

Truls Savjord

Distropic Fantasy: Steven Erikson's The Malazan Book of the Fallen

Master's thesis in Lektorutdanning i språk-fag
Supervisor: Camilla Ulleland Hoel
Trondheim, November 2018

Truls Savjord

Distropic Fantasy: Steven Erikson's The Malazan Book of the Fallen

Master's thesis in Lektorutdanning i språkfag
Supervisor: Camilla Ulleland Hoel
Trondheim, November 2018

Norwegian University of Science and Technology
Faculty of Humanities
Department of Language and Literature



Norwegian University of
Science and Technology

Distropic Fantasy: Steven Erikson's The Malazan Book of the Fallen

Table of contents

Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Fantasy Genre Theory and the <i>Malazan</i> books	6
Chapter 2: Character and plot tropes of the <i>Malazan</i> series.	16
Chapter 3: World-building and Tropes	26
Conclusion	35
Works cited	37

Introduction

“One facet of his work is his rigorous determination to defy expectations, both of received notions of fantasy and of familiar conceptions of storytelling itself, to unsettle his readers’ preconceptions as much as he can.¹” -Stephen R. Donaldson

The *Malazan* series is a long one, and discussing all the tropes that can be found in it would most likely require a book of almost the same thickness as the ones that make up the series. Erikson subverts and twists a lot of the tropes and conventions of the fantasy genre. There are also many ways in which the books conform to the fantasy genre. The effects of the magic are a lot of the time quite standard (things get destroyed). There are dragons and other fantastical creatures, plenty of magic being flung around, gods around every corner. All things that might be expected in a work of epic fantasy. It also has a sprawling cast of characters, each book having a several pages long *Dramatis Personae* in addition to the maps before the story begins. Combined with a huge original world filled with a variety of peoples and species of humanoids, it makes for an interesting subject of study.

Erikson does however make enough changes that even the elements that are expected still do things that we might not expect. Dragons who pretend to be a couple of small, skeletal lizards. Gods who end up needing help from mortals, or even get defeated by them. The most powerful magic defeated by a single squad-mage (one of the lower rungs of mages in the Malazan military). The world itself is vast and full of interesting people and creatures. Erikson's *Malazan* books are untraditional for the high fantasy genre in several ways. The story itself is not linear, and jumps back and forth in time between books.

1 Donaldson 2015

As Donaldson pointed out in his quote, Erikson uses some unconventional techniques in storytelling. It is hard to say where the story in the *Malazan* series really starts, and it is even harder to say where it ends. The first book, *Gardens of the Moon* (1999), throws us straight into what seems like the middle of a story with very little knowledge of who any of these characters are or how they got to the point they are at. In addition, the books do not follow a linear progression in time. Readers are thrown backwards or forwards in time between books. In addition, the fifth book also transports readers to an entirely new continent with an almost completely new cast of characters at least as extensive as previous books. The *Malazan* novels are also interesting due to the fact that Erikson has admitted that he played through parts of the plot using adapted *Dungeons and Dragons* rules with his own world.² The outcome of the role-playing may have had an impact on the plot of the books, as well as *Dungeons and Dragons* being a general inspiration for his works.

A lot of fantasy fiction literature can be illustrated with the Norwegian fairy tale “*Askeladden og de gode hjelperne*” (In English “Askeladden and the Good Helpers”). The main protagonist, coming from an ordinary background, sets out on an adventure. Along the way towards his goal, he gathers “plot coupons” that will eventually help him attain his goal. It is a term coined by Nick Lowe as a term for something he found to be characteristic in uncreative fantasy stories. The protagonist trots around collecting these coupons, most often in the form of magical items, and once that is done, they can “send them off to the author for the ending.”³ In Askeladden's case, these plot coupons come in the form of the helpers he finds on the way to try to claim the princess, who while strange, turn out to be exactly what was needed to complete the trials presented by the king.

Lord of the Rings can be viewed in this way. Frodo comes from nothing, and because of his relationship to Bilbo and Gandalf ends up taking up a quest to first take the Ring to Rivendell, and then to Mordor. The entirety of the *Fellowship of the Ring* is him gathering the things he needs to see it through. The Fellowship itself, the knowledge of where to go, the gifts of Galadriel, these are all collected as Frodo travels across Middle Earth. Several of the companions Frodo gains in the first book even go on to gather plot points of their own after being separated from Frodo and Sam.

2 Erikson n.d

3 Lowe 1986

Robert Jordan's *Wheel of Time* can also be seen as following this formula. Rand is an ordinary person from a small village who turns out to have magical power. After being made aware of this, he sets out to learn to control his powers and stop the end of the world. He spends 13 books gathering (and sometimes losing) plot points in the form of allies, friends, magical know-how, and magical devices until it all comes to a head in the final book.

The fact that these works of fiction can be summarized in this way does not in any way reflect on the quality of the work. It does illustrate that there might be a degree of predictability to be found in the fantasy genre. Through Nick Lowe's article, we can see that this pattern has been repeated enough that it can be viewed as significant. This does not mean that this applies to all works of fantasy. There are plenty of authors who have written works that break this pattern. The *Malazan* series is one of them.

To those who have read extensively within the fantasy genre patterns like the ones previously mentioned might become apparent. It is not necessarily a bad thing as a fan. You do not read a detective novel without expecting certain things, for example some sort of mystery, a thief/murderer/criminal of some sort, an investigator. Readers will have preconceptions based on what they've read previously. Diana Wynne Jones' *Tough Guide to Fantasyland* is a very accurate source for a lot of the preconceptions a reader might have about fantasy literature in general.⁴ This thesis will show that Erikson subverts fantasy tropes and will try to identify what elements of his writing serve to make his books dystopic. Dystopic means, for the purpose of this thesis, that tropes commonly found in the fantasy genre are in some way changed, turned on their heads. It will demonstrate how he subverts tropes, and how role-playing may have made a difference in making his work somewhat unique.

With three chapters, the first will show how the *Malazan* books fit into the fantasy genre. "Unique" as a term is meaningless without a grasp of the "normal", or average. First establishing what defines the fantasy genre as a whole. There are several definitions of what fantasy is, and this section will show where Erikson's series fits into the genre as a whole. Tropes are linked to genre, so defining the genre matters in order to show how Erikson does things differently in his books.

4 Grant 2001

The second chapter is about character and plot tropes. First showing what a trope is and what function they serve in literature, as well as a look at why something is a trope. This section will only deal with the tropes that are related to characters and the plot. It will demonstrate how Erikson subverts fantasy tropes, and look at how *Dungeons and Dragons* might have influenced the plot and characters in a way that might also have subverted expectations of readers going into this series,

The third and last chapter will deal with the tropes of the setting, the world-building. This is a term frequently used when discussing any work of fantasy literature. Fantasy stories often take place in other worlds, or in alternate versions of ours or hidden a world similar to our own. Creating entire new worlds from scratch seems like a daunting task, and is perhaps in many ways a cornerstone of both science fiction and fantasy literature. World-building is tied to tropes, and in the chapter I will show how the world-building of the *Malazan* series is unique, and also subverts some common fantasy tropes.

It is necessary to limit the works used as much as possible in this type of analysis, but it is not possible to do in a series of inter-connected books. Plots that are set into motion in one book may bear fruit in another book later in the series. Character arcs span several of the books, and the structure of Erikson's series makes it so that, in order to look at some of his more interesting characters, readers would need to access all of his books. As an example, Tehol Beddict appears first in *Midnight Tides* (the 5th book). He does not appear in the 6th, comes back in the 7th, is not present in the 8th, and is back in the 9th for his last appearances in the series, interacting with characters that he has not met in any of the previous books he appeared. It is similar for many of the other characters, since none of them are present in all of the books. In addition to the ten-book series, there are also other works by Erikson and Esslemont's book that share characters and setting with *The Malazan Book of the Fallen*. These will however not be referred to in this thesis because it would expand the scope of the task, making it too large. As for other fiction books used as examples, they will be limited to older works, pre-2000.

Chapter 1: Fantasy Genre Theory and the *Malazan* books

“Fantasy” is a genre term that can describe a very wide variety of stories. *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature* starts its chronology of fantasy fiction with *Beowulf* from 800 AD and includes along the way *Frankenstein*, *The Little Mermaid*, *A Christmas Carol*, *Dracula*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*, and *American Gods*.⁵ On the surface, the only thing these works have in common is an element of the supernatural. With such a diverse set of books listed as a part of the same genre, it would seem hard to find a definition that fits all of them, these being merely a tiny selection of the list in the book, which is again a small selection of the total body of works that can be considered fantasy.

This chapter will first define what the fantasy genre is, and where within it the *Malazan* series belongs by demonstrating how it fits with the genre markers defined by scholars on the subject. There are many theories on what fantasy is, and this thesis will cover a selection that illustrate what defines fantasy as a whole. I will also show how the *Malaza Book of the Fallen* fits into the epic fantasy subgenre. In order to be able to identify tropes, it is necessary to show where they come from by showing what texts define the genre, what the major influences of fantasy are.

In their *Encyclopedia*, Clute and Grant choose to define fantasy this way: “A fantasy text is a self-coherent narrative. When set in this world, it tells a story which is impossible in the world as we perceive it; when set in an otherworld, that otherworld will be impossible, though stories set there may be possible on its terms.”⁶ This definition for what fantasy is (in the *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*) listed above is very broad. This is acknowledged by the authors, as Clute and Grant discuss how hard it is to create a boundary for what to include and not to include as fantasy. Because of this, they created a more loose definition that makes it possible to also include works that can be argued are not fantasy, but have elements of it⁷.

5 James & Mendlesohn 2014: p. xv-xxiv

6 Clute & Grant 1997: p. 338

7 Clute & Grant 1997: p. 338

Brian Attebery gives a similarly loose definition of what constitutes a work of fantasy. He suggested that fantasy is a group of texts that to some extent share a cluster of tropes. These tropes can be objects, but also narrative techniques. The texts that contain these tropes constitute the fuzzy set of fantasy.

At the centre are those stories which share tropes of the completely impossible and towards the edge, in subsets, are those stories which include only a small number of tropes in such a way as to leave no doubt in the reader's mind as to whether what they have read is fantastical or not⁸.

The “fuzzy set” is in other words all fantasy texts. It is also worth noting that this definition of fantasy makes it intrinsically linked to tropes. The tropes define the genre. If the definition of fantasy is this broad, it makes it necessary for anyone trying to analyse a work within it to find a set of boundaries wherein the work fits.

It is somewhat traditional when discussing the fantasy genre to trace it back to Tzvetan Todorov. He refers to a genre he calls “the fantastic”. In this genre, an event takes place that is seemingly inexplicable by the laws that rule the world. Either this event is the result of trickery, and can therefore be explained, or the event really happened, in which case the laws of reality are unknown. Todorov places the fantastical as the place between these two explanations. If either explanation is given, it leaves the genre for one of two others, either the uncanny or the marvellous⁹. This would fit only a very narrow amount of works. It also excludes any story that does not take place in our own world. It does not at all cover what most people would identify as fantasy.

8 James & Mendlesohn 2014: p 1

9 Todorov 1975: p. 25

Another approach to categorizing the fantasy genre can be found in Farah Mendlesohn's *Rhetorics of Fantasy*. Rather than trying to create her own definition of what fantasy itself is, she accepts the fuzzy set of fantasy defined by Attebery and instead delves into how fantasy literature is constructed, dividing the fantasy genre into four categories. The way in which fantastic elements enter the narrated world determines what category a text fits into. This is her short summary of them:

In the portal-quest we are invited through into the fantastic; in the intrusion fantasy, the fantastic enters the fictional world; in the liminal fantasy, the magic hovers in the corner of our eye; while in the immersive fantasy we are allowed no escape.¹⁰

At a glance only one of these categories fit the *Malazan* series, the immersive fantasy. Taking place in a secondary world with no way between it and our own, there is no way to escape the fantastic elements of the story.

The immersive fantasy story as defined by Mendlesohn takes place in a world that “functions on all levels as a complete world.¹¹” It must pretend that it can not be influenced from the outside, and make the reader a part of the world to the same degree as the characters portrayed in it. The reader sees the world from the eyes of the characters in it, and accepts what they believe to be real or normal.¹² She goes on to say that thinning is central in the immersive fantasy. This is a term used in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*. There it is stated that fantasy stories can be seen as tales of restoration, or recovery. In secondary worlds, the land is somehow threatened. There is a sense that it will somehow be lessened, or that something is wrong about the land. This process in a story is called 'thinning'.¹³ Mendlesohn argues that immersive fantasy deals with this theme more than any of her other categories of fantasy, and is backed up by Clute who claims that this is because the discovery of the fantasy world is not storyable in an immersive fantasy, but the possible loss of it is.¹⁴ If the characters of a story belong in the fictional world, they can not really “discover” it without breaking immersion. They can certainly learn things they did not previously, but the plot is not driven by them looking for something new, it is driven by them needing to get something done. While it can be said that Frodo discovers a lot of things he did not know about throughout *The Lord of the Rings*, the story is driven forward by his quest to destroy the Ring. Similarly, characters in the *Malazan* series often find themselves in areas and situations they did not know existed, but the story is again not about the discovery, but about what happens while they are there. The Malazan world

10 Mendlesohn 2008: p. xiv

11 Mendlesohn 2008: p. 61

12 Mendlesohn 2008: pp. 61-62

13 Clute and Grant 1997: p. 942

14 Mendlesohn 2008: p. 61

is also going through her concept of 'thinning' in how the apparent main antagonist, the Crippled God, is poisoning the Goddess Burn, who is a representation of the world. The earth is her flesh, so poisoning her means bad things may happen to the world.¹⁵

Fantasy is also often divided into the categories 'high' and 'low'. “In high fantasy the impossible or nonrational elements function according to the natural laws of the fictive universe. At least some of these elements are treated as commonplace or natural.¹⁶” Elements of the setting or story that are not possible or that do not make sense outside of the fictional universe are treated as if they were real, and possibly normal within the setting. One of the best examples of this is magic. In the *Malazan* books, magic appears in many forms, but it behaves according to the rules of the world it takes place in. We might not be able to put into words any kind of universal law of magic based on what is known, but we do see that there is a system in place. By the reactions of characters it is possible to see that magic is more or less commonplace.

Low fantasy, as a counterpoint, deals with these elements as what they are, non-rational and impossible. While high fantasy mostly takes place in secondary worlds, according to Mendlesohn, low fantasy takes place in our own world. *The Malazan Book of the Fallen* series of books all take place in a secondary world. The impossible elements, such as magic and monsters, all behave according to natural laws in-universe. We are not always told what all those laws or rules are, but they are there. It should also be noted that high and low do not in any way relate to the quality of a work.

15 Erikson 2001 pp. 74-75

16 Angelskär 2005

A term often used in conjunction with high fantasy is *epic* fantasy. Very often used as a synonym for high fantasy (as an example reflecting popular opinion, the Wikipedia entry on high fantasy considers them to be the same term¹⁷), and is often found as a descriptor for many works of secondary-world fantasy. Clute and Grant define epic fantasy as any tale that is written to a large scale and deals with founding and/or defence of a land. They also note that it has become useless as a term due to it being used in the marketing of any heroic fantasy tale that spans multiple volumes.¹⁸ Agreeing to the uselessness of the term as a sub-genre, I think it still has a place as a descriptor for fantasy stories in an academic sense, even if it should potentially be disregarded when browsing for new books. It is useful to distinguish stories with a larger scope from stories that fit the sword and sorcery subgenre. The former might deal with the end of the world or a civilization, while the latter more often deals with personal quests for something, for example revenge, power or wealth. Editor Lou Brooks gives this as an example to differentiate the two sub-genres: "Epic fantasy is Homer's *The Iliad* while sword and sorcery is *The Odyssey*. I follow this up with, J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* is sword and sorcery to *The Lord of the Rings* epic."¹⁹ Where *The Hobbit* has focus on a small group of characters as they make their way through a series of adventures. *The Lord of the Rings* has a larger cast, and rather than a small group of characters on an adventure, the plot leads to grand battles.

In order to look at the tropes of the fantasy genre, there must be established an idea of what the recurring patterns of the genre are. To do this I want to look at the terms 'generic' and 'genre' fantasy that Clute and Grant use to describe some works. They use it to some degree to talk about the quality of a work. For the purposes of this thesis however, they rather used as a tool to refer to a body of works that adhere to the patterns and conventions of the genre more than others. *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* has an entry named "genre fantasy". It states that this subset of fantasy is almost always either high, heroic or sword-and-sorcery fantasy. These tales are defined by being extremely familiar even to those that haven't read them before²⁰. Meaning that characters are well-known archetypes, and the setting is a secondary world that is usually derivative of Tolkien's Middle Earth that, for Clute and Grant, is generically called "fantasyland."²¹ They are pointing to a large body of works that re-use elements that have been popularized by other, earlier works.

17 High Fantasy

18 Clute & Grant 1997: p. 319

19 Anders, L.

20 Clute & Grant 1997: p. 396

21 Clute & Grant 1997: p. 341

John Grant expands on his original entry on genre fantasy in his essay *Gulliver Unravels: Generic Fantasy and the Loss of Subversion*. In it he explains that the entry was originally meant to be called “generic fantasy” and that the tone was harsher, but was changed due to the concerns of editors. In summary, his argument states that any fantasy that relies heavily on the familiar, like Tolkien-imitations, are not in essence really fantasy: “Using standard characters and set in a stock environment which I dubbed (probably not originally) Fantasyland, it can best be regarded as a subgenre of the adventure thriller, or perhaps, depending on the author, of the bodice-buster.”²² It is a reaction to the perception that this type of high fantasy is the only type due to the commercial success it had, as it fills shelves in bookstores in the “fantasy” section. This does however mean that these are works that most readers would define as fantasy.

Fantasy to Grant is not just something that fits into the fantasy genre as have defined it thus far. He adds another requirement. It must also be, to some degree, subversive. It must stand on its own, not relying on the assumptions of the genre to help carry the story.²³ In other words, it has to do something new and unexpected. He likens it to going off into a territory where the only thing known is that “Here Be Tygers.”²⁴ If Stephen Donaldson's quote from the beginning of this thesis holds true, Erikson should be defined as “real” fantasy in Grant's terms.

Diana Wynne Jones catalogues a lot of these stereotypes or tropes in her book *The Tough Guide to Fantasyland* (1996). It is written in part as a guidebook and in part as a sort of satirical dictionary of high fantasy terms, with definitions that both explain what things are as well as their typical place in a fantasy story. An example from the book is armies. The entry states that only the antagonists, the bad guys, are allowed to have or create an army at the start of a story. It will be the biggest one, and it will ruin anything in its path. On the other hand, the good people are only allowed to raise an army once it seems almost too late. Even when raised, it will be outnumbered by the bad army.²⁵ This is a trope we will get back to in the next chapter, but is here as an example of a cliché that is often found in high fantasy literature. But I do want to point out a few works of high fantasy where this happens: *The Lord of the Rings*, *Wheel of Time*, *The Sword of Truth*, *Codex Alera*, several of the *Shannara* series of books. The results of these conflicts are more or less decided in advance, the army of good wins against impossible odds. It is a foregone conclusion. It is the type of plot that fits into the idea of generic fantasy. Grant describes her book as one that points out all the repetitive

22 Grant 2001

23 Grant 2001

24 Grant 2001

25 Jones 2006: p. 6

elements of generic or genre fantasy. As such, it can be used as an index of some common tropes of the fantasy genre.

Another work that can serve as a baseline to extrapolate common tropes in the fantasy genre is *Dungeons and Dragons*, role-playing game. The first version of the pen-and-paper fantasy role playing game was released in 1974. Based on the premise of taking wargaming (playing out fantasy battles) to a more personal level, about the adventures of individual characters.²⁶ It has gone through several iterations since then, the newest being the 5th edition of the *Dungeons and Dragons* rule set. While the details of the game has changed, the general premise and functionality is more or less the same. It provides a fantasy backdrop in which players, guided by a dungeon master (who functions as a rule-enforcer and narrator), play through a story using dice and record-keeping. Players can use one of the stories that can be provided by the makers of the game, or make their own. Even when using a prefabricated one, the story simply provides a setting, non-player characters and goals which the players can work towards. Players can still derail the narrative completely, in which case the dungeon master makes up what is going to happen (or tries to get the players back into working toward the story). Each player also has to create their own characters, with backstory, abilities, stats and gear. The best-known of the prefabricated adventures are set in the *Forgotten Realms*, a secondary world in which the games can take place.²⁷ *Dungeons and Dragons* provides options for race and class of character. They are archetypes for a lot of characters, and they are based on fantasy written before, particularly *Conan* and *Lord of the Rings*. The *Forgotten Realms* have been used as a setting for novels, movies and video games. *Dungeons and Dragons* was for example adapted and used as both setting and an outline of combat mechanics in the acclaimed *Baldur's Gate* games, made by *Wizards of the Coast*, which in turn have influenced all fantasy rpg games made since.

26 *Dungeons and Dragons*

27 *Dungeons and Dragons*

Dungeons and Dragons has become a big influencer on how the fantasy genre is perceived. Not just through the people who played the pen-and-paper game, but those who read the books and played the games inspired by it as well. Many authors, Erikson included, have been clear in naming role-playing games as one of their major influences.²⁸ While they probably didn't all play the same in the same settings or general stories, the system, and the archetypes provided as templates to create characters, have been used across many different games. Canavan argues that academics ignore rpg-based franchises, because their views on what the fantasy genre ignores a large section of the genre. He also puts it as close to the center of the “fuzzy set” of Attebery as *Lord of the Rings*, as one of the defining works of the fantasy genre.²⁹ Dungeons and Dragons is influenced by Tolkien (creators of the game, Gygax and Arneson, were threatened with legal action due to copyright issues from the Tolkien estate, claiming that some terms were copyrighted by Tolkien. Of several, the words hobbit, ent and warg were removed from their game³⁰).

Added to this is the fact that Erikson has stated that he and Esslemont were inspired by Dungeons and Dragons, and even played through a lot of the events that take place in the *Malazan* series of books.³¹ It should be noted that they did not use the rules from *Dungeons and Dragons* to play through their campaigns, but instead used *GURPS (Generic Universal RolePlaying System)* because it “better suited our gaming style of freewheeling, spontaneous narrative.”³² The mechanics, the way things are done, are more or less the same as in *Dungeons and Dragons*, but GURPS allows for more customization. Like *Dungeons and Dragons*, there are also sourcebooks that can give players pre-made things to use in their own campaigns.³³

28 Canavan 2012

29 Canavan 2012

30 Gygax 2003

31 Erikson n.d.

32 Erikson 28.02.2012

33 Steve Jackson Games

The fact that Erikson to some degree played through the plot of his works might give them some unique qualities. While he wrote the books himself, it may still mean that other people have influenced the plot of the books by making choices over the course of role-playing. Mikhail Bakhtin had a view of the novel as a medium where more than one 'voice' can be heard. Characters have a voice of their own that is not necessarily in agreement with the narrator or author. The judgement of the narrator is not an authority, but is rather one voice in a conversation between many.³⁴ He sees the voices in a novel as being unique subjects in a dialogue with each other as well as with the reader. In having played through his plot before writing it, Erikson has in a very literal sense created a polyphonic work through the use of other people as actors behind his characters in the story. I would argue that this might be something that distinguishes his works from others, and is unconventional compared to other fantasy literature. There are literally voices from other people in his novels.

It can certainly be said that Erikson's work fits the definitions of fantasy set down by Attebery and Clute. Todorov's definition is so narrow as to only fit with very few works. Furthermore, the series fits into the sub-category high fantasy, where it takes place in a secondary world with its own coherent set of natural laws that do not necessarily reflect those in our own. As an example, the magic in the series has its rules. Not all people in the world are able to use it, most practitioners are attuned to a specific aspect of magic. Some forms of magic are also for the most part only accessible to specific races. Omtose Phellack, for example, is associated with the Jaghut people.

The “epic” descriptor is also applicable. If we look at scale, even in the prologue it is made clear that we are dealing with some sort of empire. The first part of the first book, *Gardens of the Moon*, deals with the fall of a major city and the deaths of thousands of soldiers, followed by the slaughter of a large portion of the inhabitants of said city.³⁵ The scale does not become smaller from that point either. The second book deals with the uprising of an entire continent (Seven Cities), and the fifth introduces another continent (Letheras), with a major conflict happening. The books do not follow just a handful of characters through their encounters, but is instead focused on groups of characters that often are a sampling of the whole. When we follow the Malazan armies, we do not hear about all the individual soldiers in it, but rather a central cast representative of the whole. *Gardens of the Moon* follows Whiskeyjack's squad. The Malazan side is centered around Duiker in *Deadhouse*

34 Jahn & Ryan 2010

35 Erikson 1999, pp. 1-79

Gates. The armies often number in the tens of thousands. Gods involve themselves on all sides, as well as other powerful beings.

While as a whole, the series definitely is epically scaled, some parts of it might not feel that way. Most of *Toll the Hounds* is about the remaining leftovers of Whiskeyjack's squad surviving an assassination plot in Darujhistan, the city they have chosen to retire in. It also follows a small group of young Tiste Andii travelling to meet their kin, and some of the people they are travelling to find. These parts converge into something much bigger, and ends with the armies of the dead fighting to release something from the armies of Chaos, and the death of the lord of death, Hood. There are both epic battles as well as time spent by characters sitting around having conversations.

Chapter 2: Character and plot tropes of the *Malazan* series.

Jay Lake and Ruth Nestvold defined tropes as this in their article *Genre Tropes and the Transmissibility of Story*: “For the purpose of this article, we are using the term 'trope' in the sense of a familiar and repeated symbol, meme, theme, motif, style, character or thing that is common in a particular type of literature. Such tropes are closely related to genre.”³⁶ To make it relevant for *The Malazan Book of the Fallen*, a trope is an idea, phrase or image that is often used in the high fantasy genre. This can be a type of character, a plot device, a lot of the things that define a text as high fantasy. This is touched on with Attebery's definition of what fantasy is. The fuzzy set that shares a cluster of tropes, and is built around a core of works. For high fantasy, the main work in that core is without a doubt Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. Edward James points to this work as one that looms over the rest of the fantasy genre. Tolkien made the idea of a secondary world with no connection to our own normal³⁷ (Although he is not the first to write a story with this type of setting), which is especially essential to high and immersive fantasy.

As a founder of sorts for the high fantasy genre, Tolkien's works also contain if not the beginnings, at least the codifying of the tropes that are common to the genre today. Almost every aspect of *The Lord of the Rings* has been copied or imitated at some point. His characters have become the prototypes of fantasy, the races of people (Men, Elves, Orcs etc.) in his novels are now the “standard” set of races in high fantasy. Even the basic story, of a protagonist who comes from ordinary circumstances who ends up somehow chosen to save the world as we know it from a dark lord, has now been retold to the point of being a cliché.

But before getting into any specific tropes, it is important to mention that tropes in themselves are not inherently bad. Neither are clichés, necessarily. Again, going back to Attebery's fuzzy set, we see that the genre is defined by its tropes. Without anything recognizable as common in a set of works, it would be difficult to call it a genre.

³⁶ Lake and Nestvold 2007

³⁷ James 2014: p. 62

Tropes can function as a type of meta-text within a given genre. Meta-text is all the things about a text that are not actually a part of it. What we read versus the expectations and knowledge we have in advance of reading. The relationship between text and meta-text can change the reading experience drastically.³⁸ Someone who has never read any sort of fantasy would be unable to make predictions about how the plot will develop. On the other hand, someone who is well-read in the genre would have, consciously or sub-consciously, a lot of preconceptions and might be able to accurately predict exactly what is going to happen.

Gabrielle Lissauer uses the word “wizard” as an example. What a reader thinks of as a wizard depends entirely on the individual and what they have read. Someone who is not well-versed in the genre might expect someone like Gandalf. Old, bearded and with a pointy hat. They would not expect a wizard to, for example, solve a problem by pulling out a gun and shooting at someone. Genre readers on the other hand, may instead have “wizard” boiled down to the basic fact that it is an individual who can use magic.³⁹ “Wizard” as an idea is a trope, an idea that occurs in separate works. While works might differ and change how a wizard operates or looks, readers will at least always expect them to be able to use magic.

So while tropes define the genre, they do not really speak to the quality of individual works. There are high fantasy books where tropes are used as-is, with little to no alterations, who are still critically acclaimed books. Clute and Grant cite Tad Williams' *Memory, Sorrow, and Thorn* series as a work that conforms to tropes, and what they call generic fantasy, but is still, in their opinion, good.⁴⁰

38 Lissauer 2015: ebook

39 Lissauer 2015: ebook

40 Clute and Grant 1997: p. 396

There is no extensive and definite list of tropes and where to find them. It is up for interpretation and like literature in general, always growing and expanding. One work that has already been mentioned, Diana Wynne Jones' *Tough Guide to Fantasyland*, can serve as a compiled work listing tropes found in fantasy fiction. As previously stated, it is a satirical dictionary of high fantasy terms and ideas. The idea behind the book seems to be that most stories in the fantasy genre happened in a secondary world called "Fantasyland". Authors of the stories are management of Fantasyland, and they let the audience take tours of the land. The list in the book covers the common things tourists might find during their visit. It is really a list of tropes who are lampooned and deconstructed by Jones. There are of course also academic texts and discussions to be found on some tropes, which will be used to define tropes as well. In addition, the books used to play *Dungeons and Dragons* are useful in that they list a lot of character types and creatures from fantasy with general descriptions of both their appearances and behaviours.

Before getting into the tropes themselves, I want to break down how I am going to analyze them. It would be impractical to just try to randomly pick tropes from either *The Tough Guide to Fantasyland*. In this section, I want to focus on the tropes that are about plot devices, characters and items. Not tropes about how the world works. Those will be discussed in the chapter on world-building. Things like race, language, geography and magic systems belong to the world-building chapter. These are part of larger themes that might need some contexts and knowledge of world-building in high fantasy. I will start by identifying what element of Erikson's work I want to discuss, with a brief explanation of what it is, or of the plot surrounding it if necessary. To show that it is a trope, examples will be needed either from an academic source or by using examples from other works within the genre.

Subverting or inverting all high fantasy tropes in a single work is probably impossible, and if it can be done, the result might not look like high fantasy at all. Tropes are a large part of what makes a genre what it is. As previously discussed, this thesis will only use Erikson's *Malazan Book of the Fallen*, and not any of the associated works set in the same world by him or Esslemont. While this leaves a large span of works, it becomes necessary because they are not works independent of each other, and a plot that starts in one book may end in another, as well as the ending of the series as a whole being in, of course, the last book.

The first trope I want to look at is the idea of the bad guy, the evil overlord of fantasy fiction. Wynne states that they are always trying to ruin everything, and/or possibly trying to take over the world. Often attacks through minions, which he has plenty of,⁴¹ but is eventually defeated no matter what the odds against it are.

There are two characters who fit this description in the Malazan series. The first of these is the Pannion Seer from *Memories of Ice*. He appears as the head of an emerging empire ruled by a priesthood of crazed fanatics. His empire is defined by mass starvation and cruelty. His armies consists of an enormous mob of starving and cannibalistic people, with a smaller part of it being fed and equipped professional soldiers. In addition, he controls some undead dinosaur-like creatures with swords attached to their arms. The Pannion Seer appears to be twisted old man, almost corpse-like in oversized robes. His description sounds like the stereotype of an evil wizard. In the end, however, he turns out to not be at all what he appears. He is actually a Jaghut(tall, tusked and grey-green skinned humanoids) who has been driven mad first by being trapped and in pain for thousands of years, and then being corrupted by a god. After being freed from the influence of this god, and being reunited with his sister who was still trapped in the same place he was, he goes on to use his magic to work against his former master.⁴²

This former master is the other Dark Lord, the Crippled God. To keep it short, in addition to being responsible for the Pannion Seer, he is seen as a corrupting influence on many occasions, responsible for causing pain and destruction whenever he interferes. He seems to be the creature the series is building up to defeat. Again, it turns out that he is not what he seems to be. More than a hundred thousand years before the events of the series, he was lured into the world in an attempt to overthrow a tyrant. The process tore him into pieces, though he remained alive. This caused a lot of changes to the world, and left him twisted and suffering, and wanting others to suffer with him. To stop him, other gods and Ascendants chain him down, stopping him. They re-chain him at several points in history. Rather than defeat or re-chain him, the events in *The Crippled God* lead to his restoration and release, and implied return to his own world.

41 Jones 2006: p. 23

42 Erikson 2002

Both of these two villains end up subverting the expectations of the trope. Neither of them were evil, instead they were also the victims of others. Both of these characters also have in common that they both were shown compassion in spite of all the terrible things they caused. Destroying the Crippled God was an option, but instead the Malazans decided to free him, even knowing what he had done. Compassion is in my opinion one of the major themes of the story in *The Malazan Book of the Fallen*. It goes against convention of story that people who did such morally reprehensible things are forgiven without redemption, but in the books it is foreshadowed both in what happened to the Pannion Seer, and even more clearly in the philosophic conclusion a character in *Memories of Ice* comes to on the subject:

“We humans do not understand compassion. In each moment of our lives, we betray it. Aye, we know of its worth, yet in knowing we then attach to it a value, we guard the giving of it, believing it must be earned. Compassion is priceless in the truest sense of the word. It must be given freely. In abundance.⁴³”

The Crippled God did a lot of bad things, from the creation of the Pannion Seer to the events surrounding a people known as the Tiste Edur, and particularly their leader, Rhulad Sengar. I want to demonstrate how that character is part of breaking tropes and expectations as well by possessing a magical sword given to him by a god.

The *Malazan* series is littered with weapons with magical properties. In *The Gardens of the Moon* we are shown three, Dragnipur, Chance, and Adjunct Lorn's Otataral sword. Later we see Karsa Orlong make his own, and Rhulad acquires one from the Crippled God. For the most part, the swords do what is expected, they give their wielder an advantage. What would be mere injury by a normal blade can be fatal coming from Dragnipur, which also sends the slain into a separate realm. Chance, given power by trickster gods, allows Paran to wound a Hound of Darkness, driving it away. Karsa's stone sword is unbreakable, and collects souls. While some of these are certainly unique, the story around Rhulad and the Crippled God's sword is certainly a subversion.

43 Erikson 2001

There are many fantasy stories where the acquisition of a magical sword is somewhat central. From the titular *Sword of Shannara* to *The Belgariad's* Sword of the Rivan King. The swords are generally a boon to whomever manages to find one.

Rhulad is the youngest brother of four, his brothers are all highly respected warriors. First introduced in *Midnight Tides*, he is sent along with his two brothers and a couple of other companions to find a gift given to their people by the Crippled God. They are instructed to not touch it by the Warlock King, their ruler. When they find it, they are ambushed. In the skirmish, Rhulad loses his weapon and picks up the sword. He fights on, but is killed.⁴⁴ While dead, he speaks to the Crippled God, who promises that every time he dies, he will come to life more powerful than before. After the fight is over, his companions are unable to take it out of his hands, so they bring his corpse along with them back to their home. There he is prepared for burial in the Tiste Edur way. This involves heating coins and burning them into the skin on his entire body, then pouring wax over it. Rhulad comes back to life just as the burial preparations are being finished.⁴⁵

He does become more powerful, and leads the Tiste Edur to victory against the Letherii Empire. He is crowned emperor at the conclusion of *Midnight Tides*. He is however isolated from his family, paranoid that they want to take the power for themselves. He seeks more power by finding challengers to fight him in an arena. While he does become more powerful, he also starts losing his sanity. After becoming emperor, he is further isolated from his people by the bureaucracy of Lether, which drives him further into paranoia. His orders indirectly cause the death of both of his parents, and one of his brothers. He is defeated in *Reaper's Gale* by Karsa Orlong. He has a few moments of clarity where he wants to make things right again, but he is driven to fight and die over and over again. Rhulad dies alone and broken, only a short time before his older brother Trull would have arrived seeking to help him. This also breaks with reader expectations, as most would likely have assumed there would be a final confrontation between the brothers.

44 Erikson 2004: pp 315

45 Erikson 2004: pp 353

Magical swords are certainly a trope found in role-playing games. Mentioned earlier in the thesis is the fact that Erikson played through parts of the plot of his books through the *Generic Universal RolePlaying System*. I would argue that this is at least somewhat visible to a reader who has experience with playing pen-and-paper role-playing games of a similar type. Erikson has pointed out some sections of his books that have been played through using this system in interviews and AMA (Ask Me Anything) threads on Reddit and in the comment section as part of the TOR reread of the *Malazan* series of books. These can show at least some of the parts of the story that have been played through, and see if they break with conventions and tropes of the fantasy genre.

Additionally, I mentioned earlier how the role-playing elements of the *Malazan* books might be a form of Bahktin's polyphony. This is an opportunity to see if it is possible to see traces of an actual outside other voice in Erikson's works in addition to the more traditional sense of characters having their own voice that is not subordinated to the narrator of the story.

Pen-and-paper role-playing games such as *Dungeons and Dragons* are often played with multiple players each playing a character, who together form a party. The *Malazan* series often ends up portraying groups of people in the larger narrative. A section of a chapter will often deal with a group of characters who are trying to accomplish something together. A lot of these groups are made up of what might be seen as an adventuring party. The best example of this is the squads that are followed over the course of the story, starting with Whiskeyjack's group of soldiers in *Gardens of the Moon* who are sent to infiltrate the city of Darujhistan and prepare it for Malazan conquest. His group contains several different kinds of soldier. Fiddler and Hedge are sappers who specialize in explosives. Kalam and Sorry are assassins. Quick Ben and Mallet are mages with differing fields of specialty, and Whiskeyjack is a regular soldier.⁴⁶ In the same book, there is also a small group of locals who function as a different party. Kruppe, Coll, Murillio, Crokus and Rallick are in the midst of their own schemes. This section of *Gardens of the Moon* (the last third of the book) was gamed out as a role-playing game by Erikson.⁴⁷ The two groups function as parties in a role-playing game, where the decisions and actions of each character is determined by a player (sometimes one player can control multiple characters).

46 Erikson 1999, chapter 4

47 The Pixel Project 2016 : 1:35:50

Perhaps the most unexpected part of the ending of *Gardens of the Moon* may stem from role-playing. At the end of the book, an old powerful Jaghut named Raest is released from imprisonment and starts heading into the city of Darujhistan. Released by Adjunct Lorn in the hope that Raest and Anomander Rake (who has positioned himself in opposition to the Malazan conquest of the continent Darujhistan is a part of) will end up killing each other, or at least leave the one standing weak enough to finish off. He is first defeated outside the city,⁴⁸ but through magic he takes possession of the body of a man attending a fête in the city where a lot of the characters readers have been following over the course of the book are taking part. Anomander Rake has already left the event, which leaves everything up to the two groups of characters. Rather than the expected confrontation between Raest and Anomander, he is instead finally defeated by the sapper Hedge launching an explosive at him, which weakens Raest to the point where he is trapped by a magical construct called a House of the Azath. The magical mechanics before and after Hedge blows him up are quite conventional in the setting of a final battle in a fantasy novel. It is surprising because with all of the powerful beings present, including Anomander Rake, a dragon, and several powerful mages, it is an ordinary soldier with the Malazan equivalent of a large grenade who gets the job done.

Erikson has not specified how much of the events in *Gardens of the Moon* as a book are taken in some way directly from his games, but in light of the fact that he has directly stated that some events are the result of games, it seems plausible. The next event I want to look at is from *House of Chains*. It is noteworthy because Erikson has made it clear that they were played through with him as Game Master and a friend as the player controlling a single character, which the player helped create. That character is Karsa Orlong, a Toblakai (race of human-looking people who are 7 or more feet tall). The Toblakai dwell in small tribal villages in valleys isolated from the rest of the continent they are on. Karsa sets out from one such village with two of his friends looking for glory by attacking neighbouring Toblakai villages,⁴⁹ and ultimately the nearby settlement of what he calls 'children,' but turn out to be what his people call regular humans due to their size difference. During the raid on the human settlement, both of Karsa's companions are killed and he himself is captured and chained up to become a slave. It turns out that the humans have already been enslaving Toblakai as work slaves. Karsa escapes the slave pens and hides in the settlement, only to be discovered and recaptured after a prolonged fight. During the fight he ends up harming a group of Malazan soldiers, who decide that he should be imprisoned under their law,⁵⁰ which means he is

48 Erikson 1999, pp 442-444

49 Erikson 2003 pp. 31-77

50 Erikson 2003 pp. 78-163

sent to work in a mine. On his way there he befriends a fellow prisoner named Torvald Nom, who assists him on the journey. While at sea, their ship is hit by a storm that brings it down. They manage to survive by escaping with a mage into a warren (a realm connected to a form of magic, separate from their world). There they find the remnants of a sea battle, and climb aboard a Tiste Edur ship. The Edur want Karsa to bow down before them, but he refuses and starts a fight. He kills all the Edur on deck and proceeds to the captain's quarters. There he surprises and kills the captain's guards and impales the captain, an Edur sorcerer, with a harpoon. The oars of the ship turn out to be manned by dead Tiste Andii (humanoid race related to the Edur). Torvald and Karsa take what supplies they can fit in a dory and leave.⁵¹ This section of the story is interesting in the context of this thesis in more than one way.

First of all, according to Erikson, this entire part of the story was played through with Erikson as Game Master (*GURPS* version of a Dungeon Master) and a friend of his playing Karsa. It is also the only instance in which he has admitted that the actions of the player also became what happened in the novels. According to him, the player was frustrated with how his character was being treated and the way the story was headed. This is what prompted him to simply throw that harpoon at the ship's captain, killing him instantly.⁵² Circling back to Bahktin and his idea of polyphony in novels, this is the one instance in which we can with complete certainty say that there is a literal 'other' voice heard in the novel.

The other way this plotline is interesting is in how it showcases Erikson's unconventional timeline. One part of the aftermath of Karsa's actions are actually seen in one of the previous books. The ship is found in *Deadhouse Gates* by a group of Malazan soldiers. It is named the Silanda, and it ends up saving those Malazans,⁵³ as well as later helping a different group of injured soldiers by transporting them to a friendly port.⁵⁴ The ship is decently memorable, due to the fact that it is manned by headless people, and since the soldiers find the Edur captain pinned to the interior of the ship by a harpoon. The chain of events involving Karsa on the Silanda are again brought out in a later book in the series, *Reaper's Gale*.

51 Erikson 2003 pp. 164-209

52 Erikson in Tor 2011

53 Erikson 2000, p. 331

54 Erikson 2000, pp. 670-673

In the *Reaper's Gale* it is revealed that the Edur captain of the Silanda was actually Binadas Sengar, brother of Emperor Rhulad. At this point in the story, Karsa has made his way to the Letherii Empire as a challenger to Rhulad.⁵⁵ Revenge for his brother's death is in part what drives Rhulad to later fight Karsa. All in all, the specific event of the player deciding to kill all the Tiste Edur on board the Silanda ends up making a difference in three different books.

This selection of parts from Erikson's books illustrate some of the ways in which Erikson is unconventional in his writing. People are not who they might be expected to be, and the role-playing elements mentioned in interviews are findable in his books both where he has explicitly stated that they can be found and in other places.

⁵⁵ Erikson 2007, pp. 179-180

Chapter 3: World-building and tropes

“If you wish to make an apple pie from scratch, you must first invent the universe.⁵⁶”

-Carl Sagan

It was established in the chapter on genre that a secondary world, completely separate from our own, is one of the defining aspects of high fantasy. Stories in this genre do not take place in our world. Without the secondary worlds, there is not story to tell. Creating an entire world from nothing can be a lot of work, and there are a lot of approaches that have been taken. As a reader, one might be curious as to whether the story or the world is created first. Either choice seem like it would have a substantial impact on the finished work. In order to create any sort of story, in the same way as Sagan's apple pie, the universe itself must first be created.

Stephen R. Donaldson uses world-building as a distinguishing feature between fantasy and realistic fiction. He argues that the worlds in fantasy fiction are externalized expression of the characters, while the characters in realistic fiction are a product of the world they live in. The realistic world comes from a body of reality that is recognized by the reader. In fantasy fiction on the other hand, the reason for anything in the secondary world existing lies in the characters “The characters confer reality on their surroundings.⁵⁷” The secondary worlds of fantasy are, in other words, simply whatever is needed to drive the story of the characters on, they are a functionality of story.

A. P. Canavan counters Donaldson's argument by pointing to how role-playing games have caused a paradigm shift. He argues that the idea of the secondary worlds of fantasy has moved closer to the science fiction construct of alien worlds that are inhabited. The world is not a slave to the story, it is instead one where many stories can possibly take place.⁵⁸

A lot of tropes can also be tied to the world itself, rather than the specific characters and plots that take place in it. This chapter is going to take a look at what different authors have said about secondary world creation as well as tropes that are tied to them. It will also be a look into the different approaches that have been taken by authors in laying down how their worlds work. This section will first look at the role of the secondary world in fantasy, and then look into whether the world of the *Malazan* books differ from the tropes of the fantasy genre.

56 Sagan 1980

57 Donaldson 1986

58 Canavan 2012

If Tolkien is the progenitor of high fantasy, it should follow that he is also the progenitor of the secondary worlds that typify the genre. Edward James stated that Tolkien normalized the idea of a secondary world with no connection to our own.⁵⁹ His essay *On Faerie-Stories* is also a highly influential work, as it sets down some of his rules for how a secondary world works. In it, he refers to writers who make secondary worlds as “sub-creators”.

“What really happens is that the story-maker proves a successful “sub-creator.” He 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.⁶⁰”

This is not unlike what Mendlesohn set as a requirement for immersive fantasy, and the earlier definition of high fantasy. Requiring things to work according to the natural laws within the secondary world, leaving no room to doubt the reality of the fictional universe.

Most copies *The Lord of the Rings* do not just consist of the story itself. They also come with a map of Middle-Earth, usually at the beginning, and appendices and indexes in the end. These contain a wealth of information of the world itself that are not necessarily part of the story, but are a part of the background for it. Genealogies, notes on the history of Middle-Earth as well as how to pronounce names. Tolkien did not just create what was needed to tell his story, he created a world with a history and its own languages.⁶¹

One of the ways Erikson's world distinguishes itself from a lot of other works of fantasy is the role of women. The universe in which the *Malazan* books take place is one with equal opportunity for both men and women. Starting with Whiskeyjack's squad in *Gardens of the Moon*, it is made very clear that the Malazan army is an equal opportunity employer. Ranking officers of both genders are referred to as “sir”, and women are found on all levels of the Malazan armies in the series. Looking beyond the Malazans towards other peoples, there are generally no systems of government that are patriarchal in nature, from the Empire of Lether to the tribes of Barghast and the people across the Seven Cities continent, both women and men have equal standing when it comes to governance.

59 James 2014: 62

60 Tolkien 1947

61 Fimi

This does not necessarily mean that all the cultures we come across are as egalitarian in everything. Among the Tiste Edur, only the men seem to be warriors, while the women are the most powerful magic-wielders. While most have an internal balance, no culture except the Letherii come close to being as egalitarian as the Malazan one. Both feature women in all levels of power and in all roles in their respective armies. If we look for a list of the greatest fighters, however, the list is mostly men. The most powerful female fighter is most likely Apsalar (formerly named Sorry), who is left with the abilities of the god of assassins after being possessed by him. Faradan Sort and Lostara Yil are also high-ranking, but they are outnumbered by their male counterparts.

There are however plenty of women who fight and win in battles. There are also a lot of female commanders throughout the story. The one with the most screen-time is Tavore Paran, who is in charge of the Bonehunters, who we follow from *House of Chains* to *The Crippled God*. Another one is Bivatt, who leads a Letherii army against the last stand of the Awl, a nomadic people on their borders.

Having women in power or being warriors is not in itself subversive in the fantasy genre, though there are not many of them. The way it is presented, however, is somewhat unique. None of the powerful women are seen as exceptions, they are the rule. The Malazan world has, to an extent, complete gender parity. With the availability of healing magic, women do not die in childbirth as often. Due to the way the Malazan army fights, women are as capable of being on the front lines of a battle as men. In a fantasy world with a medieval setting, this is definitely not the norm. Erikson himself has stated that their world without sexism came as a result of he and Esslemont discussing how magic being available to anyone would change their world. Because magic is readily available, it evens out the power between men and women. With magic, men being naturally stronger physically does not matter as much.⁶²

62 Erikson in Winter 2018

While there are plenty of strong women in fantasy literature, there has been a tendency towards a male perspective within the genre, where women are often portrayed as weaker and needing to be rescued.⁶³ Furthermore, Lori Campbell has pointed out a troublesome tendency to portray female heroes as beautiful, or that they are written as unattractive, but making up for it in being good at other things to make up for it.⁶⁴ Jones in *The Tough Guide to Fantasyland* also points out that warrior women tend to be thin and attractive.⁶⁵ Neither of these things happen regularly in the *Malazan* books. While there are female characters who need help from others, it is not presented as them needing it because they are women, meaning that they are not weaker because of their gender. In the Malazan military, they are for example simply part of their unit, supporting each other. They are present in all types of roles, from heavy infantry to assassin-style fighters. They come in all shapes and sizes. Flashwit for example, is designated as heavy infantry. She is described as having larger arm muscles than some men's thighs with her hair cut completely off and beautiful eyes.⁶⁶ Not a great beauty by the description, but it does not mean anything to her as a character. She never mentions her own looks, or appear to have any anxiety linked to it. The same is true for most of the women in the series. That does not mean that there are no women who are beautiful, or use their beauty. It also does not mean that bad things do not happen to women in the Malazan world. Women are raped, are killed and dominated by men more powerful and stronger than they are. Equality does not mean that bad people will stop doing terrible things to others. There are several rapes that happen over the course of the *Malazan* series, but Erikson spares readers in that they are rarely graphic, and are for the most part depicted in the internalized thoughts of characters rather than in explicit descriptions of the acts.

It is possible that part of the equality of women in the Malazan Army was influenced by how gender-neutral role-playing games tend to be quite neutral when it comes to differences between men and women. Neither *Dungeons and Dragons* nor *GURPS* has any listed differences in the power between genders that I can find in the rules. It simply comes down to a role-playing choice.

63 Lissauer 2015, chapter 7

64 Campbell 2014, p. 8

65 Jones 2006, p. 90

66 Erikson 2002, p. 848

It is not just in the prevalence of women that the *Malazan* series appears to be diverse. There is also a very wide spectrum of ethnicities present in the series as a whole. In the first few books, many of the characters are to some degree dark-skinned, at least those whose skin colour is described. Quick Ben is described as dark-skinned, as well as Kalam⁶⁷. The entirety of the Seven Cities continent seem to be equivalent in colour to the Middle East. Dal Hon, the area where Shadowthrone and a lot of his companions come from, is predominantly black. Their cultures do not, as far as I can tell, reflect back on our own world in any obvious way, except for the fact that Seven Cities is somewhat Middle-Eastern in appearance and the area contains a lot of deserts.

The fantasy genre does have a tendency to lean toward having predominantly white characters. Nalo Hopkinson is one scholar who points out that there are few coloured people in science fiction and fantasy.⁶⁸ Helen Young explains the prominence of white people in fantasy by using works that are considered central to the fantasy genre. She explains how Tolkien, C.S. Lewis and Robert E. Howard were all white themselves, and drew on European myths and history. They were eurocentric in their writings.⁶⁹ Erikson moves away from this in his wide representation of people of colour. In some cases, for example the Letherii humans, he never actually mentions their skin colour in his descriptions. It may simply be that because of the non-existence of race-based hatred, skin colour is unimportant to characters when they look at other people.

According to Nalo Hopkinson, fantasy has a tendency to use race to refer to separate species of intelligent creatures rather than referring to different races of humans.⁷⁰ The *Malazan* books also follow this convention. I've previously stated that the fantasy races found in *The Lord of the Rings* series has become the standard races of high fantasy. It was also pointed out that the races from Tolkien's works were more or less copied into *Dungeons and Dragons*, which is another major influence on the fantasy genre, which might have cemented them as the go-to races in a fantasy setting. I would argue that these races are tropes, as they are found across a variety of high fantasy literature, sometimes with the same names as in *Lord of the Rings* and *Dungeons and Dragons*, sometimes under a different name but representing the same type of beings. An example of them being adopted into another work wholesale is the *Warhammer* universe. They have orcs, goblins, dwarves, and elves, who for the most part fit the descriptions from Tolkien. Orcs and goblins are savage, bred to fight, while the elves are pointy-eared, and to some extent live in forests or in cities.

67 Erikson 1999, pp. 59

68 Hopkinson 2007, p. 105

69 Young 2016, p. 18

70 Hopkinson 2007, p. 105

The Dwarves are short and fierce fighters, who tend to live in carved-out mountains. They have also found their way into video game franchises such as *Warcraft*.

There is a race in Erikson's *Malazan Book of the Fallen* that do, in a way, resemble one of these tropes, the standard fantasy races, but turns them into something quite different than one would assume coming from Tolkien or *Dungeons and Dragons*. That race is the Jaghut. In the books, they are generally described as having grey-green skin, taller and broader than humans, and with tusked lower jaws, with more joints on their fingers than humans. In the *Dungeons and Dragons Player's Handbook*, half-Orcs are described in almost the same way: "Half-orcs' grayish pigmentation, sloping foreheads, jutting jaws, prominent teeth, and towering builds make their orcish heritage plain for all to see. Half-orcs stand between 6 and 7 feet tall and usually weigh between 180 and 250 pounds."⁷¹ This is fairly similar to the description of a Jaghut. The major difference between them comes from the behavioural characteristics of the races. The orcs are described in *Dungeons and Dragons* as living in tribes that can number in the thousands, and that they are notoriously savage, fighting with other races as well as each other. The Jaghut on the other hand are almost never encountered in groups across the *Malazan* series. The exceptions being in *Toll the Hounds* where we meet a husband and wife, and the fourteen undead Jaghut who appear in *Dust of Dreams*⁷² who then end up fighting in the final battle of the series in *The Crippled God*. A character even remarks on the oddity of that many Jaghut gathered in one place when they appear in *Dust of Dreams*, saying "Besides, all know, Jaghut stand alone."⁷³ They are all solitary people who prefer being on their own. They are also extraordinarily powerful. Raest, the Jaghut who appears first in *Gardens of the Moon*, holds his own against several other powerful beings and keeps going (this is elaborated on in a different part of the thesis). When he appears in *Toll the Hounds*, he is very much like other Jaghut encountered in the series. Seemingly annoyed by visitors and with a peculiar sort of humour. He ends up asking for (and receiving) a dead cat in exchange for his helping some Malazans in Darujhistan.⁷⁴ They are entirely different kinds of beings than the orcs of Tolkien and *Dungeons and Dragons*.

71 Wizards of the Coast, p. 35

72 Erikson 2009, p. 439

73 Erikson 2009, p. 439

74 Erikson 2008 pp. 852-853

There are also non-humanoid beings that are represented in fantasy fiction that exist in the *Malazan* universe. Demons exist in *Dungeons and Dragons* as both monsters to fight and creatures to summon and bind. Over the course of the *Malazan* story readers are introduced to several demons that have been summoned by various characters. Starting with *Gardens of the Moon*, where one appears during a battle and kills the mage Nightchill, and is then in turned killed by her mate. Another demon named Pearl is summoned later in order to let two characters escape assassins. This demon is killed by Anomander Rake, and sent into his sword.⁷⁵ A third demon appears at the end of the book, summoned by Adjunct Lorn in order to hopefully kill Anomander Rake.⁷⁶ This one is also killed by Anomander⁷⁷.

The summonings and appearances of the demons here are in line with the conventions of fantasy. They are summoned, given orders, and are bound to complete the tasks they are set. This is how it works in *Dungeons and Dragons*. It is also how they are sometimes portrayed in the horror genre. There is also the trope of demons as possessing entities that take over a host body in order to do evil things in the world. The demons in the *Malazan* books are very different. Demons as monsters are described like this in the *Monster Manual of Dungeons and Dragons*: “Spawned in the Infinite Layers of the Abyss, demons are the embodiment of chaos and evil – engines of destruction barely contained in monstrous form. Possessing no compassion, empathy, or mercy, they exist only to destroy.”⁷⁸

For one, they do not seem to be bloodthirsty even evil. Instead they seem to be creatures from realms of their own, with their own culture and personality. The best example of this is the demon Lilac from *Midnight Tides*. It was summoned to fight for the Tiste Edur in their conquest of the Letherii. Trull Sengar finds it wounded after a battle, and feels compassion for it. Through conversation he discovers that Lilac was a caster of nets in her native realm, and is an unwilling combatant in the war. Trull makes sure that she is healed, and is then given responsibility for her. They discuss the pointlessness of war.⁷⁹

75 Erikson 1999, pp. 298

76 Erikson 1999, pp. 465

77 Erikson 1999, pp. 476

78 Wizards of the Coast 2014, p. 50

79 Erikson 2004, pp. 671-682

Another pair of demons who were summoned by the Edur for their war in *Midnight Tides* turn up later in the series, in *Reaper's Gale*. The Malazan marines are invading Lether in small squads, and one of these squads end up approaching a farmhouse. Expecting nothing but regular farmers, they are taken by surprise when two large demons come charging out of the house. A fight ensues, and ends with the Malazans retreating after using explosives to knock the demons down. In the next scene, the two demons discuss among themselves, and it turns out they had planned on retiring as farmers, hoping that it would be peaceful.⁸⁰

The demon who demonstrates Erikson breaking away from the normal idea of a demon the most is one we meet in *Deadhouse Gates*. She is named Apt, and ends up following Kalam Mekhar on his journey through Seven Cities, which is in the middle of a rebellion. Kalam, with Apt following, comes across a camp of rebels ringed by crosses. On those crosses were children, who had all been crucified but were still alive. Kalam realizes that he can't do anything for them on his own and moves on, but Apt somehow manages to remove more than a thousand children off of their crosses. She meets with the god Shadowthrone, and negotiates a deal where the children become his subjects in exchange for his protection and healing. She also adopts one of the children as her own, a boy who was missing his eyes and nose. Shadowthrone heals him, but changes him to only have one large eye, like Apt.⁸¹ With her new son along for the ride, keep following Kalam, protecting him from danger.

The demons are just non-humanoid people from different realms. They are for the most part not looking to pick fights on their own, and are for the most part pressed into service by magical means. They appear to be civil, polite even. There is enough information to see that they must have their own society in the realm they come from. The demon Apt, in showing compassion for the crucified children, ends up showing qualities that are the polar opposite of the description found in the *Monster Manual*.

80 Erikson 2007, pp. 538-541

81 Erikson 2000, pp. 468-478

Another group of characters in the *Malazan* books that are unconventional are the gods. Over the course of the ten books in the series, readers are introduced to a multitude of gods. While their motives are not always clear, what is apparent that they are to a very large degree the type of scheming gods found in Norse and Greek mythology. They have varying amounts of power, but even the most powerful rarely use them directly in a show of force, as that might attract attention from the others down on them. Their relationship with their worshippers is also unique. Mael, for example, is the god of the seas. Over millennia, faith in him has turned into people praying that he does not intervene in any way, but rather that he leaves them alone. It is also interesting to note that the gods shown in the series were not necessarily always gods. It seems that there are ways to become gods in the world, though how that happens is unclear. What is more or less given as true is that the gods Shadowthrone and Cotillion were once mortals. Shadowthrone was formerly Emperor Kellanved of the Malazan Empire. Cotillion was his partner in rule and leader of his assassins, named Dancer. There are also a lot of characters who are something in between god and mortal, where they are referred to as 'ascendants'.

By not being conventional, Erikson makes his world stand out as unique within the high fantasy genre. The Malazan world is not populated by the trope-races of Grant's generic fantasy. He also takes advantage of the fact that the secondary world is entirely fictional by removing gender inequality and human racism from his works entirely. This does not mean that it is a utopia in any sense. The world of *The Malazan Book of the Fallen* is not one people are likely to wish to live in. People can still be horrible to each other even without sexism or racism as a motive for their actions. In addition to this, he has somewhat turned the idea of the orc on its head in his depiction of the Jaghut, as well as creating demons in the complete reverse image of popular culture. Both demons and orcs are known for enjoying fighting and destroying, and Erikson's versions of them do not particularly seem to enjoy either of those things.

Conclusion

The goal of this thesis was to demonstrate how Erikson subverts common fantasy tropes in his ten-book series, as well as showing how his writing is affected by a background in pen-and-paper role-playing games. This thesis started by establishing some of the theories of what constitutes the fantasy genre. Placing Erikson's *Malazan Book of the Fallen* as a work of epic/high fantasy, and making note of what works make up the core of the genre, as well as outlining the history of *Dungeons and Dragons* and *GURPS* and how it is played in order to establish how it might affect a story written based on a game. This served as background to base analysis on.

By taking examples out of Erikson's books and performing an analysis on them compared to other works in the genre as well as *Dungeons and Dragons*, this thesis has established that Erikson has subverted a lot of fantasy tropes in the *Malazan* books. This proves that they stand out as different than other works in the same genre. Erikson has done this breaking the conventions of fantasy stories by not using elements found in Jones' and Grant's idea of generic fantasy set in a cliched Fantasyland that is all too recognizable, and subverting tropes. There is no evil overlord sending his minions out to be defeated by stalwart heroes, and there are no goblins, orcs and elves to be found anywhere in the *Malazan* series. It is a dystopic work of fantasy fiction, in that it steers away from the conventions and tropes that are common to the genre, by either subverting or twisting the tropes into something different.

I have also established that there is a direct link between Erikson's games using *GURPS* and the plot of his books. By playing through the plot with other people as players, he has added the voices of others into his writing. If Erikson has done this, it is more than possible that others have as well. I pointed to Bahktin's theory of polyphonic literature in this thesis. There are outside voices in these books that are indeed not subordinated to the author, and they can be traced to people other than the author. This is something that might be interesting to study further.

Another point brought up is the idea of Tolkien and other fantasy authors of his time no longer being the most central influences on the genre as a whole. With the popularity of pen-and-paper games such as *Dungeons and Dragons* as well as the mainstream success of video games based on their franchise, there may be a need to have a second look at what is at the center of Attebery's 'fuzzy set'. Video games that are not based off of *Dungeons and Dragons* directly, such as the Elder Scrolls games or the Witcher series have also introduced a lot of people to the fantasy genre without ever picking up a book, and probably has sway on the general perception of the genre to the public.

As for this thesis, while it has to at least some degree managed to prove what was set as goal, there is a lot more that can be said about the *Malazan* books that there simply was no room for given the limits of the task. *The Malazan Book of the Fallen* spans 10 books and more than 2.5 million words. There are plenty of examples of tropes being subverted or twisted that did not make it into this thesis. There are also more works set in the same fictional universe that can be taken into consideration in a more extended analysis of the world created by Erikson and Esslemont.

Bibliography

- Aczel, R. (2010) Polyphony. In Herman, D. & Jahn, M. & Ryan, M-L. (eds) *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*. London: Routledge. Retrieved from https://literature.proquest.com/searchFulltext.do?id=R04432296&divLevel=0&queryId=3084266796833&trailId=16673D17386&area=ref&forward=critref_ft
- Anders, L. (2014) What's the Difference Between Epic Fantasy and Sword-and-Sorcery. *Gizmodo* Retrieved from <https://io9.gizmodo.com/whats-the-difference-between-epic-fantasy-and-sword-and-1617687425>
- Angelskår, S. (2005) *Policing Fantasy: Problems of Genre in Fantasy Literature*. (Master's thesis, University of Oslo) Oslo.
- Campbell, L. (2014). Introduction. In Campbell, L. (ed.) *A Quest of Her Own: Essays on the Female Hero in Modern Fantasy*. (pp. 4-13) Jefferson: McFarland & Company
- Canavan, A. P. (2012) Calling A Sword A Sword. *The New York Review of Science Fiction*. Retrieved from <https://www.nyrsf.com/2012/06/canavan-2.html>
- Carroll, N. (1994). The Paradox of Junk Fiction. *Philosophy and Literature* 18(2), 225-241. Johns Hopkins University Press. Retrieved May 23, 2018, from Project MUSE database.
- Clute, J., & Grant, J. (Eds.) (1997). *The encyclopedia of fantasy*. London: Orbit.
- Donaldson, S. R. (2015) Epic Fantasy: Necessary Literature. *The New York Review of Science Fiction*. Retrieved from <http://www.nyrsf.com/2015/03/fantasy-is-the-most-intelligent-precise-and-accurate-means-of-arriving-at-the-truth-s-p.html>
- Dungeons and Dragons Forty Years of Adventure. (n.d.) Retrieved from <http://dnd.wizards.com/dungeons-and-dragons/what-dd/history/history-forty-years-adventure>
- Erikson, S. (1999). *Gardens of the Moon*. New York: Tor.

Erikson, S. (2000) *Deadhouse Gates*

Erikson, S. (2001). *Memories of Ice*. London: Bantam Books.

Erikson, S. (2002) *House of Chains*. London: Bantam Books

Erikson, S. (2004) *Midnight Tides*. London: Bantam Books

Erikson, S. (2007) *Reaper's Gale*. London: Bantam Books

Erikson, S. (2008) *Toll the Hounds*. London: Bantam Books

Erikson, S. (2012, 28th February) Hello Reddit, I am Steven Erikson. Please Ask Me Anything [online forum comment]. Message posted to https://www.reddit.com/r/Fantasy/comments/q8zyv/hello_reddit_i_am_steven_erikson_please_ask_me/c3vww77/?context=3

Erikson, S. (n.d.) The World of the Malazan Empire and Role-Playing Games. Retrieved from <http://www.steven-erikson.com/index.php/the-world-of-the-malazan-empire-and-role-playing-games/>

Fimi, D. (2017) Why build new worlds. *The Times Literary Supplement*. Retrieved from <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/fantasy-worlds-invention-restraint/>

Grant, J. (2001). Gulliver Unravels: Generic Fantasy and the Loss of Subversion. *Extrapolation*. 41(1). Retrieved from <https://online.liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk/doi/abs/10.3828/extr.2000.41.1.21>

Gygax, G. (2003, 24th July) Gary Gygax Q&A [Online forum comment]. Message posted to <https://web.archive.org/web/20121007050950/http://www.enworld.org/forum/archive-threads/57832-gary-gygax-q-part-iv-4.html#post1026737>

High Fantasy. In *Wikipedia*. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/High_fantasy

Hopkinson, N. (2007). Maybe They're Phasing Us In: Re-mapping Fantasy Tropes in the Face of Gender, Race, and Sexuality. *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 18(1 (69)), 99-107. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24351029>

James, E. (2014). Tolkien, Lewis and the explosion of genre fantasy. In James, E., & Mendlesohn, F. (Eds.). (2014). *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature* (p. 62-78). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

James, E., Mendlesohn, F. (2014) Introduction. In James, E., Mendlesohn, F. (Ed.). (2014). *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*. (p. 1-4) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Jones, D. W. (2006). *The Tough Guide to Fantasyland*. New York: Firebird.

Lake, J., Nestvold, R. (2007) *Genre Tropes and the Transmissibility of Story*. The Internet Review of Science Fiction IV(2). Retrieved from <https://ruthnestvold.wordpress.com/2018/11/08/genre-tropes-and-the-transmissibility-of-story/>

Lissauer, G. (2015). *The Tropes of Fantasy Fiction*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company,.

Lowe, N. (1986) The Well Tempered Plot Device. *Ansible* 46. Retrieved from <https://news.ansible.uk/plotdev.html>

Mendlesohn, F. (2008). *Rhetorics of Fantasy*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.

Sagan, C. (1980). Cosmos. Retrieved from <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/32952-if-you-wish-to-make-an-apple-pie-from-scratch>

Steve Jackson Games (n.d.) More About GURPS. Retrieved from <http://www.sjgames.com/gurps/details.html>

The Pixel Project. (23.09.2016). *Read For Pixels 2016 (Fall Edition): Steven Erikson Reading+Q&A Session* [Video clip]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H4vinTtsfC0>

Todorov, T. *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Ithaca: Cornell University press, 1975.

TOR (23.11.2011). *Steven Erikson Answers Your House of Chains Questions*. Retrieved from <https://www.tor.com/2011/11/23/steven-erikson-answers-your-house-of-chains-questions/>

Tolkien, J. R. (1947). *On fairy-stories*. Retrieved from https://scholar.google.no/scholar?hl=no&as_sdt=0%2C5&q=on+fairy-stories&btnG=&oq=on+f

Williams, P. (2010) Dialogism. In Herman, D. & Jahn, M. & Ryan, M-L. (eds) *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*. London: Routledge. Retrieved from https://literature.proquest.com/searchFulltext.do?id=R04432060&divLevel=0&area=ref&DurUrl=Yes&forward=critref_ft&rft_source=primo

Winter, N. (2018) Interview Steven Erikson. Retrieved from <https://justaword.fr/interview-steven-erikson-3d21dc6ff9f>

Wizards of the Coast (2014) *Dungeons and Dragons Player's Handbook*. United States: Wizards of the Coast

Wizards of the Coast (2014) *Monster Manual*. United States: Wizards of the Coast

Young, H. (2016) *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature : Habits of Whiteness*. New York: Routledge

Summary/Abstract

To those who have read extensively within the fantasy genre patterns like the ones previously mentioned might become apparent. It is not necessarily a bad thing as a fan. You do not read a detective novel without expecting certain things, for example some sort of mystery, a thief/murderer/criminal of some sort, an investigator. Readers will have preconceptions based on what they've read previously. This thesis will show that Erikson's *Malazan Book of the Fallen* series subverts fantasy tropes and will try to identify what elements of his writing serve to make his books dystopic. Dystopic means, for the purpose of this thesis, that tropes commonly found in the fantasy genre are in some way changed, turned on their heads. It will demonstrate how he subverts tropes, and how role-playing may have made a difference in making his work somewhat unique.

In three chapters, it first establishes how Erikson's work fits into the fantasy genre as a whole by looking at some of the major theoretical ideas of what fantasy is. After establishing how it relates to the genre, it also explores what patterns or conventions define the genre as a whole, and what the major influences of modern fantasy are. Rather than relying mostly on Tolkien and other authors, this thesis argues that one of the major influences of modern fantasy is *Dungeons and Dragons*, who through the popular pen-and-paper role-playing game and the video games based off of it have possibly taken a position at the center of Attebery's fuzzy set of fantasy.

It shows how Erikson has subverted tropes that have roots in both role-playing games and in fantasy literature.

The relevance of master thesis work to the teaching profession

Becoming a teacher has involved a lot of what I have been doing while writing this thesis. First of all, the reading. Everything from novels to academic treatises, books. Learning to sift through large amounts of information to find the things I am looking for, much in the same way I have through the curriculum of the courses I have taken about pedagogics and teaching. I have had to work on my own (with some help) organizing information, figuring out what the essentials are, and then attempted to put them into a (hopefully) coherent thesis about the tropes of fantasy fiction. Practicing the skillset required to do this type of writing has shown me a lot of my own weaknesses of organization, which I have had to try to correct.

As for the thesis itself, I would argue that it will be relevant to me later as a teacher. I don't know if I will teach about fantasy in particular, but I do know that I will teach English literature. Fantasy is also a genre that has, since my introduction to fantasy works, grown huge in mainstream media. Fantasy-based games and movies are more popular than ever. It can serve as a conversation topic, as a link to popular culture that I might continue to have in common with my future students through literature, video games and movies.

The fantasy genre will continue to change as more people make their mark on it, but some works might stay as (or become) classics that new generations discover. Writing this thesis has given me the chance to explore my favourite genre in depth, let me learn new things and discover works that I want to read. This is something I will bring with me into my job as a teacher.

