Explainer: Game of Thrones, the story so far

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Disclosure Statement

Stephanie Green does not work for, consult to, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has no relevant affiliations.

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Be unsullied no more – winter is coming … again. HBO

The heir to an ancient exiled dynasty marries his sister to the leader of a savage warrior society, in return for their support in his effort to regain his father’s throne. The heir is soon killed, while his sister rises to become the warrior leader. Along the way she survives the flames that give birth to three dragons, captures several cities and builds a legion of soldiers willing to die at her bidding.

This is just one thread of the serpentine plot of Game of Thrones (GoT), HBO’s sumptuous television production of G.R.R. Martin’s sequence of fantasy novels, A Song of Ice and Fire. Season 4 will premiere in the US on April 6, and is likely to rapidly make its way to international audiences, given it was the most pirated TV show of 2013. If you’ve only just made acquaintance with this series, you’ve got a lot of catching up to do.

Packed with princesses, poisoners and imprisonment, torture, battle and betrayal, Game of Thrones is a hyper-realist fantasy adventure. It’s a complex and compelling epic romance of mystery and magic – imbued with the unflinching reminder that “everyone dies”.


GoT features a panoply of treacherous denizens, driven to gain possession and control of a land called Westeros amid an atmosphere thick with intrigue.

As the story follows a group of powerful families battling for possession and control, GoT also becomes a family drama, with its interwoven tales of loyalty, duty and betrayal, legitimate and illegitimate heirs, rivalry between siblings, alliances and enmity between clans, with generous servings of perfidy and skulduggery.

In the final analysis, though, this is a story of loss and vulnerability, in which even the most powerful cannot always protect their own. None of the characters is spared from violence or suffering: not the loyal, gentle and kind, nor even those who are determined to bring peace and order to Westeros. Often it is only through guile and deflection that the good may escape a gory end and live to fight another day.
The canvas of GoT is as vast as J.R.R. Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings, with affairs straddling a continent and armies clashing for a stake at the throne. There are families and factions galore, with shifting allegiances reminiscent of Frank Herbert’s Dune.

But Westeros owes as much to the English Wars of the Roses as retold in the plays of William Shakespeare as it does to the epic works of Tolkien and Frank Herbert. Equally Shakespearean in its portrayal of flawed or fated leaders and the fortunes of their all-too-often luckless followers, the harsh terms of existence GoT offers its characters moreover reflects all-too-familiar values and attitudes that can be found in the way we live now.
Yes, sentiment and tenderness are scarce in this dark epic – but GoT remains one of the most original, intensely imagined, superbly designed and powerfully performed fiction adaptations brought to the small screen.

Its stellar Season 3 viewer ratings put the show on the same footing as HBO’s television top-rating TV drama, The Sopranos.

The characters are well-rounded, complex and eminently compelling. They are brought to life by an outstanding cast that includes Charles Dance, Lena Headey, Peter Dinklage, Sean Bean, Nikolaj Koster-Waldau, Emilia Clark, Iain Glen and Aiden Gillen.

So – here’s a brief guide to the story so far, with a warning, in case it’s not screamingly obvious: here be spoilers.

**Where fate plays no favourites**

The TV series compacts the key events in Martin’s original narrative, but still covers a vast and diverse territorial scope.

The Seven Kingdoms of Westeros range from the arid mountains of Dorne in the south to the frozen wastes of the bitter north. Across the Narrow Sea to the east lies the continent of Essos, inhabited by nomadic Dothraki tribesmen.

Game of Thrones Season 4: Trailer #1 (HBO).

The capital of Westeros is King’s Landing, the prize coveted by each of the contenders for the Iron Throne. Once ruled by Aerys II Targaryen, the Mad King, the throne has been seized by Robert Baratheon (Mark Addy) years before our story begins, with the help of the Lannisters and the Starks. A bombastic sot, Baratheon has married Cersei (Lena Headey), daughter of Tywin Lannister (Charles Dance), forming a miserable strategic alliance that produces three children.

His death while hunting enables the ruthless Lannisters to take the throne in the name of Baratheon’s son Joffrey. But the House Lannister’s hold on power is challenged by Robert’s son Renly (Gethin Anthony), his brother Stannis (Stephen Dillane) and Robb Stark (Richard Madden), who each believes he has a claim to the throne.
A fourth contender emerges from the east: Daenarys Targaryen (Emilia Clark), last
descendent of the old royal line, leader of thousands, whose sole aim is to see herself
enthroned.

The Lannisters have one redeeming family member, Tyrion Lannister (Peter Dinklage). Son
of a harsh Macchiavellian patriarch, Tyrion is educated, intelligent, crafty and mostly able to
look after himself. Yet he is a dwarf, the butt of courtly humour and a constant
disappointment to his father.

He survives by cultivating the air of a debauchee, whoring, gambling and drinking his life
away. It’s hard to tell whether this rakishness is the cause of Tywin’s disappointment or the
result. Unlike many of the characters in GoT, Tyrion is honorable, sympathetic, right-doing
and surprisingly chivalrous.

Except for his stature he has the makings of a good and wise king … and is thus eligible for
an early grave. There is a little of Robert Graves’ Claudius in Tyrion.

The women of Westeros
Tyrion’s sister, the fierce and passionate Cersei, loves only their brother, Jaime (Nikolaj Koster-Waldau) and her children. She is mother to the underage King Joffrey (Jack Gleeson), an unintelligent, sadistic coward with far too much power for his own good.

When King’s Landing is besieged, Joffrey flees in advance of the impending threat. His uncle Tyrion is left to defend the town, devise a stratagem to beat the odds, and go forth to face the enemy in battle.

Women hold their own in the Seven Kingdoms, be it on the battlefield or in the intrigues of state.

Daenerys Targaryen, the Mother of Dragons, garners great respect and loyalty, growing from a bartered bride to the commander of faithful armies, as she steers course towards the Iron Throne of Westeros.
She is shrewd, resourceful and remarkably ruthless when necessary.

Just as spirited is warrior maiden Brienne of Tarth (Gwendoline Christie), who takes on the man’s world of knightly battle. Her prowess with the sword is indubitable. She is tall and strong, stubborn and loyal: noble knight in all respects except gender.

Tasked with returning Jaime Lannister to King’s Landing, Brienne’s resolve is unswerving. A rapport of mutual respect develops between captor and captive as they draw closer to their destination, but fate intervenes.

**There’s something rotten in the state of Westeros**

However attached you become to likeable characters in GoT, you’ll often find them cut down in the prime of your appreciation. The taciturn Ned Stark (Sean Bean), lord of Winterfell, is a model of valour. He dutifully becomes chancellor for King Robert Baratheon – only to fall victim of palace plotting and lose his head.

Stark’s son, Robb, leads a growing army to wreak vengeance for the wrongful death of the lord of Winterfell. He too is heroic, successfully taking his forces south, but is betrayed and slaughtered at a dinner held in his honour.
One after another in GoT, the good fall and the venal triumph, leaving the audience to pick up the shards of hope and look for another worthy figure to cheer on.

But life is not all harsh realism in Westeros. There are also arcane and supernatural agencies at work.
Charice Van Houten as Melisandre. Courtesy of FOXTEL
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Dragons lend Daenerys Targaryen an air of noble magnificence, while Melisandre, priestess of the lord of light, gives birth to a horrific creature which destroys the well-loved royal claimant Renly Baratheon.

In the far north, beyond the Wall, menacing forces are mustering. Martin’s great wall seems gargantuan and invulnerable, but breaches are beginning to occur. The soldiers of the Night’s Watch, a dwindling troop of black-clad outcasts gathered from the Seven Kingdoms, stand guard against a savage band of outlaws known as the Wildlings.

More disturbing, lurking in the icy northern wastes, are the White Walkers, unstoppable wraiths that devastated Westeros so long ago they now seem mythical. While the kingdoms dissipate their energies in internecine wrangling, the Night’s Watch are abandoned to wait for what will be unleashed when winter comes.
Game of Thrones makes for gripping viewing, packed with dastardly plots, desperate deeds, astonishing feats and ignoble rulers.

Sit back, relax, be prepared to lose your favourite characters before season’s end, but also to see a few of the most knavish get their just deserts. This is a twisty tale told tortuously and you are bound to get more than your fill of guilty pleasures.

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1. ernest malley

farmer
As Terry Pratchett responded when asked why he took up writing - "as a response to the guff written by those who were influenced by those who were influenced by Tolkein".

There are really only half a dozen motifs in stories - nowt new under the sun.

10 months ago

report

1. **Paul Miller**

logged in via LinkedIn

In reply to ernest malley

Is your quoting of Terry Pratchett in this context to be taken as an indication that you believe GoT is influenced, either directly or through intermediaries, by Tolkein or that GoT was born somehow as a critical response to those who had been so influenced?

Either would appear to be nonsense but I would be curious as to the basis for your thinking.

If we only experienced stories in terms of simple plot summaries then you might have a point but, while plot is certainly important, the pleasure or interest we take from stories is in the manner/expertise of their delivery and their ability to engage us.

I have assumed you used the term 'motif' to refer to some sort of grand theme that most stories can be reduced to a version of? There are significantly more that half a dozen motifs in any one episode of GoT.

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2. **ernest malley**

farmer

In reply to Paul Miller
My initial impulse was to suggest that you not overthink this subject. Pratchett's point, and mine in quoting him, was that people who consume these tedious doorstopper books (and, worse, the people who write them) have a common longing to escape responsibility their dreary lives by indulging in phantasies where Authority provides them with something to lean on, whether a Strong Leader or the Flying Spaghetti Monster in the Sky.

And we wonder why the world is a mess - since Hammurabi the willingness of people to obey has blighted our sapience. A mob is less than the sum of its parts or, to put it in the demotic of the greatest of all Marxists (Groucho) "I wouldn't want to be a member of any club that would have me...".

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3.

Paul Miller

logged in via LinkedIn

In reply to ernest malley

Not 'overthinking' at all, merely taking your comment at face value and trying to interpret it in the context of the article under which you posted it.

I must admit that I hadn't appreciated quite how 'unaware' you were concerning Game of Thrones (either the books or the TV series). If you had read one of the books or watched one of the TV shows you would be aware that an unavoidable theme is the absence of comfortable Authority figures - that all men must die and gods, both old and new are fickle and unreliable. The GoT world is distinctly uncomfortable and nasty.

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2.

Michelle Durvea

logged in via Facebook

Renly was the youngest brother of Robert and Stannis, not Robert's son!
1. **Stephanie Green**
   Senior Lecturer, School of Humanities at Griffith University
   
   In reply to Michelle Duryea
   
   Thanks for that clarification.

3. **Joe Gartner**
   Eating Cake
   
   A tedious series of books transformed into a grisly soap opera.... If it wasn't for Peter Dinklage's brilliant Tyrion (and a couple of other bit-characters) the series would be as palatable as cleaning chamberpots.

1. **Andrew Robinson**
   Manager Community Aged Care
   
   In reply to Joe Gartner
   
   If you found it that tedious, Joe, it's a wonder you bothered to read/watch it at all.
   
   I found that the books were so detailed that they did get stuck in labyrinthine plot twists with minor characters and I found myself wishing the author would get back to the main game. Apparently the author got stuck himself a few times – and the series isn’t finished yet!
The TV series is a great realisation of the world of the books but even with 10 hours of screen time per season it struggles to pull all the story lines together and make them comprehensible. Which won’t stop me watching the rest of the series as it’s still an enormously enjoyable if guilty pleasure.

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2.

Craig Read

logged in via Twitter

In reply to Joe Gartner

Dinklage does an awesome job of Tyrion.

I haven't read the books, so can't comment on those. But I'd easily place GoT 3 notches above any of the drivel shown on FTA since "reality" TV became a thing in 1992. I disconnected my antenna not long after.

10 months ago

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3.

Peter Redshaw

Retired though not yet out

In reply to Joe Gartner

Joe, a tedious series of books. I have to strongly disagree. It is wonderful series of a complex interplay in a very brutal medieval type world that of course is still ongoing. It fits well in with the types of tragedies of Shakespeare. That is where many people struggle because all too often the good people, or if you like heroes, die.

The only trouble with it is the length of time waiting for the next book as the book series is still ongoing. People forget that we still do not really know where the author is taking this story. And when we think we do know where it is going all we have to do is remember how often the author has killed off what we thought was the main character.
The only series that I have found better in its depth of character as well as number of characters including complexity of story is the Malazan Book of the Fallen by Steven Erikson. Like this Game of Thrones book series it is composed of stories within stories within stories within stories, except with even greater complexity. When I read it I feel like I am reading some great epic Shakespearean drama, but on a completely different world.

The only problem with such series as the Game of Thrones is the difficulty of taking the story from its pages to on screen. Like the Lord of the Rings it struggles to convey that story and its complexity of character in the number of episodes/movies used to do it.

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4.

**Peter Redshaw**

Retired though not yet out

In reply to **Craig Read**

Craig, I would suggest you read the books. Even though the drama series is good it struggles to match the books themselves in their depth and intensity as well as all the unknowns.

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5.

**Joe Gartner**

Eating Cake

In reply to **Peter Redshaw**

' It fits well in with the types of tragedies of Shakespeare'

except, of course, for the writing.

10 months ago
4. **Benjamin Ratcliff**

Nurse

I heard it was sprinkled with soft porn. Maybe I will watch it after all.

10 months ago

1. **Jay Wulf**

Digerati at nomeonastiq.com

In reply to Benjamin Ratcliff

By North American prudish conservative standards it could be considered 'soft porn'. I have seen more riske European TV commercials than the 'soft porn' in GOT.

10 months ago

5. **Rodney M Shearing**

**Rodney M Shearing is a Friend of The Conversation.**

Writer, driver, guardian of plants. at Lutana Webwriters

GoT is hardly inspired by LoTR. Tolkien was inspired by his Christianity, GoT is a completly moral-free story that in no way has anything to do with goodness or even the hope of heaven in the future! I was enjoying the series up to the Red Wedding episode which I found quite devastating! Oh it's all good fun I guess...as everyone says it has a fantastic cast and a great production team.
As a fellow lover of GoT Rodney, I think you and the author of this article have it a little wrong. You both, and many others, have presented GoT as being without morality. This conclusion would mean that there is a simple opposition between Tolkien's work and GoT. One being infused with a moral message about good overcoming evil and good characters achieving their ends while evil never succeeds. Indeed, the belief that GoT is without morality has appealed to many who are tired of the old story where good triumphs over evil. The world, we know, is never that simple.

I think with GoT we do have to think differently to the typical ethics. The place to begin this reorientation is to re-ask the question originally raised by this series; who is the rightful ruler? I think the answer many might have to this question is that the rightful king is somebody who is a good person. But 'right' does not necessarily flow from being 'good'. 'Right', for example, might flow from God's blessing or through birth. I was born, for example, as an Australian, I remain an Australian by 'right' no matter what I do. This is a legal right made by humans. The right of kings is often seen to be granted by a God.

I think it is this kind of morality which is presented in GoT. As mere mortals we do not know who is doing 'good' things. A person who is rightfully a ruler may appear to be doing immoral actions but it should always be remembered that anybody interfering with the rightful rulers claim is in fact doing evil. The rightful ruler is entitled to do anything, it might be argued, to realise their claim to the throne. Such actions may appear immoral to the uninformed but, when resolved, the rightful ruler will be in power. The success of the claimant will be, by this morality, validation of the claim. This whole morality rests on the question, 'who is the rightful holder of the throne?'. Who wins here has been proven to be the moral agent and the rightful ruler as ordained.

I get a sense by the morality of GoT that only the 'rightful' ruler will be able to resist the real evil of the winter monsters. Winter is coming and only the rightful ruler will be able to save humanity.

Read more
2. **Jeff Payne**

PhD in Political Science and Masters in Public Policy

In reply to **Rodney M Shearing**

Oh, I forgot to finish my original thought as a response to your post. I agree Rodney, there is the potential for an interesting comparison between GoT and LoTR but not in terms of morality vs immorality but between competing moralities. I'm not knowledgeable about these things but it seems to me that LoTR is trying to show how continuously being 'good' and 'humble' will bring the 'grace' of God whereas GoT argues that we don't know what it is to be good or evil we should just act as though we are blessed by God in our self interest and history will judge who had God's grace. There is the suggestion of a comparison between free will and predestination. Such a comparison would really do ones head in.

[Read more]

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3. **Benjamin Ratcliff**

Nurse

In reply to **Jeff Payne**

probably right about LoTR and, from the adds I've seen, probably GoT too (also which I believe would be better because it contains lots of 'chests and rump' and 'simulations of copulation'.... all important for the story I'm sure)

[10 months ago]

4. **Michael Marriott**
Lotr is heavily influenced by Tolkiens faith. Good over evil.

GoT takes its lead from the Roman historians - history as a series of tragedies, tales of good and evil emperors. It asks questions about the use and abuse of power. Who has power, how they wield it - and how they claim it.

Each to their own tastes.

Honestly, for me it is wonderful escapism.

Just a note; Martin has stated a major influence is The Twelve Caesars by Suetonius. He was aiming for the scope of roman history. Like the ancients, events are treated as a morality play.