

How Westeros is won

What is the moral compass of “Game of Thrones”?

Being good does not get you to the top. But neither does pure evil. What does it take to run the Seven Kingdoms?



Note: this article contains plot details of the HBO show.

THE obvious mystery at the heart of “Game of Thrones” is which major characters will survive, take the Iron Throne, unite the seven kingdoms and vanquish the White Walkers. But the most intriguing question posed by the show is a secondary one: Why will the winners have won? What principles of politics and morality are the creators trying to demonstrate? What is the political philosophy and moral compass of “Game of Thrones”?

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George R.R. Martin first raised these questions brilliantly in the books, by killing off characters that readers had assumed would be the tale's heroes. Each death carried its lessons. Ned Stark lost his head for failing to use it; honour and dignity are meaningless without wisdom, common sense and any kind of strategic thinking whatsoever. His son Robb was stabbed in the heart that betrayed him; there is no place for romantic love in a war

of fragile alliances. Jon Snow was killed once for failing to appreciate how making the right decision would make the wrong enemies among his own men.

With the show in its penultimate season, the stakes have grown more deadly and the character's choices more interesting. Each character's journey raises questions about the soul of "Game of Thrones". Arya Stark is in danger of morphing from a vigilante into a sociopath. Her erstwhile frenemy, Sandor Clegane, "The Hound", has walked a path from selfish, remorseless killer to soulful citizen of Westeros, questioning why bad things happen to good people. Daenerys Targaryen's sense of duty and justice competes with her sense of entitlement and power; what are we to make of her lust to burn enemies alive in dragonfire?

Jaime Lannister, introduced to readers and viewers as an incestuous kingslayer who throws a boy out the window, appears troubled by his sister Cersei's turn from mere monster into monster of history. For now he stands by what is left of his family (Tyrion aside). Despite blowing up half her city, Cersei positions herself as the protector of Westeros from a murderous madwoman in Daenerys, her treasonous partner Olenna Tyrell (whose family Cersei slaughtered) and hordes of foreign barbarians. She has already tried to use religious fundamentalists to get the upper hand, and now has made an unholy alliance with one of the realm's most despicable figures in Euron Greyjoy. She is incredibly unpopular and seems doomed to lose in the end. Yet in real life the bad guys do win sometimes—and so too in the show, as Euron demonstrates in this season's second episode with his bloody triumph at sea.

Indeed, the baddies of "Game of Thrones" have something to teach the "heroes". Sansa Stark, once the show's naïf, has become the show's aspiring Machiavelli, a

transformation borne from her suffering at the hands of people like Cersei, from whom she learned much. To her frustration, Jon is still making what he thinks are the “right” decisions with insufficient regard for how much they may alienate his own people, appearing not to have learned much from his first death. Jon is unlikely to die again, but will his courage to make unpopular choices be his glory, or his undoing? Conversely, Littlefinger’s incessant plotting, deal-making and deal-breaking, while fiendishly clever, seems likely to alienate him in the end from everybody, leaving him with no friends. What lessons for Sansa in this? Her hard-earned strategic wisdom is admirable, but will she team up with the sinister Littlefinger against her own half-brother (well, cousin, but she does not yet know that)? Or will she manage to play Littlefinger at his own game and double-cross him at the perfect moment? If she does, will that mean she is playing the game of thrones the right way? Or will it mean that she has become another Cersei? If so, has she won, or lost?

It is clear that just as “Game of Thrones” does not reward good for good’s sake, it also does not reward evil for evil’s sake. King Joffrey, Ramsay Bolton and Walder Frey have all met grisly demises. Cersei seems certain to die soon as well, whether at her brother’s (remaining) hand or at Arya’s. Cersei famously told Ned Stark in the show’s first season, “When you play the game of thrones, you win or you die.” She echoed that sentiment in the premiere episode of this seventh season. But that does not mean that the evil path to victory is the right one, or that a pure path is either.

The lesson of “Game of Thrones” is that although it can be stupid to be good, like Ned Stark, that doesn’t have to be the case. After all, good rulers may make fewer enemies, and forge stronger alliances. But as Sansa warns Jon in this season’s premiere, one must go about things intelligently. That means being ruthless and unsentimental when necessary, not standing rigidly on principle or tradition. “Game of Thrones” definitely has a moral compass: it demands flexibility, not stubbornness, cunning rather than guilelessness. Divining the show’s true magnetic north will be one of the greatest rewards of watching it.

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