

For Whom the Bells Toll: How Dragons in *Game of Thrones* Argue for Nuclear Disarmament

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Abstract

Popular culture influences and reflects the public conversation surrounding nuclear power. One important contribution to the discourse surrounding nuclear weapons within popular culture that still needs attention is HBO's hit series, *Game of Thrones*. While academia appropriately appreciates *Game of Thrones* for its meditations on leadership and other complex themes, the show also makes political arguments and analyses through complex allegories that are important for academia to recognize and understand. First, the research will establish the validity of *Game of Thrones* as an allegory for modern international relations by comparing and contrasting the Great Houses of Westeros with nation-states in the modern international system. Following this confirmation, the role of dragons in the Targaryen dynasty will be compared to the role of the nuclear bomb in international power dynamics. Finally, Daenerys' actions in the last two seasons of the show will be analyzed as a symbolic discussion of the fragility of nuclear deterrence, ultimately leading the viewer to understand dragons in *Game of Thrones* as an important argument for nuclear disarmament.

Keywords: Nuclear Bomb, International Relations, Science Fiction and Fantasy, Allegory

Introduction

"Power resides where men believe it resides. It's a trick. A shadow on the wall."¹ In modern international relations, leaders and nation-states seek to assert power and influence to further their interests and agendas. Throughout *Game of Thrones*, the Great Houses and the Lords and Ladies of Westeros contend amongst themselves for the Iron Throne, constantly asserting power through various means in order to further their families' standing and interests in the realm. In addition, the Great Houses of Westeros and modern nation-states struggle against similar threats within their respective realities, such as environmental catastrophes, economic issues, and religious conflict. Thus, *Game of Thrones* offers a unique perspective on leadership and power dynamics in the international political landscape by following a logic similar to that which governs international relations within our own world. The inherent realism created by the logic propelling the show's main characters within the fantastical world is what attracted and retained the show's loyal fanbase for the duration of the show.

Game of Thrones is widely accepted as a

modern masterpiece in escapist fantasy, earning 655 nominations and winning 398 awards, including Best Television Series in 2019.² However, the final two seasons of *Game of Thrones* became infamous for their apparent departure from the trajectory of the show. To fans' shock and dismay, in the finale of *Game of Thrones*, Daenerys Targaryen, the show's beloved protagonist, burned King's Landing atop her dragon, decimating the very city she was supposedly attempting to liberate. Daenerys' downfall caused outrage among fans and critics alike. Across social media platforms and communities, fans expressed their frustration and anger towards the writers for villainizing their favorite character. One fan on Twitter humorously denounced the legitimacy of Daenerys' character development in the final seasons, writing that "as Dany burned innocent people," they "couldn't help but wonder if the authors sought to burn her entire character arc as well."³

2. IMDb. "Game of Thrones." IMDb, 2020. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0944947/awards/>.

3. Allen, Ben. "Game of Thrones Fans Are Shocked and Confused About Daenerys' Storyline After Episode Five." *Radio Times*, May 13, 2019: Page 1. Accessed March 23, 2025. <https://www.radiotimes.com/tv/fantasy/game-of-thrones-season-8-episode-5-daenerys-kings-landing/>.

1. Beinoff, David, and D.B. Weiss. "Game of Thrones." Episode. 2, no. 3, HBO 15 Apr. 2012. 42:50-43:50.

Critics agreed with the fans. Judy Berman, a television critic writing for *TIME Magazine*, echoed much of the audience's feelings towards the final season when she recalled, "it all felt a little empty."⁴ After years of anticipation among the audience, the final act of the show felt a disappointingly anticlimactic close to one of the most popular fantastical narratives in the history of television.

But, where other viewers saw a forced penultimate plotline, I saw a unique allegorical argument consistent with the logic governing the characters, one that holds special relevance in modern international relations. Since the events of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, popular culture and media have often reflected, amplified, and influenced public opinion on nuclear weapons and policies surrounding them. At present, the nuclear bomb remains at the forefront of discussion within both academia and works of popular culture, as the international system continues to redefine itself in a new era of multipolarity. Academia continues to monitor and discuss modern works within popular culture that influence nuclear policy discussions among the public. Yet, missing from this analysis is one of the most popular shows in the history of television. Although *Game of Thrones* is respected among scholars for its thematic discussions of female leadership, religion, and other complex topics, academia and fans alike must recognize the contribution the show makes to the dialogue surrounding nuclear weapons by using dragons in a symbolic role.

As I watched the dragon's flames consume the marble, gold, and fleeing humanity, I couldn't help but recall an eerily similar moment in our own reality's dark history: the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Thereafter, I began reviewing the role of dragons within Daenerys' rise to power, alongside researching the role of the nuclear bomb in international power dynamics and the growth of nation-states' influence on the world stage. Throughout my research, I compared and contrasted the role of each weapon within their respective realities, drawing parallels between the fantastical world of Westeros and real occurrences and trends within present-day international relations. By examining such parallels, one may begin to uncover extensive and complex political allegories within *Game of Thrones*.

4. Berman, Judy. "Game of Thrones Didn't Have to End This Way." *TIME Magazine*, 20 May 2019: Page 1. Accessed 14 Aug. 2026. <https://time.com/5591754/game-of-thrones-series-finale-review/>.

Game of Thrones should be considered a monumental contribution to the discourse in popular culture surrounding the nuclear bomb, and it is essential for academia to understand the show's potential influence on the public's opinion. An in-depth analysis of similarities between the modern landscape of international relations and the narrative world of *Game of Thrones* establishes that dragons may be interpreted as an allegorical symbol of the nuclear bomb. By accepting this interpretation, audiences can begin to understand the final act of *Game of Thrones* as a symbolic argument for voluntary nuclear disarmament. Although the source material is still developing, *Game of Thrones* makes a significant contribution to the continuous dialogue surrounding nuclear weapons within popular culture.

The Dragon Allegory

The narrative evidence and scholarly research surrounding the world of *Game of Thrones* establishes the narrative holds enough complexity to engage in symbolic discussions of international relations. Throughout her book, *Leadership in Game of Thrones*, creative industries expert Brigitte Biehl argues that "congealed in [*Game of Thrones*] as a multi-voiced creative product are notions of leadership that do not merely exist imaginatively or theoretically but are real and among us."⁵ In her examination of *Game of Thrones* alongside business managerial studies, Biehl articulates successful and unsuccessful leadership practices that can be examined through each of the primary leaders in the show. Although Biehl discusses these leadership practices in a business context, one can apply these comparisons to other positions of authority, including the heads of states in international politics. Thus, leaders of the Great Houses within *Game of Thrones* are governed and propelled by an inherent realism and motivations parallel to that which governs and motivates leaders of nation-states in the modern world.

In addition, the leaders within *Game of Thrones* contend with issues akin to those which plague leaders in international politics. Political Science professors Laura Young, Nusta Ko, and Michael Perrin recognize these similar issues in their creation of a classroom simulation based on *Game of Thrones*. The simulation was representative because "the series displays key concepts which include the major theories of

5. Biehl, Brigitte. *Leadership in Game of Thrones*. Wiesbaden, Germany: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. Page 10.

[international relations],” in addition to “the struggle female heads of state face when gaining power, how heads of state frame global concerns to their citizens, the different level of concern states have for human rights, and especially, how difficult it is to achieve harmony in the international system.”⁶ Moreover, because it is so deeply rooted in real historical conflicts, the Great Houses of *Game of Thrones* harbor elements of real-world actors, such as religious traditions, cultural norms, bureaucracy, and diplomatic alliances, allowing it to harbor a wide array of discussions relating to political leadership. Brian Pavlac and his team of historians observed that the “overwhelming bulk of the story” is “about people trying to use power” to gain control over the Seven Kingdoms in comparing the narrative of *Game of Thrones* to medieval history.⁷ In the same manner that the Great Houses of Westeros contend for the Iron Throne, the world of international relations revolves around the power struggle between nation-states to control the international system. Just as world leaders and their philosophies heavily affect the negotiation of power and conflict in international relations, the political leaders of Westeros engage in different practices to further their Houses’ place in the power hierarchy of the Seven Kingdoms. Therefore, considering the similarities between Westeros and modern international politics, alongside the logic governing the universe and the show’s creative roots in real historical events, *Game of Thrones* may be interpreted as a complex allegorical discussion of power in modern international relations.

Allegory may exist within a narrative without the author’s intent. In “The Intentional Fallacy,” W. K. Wimsatt, Jr. and M. C. Beardsley, the two literary theorists who pioneered the New Criticism movement, argue that literary works are “detached from the author at birth and” go “about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it.”⁸ Thus, although George R.R. Martin denies writing *A Song of Ice and Fire* with

the goal of discussing modern international politics⁹, viewing his work through an allegorical lens is a legitimate and reasonable interpretation of the narrative. In addition, for the same reasons allegory does not require the author’s intent to be present, interpreting *Game of Thrones* as an allegorical narrative does not preclude accepting other viewers’ interpretations of the work as legitimate.

Within this uniquely complex allegory, dragons operate as a symbolic discussion of the political role and effect of the nuclear bomb within international politics. On the surface, both dragons in *Game of Thrones* and the nuclear bomb harbor obvious similarities. Both dragons and the nuclear bomb are aerial military units with unrivaled destructive power that lack a credible defensive counterpart. Although both scorpions (a giant crossbow that can kill dragons) and missile defense systems exist, neither defense is adequately advanced enough to make either dragons or the nuclear bomb obsolete. Dragons and the bomb both have destructive capabilities unmatched by any other weapon available within their respective worlds and can reduce entire cities to rubble and ash.

And even more importantly, dragons in *Game of Thrones* provide a unique discussion of the role that the nuclear bomb plays in the formation of the international power hierarchy. When nation-states develop nuclear weaponry, their influence and position on the world stage improves multiplies exponentially. In a parallel manner, the Targaryen dynasty’s power throughout Westerosi history is directly correlated with the possession and relative strength of their dragons. Thus, the rise of nation-states that have developed nuclear weaponry is analogously comparable to Daenerys Targaryen’s rise to power in *Game of Thrones*.

Nation-states often develop and maintain nuclear weaponry to ensure their security, sovereignty, and position on the international stage. In their analysis of Russia’s motivations for maintaining a nuclear weapons program, crisis researchers Anya Fink and Olga Oliker define nuclear weapons from a Russian perspective “as a source of continuing power and influence,” arguing later that “Russia’s status and its ability to defend its sovereignty will almost certainly continue to be based

6. Young, Laura D., Ñusta Carranza Ko, and Michael Perrin. “Using Game of Thrones to Teach International Relations.” *Journal of Political Science Education* 14, no. 3 (February 21, 2018): Page 362. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15512169.2017.1409631>.

7. Pavlac, Brian A. *Game of Thrones Versus History*. Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2017. Page 9.

8. Wimsatt, W. K., and M. C. Beardsley. “The Intentional Fallacy.” *The Sewanee Review*, vol. 54, no. 3, Sept. 1956, pp. 468–488, 470.

9. Selcke, Dan. “Game of Thrones Creator George R.R. Martin on Why He Doesn’t Do Allegory in Fantasy.” *Winter Is Coming*, 16 Jan. 2025: Page 1. Accessed 29 Aug. 2026. winteriscoming.net/game-of-thrones-creator-george-r-r-martin-why-he-doesn-t-do-allegory-in-fantasy.

in its position as a nuclear weapons state.”¹⁰ Although Fink and Olikier present their arguments from an Eastern perspective, the view that nuclear weapons guarantee national security is not unique to the Kremlin. Since 1945, nuclear power has allowed its wielders to dictate the formation of the international system. Throughout the Cold War, the first two nuclear powers, the United States and Russia, controlled the bipolar international system. As more nations gained nuclear power, transforming the international system into a multipolar one, these nations were allowed more control over diplomacy, which one can examine in the formation of the UN Security Council. Even now, nations such as Iran and Israel seek to maintain unofficial nuclear arsenals in defiance of international law because they feel these arsenals inherently guarantee their security.

Comparatively, the birth of Daenerys’ dragons transforms House Targaryen from a dynasty of the past into a major power in the Seven Kingdoms, allows Daenerys to secure her house’s and khalasar’s security, and cements her sovereignty as Queen. Within the narrative of the show, the hatching of Daenerys’ dragons begins her ascension to Queendom, and as her dragons grow in strength, so does her military might and leverage in diplomacy. In their discussion of gender and power in *Game of Thrones*, William Clapton and Laura J. Shepherd, both professors teaching international relations, observe how Daenerys transforms from a “timid” woman controlled by her brother and husband into a “ruler in her own right.”¹¹ Whereas before her dragons’ hatching, Daenerys led a starving khalasar with dwindling numbers, after the birth of Drogon, Rhaegal, and Viserion, her newfound power both promotes her as a hero of prophecy and allows her to make alliances with the Unsullied, the Second Sons, and the freed slaves. Likewise, although she was previously denounced throughout the Seven Kingdoms as a traitor to the throne and a threat to peace, as the word of her dragons spreads, so does her support in Westeros. As one discovers these similarities and accepts the symbolic relationship between dragons

and the nuclear bomb, an underlying assessment of nuclear politics begins to appear beneath the scales of the Targaryen dragons.

In assessing the role of dragons in Westerosi history within HBO’s *Game of Thrones*, one can determine that dragons argue that, in contrast to the Theory of Nuclear Deterrence, nuclear bombs actually accelerate conflict. Colonel Alan J. Parrington, in his reflection on United States foreign policy during the Cold War, defines the theory of mutually assured destruction as “an evolutionary defense strategy based on the concept that neither the United States nor its enemies will ever start a nuclear war because the other side will retaliate massively and unacceptably.”¹² Although the belief that nuclear bombs would deter conflict propelled much of U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War, even Colonel Parrington admits that “nuclear weapons have been no more useful in stopping war than the vaunted Maginot line in stopping Hitler.”¹³ The allegorical argument present within *Game of Thrones* offers an objective view of the reasons behind this conflict acceleration.

For one, both nations without nuclear power and Houses without dragons, in an attempt to solidify their own security, will attempt to either gain or replicate this power. In the world of international relations, nations developing their nuclear arsenals are often at the center of international conflict. Objectively, one cannot fault some of the motivations of these leaders, as they view the nuclear bomb as the key to the security of their nation-state. However, because of the existential threat of the atomic bomb, unofficial nuclear programs are often scrutinized by world leaders and can be a justification for war, as is demonstrated by the U.S. invasion of Iraq. In the world of Westeros, the history of the Targaryen dynasty is riddled with attempts to mimic the dragons’ power. In The Dance of Dragons, an ancient war in Westeros between two royal bloodlines of the Targaryens, the conflict directly revolves around an attempt by one of the families to steal the other’s dragon. Later in their history, after the death of his dragons, the Mad King would attempt to replicate the dragons’ power through wildfire, a magic substance that burns forever. In the final seasons of the show, the Grand Maester Qyburn attempts to match

10. Fink, Anya Loukianova, and Olga Olikier. “Russia’s Nuclear Weapons in a Multipolar World: Guarantors of Sovereignty, Great Power Status & More.” *Daedalus* 149, no. 2 (April 2020): Page 37, 50. Accessed March 5, 2025. https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_01788.

11. Clapton, William, and Laura J. Shepherd. “Lessons from Westeros: Gender and Power in *Game of Thrones*.” *Politics*, vol. 37, no. 1, 7 July 2017, pp. 5–18, 12, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395715612101>.

12. Parrington, Col. Alan J. “Mutually Assured Destruction Revisited. Strategic Doctrine in Question.” *Airpower Journal*, AFRP 10-1, XI, no. 4 (Winter 1997): Page 6.

13. Parrington, Col. Alan J. “Mutually Assured Destruction Revisited. Strategic Doctrine in Question.” *Airpower Journal*, AFRP 10-1, XI, no. 4 (Winter 1997): Page 16.

the dragon by reinventing scorpions, giant crossbows geared for dragon killing, which motivates Daenerys' later burning of the capitol.

In response to this technological pursuit, due to threats to their own security, both nuclear nations and the Targaryen dynasty hypocritically abuse their power positions, which fosters resentment and motivates nations toward conflict. Because nuclear weapons guarantee security and power, they also allow nuclear nations to operate unilaterally, even when defying international standards and norms. Former United States Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, in his critique of U.S. hypocrisy regarding nuclear weapons, details how, despite pressuring India and Pakistan to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, the U.S. failed to join it itself, while also allowing Israel to maintain a nuclear arsenal without sanction or comment.¹⁴ Furthermore, even though the United States and other nuclear powers maintain their own nuclear arsenals, they actively attempt to prevent other nations from achieving this same power, creating a paradoxical situation. The Eastern Powers often engage in similarly hypocritical unilateral action in defiance of the international system, as, "in Vladimir Putin's words, 'Violating rules is becoming a rule.'"¹⁵ At present, despite NATO's disapproval and subsequent threats, Russia continues to invade deeper into Ukraine. While the United States and other Western nations see this as a threat to international peace, Russia views the invasion as a response to the United States' interference in Europe. All in all, the hypocritical ignorance of international norms fosters resentment in other nations, which leads to conflict. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has reignited tensions between the East and West. The United States' interference in the Middle East has created an anti-American sentiment in the region, especially in Iran. Both areas are the primary theaters for modern conflict, all of which can be traced back to interference in the name of controlling nuclear proliferation.

Dragons, again, represent this hypocritical abuse of the power hierarchy, especially when considering the viewpoint of non-nuclear nations. Daenerys, for much

of the series, differentiates herself from the other rulers of Westeros, such as Cersei and Robert, promising to end the oppression and violence of the elite. As Biehl points out in her assessment of Daenerys' charismatic approach to leadership, "she wants to 'break the wheel' of power in Westeros."¹⁶ However, by the end of the series, in practice, Daenerys has only continued the cycle of violence that she sought to end, culminating in the burning of King's Landing. Similar to the reactions to the unilateral action of nuclear powers, as Daenerys continues to be more and more visibly violent and unstable, her support among her advisors and followers begins to wane. By the end of the show, it is apparent that she has become no different than Cersei Lannister, using the fear of her dragons to keep people in line instead of loyalty to her cause. Again, as one can see, dragons within *Game of Thrones* demonstrate how nuclear technology leads to hypocritical abuses of power in the name of national security, which fosters resentment and accelerates conflict.

Ultimately, dragons in *Game of Thrones* develop a complex critique of the faults that lie within the belief in nuclear deterrence. Foremost, the history of dragons within Westeros emphasizes that dependence on superior military technology is futile, as this technological advantage will no doubt cease to exist in the future. Although the Targaryen Dynasty enjoyed a long reign on the backs of their dragons, as the dragons slowly grew smaller and eventually became extinct, so did the Targaryens' power. Likewise, as Fink and Oliker discuss, as other states gain nuclear capabilities, the United States' hold on international power falters, and "foreign policy elites believe that a unipolar system centered on the United States is evolving into a multipolar or polycentric configuration."¹⁷ Therefore, as Martin demonstrates through his dragons, the belief that nuclear power guarantees national security indefinitely is unequivocally false, as this advantage will no doubt fade in the face of developing technology.

Furthermore, dragons demonstrate the cost of dictating power through fear and coercion, as nuclear powers often do, and illustrate the likelihood of nuclear powers engaging in performative wars in an effort to

14. Kissinger, Henry. "Commentary: U.S. Hypocrisy Over Nuclear Weapons." *Foreign Affairs* 37, no. 1 (October 1958): Page 20.

15. Fink, Anya Loukianova, and Olga Oliker. "Russia's Nuclear Weapons in a Multipolar World: Guarantors of Sovereignty, Great Power Status & More." *Daedalus* 149, no. 2 (April 2020): Page 38. Accessed March 5, 2025. https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_01788.

16. Biehl, Brigitte. *Leadership in Game of Thrones*. Wiesbaden, Germany: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. Page 79.

17. Fink, Anya Loukianova, and Olga Oliker. "Russia's Nuclear Weapons in a Multipolar World: Guarantors of Sovereignty, Great Power Status & More." *Daedalus* 149, no. 2 (April 2020): Page 38. Accessed March 5, 2025. https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_01788.

secure their power positions through their credibility. As discussed before, nuclear powers often attempt to use their technological advantage to coerce other countries into agreements, just as Daenerys does with her dragons when she arrives in Westeros. However, in order to dictate power in this manner, one needs a certain degree of credibility, or, as famous political scientist Hal Brands defines it, “the degree to which an actor’s threats and promises are believed by other actors in the international system.”¹⁸

At present, the credibility of nuclear superpowers continues to be tested. Despite nuclear threats, countries such as Iran and Israel continue to defy international law, which heightens tensions as the credibility of nuclear power is put into question. Within *Game of Thrones*, Daenerys’ credibility is also put into question as she marches over Westeros. In the fifth episode of season seven, Daenerys demands the Lannister army to either bend the knee or burn. However, Randall Tarly, the Lord of Hornhill and the Lannister army’s second in command, refuses, to which Daenerys responds by incinerating him alongside his son.¹⁹ As Professor Biehl argues, and I agree, Daenerys “shows that power itself can become a show.”²⁰ Essentially, as Daenerys’ credibility is questioned, in order to maintain the fear that founds it, she responds with force to demonstrate her power to the remaining Lannister allies.

In the history of nuclear power, the idea of war as a performative action is not far-fetched. Political scientist Ahsan Butt argues that the United States, in response to the attacks of September 11th, engaged in a performative war in Iraq to reestablish its “international status.”²¹ Through Daenerys, Martin and the screenwriters argue that, as their credibility is challenged, nuclear superpowers are more likely to engage in performative displays of power with existential consequences. As with weapons of mass destruction, the writers demonstrate how this use of power spirals out of control, culminating the season

with Daenerys’ complete annihilation of the capital.

The final stroke of the argument comes in the final episodes. After Daenerys’ death, Drogon, the last remaining dragon, burns the Iron Throne and flies away, never to be seen again, leaving the remaining powers to decide who is king.²² Without any Great House possessing a major advantage over the others, the Houses engage in a cooperative effort to elect Bran Stark as the new king. The burning of the Iron Throne symbolizes the transfer of power in Westeros from a unilateral center to a multilateral, cooperative, and lawful effort. The exit of Drogon, his symbolic burning of the Iron Throne, and the following collaboration between the Great Houses to elect Bran King is a statement by the writers to the world of international politics: in the new multilateral world, instead of pursuing control over hegemony, nation-states must surrender the advantage of nuclear power in order to foster multilateral collaboration.

Addressing the Opposition

Certainly, there exists a long list of contributors to the academic debate surrounding political policies regarding nuclear weapons and arms control. However, my research exists not to answer the policy debate surrounding the nuclear bomb, but to establish that dragons within *Game of Thrones* make an allegorical argument that helps the public understand the perspective of advocates for nuclear disarmament. Therefore, in addressing potential counterarguments, I focus on addressing criticisms surrounding the validity and existence of the dragon allegory and my interpretation of the final two seasons of the show.

The first criticism, and the most obvious to viewers and readers who consider themselves members of *Game of Thrones*’ loyal fanbase, is that the dragon allegory requires accepting the final two seasons’ plotline, which was heavily criticized by fans and remains without a literary foundation. In a live blog for *Radio Times* minutes after the final episode, fan and writer Ben Allen asks, “the spectacle was great, don’t get me wrong ... but plot-wise; I mean, what happened?”²³ Due to the absence of books supporting the last two seasons, the screenwriters were left to their own devices, and one

18. Brands, Hal, Eric S. Edelman, and Thomas G. Mahnken. “Credibility Matters: Strengthening American Deterrence in an Age of Geopolitical Turmoil.” *Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments*, 2018, 1–38.

19. Beinoff, David, and D.B. Weiss. “Game of Thrones.” Episode. 7, no. 8, August 27, 2017. 7:00-11:00.

20. Biehl, Brigitte. *Leadership in Game of Thrones*. Wiesbaden, Germany: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. Page 89.

21. Butt, Ahsan I. “Why Did the United States Invade Iraq in 2003?” *Security Studies* 28, no. 2 (January 4, 2019): Page 2. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2019.1551567>.

22. Beinoff, David, and D.B. Weiss. “Game of Thrones.” Episode. 8, no. 6, May 19, 2019. 39:00-42:00.

23. Allen, Ben. “Game of Thrones Series 8 Episode 5 – Live Blog.” *Radio Times*, May 13, 2019: Page 1. <https://www.radiotimes.com/tv/fantasy/game-of-thrones-series-8-episode-5-live-blog/>.

cannot deny that the writing's quality certainly took a downward turn, leading some fans to reject the final two seasons altogether as the arrival of Winds of Winter still looms in the distance.

Despite fans criticizing the plot and character development, it was not the storyline that lacked the depth present throughout the show, but the pacing that severely limited the storytelling of the final season. In her argument justifying *Game of Thrones'* ending, cinema researcher Inbar Shaham asserts that, while she cannot "defend arbitrary happenings or the change of pace in the final seasons, ... the show in itself does justice to its original planting with an appropriate payoff."²⁴ Shaham makes the argument, and I tend to agree, that the show's foreshadowing at the beginning of the series, alongside the visual symbolism of the introduction, hints consistently at Daenerys' descent into violence and Bran's eventual crowning. Furthermore, the novels consistently mimic real historical events, and the show's crowning of Bran is nearly identical to the development of the Magna Carta, which again symbolizes the transition of Westeros into a system of multipolar power. Therefore, even if one is disappointed in the ending's pacing, the actual events in the plot that are utilized in the argument for the dragon allegory still retain their purpose and validity.

However, the world of Westeros is still developing through independent shows such as HBO's *House of Dragons* and George R.R. Martin's continuous work on the final book of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, the literary series on which *Game of Thrones* was based. Therefore, whether the dragon allegory retains its validity remains to be seen with the further development of the fantastical world and narrative. But within such uncertainty exists an opportunity for the dragon allegory to be expounded upon. As the world of Westeros continues to expand, academia will need to continue to monitor the allegorical trends present across the new shows and their source material. Moreover, as discussed above, interpreting works within popular culture depends heavily upon the interpreter. Thus, accepting the dragon allegory as a valid interpretation of the work does not preclude accepting other supported interpretations of dragons' role within the narrative.

Other readers and scholars may also find that the absence of other dragons in HBO's series excludes the possibility of discussing mutually assured destruction,

therefore severely limiting the dragon allegory's discussion of nuclear politics. However, the path towards the discussion of mutually assured destruction is opened by the writers when the Night King kills one of Daenerys' dragons and takes it for his own. The theory of mutually assured destruction, or the theory that two nuclear powers will not engage in conflict out of concern for their own safety, depends on two rational actors.²⁵ Mutually assured destruction, defined earlier by Colonel Parrington, serves as the foundation of the belief in nuclear deterrence. However, as the dragon allegory demonstrates, one weakness of mutually assured destruction is that it requires two rational actors. The Night King's stealing of a dragon offers a critique of this element of mutually assured destruction, as he embodies the dangers inherent in new threats to modern society, such as rogue states and terrorist organizations. Such actors cannot be trusted as rational, since conflict is often inherent within the goals of their organizations. In the same manner, conflict and terror are inherent within the Night King's goal, preventing a diplomatic resolution between the Army of the Dead and the armies of Westeros. Therefore, instead of being limited by the absence of other major Houses with dragons in the narrative, the writers of *Game of Thrones* use the Night King to discuss the dangers of rogue states and the weaknesses of the theory of mutually assured destruction and nuclear deterrence.

An Important Contribution

Since the invention of the bomb, popular culture has played an important role in constructing the public understanding of nuclear power and its consequences, and the awareness raised around the issues has led to policy change. As prominent sociologists William Gamson and Andre Modigliani argue in their assessment of media discourse surrounding nuclear power, "if one is interested in public opinion, then media discourse dominates the larger issue culture, both reflecting and contributing to its creation."²⁶ In other words, the public

24. Shaham, Inbar. "The Wheel of Power in HBO's *Game of Thrones*." *Mythlore* 40, no. 2 (2022): Page 55.

25. Malyala, Adam. "Rationality and Nuclear Weapons: Revisiting Kenneth Waltz." *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 28 Mar. 2023: Page 1, [gjia.georgetown.edu/online-archives/rationality-and-nuclear-weapons-revisiting-kenneth-waltz/](https://www.georgetown.edu/online-archives/rationality-and-nuclear-weapons-revisiting-kenneth-waltz/).

26. Gamson, William A., and Andre Modigliani. "Media Discourse and Public Opinion on Nuclear Power: A Constructionist Approach." *American Journal of Sociology* 95, no. 1 (July 1989): Page 3. Accessed March 5, 2025. <https://doi.org/10.1086/229213>.

debate among the general population surrounding nuclear power is directly influenced by arguments put forth in different mediums across popular culture. Considering the exponential growth in the availability of television and mass media in the present day, popular culture's influence on the formation of public opinion can only have increased.

For example, Professor Toni Perrine, an expert in film history and theory, in her analysis of film in the 1950s, focuses specifically on the very apparent symbolic discussion of radiation that dominated film following the nuclear bomb, arguing that "Godzilla and other fallout creatures explicitly relate to the cultural anxiety about radiation that became intense in the 1950's."²⁷ After the bombing of Japan, the United States continued to test its nuclear devices across the world, especially in the Pacific Ocean, causing both international and domestic outrage at the potential consequences of testing weapons without understanding and considering their effects. The popularity of *Godzilla* and its explicit symbolism sparked a new dialogue among the public regarding the inherent consequences of radiation and fallout that accompany nuclear weapons testing, which eventually led to the United States halting the program in the Pacific. Although Gamson and Modigliani concede that the conversation within popular culture cannot accurately predict policy outcomes, one cannot deny the relationship between the public opinion shaped by popular culture and the pursuit of policies by American politicians. After all, politicians within the American democracy are inherently directed by the opinions of their constituencies. Considering the film analysis of Perrine alongside the arguments of Gamson and Modigliani, it is evident that the medium of popular culture has played an important role in shaping the public conversation surrounding the debate about the nuclear bomb. As Perrine proves, popular films such as *Godzilla* and *The China Syndrome* began important discussions and greatly heightened public awareness of the dangers of nuclear power, in congruence with Gamson's and Modigliani's hypothesis. Moreover, the concerns introduced by popular culture align with shifts in American policy, thereby proving the importance of popular culture in the debate of the nuclear bomb.

At present, the discussion of the bomb continues to permeate much of popular culture, with films such

as *Oppenheimer* gaining massive popularity. Although films in the past tended to discuss the future risks of nuclear testing and radiation, modern films like *Oppenheimer* discuss the catastrophic, instantaneous violence that constantly rests in the backdrop of international relations. Such discussions reflect modern concerns about nuclear war, especially as the international stage appears to be plunging further into conflict in numerous regions occupied or influenced by nuclear powers. As such, modern media can be a tool to understand the complicated public debate over nuclear power in modern politics.

Because of its recency and complexity, *Game of Thrones* should be accepted and analyzed by scholars as a monumental contribution to popular culture discourse surrounding international relations and the nuclear bomb. While other works deal with the morality or consequences of the bomb, *Game of Thrones* provides a realist analysis of the role of nuclear power in international relations through the dragon allegory. Thus, *Game of Thrones* provides a unique analysis of nuclear power in international relations that is important for both academia and audiences to understand. Moreover, by accepting the final act of *Game of Thrones* as a symbolic argument for voluntary nuclear disarmament, scholars can begin to analyze the show's influence on the public's opinion of nuclear power and monitor the development of the allegory through the expansion of the *Game of Thrones* universe. By accepting dragons within *Game of Thrones* as an allegorical argument for nuclear disarmament, scholars can understand the show's important place in modern fiction and fantasy. Perhaps, against all likelihood, they will find the argument convincing—for when the bells do toll, the fire will drown them out, and the shadows will dance on the wall for no one to see.

Biographical Note

Oliver E. Sinclair is a Juris Doctor candidate from Spanish Fort, Alabama, with a bachelor's degree in Political Science and Creative Writing from the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa. A lifelong fan and student of fiction and fantasy, Oliver is specifically interested in works of allegory. In the future, after pursuing his legal education, he hopes to contribute a work of fiction of his own, and by researching other allegorical works, he hopes to develop strategies for his future in storytelling.

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