

## INKLINGS SYMPOSIUM 2023

**Pia Holste**

### You Die, Then What? Engaging with Mortality in Fantasy Narratives

In conventional realist fiction, death is the most catastrophic event a character can face. While it often offers a variety of opportunities for the rest of the narrative to progress, it represents a very definite full stop in the story of the character thus afflict Fantasy narratives do not necessarily suffer from this limitation; immortality, whether innate, acquired, or accidental, opens up vast amounts of space for new avenues of storytelling.

The eponymous Gandalf the Grey gives his life in his fight against the Balrog, but returns in reincarnate form stronger than before. A long-deceased figure is dragged back into the land of the living by necromantic forces. A character puts their fate in the hands of some higher power and find themselves having to come to terms with the fact that their life — and, by consequence, their death is no longer quite their own. In disrupting the connection between the end of a character's story and the end of their life, fantastic literature is uniquely able to explore questions of agency, power, and identity.

It is partly for this reason that table-top role-playing games (TTRPGs) have recently enjoyed a massive increase in popularity. Through embodiment of a characters' physical and emotional experience, this form of storytelling enables its players to intimately engage with even the most impossible scenarios, channeling core questions of life and existence that have fascinated humans since time immemorial.

I will explore in this paper how fantasy narratives and particularly TTRPGs like *Dungeons & Dragons* utilise the scope of death not as an insurmountable obstacle, but as a stepping stone in a bigger story. When death is not the end anymore, what remains of its original meaning, and what new facets of significance does it take on for those who suffer through it? Furthermore, how does it impact the reading (or playing) experience and change the ways in which people respond to the narrative?

In the first part of my paper, I will briefly highlight how time-honoured works such as Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* engage with the topic of death and mortality. I will then examine how the interactive forms of storytelling at play in many TTRPGs delve deeper in an exploration of death and its role in fantasy narratives.

**Pia Holste** studied Literature and Linguistics (B.A.) at RWTH Aachen University and is now pursuing a masters' degree in English Literatures and Cultures at Bonn University. Their research interests include cognitive narratology, collaborative storytelling, and queer studies. They are an avid *Dungeons & Dragons* player, currently DMing their way through a variety of source material.

