosthesis?

[Disability and Animality](#)[1] - August 10, 2018 - 10:11

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Game of Thrones (2011 –)

Created by David Benioff and D. B. Weiss, based on the novels by George R. R. Martin.

## Introduction

The fantasy drama Game of Thrones, based on the novels by George R. R. Martin, recently completed its 7th season. (Please note that some mild spoilers for the full run of the series are included in this blog post.)

It remains one of the most popular and extensively discussed TV series on the planet.

The show, GoT for short, is set in a quasi-medieval world and has a plot which initially owed much of its structure to the historical Wars of the Roses. It is also strongly influenced by the work of J.R.R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings trilogy (LotR), which means that in the GoT fictional universe, knights, castles, and dynastic struggles exist alongside magic, dragons, and other supernatural beings.

Perhaps because of its oscillation between semi-realistic drama about human power struggles and fantastical, even eschatological drama, GoT is a productive site for exploring issues related to social and bodily difference. GoT is not completely unmoored from the real-world constraints of physics, psychology and social dynamics, but it is also a continuous pyrotechnical display of narrative excess and audience gratification.

This blog post focuses on how one particular aspect of the series, namely its use of impairment and disability as narrative tools. In this regard, GoT is very much of its time – filmed in the 2010s, based on a book series that began in the 1990s – and demonstrates both contemporary and long-established functions of disability in popular narrative. The angle of analysis is disability studies, a multidisciplinary field that is concerned with how the phenomenon we call disability comes into being – and with its biological, social, and cultural sources.

## From one R.R. to another ... are we making progress?

One reason to compare GoT and LotR, other than their authors' shared middle initials, is the narrative universes' treatment of impairment and disability. The LotR universe, generally speaking, is one in which impairment and disability play a minor role. While characters are injured in ways that impact significantly on the story, LotR encodes permanent bodily difference mainly through the category of species difference. The world of LotR is one in which there exist multiple species with shared languages and comparable but

distinct cognitive and physical capabilities. The word dwarfs refer not to humans with restricted growth, but to a non-human species.

In GoT, by contrast, impairment is a major motif, and congenital as well as acquired impairments feature centrally both with regard to characterization and development. The character Tyrion Lannister, referred to as a “dwarf”, is recognizably a person with restricted growth. Moreover, he could reasonably be described as a disabled person, in that he is barred by both physical and social structures from performing certain activities and fulfilling certain roles.

Does this mean that the GoT universe, first established by Martin’s books in the 1990s and subsequently turned into an HBO series, represents significant changes in the representation of disability in fantasy narratives – as compared with Tolkien’s genre-defining work from the 1950s? The short answer is yes, probably. In addition to a protagonist with a congenital impairment, GoT features multiple characters who acquire impairments along the narrative way. One of these is Tyrion Lannister’s brother, Jaime, who has his right arm cut off, while another is Bran Stark, scion of the Lannisters’ rival clan, who sustains a spinal cord injury after Jaime Lannister throws him out of a window.

### **Narrative prosthesis – a useful concept for understanding disability?**

Tyrion Lannister, Bran Stark, and their narrative arcs are the two main examples I’ll draw on for this blog post. Not only do they demonstrate the importance of impairment to the overarching GoT narrative (a matter I’ll return to shortly); they also, at least on occasion, show the occasionally incidental nature of impairment in the GoT universe.

The latter point is perhaps even more interesting to disability scholars. There is a longstanding tradition in disability studies of identifying and critiquing the representation of disability and impairment in literature, film, and other narrative forms. Much of the critique has centered on how disability is often portrayed in a stereotypical way (cripples are bitter, developmentally disabled people are sweet and childlike), and on how disability is often used to make a point about characters: Their moral core is determined as well as expressed by their embodiment.

As David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder have pointed out in multiple books and articles<sup>1</sup>, disability, exemplified by physical or mental impairments, have featured saliently in the global storytelling canon from the first recorded stories onwards. However, Snyder and Mitchell claim that the most common use of disability in narrative is as a form of narrative prosthesis. What they mean by this is that disability is not a part of the straightforward mimetic weave of most texts – the way that texts represent the world – but functions as an artificially introduced narrative impetus.

One canonical example of this is the character of Captain Ahab in *Moby-Dick*. Ahab literally has a prosthetic leg made out of whalebone, since the white whale snapped off the original. That prosthetic leg is also a physical manifestation of Ahab’s obsessive quest for *Moby-Dick*; it constantly reminds the reader of exactly what he has lost and where he (and the story) needs to go.

Narrative prosthesis, in Mitchell & Snyder’s account, is a phenomenon that recurs throughout the Western canon, and serves to represent disability as an overdetermined, symbolically hypersaturated device of characterization. In other words, in narrative, there’s rarely such a thing as a character who happens to be disabled – there are only disabled characters. This is not, of course, universally true, but the list of examples marshaled in Mitchell & Snyder’s work, along with other work by disability scholars on the history of literature and film, provide solid grounds for closely examining disabled characters in popular narratives.

### **Impairment realism in a fantasy universe**

In the case of GoT, the character of Tyrion Lannister has received significant amounts of critical attention, not only because of his sophisticated portrayal by Peter Dinklage, but because of his role as a narrative anchor. Much like Thomas Cromwell in Hilary Mantel's historical novels,

Tyrion represents modernity in a mediaeval world, and is easy for the reader to identify with, particularly in the early parts of the story.

Tyrion's impairment serves multiple narrative functions. It reminds us of the fixity of the social order, since there are many things he cannot be or do, and it reminds us of the moral laws of a mediaeval universe, since Tyrion bears the moral blame both for his deviant physiology and for the fact that his mother died giving birth to him.

The first of these functions is reminiscent of a central tenet of narrative prosthesis theory. To endow a character with an impairment such as Tyrion's is a quick and easy way for a storyteller both to establish an outsider's perspective on a fictional world, thereby establishing that world more clearly to the audience, and to provide a motivating drive for the character in question to find his or her role in that world. This is certainly the case for Tyrion, who oscillates between factions and social stations, gaining and losing power, moving up and down, exploring and explaining the world. His intellectual abilities and social skills enable him to occupy lofty positions, whereas his impairment – or rather, the moral framework in which his impairment is given meaning – tends to be the cause of trouble.

By another criterion, however, the concept of narrative prosthesis does not explain Tyrion Lannister and his role in the world of GoT particularly well. Snyder and Mitchell point out that narrative prosthesis typically elides the particularities of impaired bodies, and that the capabilities of such bodies tend to vary with the needs of the narrative, thus demonstrating a mimetic double standard. "Normal" characters determine the course of the narrative, while disabled characters are determined by the narrative. This is not the case with Tyrion, at least not to any greater extent than for any other character in what is ultimately, as with most books of the fantasy genre, a plot-driven universe. His moral and narrative arc originates with his character, not with external circumstances.



*(Photo: HBO Nordic)*

### **Becoming an “animal”: The demands of the larger story**

The case of Bran Stark is entirely different, in a way that demonstrates quite clearly the influence of genre upon narrative prosthesis. In the early stages of the GoT overarching narrative, Bran’s story appears to be, like Tyrion’s, an interesting case of disability realism teleported into a fantasy universe. Significantly, the two characters meet after Bran has been paralyzed, and Tyrion helps design a special saddle which allows Bran to regain the freedom (and aristocratic authority) associated with horse-riding.

Later, however, Bran is endowed with psychic abilities, taking on the mantle of the spirit or seer figure Three-Eyed Raven, simultaneously assuming the narrative functions of transmitting information from storyteller to audience. The logistical problems of transporting the paraplegic Bran to and from remote regions, of having him threatened by and saved from various enemies, ultimately returning him to his family home, are “solved” according to the needs of the narrative. Any details related to, say, pressure sores and poor blood circulation in a sub-zero environment, are elided, creating a profound contrast with Tyrion Lannister’s circumstances.

From the perspective of narrative prosthesis theory, Bran Stark appears as a nearly prototypical example of disability-as-plot-function. He disappears from and reappears in the main narrative threads of GoT as the plot demands, and, by the end of season 7, has become mainly an immobilized conduit for exposition. His role as seer means that he can convey information that must be made available to the viewer, but cannot reasonably be framed by other means – e.g. by more realistic dialogue or through dramatic scenes.

From the perspective of the BIODIAL research project at the University of Oslo, which is concerned with the intersection of disability studies and animal studies, it is also interesting to note that Bran Stark assumes his expository function by becoming a symbolically freighted “animal”. In the GoT universe, ravens bring messages, and these messages are often delivered so rapidly as to break even with the show’s very flexible degree of realism. The Three-Eyed Raven represents the ultimate plot delivery system, and it is striking that it is in this figure that mystically freighted notions about animality (heightened sensitivity, pre-cognitive insight) conjoin with similar notions about disability (compensatory abilities, spiritual purity).

### **Does the plot always win?**

From fairly early on, the LotR universe was critiqued for its racist or at the very least racialized subtext; GoT has primarily been criticized for its tendency towards exploitative renderings of sexual violence. For both fictional universes, a strong case could be made that narrative prosthesis governs the representation of disability. The question is whether such a case opens onto an interesting line of argument. I will conclude this blog post with a differently inflected question: How and under what circumstances have disability and impairment, in a broadly construed popular narrative, become a point of identification and a signifier of modernity? It bears remembering, in this context, that the LotR universe kept its narrative focus on the struggles and trials of a small group of hobbits – ostensibly a species away from the heroic humans, dwarfs, and elves who surrounded them – and symbolically linked to foot soldiers, common people, and powerless civilians in wartime.

The differences between the 1950s universe of LotR and the 1990s/2010s universe of GoT are in one regard significant; perhaps the signal difference is the awareness that the creators of GoT have of the pitfalls and problems of using racialized difference to heighten drama. Differences that relate to species boundaries fall partly under this heading, but only insofar as the different species can in some way be perceived as humanoid, or, perhaps more significantly, as having a human-like consciousness. Disability, too, is represented in GoT in ways that are clearly influenced by changing real-world social norms, but there appear to be boundaries: When the story demands it – every representational strategy goes. Or does it?

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<sup>1</sup>See for example Mitchell, David T., and Sharon L. Snyder. Narrative prosthesis: Disability and the dependencies of discourse. University of Michigan Press, 2000.

 [tyrion.jpg](#) [3]

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