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PRIVATE HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH B
EXTENDED ESSAY

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Research Question: How does George R.R. Martin reflect the ways of gaining 'power' parallel to today's society through the characters in the first 5 books (A Game of Thrones, A Clash of Kings, A Storm of Swords, A Feast for Crows and Dance With Dragons) of his series A Song Of Ice And Fire?

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Abstract

A Song Of Ice And Fire, being one of the fantasy series of novels written by the author George R.R. Martin reflects many aspects of today's world through his themes and ideas in which we can explore with the help of the series' characters and plots. The series takes place in a fictional world that is parallel to an example of European society in the Middle Ages. Although the series is a fiction one, it can be clearly seen that Martin has brilliantly portrayed the society he created on political, cultural or social matters. Being one of the most important themes in the series, 'power' appears as the main focus of the 'Game of Thrones' plotline which we see the characters in a war for the 'Iron Throne' that resembles the real power.

Characters actively and passively fighting for this power in various ways, therefore, it raises the question 'What are the ways of gaining real power? This essay will explore how R.R. Martin portrays the ways of gaining power through characters and how these ways have changed since the Middle Ages. This essay examines Martin's plots and characters and analyses the ways noble and ordinary people have used to gain power. These methods of gaining power will consist of religion, money, sexuality and nobility. Then it will contain the comparison of this matter to our new modern civilized world. The essay's main source for the parts about A Song Of Ice And Fire will be the first 5 novels of the series (A Game Of Thrones, A Clash Of Kings, A Storm Of Swords, A Feast For

Crows and A Dance With Dragons), additional sources for other aspects of the essay will be included. Raising different questions about power and its nature for further understanding of the topic, the main question will be 'How does George R.R. Martin reflect the ways of gaining and the usage of 'power' in today's society through the characters and plots in the first 5 books of his series A Song Of Ice And Fire?'

Religion

For the thousands of years that mankind has walked on our planet, we as a species have always tried to form constitutions that would gather people in a society and community. These formations immediately required those people in the society to be under an order and consequently people with an authority and power over the people of society. This effect over people was born in the Middle Age times of Europe through religion, mainly Christianity. Religion is a social formation that has the ability to control large groups of its believers. History is filled with people who died in the name of their religions. Religious leaders such as pharaohs, priests and prophets have been seen as reflections of gods and people have always feared gods. These religious leaders have found chances be the center of authority and order throughout the history sometimes as the rulers and sometimes as above the rulers.

In the second novel of the A Song Of Ice And Fire series, A Clash Of Kings,

George Martin adds a woman to his story called Melisandre. In oppose to the official religion of the kingdom, Melisandre is a priestess of another god, Lord of Light. She declares Stannis Baratheon (against the official king, Joffrey and then his brother Tommen) as the rightful king according to this religion. Spreading her religion into Stannis' army, over some time, she becomes even more influential over the king's army. Following the word of the Lord of Light, all of the soldiers declare her a metaphorical queen. She gathers these people for the cause of their god and these men become willing to die for Stannis just because Melisandre told them he is the one their god has chosen just as in these words she tells Davos (right-hand man of Stannis) about their religion: "The old maester looked at Stannis and saw only a man. You see a king. You are both wrong. He is the Lord's chosen, the warrior of fire. I have seen him leading the fight against the dark, I have seen it in the flames. The flames do not lie, else you would not be here. It is written in prophecy as well. (A Storm Of Swords). She has power over both Stannis and his army. As an example of Melisandre's impact over Stannis' men can be given from his own words: "Half my knights are afraid to even say her name, did you know?" (A Clash Of Kings).

Another character in the story who happens to have power over the crown is the High Sparrow. He is clearly portrayed as the pope of the kingdom and the ultimate religious leader. High Sparrow is a man that uses religion to give hope and a purpose to the poorest people of the kingdom as he is, just like Pope, is seen by people as the reflection of Gods. This man manages to imprison Queen

Cersei and Queen Margaery as King Tommen is unable to set free neither of them when he and his men are left face to face with the anger of nearly everybody. This proves that a religious influence over a society may gather them under a purpose and that those people can be led to that purpose even when it might mean death. The influence he has over powerful people can be seen in this quote by one of the highest lords in the kingdom Randyll Tarly: "What have we become, when kings and high lords must dance to the twittering of Sparrows." (A Dance With Dragons)

Although the Christian world still has the Pope as their religious leader, it is obvious that this particular position has lost a significant amount of his power as he no longer has armies or political authority compared to the power that the Pope used to have in Medieval Europe. Though neither anybody can argue that religion and religious figures have lost their influences over people. As the Pope is still an important figure but not comparable with what it used to be, religion takes many forms and effectiveness around the world. One significant example to this can be Ruhollah Khomeini, Iranian Shia Muslim religious leader and the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran. He was also the leader of the Iranian Revolution in which he and his followers overthrow of the Shah of Iran. Following the revolution, Khomeini then became the country's Supreme Leader, a position created in the constitution of the Islamic Republic as the highest-ranking political and religious authority of the nation and he held this position until his death. Ruhollah is accepted as a religious leader amongst his people and it is obvious

that his religious position was the primary factor enabling him to become the leader he was. "Don't listen to those who speak of democracy. They all are against Islam. They want to take the nation away from its mission. We will break all the poison pens of those who speak of nationalism, democracy, and such things." -Ayatollah Khomeini (in a meeting with Iranian students and educators, Qom, March 13, 1979) This quote is significant as it expresses how religion was important for Ruhollah in sharing his political views in front of his people.

Money

For what history tells, money had not been born with the mankind with it as opposed to the other subtitles studied. What is certain is that as long as money existed, so did people with power. Money has always been one of the most important formations of societies because people would always need it. In the Medieval Europe this was no different as the Kings and Feudal Lords were the ones keeping both the power and the money in their hands.

Tywin Lannister Lord of one of the big houses of the kingdom, House Lannister, is also one of the most powerful and feared man of all of the world as his house is the richest. Using his money to either get people on his side or at least make the ones that are against him fear him. He does not fear anyone in the war because he manages to control both many armies and the crown (by depts) with his money. He even makes two houses that were loyal to Robb Stark (his main

enemy in the war) betray and then kill him. During the war he was named as hand of the king to king Joffrey (his grandson).

Martin has also added the Iron Bank in his story to add a rival to the Lannister dynasty and the kingdom itself in terms of economical issues. The Iron Bank of Braavos is just as the next band in the world we live in now. Despite actually not being in Westeros, they have more than just 'control' on the kingdom's politics. As the crown owes them millions they are even the ones to say who rules as the king. If a king does not pay his debt, the bank suddenly begins supporting other claimers to the throne by giving them large loans and with the power this money brings them they overthrow the king but the new king is not capable of paying his and his processor's debts, the process repeats itself. The bank always finds a way to take its money and thus very feared just as the common saying goes, "The Iron Bank will have its due". In the books when Queen Cersei opposes to pay to the bank, they cut all the loans to Westeros causing chaos and terrorism throughout the kingdom. The true power of the bank is also expressed by the words of Jon Snow: "...the Iron Bank was richer and more powerful than all the rest combined. When princes defaulted on their debts to lesser banks, ruined bankers sold their wives and children into slavery and opened their own veins. When princes failed to repay the Iron Bank, new princes sprang up from nowhere and took their thrones." (A Dance With Dragons)

It is often implied amongst people all over the world that today's world is more dependent to money. With Capitalism being the primary economical policy for the Western society, money nearly means everything now as companies controlling the markets they are linked to having huge influences over public as well as the richest and therefore most powerful ones even supporting candidates for presidencies or not. In the US the elections are greatly dependent on who the selective companies are supporting. These examples from Martin's book can be seen similar to the power that firms such as Goldman Sachs and banks like Bank of America hold against countries all over the world with every country being in a dept. Also being one of the richest businessmen in the Us, Donald Trump's recent candidacy for presidency is a significant new regarding the power that the richest hold. Money has always been (J.P. Morgan, Henry Ford) and now just as always (Donald Trump, David Rockefeller) is one of the most important aspects if not the most important aspect, in terms of gaining power. "Most Americans have no real understanding of the operation of the international money lenders. The accounts of the Federal Reserve System have never been audited. It operates outside the control of Congress and through its Board of Governors manipulates the credit of the United States." This quote by Senator Barry Goldwater could be seen as a proof of the system in today's world. Being from one of the most powerful and richest families in the world the quote of "Permit me to issue and control the money of a nation, and I care not who makes its laws" is a clear statement about the power of money.

Sexuality

As an animal species, and the most advanced animal species, sexuality has always been an important thing in life. The sexual differences between the two genders and hormonal desires are without a doubt one of the primary aspects of life for almost all individuals. With the introduction of formations like marriage and concepts which takes sexuality out of its roots of reproduction such as prostitution, our meaning of sexual activity has changed. As both individuals and societies became aware of their sexualities, it has been also used as a way to gain political power. Since early ages, marriage has been a key concept for kingdoms. In Medieval Europe, sexuality was under great influence of the religion but as seen in Martin's novels, the power of sexuality could never be truly diminished.

One of the main characters of the series, Cersei Lannister is the wife and queen of King Robert Baratheon and is the mother of the next two kings after his husband, Joffrey and Tommen. Described as one of the most attractive women in the whole kingdom, Cersei has always been in a non-stop hunger for power. She is a woman with a high self-confidence on her ways of gaining power. Through her life, she became aware of her body as a power source when her father tried to make her marry the prince at time and then the king. This realization leads her to use her sexuality to control over people around her and make them do what she wants from them. Examples of this situation even go

further to make soldiers kill their king. It is seen that her sexuality can make people betray their customs, families, religions and kings. Although Cersei has been successful seducing some people for her plans, whether if her way of gaining power was indeed a success is questionable when considered with this quote from Petyr Bealish: "Even some who think they are players. Cersei, for one. She thinks herself sly, but in truth she is utterly predictable. Her strength rests on her beauty, birth, and riches. Only the first of those is truly her own, and it will soon desert her. I pity her then. She wants power, but has no notion what to do with it when she gets it." (A Storm Of Swords)

Margaery Tyrell, actually an enemy to Cersei again uses her sexuality to find herself in a powerful position in ways similar to her. Margaery is seen to marry three declared kings throughout the story and she also uses her virginity to trick kings and their fathers into marrying them. Again as a beautiful woman she makes sure that her lord father also achieves power whatever side she goes. She manipulates the minds of both of Cersei's king sons after marrying Tommen after Joffrey dies. She actively claims the support of the folk, gains the trust of most of the people, makes her brothers and father come to powerful positions and becomes queen by earning the kings' hearts.

Both of these characters and their stories are perfect examples of women's usage of their sexuality in order to gain power. Although most certainly there has been examples of men using their sexuality against women, it is clear that

women are the primary users of this method. Compared to today's world several examples of sex scandals could be given such as the Lewinsky Scandal and the Hamilton-Reynolds Sex Scandal. In both of those scandals, the main point is that how a woman would still be able to gain a political power using their sexuality as the Lewinsky scandal between president Clinton and White House employee Monica Lewinsky saw the overthrow of Bill Clinton. The Hamilton-Reynolds Sex Scandal was also a case where a woman went onto an affair with then Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton in order to gain money and to use the media against Hamilton which ended with Hamilton losing his reputation. Without hesitation, sexuality is still an important part of life and examples of political scandals like Hamilton's and Clinton's prove that it can also most certainly take control and advantage of those in power and gain power.

Nobility

Nobility, as old as the first monarchs, is one of the most notable ways that people have ever been put to power through history and of course in Medieval Europe. Kings, queens, lords and nearly everyone would gain power with the help of their noble names. Because of the tight and separate gaps between the classes in the society, one's name was sometimes the ultimate reason for his/her power. This situation was no different in Martin's imaginary Europe as the absolute monarchies were always the primary places that nobility as a way of gaining power was observed.

Being the oldest son of his king-father, Joffrey Baratheon lived up to become the king of Westeros. Even when he turned out to be one of the worst kings if not the worst, his name was what made him king and it would not change. His name brought him upon everyone else while costing the lives of some of the most important lords of the kingdom because they found out that he is actually not a Baratheon but instead a Lannister. In that time being born with the right name could mean that you are a godlike leader that is more precious and rightful than anybody else. Joffrey believed he was the rightful king and believed that his name was the unquestionable source of his power as he shouts to Tywin Lannister "I am the king!" (implying he can do whatever he wants) but interestingly interrupted by Tywin saying: And any man who must say 'I am the king' is no true king at all." (A Storm Of Swords).

Being a rather newly added character to the story, Aegon Targaryen is a great example of how one's name is a pure mean of gaining or losing power. He is told to be the only male descendant of his house which had been the ruler of the kingdom before Baratheons took over. He is put to make people rise on his name against the Baratheons so that the right name could gain the power it 'deserves'. As he and his men declare him king during the war, from simple folk to the high lords loyal to the kingdom try to find out if this young boy truly is who he was supposed to be. Although he is described to be suitable for the position, nobody except his close allies care about anything but his name. It is stated that in a

situation in which his persona turns out to be false, it will cause the ultimate loss of his power as implied by Doran Martell while considering helping Aegon: "If Lord Connington's prince has a crushed skull, I will believe that Aegon Targaryen has returned from the grave. Elsewise, no. This is some feigned boy, no more. A sellsword's ploy to win support." (A Dance With Dragons).

Absolute monarchies have obviously lost their position of being the primary method of ruling a country to democracies and also it is clear that although noble families and names still exist through most of Europe, they are also significantly far from the power they used to have. Even though there are some kings and queens in Europe, it is now considered rather as an act of respect and tradition and monarchs do not have any political power. Then again, this is not the case for the whole world. Today, in civilized world, these kinds of monarchial politics can be still seen in countries such as Saudi Arabia and Swaziland where the whole nation is onto the word of a single man that was born to rule with his name. In these countries where similar social classifications to that of Medieval Europe's, nobility is still an important way of gaining power.

Conclusion

To sum up this essay, I have concluded that Martin has portrayed various ways of gaining power in his Medieval story and most importantly, as an answer to my research question, I discovered that there was a significant parallelism between

the subjects I investigated and their statuses in our modern world. It was surely interesting to see how these ways of gaining power have evolved through centuries. I observed that while the importance of someone's name has lost its value over the years for the most of the world, another subject money did not lose any of its importance, of course if not it had gained some, which I believe it had. Seeing how our society has changed was a meaningful experience for me as it has led me to think on a more rational basis when thinking about ancient times of our history as well as modern issues. I have come to realize that George Martin had written his characters in a perfectly realistic but also dramatic way that they could carry this much information on the structure of their societies even though I had been interested in his books for a long time. Also being another important aspect of my investigation for me, I became familiar and actually worked on the term "power" for the first time in my life. I realized that although it is a term we all use with less caring about its deep and complicated meaning, there is most certainly a depth to it. It is a concept that requires a full understanding of the research as long as my experiences go. Needless to say this essay helped me through these concepts as well as supporting me a new angle of understanding the world we live in.

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