Introduction

Throughout this paper, I will use my research object, the HBO television series, *Game of Thrones*, to analyze how the fantasy genre projects contemporary social issues. Since the publication of *The Lord of the Rings* in the 1950s, the fantasy genre has evolved into a medium for escape as well as a means for self-reflection. Series such as *Harry Potter* and *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* advanced fantastical narratives as allegorical entities as well, frequently referring to fictional “worlds” or environments as means for societal and cultural liberation. While *Game of Thrones* refers to this tactic of storytelling as well, the show more often depicts an unmistakably medieval era as one conjured in and tweaked by fantasy. In this way, viewers do not view the series’ imaginary world solely as an escape, but also as a reconstruction of history, modulated by modern cultural concerns. Due to this duality of seemingly antithetical characteristics within the show, I believe *Game of Thrones* possesses the aptitude to demonstrate how key components of the fantasy genre serve to relieve social tensions while also reflecting upon them.

In doing so, the televised fantasy-drama series employs modern and relevant social issues and moral trajectories in order to instill a sense of familiarity and topical relatability within its audience. Throughout this paper, I will argue how the fantasy genre as a whole does this effectively, decisively, and deliberately. However, I also intend on narrowing in on how *Game of*
*Game of Thrones* in particular manages to incorporate a wide spectrum of these themes throughout its on-screen narrative. While I will argue how other book-to-film series such as the aforementioned *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings* willfully address areas of social and cultural contention by rooting such topics in allegorical fantasy, I will provide evidence from the television series to demonstrate how *Game of Thrones* thoroughly remarks upon a broader range of subjects. Controversial or exceptionally topical issues such as feminism, immigration policy, disability-based discrimination, nepotism, and primogeniture will permeate my analysis of this phenomenon. I will argue that this wide spectrum of social controversies by virtue addresses a broader audience with variously specific, yet similar concerns. Ultimately, these topics being able to resonate with a vast viewership allows for and calls for intensive engagement in both the show and the aforementioned areas of concern.

Analyzing three integral scenes in HBO’s *Game of Thrones*, I will illustrate how the television show and the fantasy genre as a whole reflect pertinent contemporary social issues. I have chosen these particular scenes based upon their relevance and correlation to three overarching themes throughout the show: feminist refutal of and aversion to patriarchal social standards, immigration policy prejudices, and reclamation of physical and/or mental disability. These themes are not only ubiquitous throughout the television show (and therefore centralized within the general plot) but are also familiar and relatable reflections of modern-day discourses and cultural contentions. Through the analysis of these three scenes, as well as the *Game of Thrones* franchise as a transmediated enterprise (particularly in contrast to other notable, contemporary fantasy works, as well as in contrast to other genres as a whole), I will provide evidence of this phenomenon.
Context

*Game of Thrones* is categorized as a fantasy drama television series. It is adapted from George R. R. Martin’s fantasy novel series, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, which currently consists of five published novels and two additional planned novels. Martin began working on the books in 1991, publishing the first volume in 1996. His fifth and most recent installment was published in 2011, the same year that *Game of Thrones* premiered on HBO as a television series. The show’s seventh and penultimate season ended in August 2017, and its final season is set to air in April 2019.

The book series is narrated by several different characters, as perspectives consistently shift chapter-to-chapter. The television show mimics this form, as well, delegating viewpoints between Daenerys Targaryen, the former king’s daughter seeking to retake the throne, Cersei Lannister, the current queen of Westeros, Jon Snow, the ultimate leader of the Northern revolt against the throne, and several other more minor characters throughout the storyline.

Martin’s novels gradually amassed popularity and mass readership around 2000, with the proposed television adaptation contracted in 2005. While the show has a tendency of taking more sensationalized liberties in its overall plot, the general themes of Martin’s novels remain central in both narratives: loyalty, nobility, piety, violence, and derivative feudalism. More explicitly contentious themes include sexism, xenophobia, nepotism, primogeniture, and the separation of Church and State (or lack thereof). Due to the show’s relative novelty within its genre, several of the story’s overarching social issues seem to draw strong influence from contemporary political and cultural controversies.
The series was heavily inspired by Tolkien and his implementation of secondary worlds. Much like the *Lord of the Rings* series, *A Song of Ice and Fire* contains its own languages, histories, and religions. Martin was also inspired by real medieval battles and historical personas from the 11th to the 15th centuries. Though not explicitly referred to as direct influence, the *Harry Potter* series also seems to have inspired several themes throughout *A Song of Ice and Fire*, as well. Cultural obsessions with “pureblood” lineage, the employment of time travel, and taboo experimentations with blood magic all permeate both series as notable motifs.

The *Game of Thrones* franchise differs from stereotypical fantasy narratives, however, in that it uniquely blends the utopic, supernatural, and otherworldly elements of traditional fantasy with the harsher and more violent realities of historicity. Esteemed works of fantasy predating the series, such as *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* or *Harry Potter* cater more toward the young adult or children demographics, and in doing so, often omit unnecessary violence. *Game of Thrones* also remarks heavily on aforementioned issues such as race, class, and gender. *The Lord of the Rings* series, though thought to be the foundation of the modern fantasy genre, declines to remark significantly upon several of these subjects. In fact, the series presents a staggering shortage of female characters to begin with. While Tolkien and *Harry Potter* author, J.K. Rowling, utilize fantasy to combat broader concerns, such as political hierarchy and interclass power struggles, *Game of Thrones* pinpoints a wider range of prevalent and modern topics more deliberately, accurately, and acutely.

Additionally, *Game of Thrones* allows for and actively encourages a great deal of audience perspective to be interwoven with the reception of its antagonists. Traditionally, the fantasy genre depicts an epic clash between the denotative good and evil. The previously
mentioned cornerstones of modern fantasy, *Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter* juxtapose an
evident protagonist with a malicious villain. Typically, there is little backstory incorporated into
this theme that would warrant any sympathy or reconsideration of the villain’s malice. In most
major fantasy works, the bad is inserted simply to challenge the good. However, *Game of
Thrones* relies heavily on dozens of character histories, relationships, and first-person
perspectives in an attempt to perhaps muddle the otherwise conspicuous rancor of the story’s
“villains.” Both Martin and the producers of the television adaptation strive to provide ample
context behind each character’s motives. The time-honored clash of the good and evil is frankly
ever-changing and seldom as satisfactory as it may otherwise be in another notable work of
fantasy. This being said, the presence of the “evil” is often rooted in the actions, beliefs, or
unswayable morals of the characters, particularly ones which modern viewers would find
politically problematic. This is yet another tactic *Game of Thrones* seems to employ in order to
preserve contemporary concerns at the forefront of its plot.

Due to this undeniable relevancy and considerable competency in merging fantasy with
televisable drama, *Game of Thrones* has amassed a sizable following since its premiere in 2011.
The show has set record viewership on its network, HBO, and maintains an international
fanbase, as well as a monumentally devout fandom. While the series is often criticized for its
seemingly flagrant display of nudity and unhindered violence, it has nonetheless received
massive critical acclaim, including five Golden Globe nominations and forty-seven Emmy
Awards.

In 2012, entertainment news source, *Vulture*, statistically ranked the series’ fanbase as the
most devoted group of any other popular culture source, including *Star Wars, Harry Potter*, and
Justin Bieber. According to multinational media group, SBS Broadcasting Group, the *Game of Thrones* fan engagement rate has remained higher than any other fandom since 2012, with 6% of the series’ then-3-million Facebook fans engaging about the show on social media. The first season of the show averaged 2.5 million weekly viewers, while the latest season averaged an incredible 30 million weekly viewers across all streaming platforms. The show has also set records for the most pirated series in television history. It has maintained this title since 2012.

The demographics of the show’s viewership are largely predictable, but significant nonetheless. Approximately 70% of the show’s viewers are between 18 and 29 years old, while about 20% range from ages 30 to 44. Additionally, 60% of viewers encountered the franchise first through the show, as opposed to starting with the book series, though 60% of viewers who had both read the books and watched the show stated that they preferred the novels to the television series adaptation. Four-fifths of this omni-audience agreed, however, that the show proved to be a fulfilling adaptation from the novels.

In 2017, *TIME Magazine* named *Game of Thrones* the world’s most popular television show, citing in its article that the show airs in more than 170 countries. The article goes on to remind readers that each season is typically composed of ten hour-long episodes, directed and budgeted like enormous Hollywood productions. In fact, over the series’ last two seasons, HBO has provided producers with a $10 million budget per episode. Martin has mentioned in several episodes that this grand-scale production was his vision for the project all along, adding that he was deterred and offended by the idea of making cuts or watering down imperative storylines and explicit scenes. Since the beginning of the adaptation, Martin has acted as a co-writer and narrative advisor for the show.
Aside from the television adaptation, Martin’s novels have found additional success as a transmediated franchise, with the development of several *Game of Thrones* video games, branded merchandise, and supplementary televised commentary. *Game of Thrones Ascent*, originally a digital Facebook game, was released in 2013 and was met with great popularity. The video game, *Reigns: Game of Thrones*, was released in 2018 and welcomed significant membership, as well. Furthermore, HBO frequently licences *Game of Thrones* merchandise to suppliers wishing to replicate themed attire. Between 2013 and 2014, the broadcaster assembled a traveling exhibition of props, costumes, and relics from the show. The series is also the topic of several podcasts, including most notably, *Thronecast*. In 2012, a writer for the show released a book titled *Inside HBO’s Game of Thrones*, depicting never-before-seen photos and insight into the creation and production of the televised series. George R. R. Martin and several producers from HBO have also discussed a successor show, or prequel series, for *Game of Thrones* once the final season has aired.

**Literature Review**

The series is also a topical affair within modern scholarship, with many published authors taking note of the show’s feminist direction, philosophical endeavors, and diverse character representation. Colleen Donnelly’s article, “Re-visioning Negative Archetypes of Disability and Deformity in Fantasy: Wicked, Maleficent, and Game of Thrones,” analyzes how the show depicts the aforementioned, familiar brawl between good and evil. In doing so, the article speaks to two different arguments within this paper. First, Donnelly supports my claim that *Game of Thrones* offers a unique alteration of traditional fantasy by providing a great deal of perspective surrounding its villainous and most formidable characters. This additional perspective affords a
more realistic lens through which audiences view the show. Additionally, Donnelly touches on the traditional archetypes within the fantasy genre revolving around disability and handicapped characters. This also ties into my argument about the show making strong efforts to touch upon modern politics and social concerns. Throughout *Game of Thrones*, for instance, Tyrion, a dwarf, consistently acknowledges and jokes about his own “shortcomings,” as he refers to it. Through allowing this character to break the fourth wall in this way, or at least shatter the traditional stereotypes that the disabled are miserly, naive, or simply unintelligent, the show is remarking upon controversial social norms by destroying and deconstructing them.

Cathleen Cerny’s article, “Television’s ‘Crazy Lady’ Trope: Female Psychopathic Traits, teaching, and Influence of Popular Culture,” studies and demonstrates how young women view female characters on-screen as virtual role models, teachers, and mentors. This study also clarifies how men perceive male characters much less acutely, as they tend to view digital narratives as entertainment-based stories, rather than instructional or guiding anecdotes. While the article’s main focus is pointed more toward identifying the potentially detrimental “psychotic female” trope in modern media, Cerny’s work provides evidence regarding [at least] female viewership’s intrinsic dedication to seeking out relatability and perspective in televised narratives.

More specifically, several scholars have sought out to analyze what makes the fantasy genre so informative in gauging and comprehending real world problems. In their article, “Lessons from Westeros: Gender and Power in Game of Thrones,” William Clapton and Laura Shepherd assess how televised fantasy in particular teaches memorable and applicable real-world lessons. Throughout their article, the authors highlight metaphors or fables presented as
moral-building narratives, as they consider how these lessons could be considered merit able, real-world political and social strategies. Conversely, in her chapter, “I’m Not Going to Fight Them: Sexist Liberalism and Gender (A)Politics in Game of Thrones,” Elin Sandqvist asks how *Game of Thrones* is regarded so highly when it broadcasts a great deal violence and sex.

Sandqvist ultimately attributes the show’s success to the virtue of fantasy to make its viewers reconsider the world they live in. She writes, “[George R. R.] Martin’s fantasy *speaks to us* because it is a poignant social commentary grounded in sexual/sexist, economic, cultural, and political conditions” (Sandqvist, 1196). John Timmerman affirms this in his own book, *Other Worlds: the Fantasy Genre*, as he describes the purpose of fantasy. He writes, “It permits us a certain distance from pragmatic affairs and offers us a far clearer insight into them” (Timmerman, 1). These three sources prove the ability characterize fantasy as a unique genre through its capability to both isolate and attract audiences into an environment of critical and cultural understanding.

Sara Day’s review of a study conducted by Veronica L. Schanoes entitled, “Fairy Tales, Myth, and Psychoanalytic Theory: Feminism and Retelling the Tale by Veronica L. Schanoes” illustrates how fantasy, fairy tales, and myths similarly construct worlds that are distinctly similar to our own. A quote in Chapter 5, “Double Vision: Women and Fantasy,” states, “...fantasy’s illusion of another world, identical and yet opposite to ours, creates a space for expressing lived experiences of women and envisioning the feminist change necessary to improve those experiences” (Day, 114). This phenomenon, which Schanoes dubs as “narrative doubling,” is an integral component of my topic, and a recurring aspect of *Game of Thrones* (Day, 115). This text’s analysis of feminism in the fantasy and supernatural fictional genres
allows me to build off of Cerny’s feminism-in-film perspective, while studying how feminists seek out problematic or contentious aspects of media in order to analyze their own environments. Throughout the analysis component of this paper, I will construct my argument that the fantasy genre enables and encourages this based off of several of these findings in this article.

Following topics surrounding disability, religion plays a grand role in several of the major controversies over the course of the *Game of Thrones* plot, particularly throughout its later seasons. In his article, “Coexistence and Conflict in the Religions of Game of Thrones,” Daniel Clasby describes the importance of the apparent cross-religious contact amongst the fictitious country of Westeros within the television series. He notes that, opposed to a traditionally dueling duo of mainstream religions (such as Christianity vs. Judaism), the wide range of diversity and origin amongst the people of Westeros has apparently led to a state of religious coexistence, more or less. While several scandals do occur in the show revolving around variations of religion, Clasby’s more optimistic observation regarding the topic demonstrates how the fantasy genre serves as somewhat of a virtual escape from notably contentious social topics.

The topic of feminism is another social concern addressed frequently throughout the show. In fact, the majority of surrounding *Game of Thrones* either touches on or centers this subject as its forefront. Debra Ferreday’s article, “Game of Thrones, Rape Culture and Feminist Fandom” argues that the show actually employs anti-feminist themes throughout some of its episodes, particularly in scenes containing rape or violence against women. Similarly, Rikke Schubart and Anne Gjelsvik’s introduction to their book, *Women of Ice and Fire: Gender, Game of Thrones, and Multiple Media Engagements*, views *Game of Thrones*, “…as feminist and
anti-feminist, as subversive and repressive…[utilizing women] as tools for ‘sexploitation’” (Schubart, Gjelsvik, 1955).

Valerie Franken’s book, *Women in Game of Thrones: Power, Conformity and Resistance*, however, asserts that there are actually more strong-willed, capable female characters than male, and that seemingly helpless, damsel-in-distress kinds of characters can be written off as “products of their historical era,” referring to the medieval period upon which the show is seemingly based (Franken, 1). Elyce Helford’s book, *Fantasy Girls: Gender in the New Universe of Science Fiction and Fantasy Television* seeks to explain how feminism in fantasy came about, describing the earliest cases of such phenomena, such as *Bewitched* and *I Dream of Jeannie*.

Seeking to appeal to a wider demographic than suburban housewives without losing viewship, broadcasters in the 1960s and ‘70s created independent female protagonists who worked outside the home, yet could be “read as symbolic articulations of women’s aspirations for respects in roles other than wife and mother” (Helford, 2). This background is incredible pertinent to my paper, as it describes the introduction of feminism to fantasy as an escape from modern life, yet a simultaneous reflection of potential.

Several scholars have also centralized their work around the feminist aspects (or lack thereof) in J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter series* and the eight adapted films. In her article, "J.K. Rowling's Ambivalence Towards Feminism: House Elves--Women in Disguise--in the 'Harry Potter' Books," Rivka Kellner asserts that the fantastical, magical world of Harry Potter was likely modeled after, or at least highly resembles, Western capitalist society. Kellner argues that the lack of a feminist message in this kind of setting - however fictional or fantastical- proves Rowling’s ambivalence toward such social issues. The chapter, “From Sexist to (Sort-of)
Feminist: Representations of Gender in the Harry Potter Series” in Elizabeth Heilman’s book, *Critical Perspectives on Harry Potter* seems to argue a similar point. Heilman asserts that Harry Potter reaffirms gender stereotypes rather than challenging them, perhaps due to its target audience of children and young adults. While I intend on dedicating a portion of my presentation to describing how other works of fantasy do cover important social concerns, I will also use these articles to prove my hypothesis that contemporaries of *Game of Thrones* fail to cover as many important matters as extensively as the series does.

However, the *Harry Potter* series does serve as an excellent example of transmedia storytelling and the ways in which the fantasy genre enables its narratives to transcend their original form. Katherine Peterlin’s article, “*Harry Potter and the Expanding Narrative: Transmedia Storytelling, Participatory Culture, and the Harry Potter Universe*” explains how this genre is ideal for world-building scenarios, where affiliates of the story can market virtual escape through different kinds of media. Kristin Thompson explains this further in her article, “Fantasy, Franchises, and Frodo Baggins: The Lord of the Rings and Modern Hollywood,” as she analyzes why fantasy stories draw such large fanbases, particularly those willing to engage in the same story on a different platform, or via a different medium. She writes, “Moreover, fantasies lend themselves to a broad range of merchandising, and fantasy fans tend to collect things” (Thompson, 2). This practice is an integral part of my argument because it demonstrates fantasy as both a means of escape and a realm that fans desire to combine with their own. In his book, “*Beyond the Wall: Exploring George R. R. Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire, From A Game of Thrones to A Dance with Drago*” James Lowder discusses the process of adapting the original
books upon which *Game of Thrones* is based, into graphic novels, video games, and, of course, the television show.

Beyond *Harry Potter*, Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* novels are also pertinent examples of a base for a widely transmediated text. Helen Young’s book, *Fantasy and Science-Fiction Medievalisms: from Isaac Asimov to "A Game of Thrones"* explores the backstory of both Tolkien (who is largely thought to be the father of fantasy by other writers within the genre) and fantasy as a whole. Young explores the general plot of *Lord of the Rings* for those unfamiliar with the novels, exploring the series’ main points of interest and overarching themes. Young has also published an article, “Race in Online Fantasy Fandom: Whiteness On Westeros.org,” which explores the lack of diversity in the *Game of Thrones* fandom, as well as in Tolkien literature and the later film adaptations. She seeks to make connections between race and fantasy, while also touching upon the importance of transmedia in both *Lord of the Rings* and *Game of Thrones*.

Furthermore, while transmedia storytelling is one virtue of the *Game of Thrones*’ success, several scholars still dedicate work to analyzing what made *Game of Thrones* so undeniably popular to begin with. Martin Bleisteiner’s article, “Perils of Generation: Incest, Romance, and the Proliferation of Narrative in Game of Thrones” lays out the general plot the show, while also trying to pinpoint the most attractive elements of the show to its mass audience. Bleisteiner attributes scandal, drama, and taboo romances to its massive success. Henry Jacoby’s book, *Game of Thrones and Philosophy: Logic Cuts Deeper than Swords* also touches on the background of both the show’s plot and development, while providing insight into the process of adapting the novels in the television series.

**Method**
In order to categorize *Game of Thrones* into notable categories of analysis, I have chosen three scenes from the television series that exemplify or reflect prominent social issues in today’s society. These three scenes depict social situations or areas of contention that would likely not have been of prominent concern in a medieval era, had the show been placed in the context of an authentic, definable historical period. Over the course of my analysis, I will then examine how these scenes directly relate to specific, pressing, modern issues. Furthermore, I will extend this argument by demonstrating how these issues may have been more difficult to pinpoint and broadcast in a work of historical fiction. In order to ensure that my analysis is relevant, I have chosen particularly recent and visibly contemporary issues that could not logically be inserted into the plot of a historical fiction story (such as defining aspects of third-wave feminism or more modern controversies regarding American border control).

Toward the beginning of this paper, I inserted a brief list of contemporaries of George R. R. Martin who have written sizable or considerably popular works of fantasy. This list (and the listed authors’ respective works) will serve as my source of other works of fantasy to which I continuously refer throughout the analysis component of this paper. The works mentioned in this list will be continuously compared to and/or contrasted with *Game of Thrones* in order to demonstrate the novels’ and show’s deviance from and loyalty to its own genre.

I have then compartmentalized the topics which I hypothesize *Game of Thrones* thoroughly addresses throughout its theme and various subplots. These include feminism, disability-related discrimination (most relevant in the Donnelly article), immigration policies and prejudices, and by extension of these primary three subjects, nepotism, and/or primogeniture (which can be related directly to feminism and sexism). I have found clips or scenes
demonstrating each of these themes throughout the show, and I will go on to analyze how these scenes accurately depict modern social concerns while also conveying a sense of escape from such real-world issues through the show’s fantastical nature. I will then assert how the fantasy genre is possibly capable of portraying this unique dualism in a way that historical fiction might not be able to. I will dedicate a portion of my project to describing how fantasy allows for modification of both the past and the potential future, while also providing means or favorable themes for transmediation and adaptation.

Analysis

The first few episodes of *Game of Thrones* effectively establish the social ranking within Westeros, and by extension, introduce which themes and character interactions will gradually serve in the story’s overarching plot. While the government is presented as a traditionally feudal monarchy, feminist undertones quickly arise following the death of the king. Female characters begin challenging long-standing, culturally ingrained customs such as primogeniture and arranged marriage. Within these relatively brief yet meaningful moments of revolution, female characters are often given empowering dialogue, referring to and questioning sexism with a more modern day kind of inquisition one would likely never see in a work of historical fiction.

The scene I have chosen to exemplify these feminist elements consists of a brief conversation between a father and his daughter. The father, Ned Stark, is both the head of his household and the warden of the North, one of the seven sub-kingdoms within Westeros. Due to the fact that arranged marriage was ubiquitous during the medieval era (particularly among the noble families), the majority of the plot within *Game of Thrones* revolves around the strategic merging of houses/families. As Ned Stark attempts to explain to his youngest daughter, Arya,
why he must marry off his older daughter, Sansa, to the kingdom’s vile Prince Joffrey, he insists that Sansa, “must take his side, even when he’s wrong.” Arya, who is familiar with the treason and malice of the Royal Family, asks her father, “But how could you let her marry a man like that?” This seemingly innocent questioning of her father’s judgment in this regard demonstrates how the female characters within the show are meant to question their own expectations, even if these norms were deeply instilled in themselves from early ages. Arya’s inquisition of this choice demonstrates a potential aversion to traditional arranged marriages, regardless of her society’s heavy concentration upon status and social currency. On the contrary, the medieval period upon which the show is based relied heavily upon these kinds of marriage, majoritively in efforts to unite two powerful houses. Furthermore, such marriages historically entailed dowry (the father “gifting” his daughter to a man of means), female submission, and a general businesslike sensibility toward meaningful ceremony. Arya’s refusal to mindlessly submit to such a practice, especially while it is implied in this scene that her sister, Sansa, has already accepted this fate, juxtaposes a modern inquisitive mindset toward sexist practices, alongside historical compliance to traditional norms. As the show progresses, Arya and Sansa’s characters continue to partake in this telling interplay, with Arya continually defying oppressive stereotypes in relation to her far more obedient older sister.

Furthermore, in the same scene, Ned witnesses Arya attempting to tuck away a sword from his view. Concerned, he asks, “Where did you get this?” As he takes the weapon from his daughter, he declares, “This is no toy; little ladies shouldn’t play with swords,” to which Arya replies, “I wasn’t playing, and I don’t want to be a lady.” Once again, Arya’s character demonstrates a brazen defiance to the traditions of her time. As the daughter of a lord and
warden of a sub-kingdom, Arya would likely have been expected to marry a powerful official in order to strategically merge two households. Her refusal to comply to these expectations, as well as her sheer revulsion toward the idea of being ladylike, cater to the modern onlooker with presumably similar, or at least equatable, societal concerns. Though medieval marital arrangements are largely considered a hallmark of the epoque, *Game of Thrones* relies upon the seemingly boundless structure (or lack thereof) within the fantasy genre to intertwine contemporary concerns with historical contexts.

Beyond this singular scene, feminism stands at the forefront of the various modern themes interwoven into the show. Women are frequently depicted as the cunning masterminds behind each powerful male character. Even female characters who seem to lack initiative or evident gallantry, such as Sansa, transform coy demeanors into manipulative mindsets. Daenerys, for example, is introduced to her audience in the first episode of the show as the embodiment of femininity, submission, and purity. It becomes clear throughout this episode that her older brother, who rescued her as a child, possesses and commands dominant control over her every action. He hastily marries her off to the leader of a barbaric community in exchange for an army, transferring his all-encompassing domination of his sister to another man. However, over the course of the first season, Daenerys presents herself as a keen listener, silently devising a plot to both punish her brother and lead his army into Westeros to outrace the current queen. Following the death of both of her former, self-imposed male superiors, Daenerys marches forward with her master plan. Over the course of the show, she amasses several allies and armies, overrules male authority and traditional political decrees by assigning a female hand and informant, and establishes herself as an all-powerful dragon queen, proving herself as both
literally and figuratively fireproof. Her long, pale gowns transition into dark cloaks and boots, as well, denoting a visible evolution from the aforementioned pure, relatively helpless damsel in distress to the taker of her own reins. Her character arch, though more exaggerated than that of other transitional feminist characters within the show, exhibits an eagerness on behalf of Game of Thrones’ heroines to slowly amass power and revolt from within. While this concept might be inherently fruitless or implausible in a work of historical fiction for the medieval era (in which female revolt was seldom applauded or considered noteworthy), its implementation within the show seems particularly relevant to a modern era energized and exhilarated by tactful transformation and carefully crafted, premeditated change.

In fact, most of the feminist themes throughout the show take the same specific route by positioning female characters as cunning counterparts to male flagrancy. In the finale of the show’s seventh season, one Daenerys’s several female advisors offers telling insight while simultaneously addressing a recurring feminist theme throughout the show. She confidently states, “I’ve known a great many clever men. I’ve outlived them all. And you know why? I ignored them.” This fierce disregard for the traditionally omniscient, all-powerful male encapsulates a common attitude among the show’s female characters toward masculinity and patriarchy alike. Various similar phrases throughout the show seek to resonate with modern viewers by identifying with similar, more contemporary struggles. These feminist themes also serve as somewhat idealistic renderings of female capability, perhaps inserted throughout the show to incite action or a similar opposition to oppressive structures.

Due to the show’s primarily adult-based viewership, Game of Thrones seems to rely heavily upon these social justice moments in order to strike a chord with audience members
potentially experiencing or familiar with similar kinds of mistreatment. As a whole, the fantasy
genre in particular excels at this phenomenon, often utilizing monsters or unearthly villains as
allegorical stand-ins for real world dilemmas. However, contemporaneous works of fantasy that
have amassed similarly sizable readership and/or viewership, such as *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the
Rings*, and *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, have failed to address such pertinent social
issues. For instance, while the *Harry Potter* series exhibits an intelligent, confident female
character as one of its main protagonists, the novels and films alike abstain from tapping into any
kind of significant, recurring feminist themes. Rather, the series seems to remark the most upon
social or racial prejudices, as illustrated in certain characters’ prejudices against mudbloods,
half-bloods, and members of specific houses. However, even this subplot was incredibly subtle,
at least in comparison to *Game of Thrones*’ more hard-hitting ploys.

Similarly, *Lord of the Rings* fails to promote any significant feminist message in both the
book series and its three adapted films. In fact, the series contains very few female characters at
all, which inherently limits its ability to remark upon any substantial feminist topics. The
aforementioned *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* also falls short in comparison to *Game of
Thrones*, at least in the context of addressing such immediately relatable or recognizable social
concerns. While the series has been both acclaimed and criticized for remarking upon more
religious topics such as atheism and Christianity, it presents little to no feminist message.

This comparable lack of acknowledgement toward the issues *Game of Thrones* seats at its
forefront could be entirely due to a discrepancy in targeted readership. *Harry Potter*, though
originally intended for adult audiences, ultimately found incredible success among the children
and young adult genres. Similar works of fantasy, including those mentioned above, also cater
more toward the young adult demographic. *Game of Thrones* sits on the opposite side of the spectrum, however, as it has become quite renowned over the course of its seven seasons for its supposedly excessive implementation of nudity and violence. It is likely that *Game of Thrones* has amassed such a sizable audience from its ability to relay these social issues in an enticing, yet often brutal manner - one that is not entirely suitable for a young adult viewership. The television adaptation is also more recent than any of the other aforementioned fantasy adaptations, which could allow the show to *seem* more topical due to the sole fact that it is still in production. Altogether, however, *Game of Thrones* still effectively covers a wider range of contemporary concerns than any other comparable work of modern fantasy.

The second of these concerns that I have chosen to narrow in on is the pertinent prejudice against immigrants (or against immigration policy in general). Though George R. R. Martin’s *Song of Ice and Fire* was drafter, written, and published long before the current political climate (in which immigration policy stands as one of the most contentious political topics in the American legal system), there are still clear allusions to this topic within the book series (which are highlighted and exposed more prominently within the televised adaptation).

For instance, one of the show’s main characters (around which about a fourth of the show’s plot is based), Jon Snow, heads to the very northern region of Westeros to join what is essentially the kingdom’s equivalent of the army. Because he is an illegitimate son to his father, the aforementioned Ned Stark, he cannot bare his family’s true name or inherit their land and fortune. His duty in this army, entitled the Night’s Watch, is to oversee the enormous wall of snow and ice which separates the preserved kingdom of Westeros and its looming counterpart, suitably named, “north of the wall.” While no one in Westeros possesses any certainty, there is
an age-old rumor that the north of the wall contains a virtually unkillable breed of the undead, marching southbound to overtake Westeros and feed off of human life. Beyond this story, the only awareness anyone has for the contents of this region is the existence of a comparatively small society of uncivilized, supposedly barbaric viking-like figures, which members of the Night’s Watch refer to as “wildlings.”

While the majority of Westeros has been conditioned to detest these wildlings, Jon Snow finds a practical kind of pity for them. Having met and befriended a number of them, Snow (who is ultimately made Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch) decides to instruct his men to let the wildlings into Westeros, reasoning that if the undead were to come across these people and kill them, the army of the undead would multiply enormously, lowering the chances of the Night’s Watch to be able to defend their kingdom from this zombie army. However, the majority of the Night’s Watch is entirely stuck in their learned prejudices. They ultimately choose to overthrow Jon Snow as Lord Commander and threaten his death rather than letting this supposedly uncivilized society of outsiders enter their kingdom. They formulate several excuses, including a significant lack of resources, the belief that these people are inherent traitors to society, or even that this community of outsiders is simply uneducated.

When watching this plot develop throughout the show for the first time, it was difficult not to jump to conclusions that this theme was inspired - however directly- by immigration reform. The Night’s Watch’s classification of these outsiders as uneducated, dishonest, or undeserving of resources was quite familiar to me in a political sense. Once again, though the book series was originally published in the early 1990s, this dilemma throughout the show reminded me directly of the border crises between the United States and Mexico, and the EU’s
refugee crisis. Of course, prejudices and anxieties surrounding immigration are not new topics by any means. In this way, it seems that Game of Thrones gains popularity by intertwining such recurring and poignant political topics into its show. Though the scenes depicting this revolution and ultimate overthrow of Jon Snow seemed quite specific to the plot of the show, the heated debates and dialogue surrounding the inclusion of a different kind of society exhibited xenophobic tendencies and diction common in modern discussions surrounding immigration policy.

Although I believe this scene best encapsulates this theme across the entirety of the show, immigration tensions, or unwelcomed communities, are an integral component to the world-relatability within Game of Thrones. Westeros, for example, is divided into seven different sub-kingdoms, all lead or represented by different houses. Additionally, Westeros is neighbored by several islands and land masses - all of which have gradually amassed a significantly distinct culture from that of Westeros. The country of Essos, for example, sits just east of Westeros and appears architecturally and gastronomically Spanish. However, its desert lands are home to the Dothraki, a calvary of barbaric soldiers. Throughout the show, as the Dothraki society interacts with various communities within Essos or Westeros, foreigners typically act disgusted, taken aback, or incredibly frightful. Characters are often quick to judge them, as well, citing the Dothraki as savage or, once again, uncivilized. This kind of interaction among civilians is often immediately juxtaposed in the show with scenes of the Royal Family positioned in their tower, which is conveniently far removed from the majority of common society. This strikes me as an evident commentary on government or policy makers, classically framed as out of touch and out of reach from the civilians their laws are hugely impacting.
The third and final theme I found to be most pervasive throughout *Game of Thrones* was the show’s interesting take on traditional “token characters,” particularly in regards to the mentally and physically disabled. Tyrion Lannister, the brother to the Queen of Westeros, is thoroughly ridiculed throughout the series for being a dwarf. However, Tyrion is perhaps the show’s most favorable, comical, and perhaps even most well-meaning character. He consistently reclaims his own “shortcomings,” beating judgmental characters to the punchline and often addressing his short stature before he is even introduced into a scene. This is certainly a welcome change from the more traditional dwarf token characters within works of fantasy. *Harry Potter*, for instance, employs dwarves as miserly goblin bank tellers with short tempers and frown lines. *Lord of the Rings* is slightly more forgiving, depicting dwarves as so-called hobbits or halflings, though classified as an inferior race or “human variety” within the Tolkien saga. *Game of Thrones*, however, presents one of its most dignified, courageous characters as a dwarf, as the series attempts to dispel the detrimental stereotype within the fantasy genre. This character choice seems to work metaphorically, as well, as it allows the series to refrain from categorizing disabled characters as dysfunctional or in repair.

Though Tyrion’s character exemplifies this phenomenon all throughout the show, the scene I chose to embody this theme focuses on characters with emotional, or psychological handicaps, as well. Theon Greyjoy, an heir to one of Westeros’ surrounding islands, spends the majority of *Game of Thrones*’ second season in captivity, physically tortured and psychologically tormented by one of the show’s primary antagonists, Ramsay. While Theon’s kidnapping was initially strategic on Ramsay’s part, he decides to continue the tormenting solely for enjoyment, ultimately cutting off several of Theon’s fingers and appendages, all the while
training Theon to act as his loyal, subservient slave. At one point, Theon’s sister hears of his captivity and attempts to rescue his brother. However, Theon has endured such extensive torture, he fears wronging Ramsay in any capacity, and he urges his sister to go back without him.

However, after learning of Ramsay’s abusive marriage to Sansa (who was essentially a sister figure to Theon in his youth), Theon seems to muster enough courage to help Sansa escape her vicious husband. As they are fleeing Ramsay’s castle, one of Ramsay’s servants confronts Theon, taunting him about the torture he once endured, ensuring Theon that he cannot possibly be strong-willed or brave enough to escape, and reminding him of his mandatory servitude to Ramsey. Overcome with a mixture of rage, self-confidence, and bravery, Theon pushes the servant off the castle wall, effectively killing her and assisting Sansa in her escape. While Theon continues to struggle throughout the rest of the show with the aftermath of his torturing, he obviously, gradually begins to overcome his own fears and some self-imposed restrictive behaviors. This redemptive arch demonstrates a dynamic in disabled characters that is relatively uncommon in film and on television, even today, and especially in the fantasy genre. Rather than depict Theon as a helpless monster, confined by his own madness, the show gradually repositions him as an ambitious character, learning to recover from a crippling past and associated set of disabilities.

Conclusion

Altogether, *Game of Thrones* allows otherwise monofaceted elements of the fantasy genre to represent and reflect the current cultural climate. By rendering a virtual environment that is both identifiable and simultaneously distant, the show encourages viewers to engage in its story meaningfully and critically. Juxtaposed with contemporaneous works of fantasy such as
*Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings* - both series which choose to refrain extensively from hard hitting, allegorical narratives - *Game of Thrones* poses a refreshing, more comprehensive take on the dutiful nature of the fantasy genre. The show not only alludes to pertinent issues of its times, but illustrates its genre’s inherent responsibility to reflecting these concerns in the first place.

With a substantial, thorough focus on these topical issues such as feminism, immigration policy, and reclamation, *Game of Thrones* invites its audiences to escape into its alternate reality while reflecting on crucial real-world similarities. The show’s devotion to these overarching themes exhibits a mediated renaissance within the fantasy genre, as contemporaneous projects and dialogues presumably take note of the intersectional juncture behind the enterprise’s massive success. By positing such critical cornerstones of modern culture as its thematic backbone, *Game of Thrones* proves itself as the apex of interwoven topicalities, equal parts riveting and relevant.
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