

"There is only one god. And his name is Death": Why Do So Many Central Characters Die In Game Of Thrones?

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Ned, Catelyn and Robb Stark die. Joffrey and Tywin Lannister die. Viserys Targaryen dies. Khal Drogo dies. The Hound dies. Jon Snow dies. Well, for a while. A lot of people die in Game of Thrones.

That a lot of people die in some work of art is not in and of itself interesting: in a typical action film, there is plenty of death. What is interesting about Game of Thrones is that, as the above list indicates, a lot of *central* characters die *unexpectedly* in Game of Thrones. Indeed, it's from this fact that a lot of the dramatic power of the series emerges. And this, in turn, is plausibly because it's quite rare, in art, for central characters to die unexpectedly.

But we should be puzzled by this. For a tradition going all the way back to Plato and Aristotle has it that the function of art is representation (*mimesis*). Notably, they differed as to worth of art. Plato didn't look too kindly on art. For him, art was a copy of a copy, because he divided the world into concrete particular objects and the forms. A particular concrete drinking goblet—say, Tyrion Lannister's—with its scratches and chipped paint, is a copy of the abstract form of the goblet, the perfect example of gobletness. And it's the later which *really* exist, for Plato. But an artistic representation of Tyrion's goblet, on a film or a page, is itself a copy of the goblet, and so it's a copy of a copy, even further removed from reality than the goblet itself (*The Republic*, Book 10).

Aristotle agreed that art was a copy of the physical world, but didn't think it was the worse for that. In his *Poetics*, he notes that art works (such as tragic plays) by virtue of representing people's misfortune, and this enables it to perform its central role: of letting us vent or purge emotions like pity and fear by presenting stories which arouse these emotions.

These differences notwithstanding, they both agreed that art was about representing the world. And certain modern and post-modern art excepted, this is both intuitively plausible, and has remained a popular view. But bearing this in mind, it becomes unclear why it is quite rare, in art, for central characters to die unexpectedly. For it's an important and tragic fact of life that the central characters *in our lives* sometimes die unexpectedly: the unexpected death of someone close to us is invariably deeply shocking, emotionally and existentially, as we pine for someone taken from us and are made viscerally aware of the fragility of life.

Given this, it seems there must be an explanation for *why* most art doesn't represent sudden unexpected death. And there *is* such an explanation: it's that the representational capacity of art in general excludes the portrayal of sudden, unexpected death of central characters. But this raises another question: how does Martin nevertheless manage to portray it? The goal of this essay is to answer this question; along the way I hope to elucidate the nature of the representational limits of art, and the techniques for overcoming them.

In order to do so, I need to defend a series of claims. The **first** is the empirical claim that the

unexpected death of central characters in narrative art is rare. It's quite hard to argue directly for such a claim: I hope the reader can consult works with which she is familiar and will find it true. But we can consider how odd it would be had central characters in major works of art died early. Certainly a *King Lear* in which Lear dies at the end of the first act would be an odd thing. Similarly an *Anna Karenina* catching a bad cold halfway through would be somewhat lacking. And a lot of the fun would be taken from *Breaking Bad* if Walt succumbed to his cancer in series two. For such plays, novels, and tv shows--which can be multiplied at will--death often marks the dramatic and emotional culmination of the work. It's not something that pops up halfway through, as Joffrey's death does in episode two of season four.

Tolstoy is a useful foil here. Like Martin, he was concerned with telling stories on an epic scale, but his approach to death is notably different: it is something marked off or saved for conclusions. It's noteworthy, I think, that his most masterful treatment of death, the novella *The Death Of Ivan Ilyitch*, forms a work of its own which, as the title suggests, is centered around death. One could also note that the sole chapter of *Anna Karenina* to bear a title has the title 'Death'. For Tolstoy, death is something artistically sequestered away and sign posted, or reserved for big conclusions, whereas for Martin it's always ready to pop up when least expected.

It's important to note that I said it's rare for main characters to suddenly die, not that it never happens. That's too strong a claim. An interesting contemporary example is Omar in *The Wire*. In season five, he is fighting with Marlow, gradually taking down some of his men. The expected plot arc is that either he will kill or be killed by Marlow. But no: out of nowhere, when he's in the store buying cigarettes, a prepubescent kid shoots him the back of the head. This is an unexpected death of a central character as shocking and powerful as those which occur in Westeros. But it still doesn't quite evince the brio Martin has for killing off his main players: it occurs very near the end of the final season. This is in marked contrast to the death of, say, Ned Stark, who died one season in to a six (and counting!) season long series. So that's the first important piece claim that I need: it's rare for main characters in art to suddenly die.

Here's the **second** claim: it is to be expected that there are works of (narrative) art in which central characters suddenly die. The reason for this is that narrative art aims to represent the world, and it's a vital feature of life that the main characters in our lives can suddenly die. This, I take it, is uncontroversial: both emotionally and intellectually, it's fundamental. Emotionally, there are few events more upsetting than the death of a loved one. Intellectually, it is a reminder of perhaps the defining feature of life: its finitude.

This latter idea is ubiquitous in art, philosophy, and religion. In art one can see it in Epicurean poems like Catullus's fifth ode, or Andrew Marvell's *To His Coy Mistress*, in which the respective authors remind their girlfriends of the transitoriness of life in a bid to get them into bed. Or think of the visual art in the *momento mori* tradition (Latin for 'remember you must die'), often of a religious nature. In philosophy, we can think of Montaigne's essay *That To Study Philosophy is To Learn To Die* which, having mentioned some famous unexpected death, counsels us always to keep before our mind the certainty that we will some day die, so as not to stand in fear of it and so as to be able to enjoy life. And in religion one can find it at the heart of Buddhism, with its fundamental precept that *sabba anicca*, that everything, including ourselves, is impermanent (see, for example, the final verses of *Dhammapada* Chapter 20, which warn that death can come like a flood overwhelming a village, and that one should seek refuge in Buddhist practice). Again, examples could be here multiplied, if I had more space and knowledge.

Given the importance in our emotional and cognitive lives of the thought that we or those whom we love could die at any time, and given that art is meant to represent the cognitive and emotionally important features of our life, then why is it as rare as I have suggested to kill off main characters unexpectedly?

I think, and this is claim **three**, there are several possible reasons, in the form of strong arguments against the portrayal of the sudden unexpected death of central characters. The first is a priori and challenges the mere possibility of such portrayal: if a character dies suddenly and unexpectedly, then that character is ipso facto not central.

The thought here is that to be central, it's necessary to see the whole, or most of, the story through. If one fails to do that, one is at best a peripheral character. That seems somewhat plausible to me. One can test its plausibility by considering putative counterexamples. Thus imagine a novel depicting the life of someone who dies halfway through, and the rest is concerned with the effects this has on the other characters. I think there's a good sense to be made of the idea that the novel isn't really *about* the one who dies, but rather about those left behind and their grief. The dead person functions merely as a plot point to bring out the theme of grief and the grieving, and thus not as a central character.

The second argument goes from a different angle. It holds not that it's impossible, a contradiction in terms, for a central character to die unexpectedly, but rather it's just a bad artistic move. The reason it's a bad artistic move is because if the author has presumably spent time introducing and telling the audience about the character. If the author then quickly and unceremoniously disposes of that character, then that time seems wasted. It would be, one might say, bad aesthetic economics to invest all that effort into a character only to waste it by having them die unceremoniously. This would explain why, oftentimes, the central characters' deaths come at the end of the art work: because the work is about to end, one won't have wasted the effort put into the character, since there's no other chance to put the character to use in the work. Moreover, the audience might well get annoyed: you are bound to have heard fans of Game Of Thrones threaten to 'quit' the series after the death of this or that favourite character.

If either of these arguments convince you, then we have an interesting conclusion: that there's a difficulty in representing this feature of life in art. That is to say, we've come across a *prima facie representational limit of art*: a feature of the world that art can't represent. I want to briefly consider a couple of other such limits, as I hope that my eventual resolution of the puzzle as to how Martin overcomes the limit concerning death can shed light on these other limits.

The first limit concerns 'Holywood ugliness'. This is a typical trope in romantic comedies: the man pursues the glamorous girl, ignoring the less glamorous best friend, until, in the final scene, he realises the less glamorous girl is actually the one for him, and she removes her glasses and ponytail to reveal that she too is in fact glamorous. The important point for us is before this big final reveal: the actor playing the best friend will typically be conventionally beautiful (most actors are). That her character is meant to appear not to be beautiful is conveyed by such things as her glasses and clothes and hair.

The reason for this is that if the actor were indeed conventionally unattractive, then audiences wouldn't get that she was meant to be representing unattractiveness. Rather, they'd most likely be confused by the presence in a film of an actor who is not, relative to their standards, conventionally attractive. So in order to represent plainness, one has to use an attractive person and certain props that connote plainness, and so one can't represent actual plainness.

The second limit concerns representing people from different times or places. If one wants to depict a 19th century character, then it's necessary to pepper their speech with the sort of archaisms that the contemporary viewer would expect such a person to say (loads of 'methinks' and verbs ending in 'eth', perhaps) even if that's not how the character would speak. In the same vein, Bumblebee Guy from *The Simpsons* speaks a terrible Spanish which no real Mexicans would ever use, but which would be just about recognisable to someone who had taken a couple of Spanish classes in high school. This is a reflection of the general fact that it's necessary, to convey something artistically, to

tailor the representations to one's audience's knowledge of the thing represented, rather than the thing itself, and this induces a failure of accurate representation.

Let's recap what we've seen so far. First, I suggested that sudden unexpected death of central characters is rare in art. Second, I suggested that we would not expect it to be rare, because it represents a central feature of our experience, as art is meant to. Third, I gave reasons for explaining death's rarity, and suggested that its rarity is the result of a representative failure of art, an antecedently recognisable notion. But now one question looms large: how does Martin manage to get around this representational limit, and can we learn anything from it?

Here's my answer to the first question: he gets around the limit by the epic nature of *Game of Thrones*. In brief: the failure of good aesthetic economy resulting from the fact that he spends so much time portraying Ned Stark only to kill him off is offset by the fact that there are so many other characters around for us to shift our attention to. Moreover, this epicness can serve to make a character both central and, in a sense, peripheral. He simply has 'world enough and time' as poor Marvell and his coy mistress don't.

Now this isn't, I take it, an especially interesting answer. You could perhaps have guessed it yourself without reading this essay. But I think the real interest lies in the fact that it suggests a general purpose means for overcoming the representational limits of art: make the work bigger. Return to our Hollywood ugliness example. Because such stories work within dichotomous ugly/beautiful framework, one can quite easily get away with using a conventionally attractive actor and some props to convey her plainness. But say one wanted to present a story on a *larger* scale about how people look: say one were telling a story about a beauty contest, and one wanted to represent not only ugly and beautiful characters, but various gradations: quite ugly, plain, quite beautiful, etc. In such a case, the quick resort to props wouldn't help much. What would help, however, is if one had actors who were as attractive as their characters were meant to be. And that would overcome the representational limit: we'd have plain actors playing plain characters.

Similarly for the archaic speech example. It would no longer be sufficient, if one wanted to tell a story that spanned both, say, the 17th and the 19th century, to lazily use the common stock of archaisms, because the audience then couldn't tell, if a character were to say 'methinks the wind rageth too fierce' which century the character was meant to be from. And again, it seems the way around this, at least in part, would be to have the characters from the different eras speak differently, and the obvious way to achieve this would be to have them speak roughly like the people they are portraying actually would have spoken.

What this suggests to me is that epicness is the way to overcome representational limits in art. And this makes some sense, because the goal of an epic, I take it, is to present as much of life as possible. We may therefore conclude: if one wants to portray certain aspects of life that resist immediate representation, go big! Make your work epic, like *Game Of Thrones*, and the problem will go away.

There's one coda though, one final question which I must confess I remain ignorant as to the answer of, and leave for the reader. The idea of the epic is not a new one. Again, return to Tolstoy: his *War and Peace* contains over 500 characters! Why is it only now that writers are exploiting the vastness of the epic to portray the kind of deaths with which we have been concerned? Is it a good thing, as representing more of life, or is it a simple shock tactic? I don't have answers to these questions, but I hope you'll agree they're interesting and worth asking, and show the merits of considering *Game of Thrones* not merely as a good series, but as something that can teach us about the nature of art and society.

