

Jolevska Popov, Tamara; Strezova, Sonja V.

## Conference Paper

George R. R. Martin's attempt to convey current issues to his readership in "A game of thrones". Postmodern literature in search of social awareness and change: The case of George R. R. Martin's "A game of thrones"

## Provided in Cooperation with:

University American College Skopje

*Suggested Citation:* Jolevska Popov, Tamara; Strezova, Sonja V. (2020) : George R. R. Martin's attempt to convey current issues to his readership in "A game of thrones". Postmodern literature in search of social awareness and change: The case of George R. R. Martin's "A game of thrones", University American College Skopje, Skopje, pp. 102-110, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4393646>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/234163>

### Standard-Nutzungsbedingungen:

Die Dokumente auf EconStor dürfen zu eigenen wissenschaftlichen Zwecken und zum Privatgebrauch gespeichert und kopiert werden.

Sie dürfen die Dokumente nicht für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, öffentlich zugänglich machen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Sofern die Verfasser die Dokumente unter Open-Content-Lizenzen (insbesondere CC-Lizenzen) zur Verfügung gestellt haben sollten, gelten abweichend von diesen Nutzungsbedingungen die in der dort genannten Lizenz gewährten Nutzungsrechte.

### Terms of use:

*Documents in EconStor may be saved and copied for your personal and scholarly purposes.*

*You are not to copy documents for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the documents publicly, to make them publicly available on the internet, or to distribute or otherwise use the documents in public.*

*If the documents have been made available under an Open Content Licence (especially Creative Commons Licences), you may exercise further usage rights as specified in the indicated licence.*



<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

## GEORGE R. R. MARTIN'S ATTEMPT TO CONVEY CURRENT ISSUES TO HIS READERSHIP IN "A GAME OF THRONES"

### Postmodern literature in search of social awareness and change: The case of George R. R. Martin's "A Game of Thrones"

Tamara Jolevska Popov<sup>1</sup>, Sonja V. Strezova<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Univeristy American College Skopje, R.N. Macedonia

<sup>2</sup>UNiveristy SS. Cyril and Methodius R.N. Macedonia

---

**ABSTRACT:** In spite of the fact that one might be fooled into thinking that George R. R. Martin's *A Game of Thrones* medieval setting only applies to medieval topics, his faithful readers have discovered a sinister undertone to 'a winter that lasts seven years' and 'the Long Night', accentuating the timelessness of the issues of the 21st century society. It seems as if the author's message is taking a U-turn from now and today, to the Middle Ages and back to today, unequivocally stressing the time-resisting applicability of the problem doted climate change. This paper gives an account of the literal and implicit references to the grim forecast of the planet's climate. The research is unique in its own right as it represents the initial findings of the first author's future doctoral thesis, and involves students as acknowledged participants in the research process, giving them the opportunity to partake in the world of academic publishing.

**KEYWORDS:** *climate change, forecast, Long Night, a winter that lasts seven years, current issue, time.*

## INTRODUCTION

A great portion of the modern reading and TV viewing audience has already been acquainted with the legend that is *A Game of Thrones*, and its author George R. R. Martin. A great number of his faithful readers and zealous TV series audiences have eagerly been waiting each new season of this unique blend of fictive medieval Britain, supernatural monsters and pornography. One has to note, though that as the storyline progresses and gains momentum, the sensationalist aspect is slowly wearing away, and the faithful readership unequivocally takes note that this fantastic story carries a message. At the profound level where the story delves, it deals with certain deep problems of humanity, the issue and dangers of climate change.

Despite never explicitly mentioned, readers would not be wrong if they were to reach for Claude Levi Strauss's 'mythemes' (the abstractions of central elements of certain stories, or the basic themes carrying the essential messages), in order to bring to light the epicentric issues of, in his case the Amerindian peoples, by dissecting their mythical stories. This serves the purpose of exposing the issue alluded in *A Game of Thrones* (both the literary work and television show), as the battle against an untamed and threatening biological diversity, ultimately provoked by (hu)mankind itself (Strauss, 1995).

Just like any postmodern novel that provides a fertile ground for readings upon readings provided by individuals and proponents of theoretical movements and theories, this first-in-a-series-of-five is not exempt from the same deconstructing tendencies. Critical readers focus on the characters and character development, the plotline and interconnectedness of the lifelines of most characters, and their length; as we all know, Martin is a writ-

er who is no stranger to killing main and crucial characters; and also the geopolitical image that the world of Westeros presents that unequivocally mirrors the world that we, the readers, live in.

However, while one can dissect the story for examination, making surgically precise horizontal, vertical and diagonal cuts, there is one message that this paper poignantly presents and makes sure to accentuate in the underlying structure of the written work, and that is the imminent danger of a 'winter' that 'is coming' (Martin, 1996). In one occasion, Martin stated for the *New York Times* that Westeros draws a parallel to our reality, meaning that the residents of the kingdoms pertaining to Westeros are too busy fighting their individual battles, again for egotistical reasons of power and wealth, and they are distracting them from the unraveling and imminent danger that has the potential to shatter their entire world to pieces. The allegory is clear, the White Walkers, will represent the danger of the changes in climate that could end the world as they (or we) know it. The paper portends to represent the instances where the omnipresent narrating voice uses the power of allusion through vocabulary to convey the images of weather, changes in the outside conditions and the upcoming threat to humanity. The research was conducted by undergraduate language and philology students as a part of their courses to the end of incorporating them into the academic and research world, as an integral part of their future careers in academia. They worked under the supervision of the first author, introducing this topic as an initiating piece towards a PhD dissertation.

## METHODOLOGY

The research and ensuing paper represent a mixture of theoretical and empirical methodological approaches and it ap-

plies to the heterogeneous audiences concerned by the topic of changes in climate and the attempt to build lifelong resilience through the epic shifts. Literature as both an art and scientific research of literary criticism and theoretical reading of pieces of writing dwells on an unsteady surface, scientifically speaking, and when presented in front of a diversified audience, it requires statistical support to back up the theories put forward by the researchers attempting to shed a new colour to the reading of a literary piece.

The research was conducted in three different stages and distinct tasks were delegated to the more and less experienced researchers, in accordance with their level of proficiency in research work. The initial stage was based purely on desk work, critical reading of the literary work and guided reading after having formed a working study title. The principal researcher conducted mentoring sessions with the acknowledged researchers in order to aid them in delving into a complex literary text with a critical attitude and an intention to dissect it statistically to present the study results in a comprehensive way for a larger and diversified audience.

After having finished the search for wording and phrasing to aid in supporting the hypothesis that the author, whilst writing, allegorically and consistently displays the inherent human existential fear of death which could result to be the reason due to which they will unite, all the researchers conducted a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the findings on a couple of levels:

1. vocabulary and morphology;
2. syntax and sentence order (there are allusions of Early Modern English variations, though not very potent);
3. and paragraph level (meanings more abstract and subject to distinct readings).

Ensuing the qualitative and quantitative analysis, deduction and cross-reference, which is only to complement and statistically support the main argument of the paper, the authors and researchers sought to represent their findings in a comprehensive statistic through diverse statistical methods the frequency with which the words alluding to the warnings and alarm of climate change intended by G. R. R. Martin are visually represented and clear, even to the eyes of non-readers.

Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that the first level of research mentioned above (vocabulary and morphology) is more frequently represented by means of statistical data, as the remaining two would require literary reading and deduction, which may not result the same for an assorted reading audience. Levels two and three are used as a support system for level one, where the setting of the hypothesis and proving of the same is made possible.

In general, the methodology used to critically and statistically evaluate the text and screen adaptation of this great work of postmodernism proves to favour the political intertextuality of ‘a game of thrones’ (Martin, 1996), or a game of power and overpowering, unequivocally pointing to the current situations in world politics, but also the even larger threat nearing the ‘wall’ of the habitat of all humanity – an environmental crisis.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

Before beginning to explain the results of the practical research, we will turn to theory to relay some more examples and instances that go in favour of the topic at hand. In an attempt to review the issues being raised by the main topic or the battle that should truly topple all battles; the battle of true existence, we will turn to the theory of existentialism.

*The theories of existentialism and post-modernism seem like very different ideas at first glance. Existentialism is a philosophy of individuals, while postmodernism is a theory focused more on society and less on individual existence (Herring, 2005).*

Virginia Herring, in her master's thesis at Texas University, titled "The existential and postmodern individual", argues that even though the ideas of existentialism and the postmodern concerns of the developments and current flows of society may not be very closely connected to one another, so far, in literature, they may be found together in a singular character, or as leading forces in one piece of writing. In order to explain this notion more precisely, the examples for both instances are as follows: the character embodying existential and postmodern characteristics can be found in Albert Camus' "The Stranger", Monsieur Meursault, and the written work incorporating both flows can be viewed to be our research piece, "A Game of Thrones".

To put it in practical terms, the fear of the Night King's army of murderous corpses could, of course, be interpreted as a prime example of an existential fear of death, which the readers hope it would unite the characters earlier on in the narrative. However, one more struggle the characters who have witnessed the embodiment of this human existential fear is the impossibility of convincing the southern folk of its existence. The characters inhabiting the South of Westeros (the Capital, the Red Keep), display the inability to see further the rims of their own nose or pride and territorial thirst, while the forces animating the dead beings threaten to lead the collapse of civilisation as a whole, beyond the lives of individual humans. As smuggler-turned-knight Davos Seaworth poignantly uncovers to the future Queen Daenerys: "If we don't put aside our enmities and band together, we will die. And then it does not matter

whole skeleton sits on the Iron Throne" (Martin, 2005).

In the approaching of the army of the dead, or as it is named in the book, the army of the White Walkers and the winter that they are bringing with them, we can easily identify the metaphor for climate change. In addition to this metaphorical reading, the literal identification of the dead (fossil) energy as a lethal threat to humanity appears to complement the aforementioned analysis. The army of the dead evokes postmodern society's stock of machines animated by a long-dead inorganic energy in the form of coal, oil or gas. Much like pre-modern people, when faced with such technical contraptions, the seemingly medieval inhabitants of Martin's Westeros are clearly shocked by the magical capacity of dead objects to move and to wage war on the word of the living, beyond The Wall.

At this point, once again Martin's message that the never ending human competition for power must be set aside in a combined and joint effort to abolish the threat from the army of the dead, comes through as an urgent message, appearing at a time when, in the real world, humanity is subconsciously struggling with its paradoxical ability to sweep the climate crisis under the carpet while preoccupying itself with absolutely everything else, but that. In a dream-like fashion, we try to make sense of the contradiction between our awareness of the approaching catastrophe and our remarkable capacity to ignore it. Moving along this analogy, "A Game of Thrones" is certainly a tale reflecting our time.

The Introduction made mention of Claude Levi Strauss and his idea of a mytheme (being the smallest component part of a myth), and also pointed to the fact that the narratives of the real world (history) unequivocally parallels the narrative in "A Game of Thrones".

As an initial step, we must lay the groundwork of Strauss’ theory of the mytheme, based on Saussurean principles applied in anthropology, and deeply rooted in structuralism. In 1958, Strauss published his “Structuralist Anthropology”, where he analyses cultural phenomena like: mythology, kinship and food preparation. Employing the concepts of ‘langue’ and

‘parole’, he came to the conclusion that all cultures’ myths across the world, as well as human thought, share the same underlying structure, as they are governed by universal laws. In continuation, the table explaining a mainstream narrative and the narrative in “A Game of Thrones” clearly explains the notion proposed in “Structuralist Anthropology”.

**Table 1.**  
*How Westeros mirrors the real world*

<b>Mythemes</b>	Humans threatened by non-living entities	Non-living energy threatens to destroy the living world	Deterioration of the climate	Struggle against non-living energy	Priority of struggle
<b>Mainstream narrative</b>	Industrial humans realise that they are threatened by fossil-fuelled machines	Fossil (= dead) energy threatens to destroy the biosphere)	Climate change	Movement to save the biosphere by abolishing fossil energy	Plea to set other conflicts aside in order to fight fossil energy
<b>“A Game of Thrones”</b>	Pre-industrial humans realise that they are threatened by non-living things	Dead creatures threaten to destroy Westeros	“Winter is coming”	Battle between the living and the dead	Plea to set other conflicts aside to fight the army of the White Walkers

Source: *How Westeros mirrors the real world.* Alf Hornborg,

The analogy is clearly portrayed by Table 1 above; however, we may further reinforce it by quoting George Martin’s views on the parallels between his narrative and the unravelling in the real world:

*The people in Westeros are fighting their individual battles over power and status and wealth. And those are so distracting them that they’re ignoring the threat of “winter is coming,” which has the potential to destroy all of them and to destroy their world. And there is a great parallel there to, I think, what I see this planet doing here, where we’re fighting our own battles. We’re fighting over issues, important issues, mind you — foreign policy, domestic policy, civil rights, social responsibility, and social justice. All of these things are important. But while we’re tearing ourselves apart over this and expending so much energy, there exists this threat of climate change, which, to my mind,*

*is conclusively proved by most of the data and 99.9 percent of the scientific community. And it really has the potential to destroy our world. And we’re ignoring that while we worry about the next election and issues that people are concerned about, like jobs. Jobs are a very important issue, of course. All of these things are important issues. But none of them are important if, like, we’re dead and our cities are under the ocean. So really, climate change should be the number one priority for any politician who is capable of looking past the next election. But unfortunately, there are only a handful of those. We spend 10 times as much energy and thought and debate in the media discussing whether or not N.F.L. players should stand for the national anthem than this threat that’s going to destroy our world (Martin, 2019).*

In this interview posted in 2019 in the online edition of the New York Times, Mar-

tin makes sure to state that his initial idea was never to create an allegory of this imminent environmental problem, but he somehow ended up elaborating the need for (hu)mankind to take on a unified stance and front in the issues like: foreign policy, domestic policy, civil and human rights, social responsibility and social justice. Thus, to an extent, he developed further the already existing sub-genre of fantasy named: epic fantasy for climate change.

Finally, fans of the book and television show have pushed every possible theory, involving incest (we may resort to Freud's psychoanalytical cases of Oedipal complexes, but also some Electra cases as well), claims to parentage and territorial claims, but the one that was neglected at the beginning and as the show airs further is more obvious than ever before; the incoming destructive biodiversity threatening to end (hu)mankind completely. The destructive values that appear in the turmoil of the world that are capable of producing real-life dragons, used to actually win the 'game of thrones'. Humans have an uncanny, self-destructive tendency to fight amongst themselves, while the world around them is getting obliterated by a larger destructive force.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Recalling the Introduction and Methodology section of this paper, we talked about the three-fold structure of the research, and that will be addressed in the Results section, while being represent-

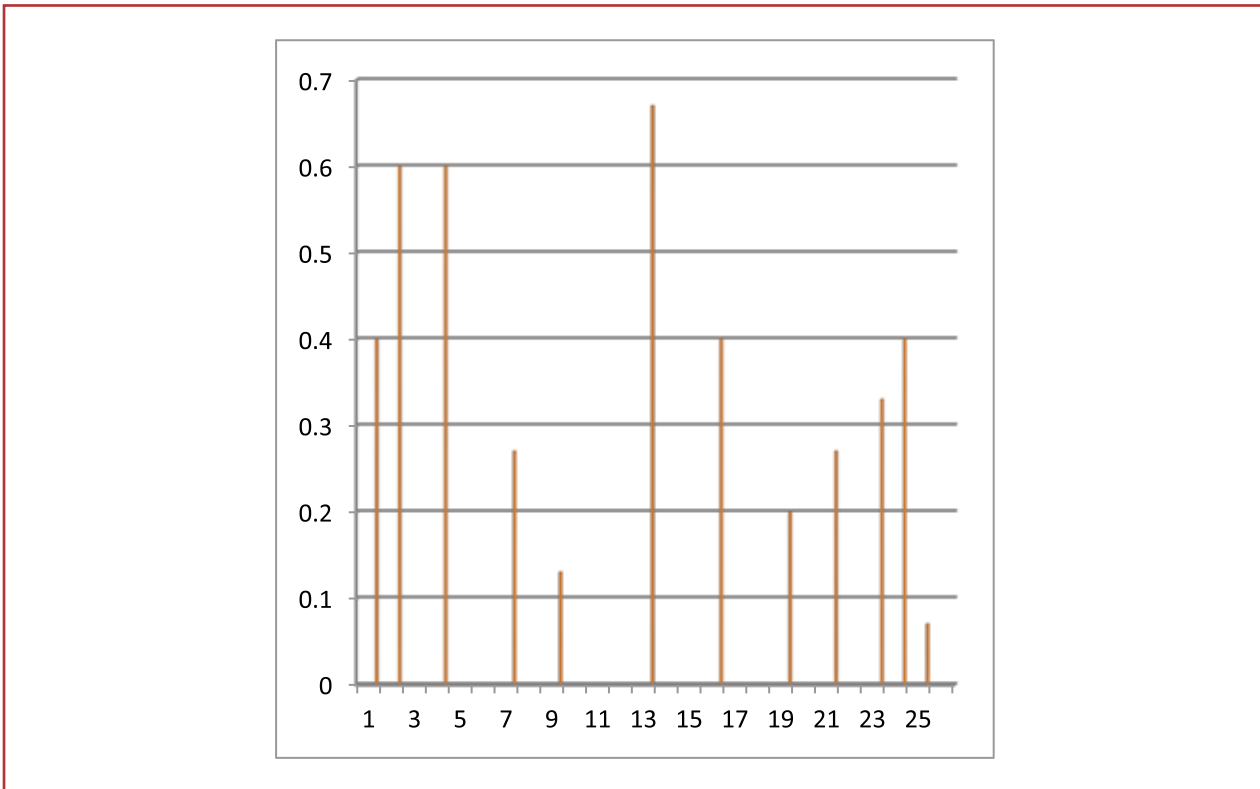
ed through percentage or frequency of terms supporting the main hypothesis of the paper. Unfortunately, the analysis of syntactic and paragraph level seemed to mirror the results of the morphological level and proved irrelevant in this case study. Having delegated tasks between the authors and mentees; each of the participants was responsible for reading the chapters pertaining to and explaining the views of one character (Catherine, Jon, Arya, Sanda, Daenerys, Ned, etc...); the reading was focused on all levels to the end of providing statistical results easily understood by a wider auditorium.

At this point it seems more than suitable to mention the viewpoint of the narrator and the narrative style, to be able to determine the character of Martin's writing. The whole work is narrated by an anonymous third person narrator, and as far as the chapters are concerned, they are all written from an eight-fold limited omniscient perspective of the character whose name titles said chapter, and this only means that the narrator only has knowledge of the character in question, for the duration of that chapter. Thus, it is interesting to see how, initially, extremely distinct perspectives may blend viewpoints, attitudes and, ultimately, knowledge towards the end of the book.

In continuation is the statistical representation of terms and phrases (syn-tagms) containing a looming notion of the approaching danger to the universe in Martin's epic fantasy:

### Graph 1.

Statistical representation of terms and phrases (syntagms)



In order to make a poignant statement we will comment on the highest peaks in this Graph 1, and they are explained as follows:

1. The peak found between points 13 and 14 (13.4) is the frequency (67%) of mentions of the fact that authorities and decision-makers will ignore the imminent problem and danger, being engaged with infighting and power struggles. The highest frequency of this notion comes as logical and normal as it simply supports the title of the book, “A Game of Thrones”.
2. There are two relatively high peaks just before 3 (2.9) and just before 5 (4.9), and those will pertain to the mention of the ‘Night’, and the long duration of the ‘Night’’. These peaks go in continuation and complement the previous result in a logical and cumulative way.
3. The peaks at 1.9, 16.9 and 24.9 explain the mentions in distinct instances (40%), respectively, of the term ‘my-

opia’<sup>2</sup>, the warnings of the Night’s Watch (the small army of convicts and outcasts from society taking residence at the Wall) about the coming danger, and the fact that the Night’s Watch, the only line protecting the residents of Westeros from the ‘wildlings’ (what was initially thought to be the greatest danger to the civilized folk living below the ice Wall), and later on, the army of the dead, or the White Walkers.

It is worth mentioning that the mentees were instructed to not only detect singular terms and phrases that carry the terms in their internal structure, but to also look at the syntactic and paragraph level in order to recognise their mention in a metaphorical, or even allegorical sense. By that analogy, we may conclude that the results are not only cumulative, but cross-referenced across linguistic structures and between researchers, under the mentorship of the

<sup>2</sup> Myopia is the inability and impossibility of a person or entity to see further into the future for imminent events.



principal authors, and will be applicable on all linguistic levels, should one decide to locate them in reading.

At this point we will reiterate Martin's initial intention to simply tell a fantastic story in a made-up universe, which largely reflects our reality, but somehow ending up with an allegory applicable to the current situation in the world that we are living as our reality. In this postmodern novel about a make-believe medieval world (and, yes, we understand how incredible that may sound/read), he manages to provide us with a valuable character analysis of his leading characters (the ones whose viewpoints are actually available to this unknown third person narrator), through the lens of a societal problem and how, if and where they find themselves in the resolution. Some of them will remain focused on the 'game of thrones' till the very end, and may not even become aware of the magnitude of the inevitable problem. For instance, the once "brave" Lannister Lion, Tyrion Lannister, now Hand to the about-to-claim-the-throne new Queen Denerys wistfully and very knowingly points to her that the threat in the Great War that they are about to face is so large that one wishes for an opponent they know, like his 'monstrous sister' (the current Queen Cersei Lannister), to battle in the Last War.

*Like Tolkien, I do not write allegory, at least not intentionally. Obviously, you live in the world and you are affected by the world around you, so some things sink in on some level, but if I really wanted to write about climate change in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, I would write a novel about climate change in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Martin, 2013).*

This statement given by the author clearly precedes the interview with The New York Times, where he admits to the unintentional allegory and, thus the readers can overtly see the unraveling and development of a very special writing process, especially in such a large undertaking as is the entire series of "A Song of Ice and Fire".

## CONCLUSION

We will begin this concluding section by mentioning an interesting observation made by environmentalists, but also zealous readers, especially of the genre of fantasy. The observing readers conclude that according to the length, width and height of the Wall, entirely made of ice, should it melt, which it is threatening to in the last third of the book, the water will exceed nine billion cubic metres, which should be enough to flood the entire planet, and more. Even though it is not scientifically proven, this insightful observation by avid readers makes for a rewarding side comment, which, in turn goes in favour of the hypothesis this paper is seeking to prove.

Gorge R. R. Martin has been one of the most talked-about names in literature and pop culture lately, and has relayed his ever-so-changing intentions in various interviews for renowned newspapers and journals. Following his responses chronologically, we may follow the development of the book series, and especially more of the first book, as it has proven its multiplicity in various media (written, television show, even short plays); hence we may observe the development of something that began with fairly timeless topics (the human condition and its near/far sightedness), tying itself down, unintentionally, allegorically, but ever so poignantly to the human condition in the modern reality (the one that we are living). It makes unintentional parallels as well (one simple example: Joffrey Baratheon – Donald Trump, but that is an entirely different topic), and very subtly makes us attempt to parallel our narrative to the one that we are reading or watching (according to preference), coming to very simple conclusions: (hu)mankind is suffering a severe case of myopia, and in the wake of yet another tragedy that is about to befall the human being as a life form, this same life form is more concerned with the "Game of Thrones".

## REFERENCES

Benioff, D., et al. (2012). *Game of thrones. The complete first season The complete first season.*

Herring, Lesley Virginia (2005). *The existential and postmodern individual.* Master's thesis, Texas A&M University. Texas A&M University. Available electronically from <http://hdl.handle.net/1969.1/2371>

Martin, G. R. R. (2011). *A Game of Thrones.* New York, Bantam Books

Martin, G. R. R. (2000). *A Storm of Swords.* New York, NY, Bantam Books. *The World of Ice & Fire, Ancient History: The Long Night*

Martin, G. R. R. (2000). *A Clash of Kings.* New York, Bantam Books. Martin, G. R. R. (2000). *A Storm of Swords*, Chapter 63, Davos VI

Martin, G. R. R. (2011). *A feast for crows.*

Levi-Strauss, C., Jacobson, C., & Schoepf, B. G. (1963). *Structural anthropology.* New York, Basic Books