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**Women Characters in *A Game of Thrones***

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## **Abstract**

*A Song of Ice and Fire* is a saga written by George R.R. Martin and was made famous when it was adopted into a HBO show titled as the first book in the series, *Game of Thrones*. Given its popularity and worldwide recognition, it is a wonder that so few scholarly studies have been done on the novel and so this paper will attempt to rectify that. This paper focuses on the female characters because of their importance to the plot but also because they point out George R.R. Martin's contribution to the genre of high fantasy. These female characters differ greatly from the female characters in previous works of high fantasy, if only in being more human than just fitting into molds of supporting roles, as was done with female characters in high fantasy thus far. This paper will analyze each of the major female characters present in *A Game of Thrones* and then a conclusion will be drawn based on the analysis done in the preceding chapters.

**Keywords:** *A Game of Thrones*, George R.R. Martin, female characters, high fantasy

## Introduction

The world George R.R. Martin created in *A Song of Ice and Fire* is vast not only in the plethora of fictional places and historical events, but also in the great variety of characters that are individually as complex as the collective struggle for the Iron Throne. This lengthy saga of Westeros and Essos is the quintessential masterpiece of high fantasy genre. One of the major reasons being that *A Game of Thrones* acknowledges the hardships of women in an utterly feudalistic and, from the modern point of view, misogynic land. The structure of the book is also uncommon for the fantasy genre as the entire story is not told from a single point of view but rather from many; each chapter bears the name of the character whose point of view it has taken. Most of these “leading” characters are not on the top of the social pyramid, namely noble men and knights, but as can be said through words of Tyrion: “cripples, bastards and broken things” (Martin 244). In terms of high fantasy, this is quite unexpected, yet it introduces us to “a complex array of conflicting interests and a distortion of the traditional values of good and evil, which are vital for delving into the messy, exhausting political and personal affairs of the rulers of Westeros...” (Tegelman 5). However, this paper will not examine the aforementioned ideas as its main concern are female characters and how they differ from typical women characters in the fantasy genre.

Before delving into the individual analyses of *A Game of Thrones* female characters, we have to define who a “strong” female character in fantasy is. Up to this point in works of fantasy, she has been either an extremely violent tomboy or a conniving seductress, both of whom reject intuition and empathy to be a heroine who is a replica of the male (Echavarria Roldan 2). What makes the male gender seem so superior to female in fantasy is that “the male characters contribute in war, resolve alliances, rule and dominate the society. Women are depicted as assets where they are either married to men or live to serve and obey them” (Sandqvist 14).

The question of “strong” female characters cannot be resolved without taking a look into the novel’s genre. As a work of high fantasy, *A Game of Thrones* emulates a medieval Europe that is very much laden with sexist attitudes simply because of the historical conventions (Tegelman 9). Writers who create such worlds of fiction seldom focus on the development of female characters and their involvement in the story. That is why this paper will attempt to prove that George R.R. Martin’s contribution to the genre is through, amongst others, the “strong”

female characters. Catelyn, Cersei, Daenerys, Arya and even Sansa are all fully realized characters, who have desires, ambitions, dreams, skills and duties; they are much more than just “two-dimensional characters set in the background to aid the traditional male hero” (Echavarria Roldan 4).

## 1. Female characters in *A Game of Thrones*

### 1.1 Catelyn Stark

Catelyn is the wife of the warden of the North – a title she procured through marriage. Although originally betrothed to Ned's brother Brandon, due to Brandon's untimely death, Catelyn was arranged to marry the next heir of the House Stark – Eddard. Even though the marriage was not of her wanting, Catelyn has an understanding and loving relationship with Eddard which is not common amongst arranged marriages, as the marriage between Cersei Lannister and Robert Baratheon and the marriage of Daenerys Targaryen and Khal Drogo prove. Because of this intimacy that exists between Eddard and Catelyn, Catelyn has gained a hand in political endeavors, as in the seemingly innocent persuasion of Ned to become the next King's Hand as Tegelman puts it (39). Furthermore, when the threat of her children's death occurs, Catelyn becomes even bolder in her political endeavors as she decides to capture Tyrion Lannister because he was reportedly involved in Bran's horrible fall of a tower: “[Tyrion] came a guest into my house, and there conspired to murder my son, a boy of seven,” she proclaimed to the room at large, pointing. (...) She did not know what was more satisfying: the sound of a dozen swords drawn as one or the look on Tyrion Lannister's face” (Martin 292). By this act, Catelyn has proved herself equally politically influential as Ned, if only in status of his wife and the daughter of Lord Tully. This is also where Catelyn's and Cersei's political authority differs since Cersei's is at its core dependent on the King and her family (Tegelman 43).

Growing up as a Tully, she learnt to live by the motto of her house: “*Family, Duty, Honor.*” This motto became a part of her very being and identity. For example, Catelyn's love for her children is as fierce as the direwolf sigil of House Stark. Upon discovery that an unknown man is about to assassinate her son Bran, she without thought for self-preservation throws herself on the attacker and gets her hands badly wounded, never to use them in their fully capacity again: “Catelyn looked at the knife, then at Bran. ‘No,’ she said. (...) She reached up with both hands and grabbed the blade with all her strength, pulling it away from her throat (...) She bit down hard into his palm” (Martin 132-133). Even though politically motivated, Catelyn's act shows that “at the heart of even [her] wildest political endeavors lies the well-being of [her] children” (Tegelman 40). However, “even maternal motivations are not synonymous with

altruism – quite on the contrary, on many occasions they would even appear to cloud the judgment of the mother” (Tegelman 40). Catelyn’s judgment was indeed clouded when it comes to Tyrion’s capture. Although she acted out of the want of justice and maybe even vengeance, the imprisonment of a man of substantial means and a well-connected family does not seem like a cool-headed and truly thought-out idea.

Another important aspect of Catelyn’s character is her sexuality as “it is what shows her commitment to her husband and the house” (Sandqvist 18). She makes her duty to procure children, which she does with Robb, Bran and Rickon and the girls Sansa and Arya. This is how Catelyn shows not only her loyalty but also her satisfaction with the bond she shares with Ned: “Her loins still ached from the urgency of his lovemaking. It was a good ache. She could feel his seed within her. She prayed that it may quicken there. It had been three years since Rickon. She was not too old. She could give him another son” (Martin 59).

Catelyn’s love for Ned might have originated from the fact that the Starks care a great deal for honor as is shown through Ned’s strong sense of duty to all depending on him, be they mere vassals or even members of his own family. Even when the king, who is also Ned’s old friend from the war, suggests some mischievous behavior involving leaving everything behind, Ned does not falter: “‘Would that we could,’ Ned said, ‘but we have duties now, my liege... to the realm, to our children, I to my lady wife and you to your queen’” (Martin 111). On the other hand, Catelyn’s acute sense of honor leads to her excessive pride as she cannot come to terms with her husband having a child out of wedlock. She claims to have forgiven Ned for his transgression because she understands a man has needs: “Many men fathered bastards. (...) It came as no surprise to her, in the first year of her marriage, to learn that Ned had fathered a child on some girl chance met on campaign. He had a man’s need, after all” (Martin 65). Yet, her pride does not let her acknowledge Jon Snow as anything else than her husband’s bastard as Catelyn could never have found love in her maternal heart to give it to the boy without a real family: “‘What are *you* doing here?’ she asked in a voice strangely flat and emotionless. ‘I came to see Bran,’ Jon said. ‘To say god-bye.’ Her face did not change. (...) ‘You’ve said it. Now go away’” (Martin 94). On the outside she, however, claims to have forgiven Ned because she realizes that “[i]f [she] would have turned away from Ned, it would most likely have become difficult for her to achieve respect from him, which would have made her weaker and not as influential” (Sandqvist 18). Catelyn’s sexuality has thus to be linked with the unwritten laws of the land: if a

lord's job is to uphold law and order among his vassals, then a woman's responsibility is to maintain the blood ties. Yet, in Catelyn's mind

where the other children are tied biologically, [Jon] represents a disturbance in the natural hierarchy, which was the one she strived, but failed, to uphold. No matter how many children she and Ned conceive, or how hard she tries to push Jon away from her sphere, their family will always be viewed as different from the norm. (Sandqvist 19)

Therefore, Catelyn cannot do what she views as her duty because the very existence of Jon Snow negates it. In other words, Catelyn is prevented from performing her duty and her inadequacy is displayed for all to see in the form of a bastard boy of her husband's. Recalling the family motto of Catelyn's house, family comes before duty and whereas she herself tries to uphold that, she inwardly begrudges Ned for doing the same with Jon by making the boy almost an equal in rights and privileges to their own children.

In terms of archetypes, Catelyn can be seen as both Warrior and Mother. As Mother, she cares deeply for her children, but she is not a perfect one because she favors some over the others. For example, after Bran's fall, she is constantly at his side neglecting her youngest Rickon, who is the one who needs her the most right now, yet he receives the least of her (and Ned's) attention so the boy grows wild: "And what if Maester Luwin is wrong? What if Bran needs me and I'm not here?" "Rickon needs you," Robb said sharply. "He's only three, he doesn't understand what's happening. He thinks everyone has deserted him, so he follows me around all day, clutching my leg and crying" (Martin 130). As Warrior, Catelyn proves herself to be fierce by taking charge of Tyrion's imprisonment and through the enactment of justice for Bran's fall.



## 1.2 Cersei Lannister

Cersei Lannister is the queen to the seven kingdoms. She acquired this title through the marriage with Robert Baratheon, yet her relationship with Robert is the exact opposite of what Catelyn and Ned have. Although she enters the marriage with Robert with hope of having a loving relationship with her husband, pretty soon she realizes that Robert's first and only love was Lyanna Stark, the deceased sister of Ned Stark: "but beside him the queen seemed as cold as an ice sculpture. 'The queen is angry too,' Jon told his uncle in a low, quiet voice. 'Father took the king down to [Lyanna's] crypts this afternoon. The queen didn't want him to go'" (Martin 53).

With the intimacy never achieved, the relationship between Cersei and Robert is doomed from the start and leaves Cersei no other choice but to turn inwardly and wall herself in a fort of pride made of resentment and bitterness she feels for Robert. This is where the sigil of her family – the lion – really becomes important in the formation of Cersei's identity. The lion is without doubt the king of the animal kingdom, the rest are no match for him and he is the ultimate predator. All of these traits can be seen in Cersei as well. In the conversation between her and Ned, he confronts her openly about her disloyalty and loathing towards her husband: "Her eyes burned, green fire in the dusk, like the lioness that was her sigil. 'The night of our wedding feast, the first time we shared a bed, he called me by your sister's name. He was on top of me, in me, stinking of wine, and he whispered Lyanna'" (Martin 486). This conversation shows that Cersei will not back down when she is cornered as that would be beneath her. Furthermore, for the first time in the book, she is presented like a real human being rather than a stereotypical witch-like and downright evil queen usually found in fantasy. With this little piece of information shedding some light on Cersei's background, she is shown to have some depth to her character and complexity, rather than to indulge in the preconceived visage of evil. She is shown as actually trying at one point to connect with Robert, yet her attempt was futile as there is a shadow of a dead girl between them, which in turn forces her to harden her outer shell over time and create a masked persona: "The queen's face was a mask, so bloodless that it might have been sculpted from snow. She rose from the table, gathered her skirts around her, and stormed off in silence, servants trailing behind" (Martin 300).

If we are to draw further parallels between Catelyn and Cersei, it is easy to notice that Catelyn centers her life around the family and their well-being whereas Cersei cannot create a loving family as she cannot have a deep and trusting relationship with her husband. This is why her interests lay outside the boundaries of the house; she is very politically motivated and aims to rule through her son Joffrey. She wants to hold all the power single-handedly and she can only do that if she is not subdued by her abusive husband (Tegelman 41). It is also interesting to notice that Cersei had a certain amount of power over Robert while he was still alive. For example, when Cersei demanded a direwolf killed for injuring her son Joffrey: “It took them all a moment to comprehend her words, but when they did, the king shrugged irritably. ‘As you will. Have Ser Ilyn see to it’” (Martin 157).

To touch upon the idea of Cersei’s motherhood, it must be said that through it, “political and emotional agendas are inherently tied to one another in the novels” (Tegelman 37). For the woman to take the authoritative stance, several factors must be taken into account: inheritance, marriage and influential husband (Tegelman 37). Cersei has all of those, she comes from an old and respected family, she gets the highest title possible for women through marriage and Robert has proven himself in the field of battle so he is a renowned warrior in the kingdom. However, unlike Catelyn, she feels encumbered and restricted by the female gender throughout her life because “Cersei has grown up in the shadow of her twin brother Jaime” (Tegelman 41). One time she outright wishes she were a man: “Cersei’s face was a study in contempt. ‘What a jape the gods have made of us two,’ she said. ‘By all rights, you ought to be the one in skirts and me in mail’” (Martin 429). Her political agenda does not raise any red flags with the others as she calculatingly commits the duties of a wife (Sandqvist 20). However, Joffrey, Tommen and Myrcella are conceived through the incestuous relationship with Jaime, her brother.

Cersei is aware of the common disapproval of such a relationship so she looks up to the Targaryens and considers herself their equal without taking into account the ancient past and glory of the Targaryens as supreme rulers and dragon riders: “‘Your brother?’ Ned said. ‘Or your lover?’ ‘Both.’ She didn’t flinch from the truth. ‘Since we were children together. And why not? The Targaryens wed brother and sister for three hundred years, to keep the bloodlines pure’” (Martin 485). Either as a means of justification or true admiration for the Targaryens, Cersei, like Catelyn, tries to maintain the blood ties. However, she does not maintain them for Robert, but

rather for herself, which could again be interpreted as a form of emancipation for Cersei (Tegelman 34).

Although there is some truth in depicting Cersei as a “flat villain,” which is what Rebecca Jones calls her in her article (15), being portrayed only through the views of others and not having a voice of her own in a form of a chapter, actually proves her to be strong and powerful and since many of her acts are committed behind the scenes, “her character is easily regarded as manipulative and treacherous, thus deviant” (Tegelman 41). Only when Cersei’s power wanes and she starts losing control over her son, she gets a voice of her own in the saga; however, since this takes place in the forth book, *A Feast of Crows*, it will not be discussed here.

### 1.3 Daenarys Targaryen

Daenarys, along with her brother Viserys, is a survivor of Robert's Rebellion, which brought down the long reign of the Targaryens. She is also known by the nickname of Dany, which serves as one of the initial indicators of her innocence and youth, as she starts out in the book as a 13-year-old girl. She and Viserys find themselves in the Free City of Pentos where Dany also faces an arranged marriage with a horse lord who has an army that can help Viserys take his revenge on the "usurper Baratheon," as king Robert is called by Viserys, for the Targaryen's loss of the Iron Throne.

In terms of the gender roles, Dany has no choice but to conform to them because those are the notions Viserys has and he is very dedicated to his "male masculinity, and many of the harmful ideas that come with it" (Williamson 9). For this reason, Dany has no choice but to comply. But as soon as Viserys' and Khal Drogo's male masculinity clash, the notions of Dany's gender role change to a significant degree. Whereas Viserys molds her to be compliant and meek, Khal Drogo starts developing feelings of love, and to go as far as say respect, only when she becomes more assertive and independent. With her newfound assertiveness and independence, she finds it difficult to once again submit to Viserys' "forced gender prescription" (Williamson 9) and when Khal Drogo kills Viserys by pouring melted gold on his head, she does not even feel sorrow but rather a sense of peace, maybe even pity: "Thick globs of molten gold dripped down onto his chest, setting the scarlet silk to smoldering... yet no drop of blood was spilt. *He was no dragon*, Dany thought, curiously calm. *Fire cannot kill a dragon*" (Martin 500). Although it is still true that in her new role as Khaleesi Dany experiments and tests the limits of her power, the ultimate power is still in the hands of the man, namely Khal Drogo. Basically, she holds power only while he does so when he dies due to black magic, Dany's power over the khalasar becomes next to nothing, as "[w]ithout the Khal's protection, she gets questioned and some of the men eventually leave her which means she has lost almost everything in terms of power" (Sandqvist 24). However, this tragedy can be seen as a lesson for Dany as it forces her to finally break from her previous gender conformity and it allows her to become something else, and "[t]his is represented in her body's ability to withstand fire, and outward expression of her body's nonconformity as well" (Williamson 9).

According to Jones, Daenerys can be an archetypal Queen, but also Warrior. As Queen, she is put in the same rank as Cersei, however, it is important to note that there are great differences between them. Cersei was prepared for that role from childhood and immediately acknowledged by the people as a queen, Daenerys had to rise up to the position, hence here comes her second categorization as Warrior. The Warrior class is what arises from the “demands of the barbaric and nomadic Dothraki culture. [Dany] quickly learns she cannot be gentle here, but must assert herself” (Jones 19). Although Daenerys sees herself as Warrior, her assertion over the Dothraki men and the knight Jorah Mormont is seen as an empowerment given to Daenerys through the child that she is carrying, so again it is not power that comes from Dany herself but from a man which “belittles her strength and credits it to a man rather than acknowledge that she is strong on her own” (Jones 19). It is undeniable that her strength and power rely on the willingness of men around her, however, when she loses Drogo and the child, she truly becomes independent and the most empowered woman in the book (Jones 20).

In Dany’s plotline, we also learn about the rape culture, which occurs within the Dothraki society and is a great determiner of Dany’s character in many ways. The very term of the “rape culture” “indicates the need to understand rape *as* culture; as a complex social phenomenon that is not limited to discrete criminal acts perpetrated by a few violent individuals but is the product of gendered, raced and classed social relations that are central to patriarchal and heterosexist culture“ (Ferreday 22). Although the rape culture first and foremost applies to real life situations, it also appears in literature, namely fantasy and so in *A Game of Thrones*. The reason why fantasy especially makes it possible for the rape culture to manifest itself within the genre is because “the fantastic as a genre is historically a space in which possible (emancipatory or violent) futures are proposed, explored and brought into tension with one another” (Ferreday 23). If this theory is applied to Dany’s story, it becomes obvious that though she herself experienced non-consensual intercourse: “He always took her from behind, Dothraki fashion, for which Dany was grateful; that way her lord husband could not see the tears that were on her face, and she could use her pillow to muffle her cries of pain” (Martin 228), she learnt to use her sex against her brutish husband and therefore change her future. Although many might disapprove of such a thing, Dany’s taking control over her sexuality might actually be symbolical because “fantasy has always been linked to feminism: since it is concerned with power, it allows women to

imagine possible futures, to dream of ‘claiming forms of power that were previously off-limits to them’” (Ferreday 24).

It must, however, be noted that her first sexual intercourse with Khal Drogo was not really a rape, although it can hardly be approved of in today’s society because Dany is only 13 and Khal Drogo is in his 30s. Therefore, the relationship can be deemed through the eyes of modern readers as pedophilic: “He cupped her face in his huge hands and she looked into his eyes. ‘No?’ he said, and she knew it was a question. She took his hand and moved it down to the wetness between her thighs. ‘Yes,’ she whispered as she put his finger inside her” (Martin 108).

With the ever-present rape culture and the tragic end of Dany’s love story in *A Game of Thrones*, a feminist reader might believe that it was Martin’s punishment for Dany’s rebellion against the men-controlled culture and tradition in the Dothraki tribes. However, when asked about this violence towards women, Martin expressed a very sound and reasonable counter-question and that was: “To be non-sexist, does that mean you need to portray an egalitarian society?” He explains further that an egalitarian society where men and women are equal cannot be found anywhere in the history of the world and neither can it be said of present time<sup>1</sup>.

Therefore, Dany’s loss could more correctly be interpreted in terms of her character that, like some other *A Game of Thrones* women, suffers from excessive pride or, as the Greeks call it, hubris. Dany enters the story of Westeros with an attitude that already hinted at hubris, as can be seen in the situation when she is faced with something that scares her, namely marriage to Khal Drogo, and she has no other way to cope with it but to build herself up in her mind: “So she sat in her wedding silks, nursing a cup of honeyed wine, afraid to eat, talking silently to herself. *I am Daenerys Stormborn, Princess of Dragonstone, of the blood and seed of Aegon the Conqueror*” (Martin 102). Assuming her role as a ruler, or a queen, she is freed from her brother’s oppressive ways, yet she retains arrogance and the hunger for power. Therefore, as a form of divine punishment, she has to face a heart-crushing demise. Nonetheless, Dany’s story shows her endurance and the hereditary right to the throne, as she is symbolically reborn from the fire with three dragons in her arms.

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<sup>1</sup> The full citation can be found in Works Cited.

## 1.4 Sansa Stark

One of the first references to Sansa in the novel is as follows: “‘Sansa’s work is as pretty as she is,’ Septa Mordane told their lady mother once” (Martin 68). This sentence actually sets the tone for Sansa’s character for the rest of the book as the first information the reader learns about her is not that her work was expertly or deftly done but *pretty*. The specific use of this adjective in describing Sansa intrinsically signals the reader to focus on her outward appearance rather than on her inward personality or intelligence. Sansa is the epitome of a stereotypical girl as she excels in what is considered to mark a high-born lady in a feudal society: “Sansa could sew and dance and sing. She wrote poetry. She knew how to dress. She played the harp *and* the bells. Worse, she was beautiful” (Martin 70). Stereotypically, she is not good at activities generally associated with high-born men in their society, like riding and calculating: “It hurt that one thing Arya could do better than her sister was ride a horse. Well, that and manage a household. Sansa never had much of a head for figures. If she did marry Prince Joff, Arya hoped for his sake that he had a good steward” (Martin 71).

In terms of her gender, Sansa is a feminine female (Williamson 8) and thus contrasting Arya who has a more complex relation to her gender, as will be explained in her own section of the paper. Being such a character, Sansa obeys the rules ascribed to her gender without much protest, which also presents contrast with her sister Arya. Because Sansa did everything that was asked of her, she never really faced any troubles of the world, especially as a daughter of a high lord, she believed that she would live the fairytale life by getting married to a prince or a knight who would love her and she him and they would live happily ever after: “All she wanted was for things to be nice and pretty, the way they were in the songs” (Martin 143). Her grip on this fairytale belief is so strong that it almost makes her blind to reality. Sansa does not realize that “[b]eauty and gallantry are at an end, and it is time for death, both of the land and, apparently, of knightly ideals and values” (Echavarria Roldan 3). A situation depicting this problem of Sansa’s is when Prince Joffrey gets his hand bitten by Arya’s direwolf Nymeria, Sansa still blames her sister, and not her prince, even though it was obvious that Nymeria attacked out of self-defense:

Joffrey slashed at Arya with his sword, screaming obscenities, terrible words, filthy words. Arya darted back, frightened now, but Joffrey followed (...) Then a grey blur flashed past her, and suddenly Nymeria was there, leaping jaws closing

around Joffrey's sword hand. (...) 'You leave him alone!' Sansa screamed at her sister. (Martin 151-152)

Even further in her story-line, Sansa continues to "cloak herself," as Williamson calls it (7), in the gender role of a feminine female: "For Sansa she can only see the gender binary and nothing in between" (Williamson7).

Sansa is the only remnant of an old female fantasy character, fitting into the archetype of Maiden and Ingénue, namely "[h]er innocence and damsel demeanor fit well into the traditional chivalric female characters who passively await the active men's returns or rescue" (Jones 17). However, in Martin's harsh world that has standards for women closer to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, such a character cannot exist, and for that reason, Sansa is punished. Her idealistic hopes of life ending up just like the songs she liked are crushed when she falls into the hands of prince Joffrey and his henchman Sandor Clegane, also known as the Hound. It is also interesting to note the irony contained in the fact that Sansa's brutal punishment is carried out by the saviors of maidens in the old fantasy genre, namely a prince (Joffrey) and a knight (Hound). Although Sansa's awakening from her illusions to the ways of the world seems harsh and cruel, through it she learns to use her wits more: "But a voice inside her whispered, *There are no heroes*, and she remembered what Petyr Baelish had said to her, here in this very hall. 'Life is not a song, sweetling,' he'd told her. 'You may learn that one day to your sorrow.' *In life, the monsters win*" (Martin 746).

Labeling Sansa as the weakest of the female characters, like Rebecca Jones does (18), might present itself as the obvious choice; however, it is one that is done without careful thought and consideration put into it. There are certain factors one should keep in mind while considering Sansa's character. One of the factors is her age, because not a lot of 11-year-olds understand the internal workings of the world. Furthermore, the education of women in the books consists of "doing things prettily" and singing old romance songs and not much of preparing for the real world, which is certainly harsh and unforgiving. Furthermore, on one occasion in the book, Arya displays her poorly made stitching to the Septa and whereas Sansa's companion, Jeyne, snickered openly, "Sansa was too well bred to smile at her sister's disgrace" (Martin 70). The key is the use of the word *bred*, because the word breeding is usually connected nowadays with breeding of animals; creatures deemed lesser to humans and so, by using it here, once again, it shows that women were not considered desirable for their intelligence but for their looks and



ladylike manners. Their own opinions did not matter; they were *bred* to follow rules set by men. So for a good half of the novel, Sansa merely repeats what her septa taught her was the correct way to converse as a high-born lady, and for that, the Hound's comparison of Sansa to a singing bird does not seem that far off: "Some septa taught you well. You're like one of those birds from the Summer Isles, aren't you? A pretty little talking bird, repeating all the pretty little words they taught you to recite" (Martin 302).

Without much consideration, it can easily be deduced that Sansa goes through the biggest psychological transformation in the book because she went from "a passive self-centered child, to an active self-sacrificing woman who now sees reality for what it is and must play the game in order to survive in her new role as queen-to-be" (Jones 18). Basically, with the progression of the story, Sansa transforms from her initial representation of a classical fantasy archetype of Maiden to that of a girl who starts to understand the art of deception and court intrigue while struggling to keep her head still firmly attached to her shoulders. That is why the symbolical killing of her direwolf Lady plays a great role in this transformation.

The link between the direwolf and his Stark owner is undeniable and strong: "The kennelmaster once told her that an animal takes after its master. She gave Lady a quick little hug. Lady licked her cheek. Sansa giggled" (Martin 143). For this reason, the killing of Lady is symbolical as it represents the outcome of staying true to a gender code that does not bode so well in the real world and Sansa is starting to realize this. Nonetheless, Sansa starts using her femininity in such a way that it might provide some protection (Williamson 7). This is seen after Eddard's beheading and when Sansa ends up alone in the hands of a sadistic prince, but as that occurs in *A Clash of Kings*, it will not be discussed in this paper.

## 1.5 Arya Stark

Arya is the youngest daughter of Catelyn and Eddard Stark and can be characterized as an anomalous character in Westeros society because she is the complete opposite of her older sister Sansa and can therefore be considered “the embodiment of the modern feminist standard for women” (Jones 18). Even the way she is introduced in the book shows her to excel in things that come more naturally for boys and what they are more schooled in like calculating and horseback riding: “Arya took after their lord father. (...) It hurt that the one thing Arya could do better than her sister was ride a horse. Well, that and manage a household. Sansa had never had much of a head for figures” (Martin 70-71). Being the classical tomboy, she proves herself to be proficient in activities meant for boys yet inept in activities usually reserved for girls.

As Arya really does deconstruct “gender norms not only through her outward rejection to act feminine, but also through her actions” (Williamson 3), it becomes difficult to understand Williamson’s claim that Arya refuses to attach herself to a single gender. Reasons that counter Williamson’s claim are numerous in the novel, so just to name a few. From the start we see Arya displaying feminist views: “‘The Lannisters are proud,’ Jon observed. ‘You’d think the royal sigil would be sufficient, but no. He makes his mother’s House equal in honor to the king’s.’ ‘The woman is important too!’ Arya protested” (Martin 73). Even later on in her plotline, when Arya gets to King’s Landing, she does not shy away from her gender: “‘Can you drop part of your arm? No. Nine years Syrio Forel was first sword to the Sealord of Braavos, he knows these things. Listen to him, boy.’ It was the third time he had called her ‘boy.’ ‘I’m a girl,’ Arya objected” (Martin 224). However, Arya keeps in mind that “she lives in a society that, while having empowered women like Cersei and Catelyn, still does not allow them to bear swords and fight as equals to men” (Jones 18) and for that reason, she does not care having to pretend she is a boy as long as it allows her to pursue her dreams. By doing so, she might appear to take the middle path between female and male. However, she does identify herself as a female first, as Jones asserts: “For all her longing to have the rights and freedom of men, she never once denies her gender. Multiple times in the story, she is called boy but each time she corrects the speaker” (8) and she most certainly “intentionally goes against the cultural expectations to become a sexual object” (Williamson 4).

It is of no question that Arya redefines the role of a woman in the novel and this can be seen even in the ironic name of her sword – *Needle*. A needle is a woman’s tool and Arya is not very good with it: “She studied her own work again, looking for some way to salvage it, then sighed and put down the needle” (Martin 68). As a result Arya uses a man’s tool that was given a name of a women’s tool in hopes of proving her worthy of it: ““Does this have a name? Oh, tell me.’ ‘Can’t you guess?’ Jon teased. ‘Your very favorite thing.’ Arya seemed puzzled at first. Then it came to her. She was that quick. They said it together: ‘*Needle!*’” (Martin 98). With this gesture, it might even be said that Arya transcends traditional gender roles and that “*A Game of Thrones* has taken a common symbol of femininity, the needle, and used it to show a scale of gender representation” (Williamson 5). Martin has taken this play on genders even further; Arya’s play with her Needle was given the royal seal of approval by her father and by doing so, he encouraged Arya’s exploration of the gender spectrum (Williamson 5). Furthermore, Eddard finds Arya a “dancing master” Syrio Forel, who is to teach Arya how to do swordplay (Martin 224). But what is interesting here is that Syrio not only teaches her a mastery usually fit for boys without reserve: ““Boy, girl,’ Syrio Forel said. ‘You are a sword, that is all’” (Martin 224) but he also “directly introduces to her for the first time another version of life, a non-gendered type of female that she can be” (Williamson 6).

Thus far, many examples have been given about Arya’s upheaval of the standard feminine traits and duties. However, Arya does show something of a “woman’s heart” (Martin 269), which in the feudal world has more of a negative and derisive meaning to it because it refers to a softer soul that is kind to those who are kind to it, whereas a man’s heart is strong, unyielding and strict, yet a woman’s heart is exactly what Arya has. She interacts freely with people below her social status:

Arya had loved nothing better than to sit at her father’s table and listen to them talk. She had loved listening to the men on the benches too; to freeriders tough as leather, (...) Their wives gave her scones and she invented names for their babies and played monsters-and-maidens and hide-the-treasure and come-into-my-castle with their children. (Martin 217)

She even has a soft spot in her heart for her half-brother Jon, who as a bastard of her father gets shunned by other members of the family, yet Arya feels a connection to him: “Jon grinned, reached over, and messed up her hair. Arya flushed. They had always been close. Jon

had their father's face, as did she. They were the only ones" (Martin 72). Her relationship with Jon "shows another side of her personality, which makes her so sympathetic and endearing to a modern audience, she is kind to the outcasts and the lowly" (Jones 18).

As Arya is a non-typical, tomboyish girl, who despite acting tough, still has it in her heart to relate to those deemed below her social status, it becomes clear why Jones sees Arya as the archetype of Hero (18). However, she is not Hero in the sense of the old epic fantasy heroes, but a modern type Hero who boldly defies the restraints of gender, social class and authority while having both feet on the ground.

## Conclusion

Despite belonging to the high fantasy genre with elements of epic fantasy and therefore expected to focus on the heroic male characters, *A Game of Thrones* features many strong female characters. The women are shown in all their complexity and deep-rooted issues that make them feel as real-life people to readers, just as the male characters do. On the very subject of his female characters, George R.R. Martin has received many inquiries most of which stress the strength of his female characters. His answer is thus: “Well, I consider them to be people (...) But then the main thing is empathy. (...) There is a certain basis for humanity and that’s true when writing about women or writing about a dwarf or any of them”<sup>2</sup>. This very simple and short answer reveals the true brilliance of George R.R. Martin’s writing and his *A Song of Ice and Fire* saga that, although not yet finished, already belongs to the great works of not only fantasy but literature of the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a whole.

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<sup>2</sup> The full citation can be found in Works Cited.

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