

The Fictional World of “A Game of Thrones” and the Real World

Applicability Theory

To what extent and how does the fictional world of the novel “A Game of Thrones” by George R. R. Martin resemble the real world with respect to our history?

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ABSTRACT

The world of “A Game of Thrones” by George R. R. Martin intrigued me a lot because it contained elements, which I could relate to either from what I learned about the past of our world or through my imagination. I decided to search whether the events in the series of novels apply to the real events of our past.

I wanted to investigate the extent which the fictional world of “A Game of Thrones” collides with the real world with respect to history and explain some of the basic similarities I have found while reading the novels. The novels contain many of our historical significances adapted to the fictional world’s past. I will analyse the correlation between a fantasy and the real world and how similar they are by going through documents and also add my own comments to the situation.

After searching for some similarities I came across dozens of them and found that the effect of reality and allegories contribute to the novel in the sense that they are more relatable and provide information as well as entertainment. The novels contained similar warfare, diplomatic shifts such as being conquered, the paradigm shift of religion through the years, as well as geographical resemblance.

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Introduction

George R. R. Martin is an American novelist who specializes in writing fantasy, science-fiction and horror. "A Game of Thrones" is a high fantasy novel from the series "A Song of Ice and Fire" by George R. R. Martin published on the 6th of August 1996. The novel presents the occurring events through the perspectives of various characters from various places within Westeros, the land the novel takes place in. The point of view of the novel is third person limited which limits the ability for the reader to know more than the characters in the story. By doing so George R. R. Martin enables the reader to be a part of the story and know as much as the characters themselves know. Therefore, I, through learning the different relationships and policies between different groups of people, took on the duty to investigate and explain the correlation between the world of Westeros and our world.

When we first take a look at the fictional novel "A Game of Thrones", the first thing that we notice is the title. The title of the novel itself is an allegorical expression for the fight given by those with power for the right to rule others, a game which is a metaphor for wars and acts done by those whose goal is to be the one on the throne, the king of The Seven Kingdoms. The name, The Seven Kingdoms, for the unity of the houses in the continent resembles the name of the unity of countries in the real world which is the United Kingdom.

"History is written in blood and Westeros is no darker nor more depraved than our own world. The atrocities in "A Song of Ice and Fire", sexual and otherwise, pale in comparison to what can be found in any good history book."

This is a quote from the author of the novel George R. R. Martin himself from a speech he gave when he was told that the novels involved seriously cruel actions. The fact that the author himself compares his novels with the history of our world shows that the novels do share similarities between the fictional world of George R. R. Martin's creation and the real world in terms of wars and political affairs of the countries of earth and houses of Westeros and the novel can be interpreted as a criticism of our history.

"This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, event or localities is entirely coincidental."

Although it is stated like that at the cover of the book, it is said that George R. R. Martin was greatly influenced by the Wars of the Roses and its characters. The fact that the novels carry so many similarities, which I will dwell into, shows that it is up to the reader to decide whether the novel is applicable to the history of our world or not. I for one think it is because although there are supernatural factors in the novels, the overall theme is present in our world.

Geographical Similarities

When I looked at the map of Westeros, all I could see was the United Kingdom. The shape of the land is narrow and slender just like the Great Britain. The Seven Kingdoms are surrounded by four seas which are Sunset, Summer, Narrow and Shivering, just like the United Kingdom which is bordered by North, Irish Celtic seas and the Atlantic Ocean. The Iron Islands and The Isle of Man which are the separate islands on the west of the lands and the Ironborn, people who are from the Iron

Islands, are strong and big people who are into the sea and cold just like the Norse-Gaelic culture of the Isle of Man.

The capitals of both lands are located on the south: The King's Landing and London. Just like London the rulers of the whole country reside there. Hadrian's Wall resembles The Wall in the sense that it separates the Wildlings, the free folk –free because the systems and norms of the society does not restrict them just like native tribes of today's world- and the Westerosi, belonging to Westeros, people just like how Hadrian's Wall separates the barbarians and the English which I will explain in detail later on.

To the east there is a vast brown land where there are steppe grasslands rather than tall trees and the average temperatures are noticeably different. This is where they both have enemies which are the Dothraki in Essos and the Huns and Mongols in Asia. They both are nomadic people whose lives revolve around their horses and battles. Their approach to warfare is quite similar which is different from the military styles of the Europeans and it is based fast paced attacks and quick withdrawals as defence.

The Similarities with the British History

The war between the Starks of the North and the Lannisters of the South which are the rival kingdoms in the Seven Kingdoms, can be taken as an allegory for The Wars of the Roses which were a series of wars for the throne of England fought by the two rival sides of the royal house of Plantagenet, the house of Lancaster and the house of York. The fact that the author of the novel is British and the names of the branches, and even the colours of the Heraldic badges of the houses, which were

white for the house of York similar to the white wolf of the Stark's banner and red for the house of Lancaster similar to the red banner of the Lannisters, supports the similarity between the clash of the two houses in the fictional land of Westeros and the clash between the branches in England. However, the Wars of the Roses are wars fought to determine a new king for England whereas, the wars fought between Lannisters and Starks are fought because of the unfair actions the new king has committed against the Starks and the need for vengeance.

The Wars of the Roses, portrayed as the War of the Five Kings, are civil wars in which the men of the country fight against each other for various reasons such as the similar goal of taking the throne and becoming the king just like the Wars of the Roses, or for vendetta. The situation of the country is described as such by Daenerys:

"The Seven Kingdoms are at war with one another... false kings destroying the country... the Usurper is dead. The Starks fight the Lannisters, the Baratheons fight each other."

The Wall in the North can be an allegory of the Hadrian's Wall which is said to be built under Hadrian's order to protect the Romans living in Britain's territory in around 122 AD from the barbarians living on the north of the wall. The wall's purpose was to defend the Roman Britain from the dangers coming from the north of the country similar to the reason why The Wall was built in Westeros. Although fictional attributes are involved in the novel such as the White Walkers, the concept of a wall being built is exceptionally similar in both cases.

Also The Wall is the place the people who are exiled are sent to and this serves to show that the justice system of Westeros is quite similar to the justice system of the

Middle Ages because of the fact that people who steal, kill or rape are sent to exile and that place happens to be The Wall which is described as the worst place to be in. The fact that they are sent to a place that is known for being awful shows that unethical behaviour is not tolerated.

The Seven pointed star, the religious symbol of the New Gods, is the same star as the Commonwealth Star, which is the star of the Federation of Australia, a part of the commonwealth of the United Kingdom. This similarity implies that Britain and its derivatives have influenced the region of Westeros.

The Naval Siege

The Battle of Blackwater Bay is the attack performed by Stannis Baratheon as he had right over the throne when Robert Baratheon died. Stannis attempted to siege the capital of King's Landing, to take over the throne but was met with a fire that was not extinguished by water similar to the fire that was used by the Greeks when defending Constantinople against the Second Arab Siege of Constantinople. From the same battle, Tyrion Lannister also used the idea of a chain to cut through the navy which is similar to the Great Chain of Constantinople.

The Characters

Aside from the people involved in the Wars of the Roses, there are some special exceptions that significantly suggest that there is a strong resemblance between the important people in European history and the characters in the world of "A Game of Thrones".

The young king, Joffrey Baratheon, resembles Edward of Lancaster in the way that both are said to be touched by madness and both are said to be children born of illegitimate birth. Both children became important members of their houses in their early teenage years. The Ambassador of Milan is said to have stated that the boy, Edward, though thirteen of age, would not talk about anything other than cutting heads or making wars just like Joffrey who had people beheaded for no reason. Joffrey's uncle describes Joffrey as:

"We've had vicious kings, and we've had idiot kings, but I don't know if we've ever been cursed with a vicious idiot for a king!"

Theon Greyjoy, who grew up in Winterfell as a ward to Ned Stark and was counted as family because of his close relationship with Robb Stark. After the war began between the North and the South, Theon changes sides and invades Robb's home, Winterfell, after visiting his father even though he was an important advisor to Robb as well as being his closest friend. The similar event happens in the Wars of the Roses. George Plantagenet, Duke of Clarence was sided with the Yorks in the civil war but later on turns on his brother and sides with the Lancasters. They were both tortured for their treacherous acts after the wars.

Gottfried von Berlichingen might be the historical counterpart of Jamie Lannister based on him being called "Götz of the Iron Hand", he used an iron prosthetic hand to cover his hand that he lost in a war. Same happened to Jaime Lannister when he was taken hostage during the War of the Five Kings, his hand was cut and he had it replaced by a golden hand prosthetic. They both served as royal knights, Jamie as the Kingsguard and "Götz" as the Imperial Knight.

Lyanna Stark of House Stark, sister of Eddard Stark, was the lover of Robert Baratheon, the former king of the Seven Kingdoms. She was allegedly kidnapped by the king, Rhaegar Targaryen, and the events that have occurred after the kidnapping led to Robert becoming the new king after Rhaegar was killed by Jamie Lannister. Lucretia might be considered an influence on the character because she was taken and raped and committed suicide consequently, this resulted in the revolution that overthrew the monarchy and formed the Roman Republic. Lyanna's last words "Promise me" and Lucretia's last words "Pledge me your solemn word" seem to resemble each other in content.

The Conquests

The War of Conquest was the campaign in which Aegon I Targaryen conquered Westeros which is considered the beginning; hence the dates after this invasion is called AC, after Aegon's Conquest, just like AD –Anno Domini, which means the Year of Our Lord- show that the date of conquest is significant as it is taken to be the beginning of another chapter in the world. The conquest resulted in the invader, House Targaryen, becoming the ruler of the six kingdoms, excluding Dorne since it resisted, in the continent. After the conquest, the line of kings of Westeros becomes mainly of Targaryen descent. This event is similar to the Norman Conquest of England in which the people of Normandy, which are the Northmen, invaded the British territory starting from France. The conquest resulted in the involvement of England with the Continental Europe and created one of the strongest monarchies in Europe and also engendered the most sophisticated governmental system in Western Europe. The Norman Conquest changed the English language and culture

by combining the language and traditions of the French with English and thus creating the modern English language which I am writing this in.

Both, Aegon I and William I, were the first of their names and were called the Conquerors and they determined the fate of the lands they have invaded and in long term created the societies we know today.

To Be In Power

The Earl of Chatham and British Prime Minister from 1766 to 1778, William Pitt the Elder said the phrase in his speech to the United Kingdom House of Lords in 1770:

"Unlimited power is apt to corrupt the minds of those who possess it"

The phrase means that the power to rule and the very same power that holds you above everyone else will eventually become your demise. As it can be seen in "A Game of Thrones", when Joffrey Baratheon became the ruler of the Seven Kingdoms he had Eddard Stark beheaded for his own pleasure. This act of selfish arrogance shows that he is the most powerful man in the whole world that can do whatever he pleases and also gathers the hate of many from the people of the Seven Kingdoms because the new king openly attacks those who do not have the same ideals as him.

"Crowns do queer things to the heads beneath them."

Is another quote which suggests that the power of owning the crown changes its owner. "Queer things" might imply either negative or positive meanings depending on who is judging but queer is used mostly for negatively strange feelings. This shows that the king usually does bad deeds eventually since the power will render him inhuman most of the time.

“Why is it always the innocents who suffer most, when you high lords play your game of thrones?”

The quote by Varys, a member of the small council which aids in ruling the kingdom, portrayed as a neutral character, implies that the ones who get hurt from playing the game of thrones, implying the wars fought to become allies with the king or to be the king himself, are the people of the country rather than the lords themselves. This phrase is not just a criticism in the world of the novel but a criticism of our politics as well.

The situation, which the quote criticizes, can be seen in the First World War. The usage of ANZACs, Australian and New Zealand Army Corps, as soldiers in the war supports the idea that the ones who suffer are the ones who are not involved with the conflict at all. Australia and New Zealand are located in the Southern Hemisphere and the First World War was a war between European Countries for the protection of their rights on their colonies. The ANZACs were used by the United Kingdom to fight against Ottomans. This event proves that the United Kingdom had used innocent young men from their colonized countries to fight for them. This is just one of the many examples in which the governments have used their people to fight their battles for them.

“So many vows... they make you swear and swear. Defend the king. Obey the king. Keep his secrets. Do his bidding. Your life for his. But obey your father. Love your sister. Protect the innocent. Defend the weak. Respect the gods. Obey the laws. It's too much. No matter what you do, you're forsaking one vow or the other.”

This is another quote which emphasizes that in “the game of thrones” except for “the players”, everyone is a peon and they are the true players. The quote shows what the inferior promise to the superior who are in charge.

The Religions

In Medieval England people converted from paganism, polytheistic religions where each god serves a different purpose, to Christianity, a monotheistic religion. Churches and cathedrals were built for people who wanted to pray and the church played significant roles in governing the land. Similarly, in the novel, after Aegon’s Conquest; the First Men, who were followers of the Old Gods, converted into believing in the New Gods. Although the idea of a polytheistic religion does not change, the New Gods are modern and human gods such as The Father and The Mother. The Old Gods which are replaced are represented by trees, which is similar to the pagan traditions. This shows that the religion of the land was influenced parallel to the cultural changes caused by invasions.

There are more than one religion in the novel and one religion which is based on R’hllor, the Lord of Light. The Lord of Light can be contacted with the usage of fire similar like the religion Zoroastrianism in which fire is considered as the medium through which spiritual wisdom and insight is acquired. The Red Faith is a religion active on Essos, the eastern part of the world of “A Game of Thrones”, just like where the religion Zoroastrianism is actively performed which is the east, Persia. In both religions there is a constant struggle between good and evil, which is portrayed as the on-going fight between “R’hllor, The Lord of Light”, and “The Great One”, the evil one whose name is not openly said.

The Status of Women

The role of women in the fictional world of “A Game of Thrones” is quite similar to the notion of woman and her place in the society in the medieval times since the novel is based on our world’s earlier eras. The dominance of the male gender can be seen clearly except for some of the characters. Women are extant so they can cook, clean and bear children in both societies, which are the fictional world’s and the past of our world’s. The exceptions are the wives of the heads of the House due to the protection from the kings. Same situation was present in the medieval times of England where only the queens and princesses received respect. This shows that except for minor exceptions the women were weak and inferior to men as they were not promised any jobs except for working at the brothel.

During a conversation between Rickard Karstark, fellow bannerman of the North, Catelyn Stark, who is an exception of the women of the society and a strong character, the man looks down upon her even though she is just as strong. This shows that the status of the women is inferior to that of men’s:

“You are a woman, my lady,” the Greatjon rumbled in his deep voice. “Women do not understand these things.” “You are the gentle sex,” said Lord Karstark, with the lines of grief fresh on his face. “A man has a need for vengeance.” “Give me Cersei Lannister, Lord Karstark , and you would see how gentle a woman can be,” Catelyn replied.”

Conclusion

“A Song of Ice and Fire” is one of the best sagas I have read and seen. It has so many twists and turns and ups and downs, which makes the whole read like a rollercoaster. Even though George R. R. Martin says he does not like involving this world with his works, he leaves hints for the reader to trace and find the parallelism between the novels and our world. The novels focus on the different perspectives of different people involved with the diplomatic relationships of the Seven Kingdoms and as they are portrayed, a lot of hidden information about this world is presented. Although the novel is a fantasy, the world in the novel seems so real and close to ours.

From the geography of the land to the events that take place in it, it can clearly be seen that the similarity between the worlds is not entirely coincidental. Starting from this I have correlated the events and characters from the novel with the people in British history, unbound by time. The events I have found similar are from different eras but share connections with the novel in their own ways. George R. R. Martin states he is influenced by J. R. R. Tolkien however, his novel holds much more resemblances with our world than Tolkien’s does.

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