



**BETWEEN MORTALITY AND MAGIC: IDENTITY AND  
BELONGING IN *THE WICKED KING***

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**Abstract .** *This article examines the theme of identity and belonging in *The Wicked King* by Holly Black, focusing on the conflict between human and faerie nature. It analyzes how Jude Duarte, a mortal living in the faerie world, navigates social prejudice, political power, and personal transformation. Drawing on literary summaries and thematic analyses from multiple sources, the paper argues that identity in the novel is fluid rather than fixed, shaped by environment, survival, and ambition. The study highlights how Jude transforms her perceived human weakness into strategic strength, challenging faerie assumptions of superiority. Ultimately, the article concludes that belonging in Faerie is not determined by birth but constructed through adaptation and self-definition.*

**Key words:** *Identity; belonging; human vs faerie; transformation; prejudice; power dynamics; Jude Duarte; Faerie politics; Holly Black; fantasy literature; survival; social hierarchy; adaptation; dual identity.*

### **Introduction**

Holly Black's *The Wicked King* is far more than a tale of political intrigue set in a magical realm. At its core, the novel is a profound meditation on what it means to belong — and whether belonging can ever truly be earned by those deemed "other"



by the dominant culture. Set in Elfhome, a faerie kingdom governed by rigid hierarchy, ancient tradition, and an absolute belief in the superiority of the fae, the novel places its protagonist, Jude Duarte, at the most uncomfortable intersection imaginable: she is human in a world that despises humanity. Unlike many fantasy narratives that resolve this tension by granting the protagonist hidden magical origins or supernatural powers, Black refuses such easy solutions. Jude remains mortal throughout, and it is precisely this vulnerability — her humanity — that becomes the engine of her transformation. Through Jude's journey, Black invites readers to question deeply held assumptions about identity: Is it determined by blood and birth, or is it something we construct, claim, and continuously reinvent in response to the world around us?

This article argues that *The Wicked King* presents identity as a dynamic, negotiated process rather than a stable, inherited category. By placing a human character at the center of faerie politics, Black exposes the arbitrary nature of social hierarchies and demonstrates how power can be seized by those willing to exploit the blind spots of those who underestimate them [1][2].

### **Human Inferiority and Faerie Superiority**

The social world of Elfhome is constructed upon a foundational belief: faeries are inherently superior to humans. This is not merely a cultural attitude but an organizing principle of faerie society, embedded in law, custom, and everyday interaction. Humans in Elfhome occupy a precarious position — they are permitted to exist, but always as secondary figures, tolerated rather than respected, visible yet effectively invisible when it comes to power and recognition [1]. Jude's experience of this prejudice is relentless and multifaceted. She is mocked for her mortality, dismissed for her lack of magic, and denied the social legitimacy that faeries inherit simply by virtue of their nature. What makes her situation particularly layered is that her marginalization persists even when she holds genuine political influence. As the secret power behind the throne — having placed the High King Cardan under her control — Jude wields extraordinary authority, yet her identity as a human ensures that this authority is never publicly acknowledged or legitimized [2]. This dynamic



mirrors broader sociological patterns in which systemic inequality operates not just through overt discrimination but through the denial of recognition. Even competence and achievement cannot fully overcome the stigma attached to an "inferior" identity when the social system itself is designed to exclude. Black uses the faerie court as a sharp metaphor for real-world structures of bias, where birth, appearance, and perceived "nature" continue to determine access to power long after individual merit has proven itself [3].

Importantly, the prejudice Jude faces is not incidental — it is structural. It is reproduced through the behavior of noble faeries, through ceremonial exclusions, and through the very language used to describe humans in Elfhome. This institutionalized contempt serves a crucial narrative function: it establishes the stakes of Jude's ambition and makes her eventual successes all the more significant.

## **Jude Between Two Worlds**

Perhaps the most psychologically compelling dimension of Jude's character is her profound sense of in-betweenness. Raised in Elfhome after being taken from the human world as a child, Jude has grown up absorbing faerie values, customs, and ways of thinking. She is ambitious in the fae tradition, skilled in deception and strategy, fluent in the unspoken rules of courtly politics. In many essential ways, she thinks and acts like a faerie [1][4]. Yet she is not one. No amount of cultural assimilation can change the biological fact of her mortality, and in Elfhome's rigid worldview, that fact outweighs everything else. She is perpetually marked as an outsider, her achievements framed as anomalies rather than proof of her worth.

What complicates matters further is that Jude cannot simply return to humanity. The human world she left as a child has become foreign to her — she no longer fits its rhythms, its expectations, or its ignorance of the magical world she inhabits. She has, in a meaningful sense, outgrown a world she never fully knew [2].

This condition — belonging fully to neither world — is what theorists of cultural identity might call a liminal state: an in-between space that is uncomfortable but also generative. Rather than resolving her identity crisis by choosing one world over the other, Jude inhabits the boundary itself. This liminal position becomes both



her deepest wound and her greatest strategic asset, granting her a perspective on both worlds that pure faeries simply cannot possess. Black portrays this liminality not as a flaw to be corrected, but as a complex and ultimately powerful way of being. Jude's dual perspective allows her to see faerie society from the outside even as she operates within it — a detachment that fuels her clarity and her ambition.

### **Adaptation as Resistance: Turning Weakness into Power**

One of the novel's most subversive arguments is that the traits faeries dismiss as human weaknesses are, in practice, sophisticated tools for survival and dominance. The most obvious example is Jude's capacity for deception. Faeries, bound by their nature to speak only truth, are paradoxically limited in ways that humans are not. Jude can lie, dissemble, and misdirect with ease — capabilities that prove invaluable in a court built on intrigue and manipulation [1][3]. But Jude's adaptability goes beyond mere dishonesty. She is a rapid learner, capable of reading shifting social dynamics and adjusting her behavior accordingly. She possesses a resilience born of knowing that no magical safety net exists for her — she cannot rely on enchantments or supernatural power to rescue her from the consequences of her mistakes. Every move she makes is calculated, grounded, and self-reliant.

This reframing of weakness as strength is central to the novel's thematic project. Black suggests that what a dominant group defines as inferior is often simply different — and that difference, properly understood and deployed, can dismantle the very hierarchies that sought to suppress it [4]. Jude does not succeed despite being human; in crucial ways, she succeeds because of it. Her journey thus functions as a critique of essentialism — the belief that identity categories carry inherent, fixed values. By demonstrating that a "weak" human can outmaneuver "superior" faeries on their own political terrain, Black challenges the foundational logic of Elfhome's social order

### **Blurring Boundaries: The Fluidity of Identity**

As *The Wicked King* progresses, the sharp boundary between human and faerie identity begins to dissolve — not just for Jude, but for the narrative as a whole. Jude grows increasingly fae-like in her ruthlessness, her political cunning, and her



emotional guarded-ness. Meanwhile, Cardan — the High King whose faerie identity is never in question — begins to exhibit qualities traditionally associated with humanity: vulnerability, doubt, and an emerging capacity for genuine feeling [2][3]. This crossing of identity lines is not accidental. Black uses it to undermine the entire premise of Elfhame's hierarchy. If a human can master faerie politics and a faerie can harbor human-like doubts, then the categories themselves are revealed as constructs — useful fictions that serve the interests of those in power, rather than natural or inevitable truths. The novel suggests that identity is not a noun but a verb: something continuously performed, negotiated, and revised in response to circumstance and relationship. Belonging, likewise, is not a status one possesses but a practice one engages in — an ongoing act of self-definition within the constraints and possibilities of one's environment.

## Conclusion

*The Wicked King* offers one of contemporary fantasy literature's most nuanced explorations of identity and belonging. Through Jude Duarte's relentless negotiation of her place in a world that rejects her, Holly Black constructs a powerful argument against essentialism and in favor of a more fluid, self-determined understanding of who we are and where we belong. Jude's story is not a simple triumph of the underdog. It is a more complex and honest portrait of what it costs to inhabit the margins of a society — the psychological toll of constant vigilance, the loneliness of never fully belonging, and the double-edged nature of a power built on concealment rather than recognition. Yet it is also a testament to human adaptability, strategic intelligence, and the refusal to accept the identity that others would impose. Ultimately, Black's novel suggests that the most dangerous person in any rigid, hierarchical world is the one who has nothing to lose by rewriting its rules — and everything to gain by refusing to be defined by them [1][2][3][4]

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