Balancing Allegiances:

An Analysis of Daenerys Targaryen's Character Arc in *Game of Thrones*

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Abstract

This master's thesis conducts an in-depth examination of the evolution of audience alignment and allegiance towards Daenerys Targaryen, a central character in the popular television series *Game of Thrones*, based on George R. R. Martin's acclaimed fantasy novels. With a specific focus on the character's transformation in the concluding episodes of the series, the study seeks to investigate how the series nurtured, shifted, and, in some viewers' perspectives, shattered their allegiance to Daenerys.

Utilizing Murray Smith's "Structure of Sympathy" and Jason Mittell's insights on the changing landscape of complex television, the thesis explores the multifaceted journey of audience allegiance throughout the series. Further, it examines the role of cinematic narrative techniques in the series' medieval secondary fantasy world setting in facilitating modern viewer's connection with the on-screen characters. It seeks to lay out moments of moral ambiguity, juxtaposed with moments of kindness and absolute morality, effectively mapping the complex balance of Daenerys' path to tyranny, creating grounds from which to consider allegiance.

A thorough analysis of Daenerys Targaryen's character arc reveals that, despite her descent into tyranny being heavily foreshadowed, the perceived abruptness and lack of motivation behind her transformation resulted in viewer disillusionment. The thesis posits that while the narrative complexities of long-form television offer substantial opportunities for evolving characters, maintaining consistent and plausible character development is crucial for sustaining viewer allegiance.

However, recognizing the inherent subjectivity of viewer responses, the thesis concludes with an open-ended contemplation: In the context of extensive narratives like in *Game of Thrones*, is it possible to conclusively determine if audience allegiance is unequivocally present, maintained, or lost – or is it essentially an individual interpretation of the character's journey?

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Introduction

In 2019, the screen adaptation of George R.R. Martin's riveting fantasy series, *Game of Thrones*, drew to a dramatic conclusion. The series, masterfully brought to life by showrunners David Benioff and D.B Weiss, had captivated global audiences since its debut in 2011. Yet, as the final episodes aired, the show encountered a surprising torrent of criticism. Viewers expressed disillusionment with the apparent shift in narrative pace and, most strikingly, with the transformation of a central character, Daenerys Targaryen, portrayed by Emilia Clarke, and enlightened in the words from an article following the Emmy Awards in 2019: "Fans who waited for a year for the 8th season weren't quite happy with how the season ended, they were especially unhappy with Daenerys Targaryen (…) (Gonzales, 2019). After nearly a decade of intricate character development, Daenerys' abrupt and unexpected character arc in the concluding episodes sparked controversy. This controversy, however, did not seem to dimmish the franchise's popularity, with the spin-off series *House of the Dragon* (2022-) achieving significant success.

This intriguing controversy forms the basis of this thesis, which proposes an in-depth analysis of the character arc of Daenerys Targaryen within the broader context of *Game of Thrones*. Our investigation focuses on the evolution of audience alignment and allegiance with Daenerys – how it was fostered, transformed, and, for some viewers, irrevocably shattered across the series' eight seasons. To guide this exploration, Murray Smith's "Structure of Sympathy" serves as our analytical compass, allowing us to chart the multifaceted journey of audience allegiance throughout the series.

Additionally, we will examine the role of cinematic narrative in shaping audience reception of Daenerys, considering how narrative elements and the series' medieval secondary fantasy world setting facilitate a connection between modern viewers and the characters on-screen. The deepen this exploration, we invoke the work of Jason Mittell, particularly his insights on the shifting landscape of media consumption. We then utilize Mittell's concepts to complement and extend Smith's framework, thereby illuminating how changes in media consumption may have potentially impacted the audience's response to Daenerys' character arc. This leads us to the central questions of this thesis:

1. How is audience allegiance towards Daenerys Targaryen constructed, maintained, and potentially shattered throughout the eight seasons of *Game of Thrones*? What

elements of her character and her story arc contribute to the invitation of allegiance, and vice versa, disregard it?

2. What narrative elements and contextual elements within the *Game of Thrones* series justify or explain Daenerys Targaryen's transition towards perceived madness? How do these factors impact her character development and, subsequently, audience allegiance?

Given the nature of the criticism the series' received upon its completion, one could anticipate a reception analysis. However, for an investigation of that nature, the reader may refer to *Watching Game of Thrones: How Audiences Engage with Dark Television* (Barker, M, Smith, C. and Attwood, F. 2021). Likewise, *Game of Thrones'* hierarchical dynamics combined with this thesis' focus on the powerful female character of Daenerys, could suggest an analysis of power and gender, which is also beyond the scope of this thesis but can be explored in *Women of Ice and Fire* (Gjelsvik, A. and Schubart, R. 2016). While these analyses provide valuable insights into significant elements of *Game of Thrones*, they do not directly address the heart of this project: the in-depth character analysis focusing on development, transformation, and potential dissolution of audience allegiance to Daenerys Targaryen.

Theory

This theory section will explore the insights of media scholar Jason Mittel regarding the use and influence of characters in television storytelling. In particular, we will examine how Mittell's concepts of character development, arcs, change, and the use of episodic and serial storytelling techniques can be applied to the iconic series *Game of Thrones*. Mittell's ideas alongside media scholar Murray Smith offer a comprehensive framework for understanding how characters can be used to create ongoing storylines, keeping viewers invested across multiple seasons for nearly a decade. Through the examination of Mittell's and Smith's concepts and ideas, we hope to gain a deeper understanding of the unique possibilities and limitations of the serialized television format in terms of character development – ultimately understanding how *Game of Thrones* utilized these techniques to create complex and engaging narratives.

Characters

In order to delve into Mittell's ideas of character analysis in contemporary television, it is beneficial to first define how he recognizes characters. He follows Jens Eder's proposal, who envisages film characters as: "*identifiable fictional beings with an inner life* that exist as *communicatively constructed artifacts*" (Eder, 2010, p. 18). Mittell elaborates and considers that characters are not to be considered as images and sound on screen, but rather understood as constructs of real people, which is of importance when consuming fiction – as to not ponder whether a character is "real", but rather immerse yourself in the textual representation with the notion of actors on screen are characters.

When examining serial television, it is important to take into account distinct factors that may be less significant in other forms of media analysis. This in particular includes industrial norms and viewing practices, where the serial format has to rely on a different approach given the format of the medium. Mittell argues that the typical collaborative creative act between director and actor in film production shifts position, as TV has rotating directors, often placing that role between producers/writers – or even as far as to have actors involved in the writing process. *Game of Thrones* was primarily produced by showrunners David Benioff and D.B. Weiss, who both were responsible for production, writing, directing, and casting, which helped ensure a close relationship with the actors, becoming beneficial to shaping the characters and being able to

consider actors suggestions on how to present their character, ultimately giving actors small to major degrees of creative authority in the collaboration. This is in turn possible due to the nature of the serial performance, creating a timeline that allows change and adjustment, as opposed to the literary model of single authorship and stand-alone character development (Mittell, 2015).

While the unique chance for collaboration between production and actors has benefits, serialized television also offers restraints – "(…) or what the invaluable TV Tropes website calls "Real Life Writes the Plot"" (Mittell, 2015, p. 119). A series can easily span for a decade or more, as seen with the series *The Walking Dead* (IMDb, 2010-2022), successfully maintaining a long-running narrative with multiple seasons and spinoffs. It creates a demand for stable actors to not ruin the experience of the viewers' relationships with on-screen actors. Despite usually relying on long-term contracts, issues can arise where an actor has to leave the show earlier than anticipated, be that from personal issues, other work, or disagreements with the production. When this happens, writers are forced to find a workaround, either recasting the character entirely or writing them out of the show, creating a natural exit for the character. The latter of those choices seems preferable, however, if it is an adamant character portrayed uniquely by an actor, the audience will question their commitment to the paired actor-character identity.

Despite *Game of Thrones* spanning nearly a decade, the series had very few actors being recast, and those who were, were secondary supporting characters or tertiary recurring characters, hence not spoiling the viewers' commitment – although it could provide a bit of confusion, especially if you consider how the character of Gregor Clegane was played by three different actors over the course of the show. Despite the heavy recasting of this character, it was more easily recast than others, as the character consisted of a bulky, strong, warrior-type, with minimal dialogue and screen time. The casting of similarly looking characters aided this endeavour, alongside having the character wearing a helmet for a big part of the series, rendering the need for facial recognition to commit to the character unnecessary. Another recast on *Game of Thrones* was the character of Daario Naharis, who again could be considered a tertiary recurring character, and hence not disrupt the viewing experience too much, although the second actor portraying the character had a vastly different appearance than the first, making it difficult for viewers adjusting to a new actor – at first. Likewise, Lena Headey, the actor for the character of Cersei Lannister, became pregnant during the filming of *Game of Thrones*, requiring the production to work around

it, resulting in a different wardrobe and an emphasis on close-up shots and fewer scenes that require extensive physical movement, resulting in a different approach to displaying her character, although not necessarily of negative descent (IMDb, *Game of Thrones*).

Real-world practicalities are then considered to have a complicated impact on the writers' plan for storytelling, while simultaneously impacting the viewer's comprehension of ongoing narratives. Mittel argues that while actors can constrain a series by their off-screen lives, they also offer the opportunity to open up interesting resonances "(…) actors serve as sites of intertextuality, merging viewer memories of previous characters and knowledge about off-screen lives to color our understanding of a role" (Mittell, 2015, p. 122). The off-screen life of actor Sean Bean, who played the character of Ned Stark in the first season, came with audience theories and expectations. This was due to Bean's reputation for playing characters with untimely deaths, such as his portrayal of Boromir in *The Lord of the Rings*. Viewers were able to theorise that he yet again could have a tragic outcome, considering his acting career of playing doomed characters. The show built up a sense of anticipation around Ned Stark's fate, with viewers assuming that he would overcome his obstacles, despite the odds against him. While this did not happen, the dramatic irony and tension that led to the moment of his decapitation were joined by even more shock, seeing as how the audience – despite being aware of the actor's reputation – could not possibly believe that he would depart the show early (Vineyard, 2018).

Mittell states that it can be difficult for serial television to create dramatic stakes against the odds of audience knowledge, as the danger leading characters find themselves in rarely comes with fatal outcomes, guaranteeing relative safety. He also expands on the death of Ned Stark, relaying how the demise of the character provided backlash from the audience, despite the death being expected as the series is based on a set of novels. He doubts that the early demise of Ned Stark would be unlikely to happen, had it not been a literary adaptation, as he considers consumers to have different expectations from novels and television, as the former has a history of killing off lead characters, while the latter rarely exerts to such dramatic actions: "For television, actor embodiment creates a different type of parasocial bond; when coupled with the medium's long-established norms and industrial cues such as credits (…) and actor reputations, viewers expect more safety and long-term commitment to main characters" (Mittell, 2015, p. 124-25). This results in a demand for characters to invest in when ingesting tv, whereas consumers have a larger

appetite for the story in novels.

Recasting characters, as mentioned, comes with industrial inconvenience, although the bigger issue is that consistency of characters is the primary way that viewers engage with tv, and in turn, develop long-term relationships with characters on-screen. The term is the aforementioned bond, namely "parasocial relationships" and dates back to the 1950s: "We propose to call this seeming face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer a *para-social relationship*" (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215). It was initially considered as a negative, rendering consumers unable to distinguish between reality and media, deeming it an unhealthy relationship. Mittell argues that: "(...) they can instead be viewed as an active, participatory facet of media consumption, with fans choosing to engage with a media text and extend its reach into their own lives" (Mittell, 2015, p. 127). He thinks the relationship should be embraced, and that is important to not assume becoming emotionally invested in fictional characters is a negative thing suggesting poor emotional boundaries, but rather an integral aspect of storytelling, where the audience temporarily immerse themselves in a fictional world, allowing it to evoke strong emotional responses. Considering how serial television is a long-term process, stretching over a long time with interceding gaps, the viewer's investment will continue through these gaps, with dedicated fans discussing the characters, theorizing on online forums and communities, engaging with social media of the show, or even produce their own fan fiction. Exactly that was true for *Game of Thrones*, with fans creating content on the popular social media platform Reddit, where the subreddit r/gameofthrones currently sits on more than 3 million members. When *Game of Thrones* initially aired, the site would be used to have post-episode discussions, theorizing, and contemplating the fates of certain characters. The site is still active to this day, with fans creating fan art, discussing characters, and showing pictures of them visiting locations where the show was filmed. Viewers would also gather for real-life events, with watch parties as new episodes aired, prompting a sense of unity while watching the show, and a simultaneous opportunity to discuss characters. Most of the stars from the series had a heavy social media presence, with fans being able to interact and follow their career outside of *Game of Thrones* episodes, gaining a further view into the lives of the actors and glimpses of behind the scenes, gaining further investment in the show (reddit.com/r/gameofthrones).

Mittell says that these types of relationships are heightened for television and that

fans will frequently develop sincere emotional attachment towards a character, or even "(…) cultivating hateful (but often pleasurable) antipathy toward a character" (Mittell, 2015, p. 128). A key example of this hateful antipathy is the character of Joffrey Baratheon portrayed by Jack Gleeson, where his villainous behaviour was met with strong antipathy, considering how his character was sadistic and cruel. The portrayal of him was done convincingly however, written, and portrayed fascinatingly, resulting in a character that was entertaining to watch despite his reprehensible actions, resulting in watching him becoming sort of a "guilty pleasure". *Game of Thrones* succeeded in creating characters that evoke these emotions, as there is a long list of characters the audience considers with antipathy, but yet produces pleasure when watching.

While the audience is able to develop emotional attachment towards characters, they are also able to become invested within the fictional frame itself, rooting for certain character pairs to become romantically entangled. When the character Jon Snow, played by Kit Harrington, and the character Daenerys Targaryen, played by Emilia Clarke, finally met each other on screen, fans were "shipping" their romantic relationship, even to the point of giving them the nickname "Jonerys". Fans were fascinated by their on-screen chemistry and the characters' shared ideals; however, their relationship became controversial when it was revealed they were related – with some fans considering the morally questionable relationship to be distracting, with others maintaining their standpoint. This goes to show the level of investment in characters, when the audience is able to still maintain their "shipping" of two characters they are emotionally invested in, despite the obvious taboo (shipping.fandom.com/wiki/Jonerys).

Viewers can then be said to care for characters, investing in them, to the point of rooting for certain characters to succeed in their relationships and goals, even outside of the fictional frame, hoping that characters get more or less screen time: "These facets of serial engagement all suggest the centrality of the nonreciprocal relationship between viewers and television characters" (Mittell, 2015, p. 128). While the relationship is nonreciprocal, it still exists and determines the viewers' experience when watching long-term serialized television. It is interesting to note how viewers will root for different characters, as with *Game of Thrones*, which applies a multiple protagonist constellation, with different sides warring against each other – there is no right answer in terms of whom to root for, it is ultimately up to the viewer to decide whom

they want to root for, which is usually determined by whom they identify the most with. This will be explored further in the following section.

The Structure of Sympathy

While the relationship between viewers and television characters is a crucial aspect of long-term serialized television, as Mittell argues, it is also a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that is difficult to define. "Often such connections between viewers and characters are termed "identification," but I agree with Murray Smith that this term is inadequate to convey the complexity of the viewing process (…)" (Mittell, 2015, p. 129). The problem with using the term "identification" is that it often serves as a shorthand to describe the viewer-character relationship, whilst being inadequate in conveying the complexity of these dynamics. For instance, it tends to imply a one-dimensional, passive relationship based on similarity, failing to capture the multi-faceted nature of the audience's engagement.

Murray Smith, another prominent film scholar, proposes a theory called the "structure of sympathy", which seeks to describe the specific cinematic techniques that filmmakers use to generate emotional responses in viewers and create a sense of sympathy with the characters on screen: "I argue that we need to break the notion down into a number of more precisely defined concepts: recognition, alignment, and allegiance" (Smith, 2022, p. 73).

Recognition is a crucial aspect of the viewers' engagement with characters in long-term serialized television. Smith explains that recognition refers to "(…) the perception of a set of textual elements, in film typically cohering around the image of a body, as an individuated and continuous human agent" (Smith, 2022, p. 82). The process of character recognition is not confined to the text itself but also involves the referential understanding provided by the mimetic hypothesis. Viewers recognize that characters are fabricated constructs, made up of traits outlined in the text. Nonetheless, they tend to see these traits as analogous to those found in real-world individuals. This assumption persists until the text explicitly contradicts it, breaking the mimetic illusion. Therefore, viewers' understanding of characters is a blend of textual information and their extrapolations based on real-world knowledge and experiences. For example, the mimetic hypothesis does not apply to the character of the Night King, who is seen as a supernatural and non-human character, and hence cannot be understood in the same way as human characters in the show. The viewer cannot assume that the Night King's traits and behaviour correspond to

analogical ones found in persons in the real world, making it difficult for the viewer to consider the Night King as an individuated and continuous character, albeit, with its connections to genre it becomes difficult to conclusively consider the Night King incapable of being examined in terms of the mimetic hypothesis.

Smith argues how recognition is often overlooked, as it can be considered "obvious", and often happens automatically from the viewer, however, it is an important aspect of gaining deeper insight into a character and being able to invest emotionally in their stories. "For serial television, recognition also means viewers differentiating roles within a program's ongoing ensemble (…)" (Mittel, 2015, 123). Here Mittell argues that viewers are able to differentiate and recognize different characters according to their importance to the story, as characters are positioned in a fluid but meaningful list of tiers. These tiers have industrial meaning, and impact how a character functions in the story, often giving hints to the audience. However, the tiers contain meaning for the audience as well, as they from the credits are aware of which characters are available to invest in, as the primary lead characters usually are protected by relative safety. In *Game of Thrones*, Sean Bean got top billing in the opening credits of season 1, being recognized as the protagonist by credit-spotting viewers, although in this unusual instance, not becoming immune from it. Having established the importance of recognition and how characters are differentiated within a program's ensemble, we can now examine another dimension of viewer engagement, known as alignment.

"The term *alignment* describes the process by which spectators are placed in relation to characters in terms of access to their actions, and to what they know and feel "(Smith, 2022, p.82). This means the audience must determine their investment based on the access of the character's feelings and thoughts, which can be stated explicitly or in other cases harder to recognize. Murray Smith notes that the concept of alignment is similar to the literary notion of "focalization" proposed by Gérard Genette. Focalization describes the way in which narratives can convey story information to the reader through the perspective of a particular character. Character access is bound to be restricted, as most audio-visual productions do not give explicit access to characters' thoughts and feelings, hence putting the responsibility on the actors' ability to convey the intended emotions, so that the audience becomes invested (Smith, 2022, p. 83). The restricted nature of access to a character, Smith argues, is to a great extent what implores "identification". He

proposes two means to analyse alignment: *spatio-temporal attachment* and *subjective access*. The former concerns the way in which the narrative aligns with the viewer's perspective of a given character, hereby limiting the viewer's information to that of the character. This results in the audience experiencing what the characters experience, and hence bearing the same level of understanding as the character, e.g., when Jon Snow leads his army into battle against Ramsay Bolton in episode 9, season 6, where the camera stays with Jon throughout most of the episode, showing his actions and reactions as he fights and struggles to survive. The viewer is attached to Jon both spatially and temporally, as we see the battle unfold through his perspective and experience the passing of time alongside him, creating a sense of immersion and involvement in the narrative.

In Gérard Genette's work on focalization, he differentiates between zero, internal and external focalization. "The variations in "point of view" that occur in the course of a narrative can be analyzed as changes in focalization (…) in such a case we can speak of variable focalization, of omniscience with partial restrictions of field, etc." (Genette, 1980, p.194). In the case of *Game of Thrones*, with its multiple protagonist constellation, the narrative model would likely be considered a form of "variable internal focalization". Each scene typically aligns with the perspective of a specific character, thus giving the viewer access to that character's experiences, actions, and sometimes even thoughts or feelings. However, this type of focal character changes throughout the episode, offering a shifting array of perspectives rather than a singular, constant point of view. The use of variable internal focalization helps to create a multifaceted complex narrative world, where no single character's perspective dominates entirely, allowing the audience the creation of multiple attachments. Yet, it is also important to note that in some scenes, the series may shift towards a more zero or external focalization, providing a broader view of events, particularly in scenes that involve large-scale battles, where it is crucial to understand the overall context and progression, independent of any one character's perspective.

Regarding subjective access, Smith refers to the degree in which the audience is given access to characters' thoughts, emotions, and internal experiences. While novels have it easy to convey characters' thoughts, it is far more difficult for film and television to convey, resulting in different techniques to get the proper information across: "Instead, moving-image media convey subjective interior states through the accumulation of exterior markers of what we see and hear

about characters: appearance, actions, dialogue, and other sorts of evidence explicitly presented within the narrative discourse" (Mittell, 2015, p. 130). Subjective access is often used in *Game of Thrones*, making it possible to give an insight into the characters' motivations and inner turmoil, e.g., in season 1, episode 7, where the audience is given subjective access to the character Ned Stark, showing his thoughts and emotions as he struggles to have a conversation with the dying Robert Baratheon, played by Mark Addy, as shown in the following framegrab:

[Framegrab of Ned Stark] (Season 1, Episode 7, 25:02)

The scene consists of closeups, making it possible to recognize facial features. Likewise, the lighting and colour grading adds to the sombre and emotional tone, creating a sense of intimacy and vulnerability. Given the current access and knowledge about Ned Stark at this point in the series, the audience is also aware of the impact of the answers – and the silences. By contrast, *Game of Thrones* also consists of characters with more limited subjective access, leaving their thoughts and emotions to be interpreted by the audience, e.g., Cersei Lannister, who is often seen maintaining a stoic facade, potentially making it difficult for viewers to gain access to her true emotions and motivations.

Mittell expands on attachment, stating how it is a crucial variable in a long-form serial, and that the connection to individual characters can shift from episode to episode, and that it is common to create multiple attachments to different characters in a serial. "A series typically creates a broad ensemble with wide-ranging attachments across scenes and episodes; these attachments often work to foster the sense that the serial is aligned more broadly with its setting and scenario than with individual characters" (Mittell, 2015, p. 129). When creating multiple

attachments to different characters, viewers are able to engage with the serial on a deeper level, becoming more invested in the narrative as a whole, fostering a sense of alignment with the setting and scenario. This benefit shows like *Game of Thrones*, where there are multiple plotlines and a large ensemble cast, which in turn provides a need to have episodes centred around certain characters, as it would become difficult and entangled for the viewers to differentiate between their attachments if they are being forced to process an excessive number of characters. *Game of Thrones* hence dedicates entire episodes to certain factions, with primary lead characters not being present, e.g., season 6, episode 5, which focuses on the storyline of Bran, Arya, Jon and Hodor. This method also helps in terms of practical reasons, not requiring actors to be present for every episode, but mainly, it contributes to the attachment of certain characters, "(…) as spending time with characters encourages parasocial connections – the more time we spend with particular characters, the more we extend that time through hypothetical and paratextual engagement outside the moments of watching" (Mittell, 2015, p. 130).

Mittell states how characters can have episodes that are "centric" to them, where the viewers' knowledge of particular characters deepens, providing access to their backstories and granting broader knowledge, all the while showcasing engaging storytelling (2015). Using the abovementioned episode as an example, it is centric on the character of Hodor played by Kristian Nairn. The episode revealed a previously unknown connection between the present and the past and provided a new layer of understanding to the character of Hodor. It also showcased a unique way of storytelling, as it used time travel and cause-and-effect to reveal the meaning behind Hodor's name and actions. The reveal of his name also served as a key plot point, evoking a strong emotional response from the audience, which in some situations translates to strong attachments.

The characters we become aligned with, connected to, and invested in, are those whom we over the course of a serial spend the most time with and have the most access to. Gaining access to a character's interior state is a crucial appeal of fiction, helping in understanding characters' actions and motives, demanding viewers to become active mind readers, and balancing the active knowledge of characters and narrative. The natural long format of serialized television provides the opportunity for the audience to become emotionally invested, and aligned, with the characters, creating subjective versions of their thoughts and feelings, both on and off screen, while continuously processing new information and knowledge, to then revisit said alignment and

consider it: "Our alignment with characters certainly changes throughout the course of a series – but do the characters themselves change?" (Mittell, 2015, p. 132).

Serial Characters and the Possibility of Change

"To grapple with character changes, we need to consider Smith's third factor of character engagement: *allegiance* (…)" (Mittell, 2015, p. 134). Mittell considers it a moral evaluation of characters we are currently aligned with, deeming them worthy of our sympathy and upkeeping regard for beliefs and ethics – then we can invest in their stories emotionally. Smith notes that moral evaluation happens on basis of the spectator's ability to perceive the character's state of mind, comprehend the context of their actions, and make moral judgments based on that knowledge. The evaluation includes both cognitive and affective dimensions, as categorizing an action as undesirable can evoke anger – or on the other hand, a desirable action can spark joy, or experiencing loss can grant sympathy. Essentially, the viewers' allegiance to a character is rooted in their understanding and emotional responses to the characters' behaviour and motivations (Smith, 2020). There are multiple characters in *Game of Thrones* that undergo changes, making the audience question their allegiance and consider their moral evaluation. The character Jamie Lannister, played by Nikolaj Coster-Waldau, is initially portrayed as ruthless and immoral, however, over the course of the serial he becomes sympathetic, changing his personality and behaviour. This calls for a reconsideration of viewers' initial feelings towards the character, and to then re-evaluate their allegiance towards him. On the other hand, the character of Theon Greyjoy, played by Alfie Allen, has his allegiance questioned in reverse, as he starts off as a loyal and proud character. He then proceeds to commit terrible acts, losing any allegiance the audience had for him – to finally attempting to make amends for his misdoings, leaving it up to the viewer if he deserves their allegiance.

Despite previously mentioned examples of change in character, Mittell argues that most television characters are more stable and consistent, rather than changeable entities. His argument supports the notion that these fictional characters tend to maintain a certain identity despite the dramatic occurrences that befall them, and their experiences tend to accumulate and shape their narrative – as opposed to completely altering their personalities, which contradicts the notion of appeal from watching characters grow and develop over time.

Mittell references Roberta Pearson, who switches character change with character

elaboration, referencing how the repetitive nature of television dictates the need for stability in characters, so as to not undermine the premise of a series by interfering with the pre-established dynamic of characters. She hence concludes that characters are not developing, but rather accumulating and becoming deeper, praising the television format for being capable of creating highly elaborate characters, albeit stating: "But a highly elaborated character is not the same as a well-developed character" (Pearson, 2007, p. 55), effectively creating a juxtaposed opinion on the practice of stable characters.

Mittell agrees with her to an extent but manifests that character development and transformation do occur, however, he considers it difficult to determine given the nature of serialized television, containing several narrative events and shifts in relationships with multiple characters, culminating in the need to consider allegiance in order to recognize change (Mittell, 2015, p. 133).

While Pearson's notion of 'character elaboration' certainly holds merit, emphasizing the need for stability in serialized television characters, it is important to note the evolving nature of modern television narratives. Series like *Game of Thrones* and *Breaking Bad* (IMDb, 2008-2013) demonstrate that showrunners are increasingly willing to defy traditional character stability norms. Characters like Jamie Lannister from *Game of Thrones*, as well as Walter White from *Breaking Bad*, undergo substantial transformations that continuously rope audiences' in while surprising them. This suggests a trend in the serialized television landscape, one that embraces more intricate and dynamic character development, showcasing characters with transformative potential. Consequently, this adds a layer of complexity and intrigue to the narratives, breaking with the traditional notion of predominantly stable characters. It is crucial not to overlook the integral role of more stable characters, as they provide a constant drop back against which the transformative characters' arcs can unfold.

To acknowledge character change via allegiance, we must initially scrutinize interiority. Given its typical restriction, we are forced to focus on external markers, alongside morality and belief. This includes their behaviour, appearance, and their interactions with other characters – and how they talk about others and are talking about themselves. "When Pearson connects character development with a "higher degree of self-awareness" and "life-transforming decisions," she is referring to changes within interior beliefs and moral values (which prompt

shifting actions) that Smith frames as promoting allegiance" (Mittell, 2015, p. 134). When these shifts occur, they are usually of a short extent, and usually only appear across a single episode or a short arc, rather than being full transformations of core morality, which would prompt a change in allegiance. This argument is what Mittell considers to be the key to examining stability and change. Considering that the means of changing allegiance happens through moral evaluation, prompted by both exterior and interior markers, we are forced to investigate the former, as access to the feelings of a character happens through what we are shown on screen, rendering it necessary to consider shifts in allegiance through the exterior.

A character on *Game of Thrones* that exhibits the traits of an "elaborated character" is Sandor Clegane, played by Rory McCann. He is known for his fierce loyalty and brutality, however, in season 3 he shows moments of compassion when travelling with Arya, protecting her from harm and giving her advice on how to stay alive. In later seasons, he is back to his brutal ways, not recognizing a full character change, but rather a smaller arc – becoming a deeper character for it, but not changing at his core.

Mittell expands on the categories of change, mentioning *character growth, character education, character overhaul* and *character transformation*. For the relevance of this project, the former and the latter are of interest, despite *Game of Thrones* exhibiting characters experiencing all types of changes. "Although wholesale shifts in allegiance are rare, there are instances when we do see characters change (…)" (Mittell, 2015, p. 137), Mittell distinguishes a common model of change as character growth, referring to a slow and subtle development of a character's personality, attitude, and beliefs. The act of growing over the course of a long-term serial suits the coming-of-age narrative, making the arc suitable for young characters, considering how there is a premonition the character will change, and grow into adulthood leaving their youth behind. Mittell mentions that these types of character arcs are often contrasted by an accompanying character, whose actions and personalities are much more stable – highlighting how rare and unique character change is. If you consider Daenerys Targaryen in *Game of Thrones,* she appears to fit this model, as she slowly grows and matures throughout the series. In the early seasons, she is portrayed as naive and uncertain, but as the series progresses, she gains confidence and a stronger sense of her own identity. Her relationships with other characters shape her growth, although her core values and motivation appear to remain relatively stable.

"(…) a *character transformation* of an adult, complete with a gradual shift of morality, attitudes, and sense of self that manifests itself in altered actions and long-term repercussions" (Mittell, 2015, p. 141). This very definition of character transformation fuels the fire of this thesis, as one of its main goals is to find out if this model is applicable to Daenerys Targaryen. This model is more suited for stand-alone films, although there are rare instances of television character transformations that fit this category. Both Pearson and Mittell argue that a full character transformation of long-format serialized television is uncommon, and that change in this format is usually of minor impact, spanning single episodes or across small arcs. Viewers need to invest in characters, and characters need to come across as stable entities, so as to not interfere with audience expectations. Mittell recognizes this need for stability and use of less organic models, and rather than criticizing the nature of the more "basic" change in characters, he accepts it and considers the positive attributes that follow; namely that of creating parasocial relationships, and opportunities to produce an intense emotional effect – resulting in multiple allegiances to various characters, growing or fading across years of on-air television. When the actions of a character become foreign or unmotivated to what the viewer has become accustomed to, it disrupts the relationship between the two, again underlining the importance of stability. Despite that importance, a full character transformation in the serialized format still has a role to play, and when done well becomes an exceptional feature, allowing a series to create dramatic changes and allow the audience to grow, understand, and accept the changes the character goes through. The grand question then becomes, how do we view Daenerys Targaryen's character growth, and does she undergo a complete character transformation – if so, does this evolution into the 'Mad Queen' follow a credible narrative logic?

Analysis

This section presents an analysis of the character Daenerys, using an interdisciplinary approach that combines theories from media studies and cognitive psychology. The aim of this analysis is to gain a deeper understanding of how Daenerys Targaryen's character is constructed in the series and how the audience's relationship with her is developed and maintained over time. By examining the character's actions, motivations, and relationships with other characters, as well as the visual and narrative techniques used to portray her on screen, this analysis seeks to shed light on the complex and dynamic nature of her character's construction in the world of *Game of Thrones*. Ultimately, this analysis aims to contribute to the understanding of how television narratives create engaging and memorable characters, and how viewers become emotionally invested in their stories.

The introduction of Daenerys Targaryen: Establishing recognition

We first meet Daenerys Targaryen in season 1, episode 1, a little more than half an hour into the episode. During that time period, the show introduces a vast number of characters, some attracting more recognition than others, albeit it then becomes an active decision for the viewer whom they find interesting, and who "deserves" their attention. Because of the multiple protagonist structure that *Game of Thrones* carries, it can become difficult for the viewer to execute those decisions comfortably, hence relying on the showrunners to use certain techniques to grant attention to characters that require it. The first example of the magnitude that the character Daenerys Targaryen has to play is revealed in the credits:

[Framegrab of Daenerys Targaryen actor credits] (Season 1, Episode 1, 0:07:36)

The fact that Emilia Clarke, who is portraying Daenerys Targaryen, is mentioned early on in the credits, creates insurance (if spotted) for the audience that the character will be prominent, and when characters are ranked highly on the tier list, it becomes easier to invest in them. This first showcase of recognition might be overlooked by most viewers, especially viewers

that are without knowledge of current actors on the show. The next point of recognition would naturally be the character's first appearance on screen; however, the mentioning of her character comes just before that, during a conversation between Robert Baratheon and Ned Stark, discussing the lineage of the Targaryen, with Robert expressing his hatred towards them, Ned says "It's done, your Grace. The Targaryens are gone"., to which Robert responds, "Not all of them" (Season 1, Episode 1, 0:33:06-15). This foreshadows the eventual introduction of Daenerys Targaryen as a major character. Robert's response implies that there is still at least one Targaryen out there, setting up the audience to expect the appearance of a surviving Targaryen. This creates anticipation and sets up her arrival in the narrative, whilst also being an important factor in the storytelling, having a significant impact on the narrative later on.

Directly after the aforementioned scene, the camera cuts and our character of interest is revealed:

[Framegrab of Daenerys Targaryen] (Season 1, Episode 1, 0:33:20)

She is first pictured behind a curtain, which gradually reveals her back, causing intrigue and a desire from the audience to have the character fully revealed, as the foreshadowing in the previous scene made it interesting to meet this new character. The camera turns and we are presented with her upper body and face in a medium shot, as her brother Viserys Targaryen, played by Harry Lloyd, calls for her. This introduction and hence recognition of her character, might – as Murray Smith puts it – seem obvious, but the distinction between her character and that of her brother becomes highlighted in this scene due to the use of camera techniques. While the

audience at this point is aware of the geological aspects of the North and the South, they are now introduced to a new setting and culture, adding depth to the worldbuilding and expanding viewers' understanding of the different societies and cultural norms present within the show.

The scene introduces two Targaryens, which poses a difficulty for the audience as to where to cast their allegiance (if so invoked). However, the showrunners portray Daenerys in a way that causes recognition of her character, more so than that of her brother. If we consider her very first appearance, the fact that we are introduced to her firstly, and not Viserys, automatically creates an understanding for the audience, that we are now concerned with her journey and how things shape out for her; as her brother yells in the background, we are considering what she is thinking – and what the character yelling wants with her. In terms of what the character is thinking, the audience has access to the medium shot of her upper body and face, granting access to physical actions and allowing them to see the character's facial expressions.

[Framegrab of Daenerys] (Season 1, Episode 1, 0:33:28)

In this particular scene, however, the medium shot somewhat showcases it as a juxtaposition, as the lack of movement and facial expressions are exactly what grants the audience information as to what she is thinking. She does not walk towards the call, referencing her lack of wanting to see her brother, and her eyes do not light up, rather she seems to have her daydreaming interrupted, and when faced with her reality she looks timid and nervous.

The following conversation and introduction of Viserys clearly establish the relationship and hierarchy between the two. Viserys appears as the dominant figure, while Daenerys is seen as submissive. Viserys shows very little regard for her comfort or well-being, he

rather sees her as a piece to his puzzle in his quest for the throne. Daenerys appears in contrast, being portrayed as vulnerable and helpless, which is highlighted when Viserys says "You don't want to wake the dragon, do you?", to which she responds "No" (Season 1, Episode 1, 0:34:54-59). The scene ends with Daenerys being the focal point for the camera, whilst she slowly walks into a hot bath. The steam rises in front of her as she lowers herself, and the score rises in volume and becomes ominous, serving as a dramatic device enhancing the emotional impact of the scene. It signifies a moment of release and liberation for Daenerys, after enduring the emotionally charging and abusive encounter with her brother. She does not have a reaction to the explicitly stated *too* hot water, which shows a turning point in her story, as she begins to assert her agency and take control of her own destiny. The fact that the scene starts with her, and ends with her, makes the audience recognize her as a more important character than her brother, especially considering the state of the camera, score, and dialogue.

Up until this point, without the focalization on Daenerys, it would be difficult to determine which character is most critical to the show, especially considering the entrenched hierarchy and power structure of the medieval setting within *Game of Thrones*. As scholars like Shiloh Carroll argue in *Medivialsm in A Song of Ice and Fire and Game of Thrones* (2019), the series' medieval context helps shape not only its narrative backdrop, but also its characters' behaviours, choices, and development. It is within this medieval context, with its rigid hierarchies and norms, that characters like Daenerys can defy these norms and stand out creating a path for allegiance. However, the context of medievalism will not be a focal point of this thesis, for further information see also Skovgaard, A.K.P *Det stof som middelalderen er gjort af: Om Game of Thrones tapetets middelaldermediering* (2019).

In the following scene, the sibling couple is introduced to the Dothraki by their hostess: "Viserys of House Targaryen, the third of his name, the rightful king of the Andals and the first men. And his sister, Daenerys of House Targaryen (Season 1, Episode 1, 0:36:22-35). The difference in title could persuade the audience to believe Viserys would play a bigger part, especially considering the title of the show, as Daenerys at this point does not possess the requirements to sit on the throne.

However, the showrunners use several cinematic techniques to establish Daenerys as a central character. Firstly, as mentioned before, the opening scene introduces Daenerys before her

brother, giving the audience a sense of recognition of her character. Additionally, the camera focuses on her facial expressions and movement, providing insight into her thoughts and emotions. Secondly, her initial lack of agency and submissive behaviour towards her brother creates a sense of sympathy and ignites a potential desire to see her rise above her circumstances. These techniques work together to establish recognition with Daenerys and to create a connection between the audience and her. Through these narrative and character-building techniques, the showrunners are able to create a sense of recognition and investment in Daenerys' journey, setting the stage for her character arc throughout the series.

While the establishment of recognition with Daenerys is crucial in creating a connection between the audience and her, it is only one part of the equation. The audience's allegiance to a character plays a significant role in their engagement with the narrative. In the case of *Game of Thrones*, where moral ambiguity and shifting alliances are prevalent, the audience's alignment with certain characters can have a significant impact on their investment in the story. Therefore, it becomes worth exploring how the showrunners managed to apply these aforementioned techniques to shape the audience's alignment with Daenerys.

The early foundations of alignment

The audience becomes aligned with Daenerys from the very first episode; she is but a young woman, stranded in a foreign country, with her only kin being a brother that "(…) would let his [Khal Drogo's] whole tribe fuck you, all 40,000 men, and their horses too, if that's what it took" (Season 1, Episode 1, 0:39:09-19). Albeit, it does not go that far, but after being traded in a forced arranged marriage to Khal Drogo, played by Jason Momoa, she is forced by him to consummate the marriage – visibly nonconsensual.

[Framegrab of Daenerys and Drogo consummating the marriage] (Season 1, Episode 1, 0:57:12)

        The thought of her being all alone in the world, with the only ally being her cruel and indecent brother, now traded into a foreign and violent culture forced to entertain the sexual desires of a brutal man she does not know – all of this serves to invoke alignment. As stated, her dialogue in the first episode is next to non-existent, and the communication between her and the audience is mostly via facial expressions. The scenes that centre around Daenerys have a heavy use of close-ups to convey her thoughts and feelings. The actor manages to portray the character going through a range of emotions, including fear, uncertainty, and vulnerability. As Drogo undresses her, she looks nervous and hesitant, and her body language is defensive and closed off. She tries to avoid eye contact with Drogo, and it appears as if she is trying to make herself as small as possible – trying to hide with nothing to cover her. The lighting in the scene is dark and gloomy, with deep shadows and colours that have muted tones which contribute to the overall sense of foreboding. The score has a haunting quality to it, with a slow and increasingly mournful melody that adds to the sense of danger and uncertainty. The first episode does an excellent job of conveying the complex emotions and struggles that Daenerys is feeling, and the audience becomes well aware of her emotional and physical vulnerability. This, in turn, creates a strong sense of empathy and compassion towards her character, further solidifying the alignment, while setting the stage for the challenges and conflicts that she will face as she tries to navigate this new and dangerous world – seemingly alone.

        It can safely be said that after the first episode, the audience recognizes Daenerys as a central character and that she evokes alignment based on how the narrative and the actor portrayed the character. Albeit, as the series contain a vast number of characters that likewise

encourages the audience to invest in them, it then becomes a question of whether the characters invite the notion of allegiance. Although the question of allegiance cannot be answered wholly, as it is dependent on the particular viewer, it can still be contemplated and examined through key moments of Daenerys' journey, which is why before we are able to determine the existence of allegiance, we will examine whether the alignment is continuous, and how she grows as a character.

As Mittell mentions, audiences are able to have alignments with multiple characters, which could be a cause for competition, but as the show carries multiple plotlines, the nature of being attached to different characters helps shape the complex narrative as a whole. An example of this is when Robert and Ned once again discuss the issue of the last Targaryens, with Robert being committed to forcefully ending their lineage, to which Ned replies: "She's little more than a child. (…) Tell me we're not speaking of this" (Season 1, Episode 2, 23:30-36). While the character of Ned and Daenerys have never met, Ned still recognizes her as innocent, despite the alleged wrongdoings of her father. This helps the plot, as both Ned and Daenerys are characters that we at this point consider us aligned with, and both characters are considered central. It also serves as a bridge between the different plotlines, as Daenerys is yet to set foot on Westeros, and yet to pose a threat to Robert. This continuity is important for the show, as it helps to build a more cohesive and immersive world that feels grounded in the actions and motivations of its characters. By creating a web of interconnecting plotlines and character alignments, the show can create a more nuanced and realistic portrayal of the world within *Game of Thrones,* which in turn helps to draw in the audience and keep them engaged in the narrative. While all of this is true for this particular example, it also serves as a key plot moment in the narrative, considering how it is a setup and slight foreshadowing of what is to come; bearing in mind how Ned's supposed bastard Jon, is in fact a Targaryen, hence giving Ned another reason to argue against the assassination of Daenerys, although not revealed until much later in the series – more on this later.

Already by the second episode, there are vast differences in Daenerys' behaviour and attitude. In great contrast to her first sexual encounter with Drogo, the third time comes across as consensual and enjoyable:

[Daenerys' and Drogo's third sexual encounter] (Season 1, Episode 2, 42:09)

The camera focuses on the intimacy and passion between the two, with the scene being shot in a more romantic and sensual manner. The shift in tone from the previous encounter underlines the change in the dynamic between the characters, which now could be considered to be based on mutual respect. Daenerys' body language is no longer closed, and she is not the submissive, timid, little girl from earlier. Instead, she has shown growth and she has embraced the Dothraki language, putting in effort to learn the language and their ways, while seeking information on how to please her now husband. During the scene, she forcefully takes charge, not being afraid of Drogo's power or position, but instead, asserting her own desires and agency. Drogo is surprised, yet intrigued, and the camera features close-ups of their faces, visibly showing enjoyment. This newfound confidence and assertiveness are a significant development for Daenerys' character, as it shows her growing into a more self-assured and empowered woman. This scene also deals with the issues of hierarchy, as she challenges the traditional power dynamics between men and women, showing the audience that while her character might be that of a young and alone female – she is still strong and capable of competing equally with the opposite sex. Lastly, the positive portrayal of the relationship allows the audience to invest in Daenerys further, as her chances for success greatly rise, no longer being dependent on her brother for her future endeavours.

In the third episode of the first season, Daenerys begins to take on her newfound role, and it becomes highlighted how she grows from passive to taking charge; the scene in question begins with her questioning the practicalities of the slaves owned by the Dothraki. She

then orders the horde to stop, prompting a response from her new companion Jorah Mormont, played by Iain Glen, who says "You're learning to talk like a Queen", to which she responds, "Not a Queen. A Khaleesi" (Season 1, Episode 3, 35:50-55). This exchange between Jorah and Daenerys represents a significant turning point for her character, as she has begun to take ownership of her new role and identity. Jorah's comment suggests that she is displaying leadership qualities and taking charge in a way that befits a true ruler. However, the fact that Daenerys reject the title of Queen, and identifies herself as Khaleesi, goes to show she is not simply trying to fit into a pre-existing power structure but instead is trying to make her own place in the world. It also sheds light on her respect for the culture of the people she now leads – a recurring theme throughout her character arc. It is, however, also a step away from her brother and his ideologies, as the title he bestows himself is king – with a clear vision of conquering Westeros, an ideology Daenerys has yet to reveal to share, culminating in uncertainty and curiosity towards her character's continued development.

After she calls the horde to a halt, she enters the willows with a sense of tranquillity and profoundness, underlined by the tracking shot following her character behind the willows, enhanced by the score that implores a sense of wonder. The score suddenly becomes dramatic and gloomy, indicating a presence of danger; and sure enough, Viserys comes riding towards her with his sword drawn.

[Framegrab of Viserys threatening Daenerys] (Season 1, Episode 3, 36:48)

The framegrab pictures Viserys threatening Daenerys on the ground of making him stop, not being particularly fond of receiving orders from his younger sister – whom he merely sees as an object to trade to gain favour in reaching his goal. This scene is significant, as while we have

established Daenerys is starting to take charge and unfold into her new identity, she is still within the grasp of her brother. Once he grabs her physically, it is as if she freezes entirely, unable to move or answer to the immediate danger, despite having become more assertive and rising to the task of becoming a Khaleesi, and matching the power displayed by her husband. This can be explained by her kindness and passion, seeing as the scene continues with Viserys being captured by the neck with a whip from one of the Dothraki riders, questioning Daenerys whether she wants him killed. She passionately commands and begs that no harm is to befall Viserys. The audience, in this scene, considers Viserys with very little if any alignment, and almost hopes that Daenerys will finally rid herself of her brother and become free of the grasp he holds on her. Yet, she decides to show mercy, recognizing that he is still her brother, allowing him to continue his quest beside her. The scene unfolds, and Jorah whom Viserys previously believed to be sworn to him, ignores his requests and instead seeks to answer to Daenerys from this point on – becoming one of the first of many, to show her loyalty and consider her the true ruler of Westeros.

The familial connection she shares with Viserys, which in turn guarantees his safety – does not last long. In season 1, episode 6, Viserys threatens her once again.

[Framegrab of Daenerys being threatened by Viserys] (48:42)

However, this time it is different as Daenerys has become pregnant, and Viserys is threatening both her and her unborn child. The character's facial expression in this framegrab is vastly different from the last. The former pictured her nervous and afraid, while this one clearly shows her contemplating his fate. She is listening to the Dothraki talking about giving him the crown – a crown that will kill him, and her facial expression relay information to the viewer, clearly showcasing how she is rationally trying to consider her options, finally deciding not to stop him from receiving his golden crown. While the audience had been waiting for her to rid herself of him,

the scene could be considered to make you question your allegiance, however, the behaviour and actions of Viserys justify his outcome. Instead, the fact that Daenerys refused to look away when Viserys was killed, could be interpreted as a sign of strength and determination. It shows that she is now willing to do what needs to be done to achieve her goals, even if it means sacrificing her own family members. It may also be seen as a symbol of her finally breaking free from her past, and the abusive relationship she and her brother shared.

The contrasting reactions of Daenerys in the mentioned scenes give viewers insight into the layered depth of her character and foreshadow her character's eventual change. Foreshadowing, in this context, serves as a narrative device that hints at critical developments or events that are yet to transpire, setting the groundwork for future narrative payoff, by subtly clueing the audience into her oncoming moral dilemmas and consequential choices.

By the end of the sixth episode, Daenerys has fully accepted her destiny as a leader and the last true 'dragon'. This is illustrated when she coldly observes her brother's death, declaring: "He was no dragon. Fire cannot kill a dragon" (Season 1, Episode 6, 51:27-30). The quote is a personal revelation, signifying her transition from a submissive young girl to that of a resolute leader. It hints at her eventual evolution into the 'Mad Queen'. This particular scene effectively symbolizes her growing desensitization to violence and death, while foreshadowing the tragic trajectory of her character.

Daenerys says to Jorah: "My brother was a fool, I know, but he was the rightful heir to the Seven Kingdoms" (Season 1, Episode 7, 28:26-30). This quote is a significant moment in her character development, as it highlights a shift in her motivations and desires. Prior to this point, Daenerys' primary motivation was to merely return to her home of Westeros, not necessarily to rule it. This change can be analysed in terms of narrative progression and character development. From a narrative perspective, the quote contributes to the overall coherence of the story, as the audience is invested in the intertwining plotlines of the series, they are keen to see characters come together and witness the unfolding of key events. Daenerys' change of heart, from merely desiring to return to Westeros to actively pursuing the Iron Throne, ensures that her storyline remains relevant and compelling. The audience's initial disappointment at her unsuccessful efforts to persuade Drogo to cross the seas, become replaced with excitement and curiosity, as he now pledges to conquer the Iron Throne, due to the attempt from Robert Baratheon to assassinate

Daenerys. This foreshadows an eventual convergence of major characters and events, ensuring the storyline of Daenerys is relevant.

In terms of character development, the quote marks a turning point for Daenerys. The attempt on her life and the safety of her unborn child becomes a catalyst for her determination to conquer Westeros. The personal stakes in the quest for the Iron Throne add depth and complexity to her motivations and grant the audience more access to her interior state, resulting in a deeper alignment. Daenerys' newfound resolve is not just about reclaiming her family's legacy, but also about ensuring her own safety and that of her child. This growth in character resonates with the audience and contributes to a stronger emotional connection with her character while inviting allegiance. Considering how Daenerys acknowledges the weakness of her brother, while simultaneously recognizing the legitimacy of her claim to the throne, showcases to the audience that she is capable of understanding the power dynamics at play in Westeros – this moment of insight allows her character to grow from a passive character bound by her either Viserys' or Drogo's desires, to finally becoming an active protagonist who pursues her own goals. The quote ultimately becomes crucial for the narrative structure while being a key moment for her character development.

The initial focus of this analysis has been centred primarily on the first season – and rightfully so. Jason Mittell states that: "In a long-form serial, attachment is a crucial variable, as our relative connection to individuals can shift from episode to episode (…)" (Mittell, 2015, 129). The first season provides us with ten episodes, during which Daenerys Targaryen is given substantial screen time. This effectively fosters a connection between the audience and her character, making it possible for the audience to become attached and produce allegiance towards her. Her character elicits sympathy in terms of the challenges she faces, as well as the struggles of her traumatic past. However, as her narrative unfolds across the Narrow Sea, it initially appears less integral to the overarching plot, as other characters within the series also contest for audience allegiance and seems to hold more immediate relevance to the primary narrative.

This perception is mitigated as Daenerys begins to recognize and pursue her true ambitions, signalling to the audience that her character – to which they have already established alignment with – is destined to cross with other key characters in the series. This narrative anticipation serves to keep the audience invested in her character, even though her storyline

initially seems separate from the central plot. By the end of the first season, Daenerys has firmly established herself as a key player in the Game of Thrones. Her narrative arc has been carefully crafted to command audience sympathy and alignment – dominantly inviting allegiance. As the series progresses, this initial groundwork proves crucial in maintaining allegiance, as her journey takes unexpected turns and her decisions become increasingly complex and morally ambiguous, hence making this early establishment of audience alignment a pivotal point in ensuring that her character arc remains a significant point of engagement throughout the series.

Daenerys' gentle heart and early signs of moral ambiguity

The second season introduces Daenerys and her remaining followers navigating across the Red Waste, struggling with intense heat, and suffering from scarcity of food and water. Daenerys does not seem concerned with her own well-being, but rather that of her followers: "I promised to protect them. Promised them their enemies would die screaming. How do I make starvation scream?" (Season 2, Episode 1, 15:50-55). This phase introduces a marked shift in the source of audience alignment with Daenerys. Initially, the alignment was primarily anchored in sympathy evoked by the injustices she endured throughout her life. However, in this context, the alignment evolves beyond mere sympathy for her individual plight – as she now shows a willingness to carry the responsibility for her followers' survival. Her genuine concern for their well-being serves to deepen the audience's allegiance.

The quote encapsulates her transition from a victim to a compassionate leader who is willing to fight for her people. The audience's alignment is no longer merely out of sympathy due to her victimhood; instead, they are now also aligning with her because of her empathy towards her followers, commitment to her responsibilities, and emerging leadership qualities. The shift in the basis of audience alignment is crucial for her character development, as her newfound qualities forge a deeper connection between Daenerys and her followers – and consequently with the audience.

[Framegrab of Daenerys after her horse died] (Season 2, Episode 1, 15:50)

The framegrab of Daenerys falling to her knees to console her dying horse is interesting in a number of ways. In terms of framing and composition, the central positioning of Daenerys in the image, with Jorah slightly behind her, draws the viewer's attention to her as the focal point. The framing emphasizes her importance and leadership role within the group. The placement of the Dothraki in a half-circle surrounding her enhances a sense of unity and support, while also highlighting their concern and worry. The composition suggests that Daenerys is at the centre – and that her actions will determine the future for them all. In terms of body language and facial expressions, Daenerys looks exhausted, troubled, and grieving. These expressions are pivotal in conveying her emotional state, as through the use of close-ups and careful framing the cinematography captures the subtle nuances of her facial expressions, allowing the audience to empathize with her loss and sense of hopelessness. The act of physically kneeling demonstrates her vulnerability and willingness to connect with her people on a personal level – not considering herself above them, thus creating a deeper emotional impact.

While cinematic techniques do provide a window into Daenerys' interior state, the perspectives of other characters in relation to her are also instrumental in shaping audience alignment: "Thus while we want to gauge a character's interiority, we judge characters mostly by what they do, cued by how other characters regard, interact with, and talk about them (…)" (Mittell, 2015, p. 135).

The scene where Daenerys converses with Rakharo, one of her loyal bloodriders, exemplifies this dynamic. During their exchange, they are speaking in Dothraki, however, Daenerys unexpectedly switches to the "common tongue" and Rakharo responds in kind.

[Framegrab of Rakharo] (Season 2, Episode 1, 17:24)

This interaction holds significance when considering the cultural context of the Dothraki – a patriarchal, nomadic warrior society. Their allegiance to Daenerys, a young woman from a foreign culture, is indeed exceptional. This exceptional relationship established between her and the Dothraki advances the allegiance of the viewer, as it showcases Daenerys' abilities to bridge the cultural gaps and earn the respect and loyalty of the warrior society. She manages to challenge and subvert the initial perception of the Dothraki as savage and uncontrollable, instead presenting them as a powerful force that she can lead and inspire. Her conversation with Rakharo contributes to the viewers' alignment with her character, as they witness the development of personal connections and the building of mutual trust. Daenerys managed to become close to the Dothraki by embracing their customs. While the viewer anticipated that, as it appeared she was out of options and did not have a say in the matter of the arranged marriage, the audience could be considered surprised and intrigued to learn how some of the Dothraki would embrace her culture as well.

With Rakharo smiling and conversing in the common tongue, Daenerys can be considered a unifying figure, bringing together diverse groups under her leadership – this resonates with the audience, because if Daenerys can make cold-blooded warrior men align with her, by showing compassion, strength, and leadership, surely the audience will as well?

The relationships Daenerys forms on her journey play a significant role in facilitating audience alignment. Her ability to win followers from diverse backgrounds and circumstances speaks to her charisma, leadership skills, and the compelling nature of her cause. One of the most prominent followers she accrues is Ser Jorah Mormont, whose evolving relationship with Daenerys offers insight into her character. In season 2, episode 5, Daenerys and Jorah engage in a heated argument, which ends up with Daenerys shouting at him, requiring to know his intentions: "To see

you on the Iron Throne" Jorah says, to which she responds rather angrily: "Why?". "You have a good claim. A title. A birthright. But you have something more than that. You may cover it up and deny it, but you have a gentle heart. You would not only be respected and feared, you would be loved" (Season 2, Episode 5, 50:00-15).

[Framegrab of Daenerys' and Jorah's argument] (Season 2, Episode 5, 50:41)

This argument showcases the complexity of their relationship, while simultaneously highlighting the traits for which Jorah follows her and why he sees her on the Iron Throne. This exchange between the two illuminates several key aspects of Daenerys' character that contributes to audience alignment. Firstly, the fact that Jorah endorses her carries weight, not just because of his character's perceived wisdom and experience, but also due to the evolution of their relationship. He began as a spy serving her enemies, then became a trusted advisor and eventually a loyal supporter. His transformation is a testament to Daenerys' ability to inspire loyalty and trust, even in unlikely circumstances. Furthermore, with the audience bearing witness to Jorah's journey, from betrayal to redemption, they are likely to value his judgement, making his endorsement of Daenerys' potential rule even more impactful.

Secondly, the history of misrule in Westeros is a crucial backdrop against which Daenerys' style of leadership is juxtaposed. This contrast is vital to understanding audience alignment, as characters like the Mad King or even King Joffrey Baratheon exemplify the corruption, cruelty, and madness that power can breed. Daenerys presents an alternative model of leadership, with her compassion, sense of justice and desire to break the well-known "wheel" of power, represents a departure from the status quo within the world of *Game of Thrones* which deeply resonates with audiences, as she represents a more virtuous and capable leadership.

Thirdly, Jorah's mention of Daenerys' "gentle heart" underscores the duality of her character – her capacity for both ferocity and kindness. This balance makes her a complex and

multi-dimensional character, which appeals to the audience and can deepen engagement and alignment. Importantly, this aspect of her character also becomes a source of tension as she navigates her leadership, which helps further intensify audience alignment in her journey.

Lastly, the argument exposes her vulnerabilities, revealing the internal and external conflicts she contends with. It is a reminder of her relative youth and inexperience and the immense pressure she is currently under. These moments help to humanize Daenerys, making her a more relatable character to the audience. With the great challenges ahead of her, a layer of suspense and uncertainty to her narrative arises with the complications of her vulnerabilities, which will lead to the audience contemplating how she will overcome them, heightening viewer engagement and alignment with her.

To be respected, feared and loved at the same time is definitely a significant feat, and an intricate balancing act – one that Daenerys continually navigates throughout the series. Her actions during the pivotal scene in Astapor serve as a crucial turning point for her character, demonstrating the aforementioned complex duality of her nature. The scene commences with Daenerys ostensibly agreeing to trade one of her dragons, Drogon, for the Unsullied army. This decision already raises eyebrows among her followers as well as the audience, as it appears uncharacteristically naïve and desperate. However, the subsequent revelation of fluency in High Valyrian, unbeknownst to the slaver Kraznys and the audience, reinstates her cunning, underlining her ability to manipulate power dynamics to her advantage.

The scene escalates into a brutal display of power, as Daenerys commands the Unsullied to slay the slave masters: "Unsullied! Slay the masters, slay the soldiers, slay every man who holds a whip, but harm no child. Strike the chains off every slave you see!" (Season 3, Episode 4, 48:39-48:49). This act, while violent, offers a nuanced view of her leadership, forcing the audience to grapple with the ethical implications of her actions. The execution of slave masters, though shocking, is a response to the systemic cruelty inherent in Astapor, evoking a paradoxical sentiment of understanding within the audience. Her actions are jarringly violent, but not unlike when she allows the Dothraki to kill her brother. This time, however, the violence was of a larger scale, violence to characters that had zero dialogue, making the killings of the Astapor inhabitants a cause for moral evaluation of her character within the audience.

Although the allegiance towards Daenerys might not waver, the showrunners

undoubtedly intended to raise grounds for moral evaluation of her character. The scene could have played out in a manner of positivity, with Daenerys and her followers sharing the joy of gaining a new army, without the loss of a dragon, while simultaneously freeing the world of some horrible men.

[Framegrab of Daenerys as she is burning the slave masters and the aftermath]
(Season 4,   Episode 5, 49:27 & 50:04)

[Framegrab of Daenerys after her victory] (Season 3, Episode 4, 49:49)

This, however, was not the route the showrunners chose to go. Instead, they employ cinematic techniques that enhance the emotional complexity. The setting is deliberately grim, with

dark shadows and thick smoke creating an ominous atmosphere. The sombre music adds to the tension, demanding reflection on the gravity of Daenerys' decision. It is a stark visual and auditory representation of the actions, making the audience reflect on her actions, as the mood and setting have become dark and grievous.

The first framegrab illustrates Daenerys, as her dragons light the slavers on fire. She is pictured in a medium close-up, capturing her from the shoulders up. The fire from her dragons vividly rises in the background, creating a dramatic scene. Despite all the horror happening around Daenerys, her face is stark and unmoving. The camera tilts up, portraying Daenerys in a low-angle shot, conveying a position of power. This provides the audience with information about her decisions; she is determined. Her facial expression conveys the fact that her actions are deliberate and that she stands by them – not second-guessing herself, despite what is now happening. In the final framegrab, Daenerys is depicted as a silhouetted figure against the light entering the city, a symbolic representation of her actions' moral ambiguity. These visual cues serve to reaffirm the deliberation behind her actions and demand a re-evaluation of audience allegiance.

The sequence concludes with a resonant act of liberation as Daenerys emancipates the Unsullied. This gesture of compassion and justice provides a crucial counterpoint to the preceding brutality, re-establishing her commitment to freedom and justice. The juxtaposition of these acts emphasizes the duality in her leadership, reflecting her ability to balance power with empathy. It is a powerful demonstration of her leadership style, one that tests, reshapes, and potentially strengthens the audience's allegiance to her.

Daenerys Targaryen's character complexity is a fundamental component that shapes audience allegiance. Her unique blend of attributes – her might juxtaposed with her kindness, her pursuit for power controlled by her sense of fairness – form a relatable and multi-faceted character. This intricacy elicits viewer empathy and alignment, yet it is not without its tentative qualities. A shift in this balance, as witnessed in the Astapor scene, can prompt a rethinking of her moral compass. This pivotal scene exemplifies Daenerys' capacity for both heroic and draconian actions, introducing moral ambiguity into her character. The dynamic of her characterization creates a fluctuating relationship with the audience, as there is a constant need to redefine it throughout the narrative arc of the series.

Daenerys manifests her position as a liberator

Following the events in season 3, episode 4, the audience is left to grapple with the moral ambiguity of Daenerys' actions, potentially leading to a re-evaluation of their allegiance. Daenerys' exercise of power, though fierce and decisive, also revealed an unnerving capacity for violence. This episode in turn presented a crucial test of audience alignment, challenging them to consider whether her acts of retribution were indeed justifiable. However, as the narrative unfolds, it begins to shape her journey in a more redeeming light, namely beginning with the following dialogue: "How many slaves are there in Yunkai?" Daenerys asks, "200,000, if not more" Jorah replies. "Then we have 200,000 reasons to take the city" Daenerys responds (Season 3, Episode 7, 20:04-13).

This conversation highlights her determination to free the oppressed and serves as a catalyst for her actions in the episodes that follow. The dialogue also shows how her evolving goals shift from personal ambitions to a larger mission of fighting for justice and freedom on a grand scale. By redefining her goals, Daenerys undergoes significant character growth. As mentioned in the theory section, this type of growth arc is common with young characters, and even when they are older, often seen in contrast with "(…) stable adults whose personalities and actions are much more static, highlighting how character change is far from universal" (Mittell, 2015, p. 138).

[Framegrabs of Daenerys and Jorah] (Season 3, Episode 7, 20:10 & 20:15)

The decision by Daenerys to liberate the slaves of Yunkai finds little resonance with her trusted advisor, Jorah. The first framegrab presents a close-up of Daenerys, her countenance is stern and determined, much like the resolute expression she displayed during the events in Astapor. Jorah very well knows this look by now, and despite him advocating against making the

efforts to engage in the politics of yet another slave city, he does not object in the end, concluding the conversation with silence. The framegrab featuring Jorah also offers a close-up, allowing us to effectively try to discern his interior state through exterior markers: his lips are taut, his brow furrowed, and his eyes barely open – to the point of appearing downward, avoiding Daenerys' gaze rather than meeting it. This visual representation shows that while Daenerys' is experiencing growth finding agency in helping the oppressed, Jorah does not share her concern. He then becomes more of a static character, concerned with the task at hand, remaining largely unaltered in his worldview and approach – his primary focus being fixed on Daenerys' ascendancy to the Iron Throne.

Daenerys on the other hand, transcends her initial quest for power and becomes a leader who seeks to dismantle the oppressive systems that keep the marginalized in chains. This evolution highlights her capacity for empathy and her willingness to take action to rectify the injustices she encounters. This pivotal dialogue prompts the audience to reassess their allegiance to Daenerys, as it challenges them to navigate the moral complexities of her past actions and determine whether her pursuit of justice justifies the means she employs.

While the nature of her empathy towards the oppressed is an inherent aspect in terms of inviting allegiance, it also presents a moral dilemma. The question remains as to whether the use of force and conquest is the most ethical way to achieve it: "My Unsullied need practice. I was told to blood them early" (Season 3, Episode 7, 23:07). This quote from Daenerys' when speaking with the slavers of Yunkai, exposes the tension between Daenerys' compassionate intentions and the more violent means she threatens to employ in order to achieve her goals. The moral evaluation of this particular instance becomes easier for the audience due to several considerations.

Daenerys does not cunningly resort to violence; instead, she exercises a measured approach to achieve her goals. Prior to taking action, she reciprocates her threats to both the slavers and the Second Sons, engaging in diplomatic efforts to bring about the change she seeks. Although the attempt in this instance fails, she demonstrates a willingness to achieve her goals peacefully. This time, she also actively seeks input and guidance from her advisors and followers – by involving them in her plans, she fosters a sense of collaboration and inclusivity. This allows the audience to follow the dialogue behind her actions, cementing a better understanding of the

means of the upcoming assault on Yunkai. Likewise, the fact that the attack is not impulsive and sudden, like the display of violence in Astapor, adds to the audience's perception of her strategic and calculated prowess, as the attack is a complex and well-thought-out plan. This careful planning and open consultation help maintain the audience's allegiance, as they witness her willingness to consider different perspectives and make calculated decisions.

The conquest of Yunkai, though undeniably violent, is intriguingly not orchestrated solely and directly by Daenerys herself. Instead, the task falls upon the shoulders of three of her most loyal followers. Pitted against seemingly insurmountable odds, they confront a heavily armed force, greatly outnumbering them. Yet, against all expectations, they emerge victorious. This scenario strategically positions Daenerys and her allies as the "underdogs", a narrative device which naturally makes the audience inclined to root for them. Likewise, the fact that this violent encounter is not a massacre of defenceless individuals, but a battle against prepared soldiers, significantly alleviates concerns regarding Daenerys' use of force. The violence here can be considered a by-product of war, an unfortunate – yet sometimes inevitable – path to achieving larger objectives. This nuanced portrayal serves to further promote audience allegiance, cementing Daenerys' image as a leader who, while willing to engage in battle, does so thoughtfully and not without cause.

Thus, as we approach the denouement of Daenerys' Yunkai storyline in Season 3, Episode 10, the stage is set for a powerful culmination of her character arc. Her success in the liberation of the Yunkai slaves is encapsulated in her dialogue: "You do not owe me your freedom. I cannot give it to you. Your freedom is not mine to give. It belongs to you and you alone (0:58:25-36). This statement embodies her empathetic and sympathetic leadership style, emphasizing the redeeming quality of her "gentle heart". It further anchors the allegiance – both within the characters in *Game of Thrones* as well as with the audience. Her words signify respect for the autonomy of the people of Yunkai, and acknowledge their inherent rights, reinforcing her role as a liberator – rather than a conqueror.

[Framegrab of Daenerys being lifted by the liberated slaves and Jorah's reaction]

(Season 3, Episode 10, 1:00:54 & 56)

[Daenerys encapsulated by the liberated slaves] (Season 3, Episode 10, 1:01:10)

Daenerys receives praise from the newly liberated slaves, as they all chant "Mhysa" the local term for "mother". The word not only functions as the title of the episode, but it also symbolizes the deep respect and adoration the Yunkai people have developed for Daenerys. It echoes the role she has taken on as their liberator and protector, further solidifying her position as a leader of compassion and strength. Upon hearing the chants, Daenerys confidently steps into the crowd – despite the caution of her advisors – allowing herself to be elevated by the Yunkai people. The first framegrab reveals Daenerys in a close-up with a broad, heartfelt smile. It captures her genuine happiness and sense of accomplishment. The broad smile indicates that her joy stems, not from a power-hungry desire to rule, but rather from the satisfaction of having freed the oppressed.

This display of unadulterated emotion proves a stark contrast to the stern, determined look she wore upon her arrival at Yunkai. It humanizes her character, making her more relatable and thus strengthening the viewers' allegiance towards her.

In the second framegrab, the camera turns to Jorah with his face showing a mixture of surprise and awe. This close-up presents a noticeable shift from his earlier, more sceptical expression. Jorah's astonishment indicates that even he, her close confidant, underestimated the transformative power of Daenerys' leadership. The contrast found in his reactions further highlights Daenerys' growth and her ability to inspire loyalty and admiration.

The episode and season conclude with a powerful overhead shot displaying Daenerys amidst the multitude of Yunkai people, their hands reaching towards her in a gesture of unity and gratitude. Her dragons soar above, an awe-inspiring spectacle – even and especially in the world of *Game of Thrones* – that amplifies the grandeur of the moment. This compelling visual representation encapsulates the far-reaching impact of Daenerys' actions and the intricacy of her character. By the end of season 3, her character heavily promotes allegiance with audience alignment being solidified.

As the series progresses into later seasons, the audience's established alignment and fondness for Daenerys complicates and challenges the process of moral evaluation. The allegiance manifested towards her by the end of this season becomes a lens through which subsequent actions are viewed – potentially tinting moral ambiguities with shades of sympathy and understanding – or as Mittell puts it: "Our serial memories help sustain lingering allegiance, despite his [Walter White in Breaking Bad] irredeemable acts along the way" (Mittell, 2015, p. 156). It is this intricate balance between character development, moral ambiguity, and viewer allegiance that contributes to the complex and engaging character of Daenerys.

The complex dynamics of Daenerys navigating her power

In season 4, Daenerys sets her sights on Meereen, determined to liberate the city and seize control. At this point, the audience cheers her on, as they are aware of the horrible circumstances the slaves are subdued to inside the city. Like Daenerys' previous act of liberation, it is done thoughtfully, minimizing the exercise of force and violence. This time, rather than solely relying on the brunt force of her army and dragons, she leverages the power of the slaves themselves, orchestrating a rebellion from within.

[Framegrab of Mereen slaves & Daenerys] [Season 4, Episode 4, 07:50 & 07:58)

The first framegrab captures a moment of violence, in fact, the sole instance of such in the process of seizing control of Meereen. The character in the image finds himself surrounded by a horde of slaves, potentially meeting his demise – although the audience is left to imagine it, considering that the scene cuts away. Merely eight seconds later, the second framegrab emerges, revealing Daenerys beaming alongside the liberated slaves who cheer her on. These two images starkly contrast each other, not only in their visual composition but also in the emotional tones they evoke.

The first image employs a dark colour scheme, bathed in a blue-tinted light. It is shot from an overhead perspective, concluding with a cutaway, deliberately creating a sense of detachment between the violence and the audience. In contrast, the second image emanates brightness and warmth, filled with smiling faces and a vibrant colour palette. The striking contrast serves to sustain the allegiance between Daenerys and the audience. While acts of violence and murder do transpire, they never occur directly at the hands of Daenerys herself. Instead, she is praised for her role as liberator, deftly shaping her character around acts of goodness, rather than focusing on the darker aspects of her journey.

Shortly after, the audience is confronted with Daenerys' intent to carry out violence, as she questions Jorah: "Remind me Sir Jorah, how many children did the Great Masters nail to mileposts?" (Season 4, Episode 4, 08:43-45). The significance of her inquiry is tangible, setting the stage for what is to come. In a telling closeup, Daenerys locks eyes with Greyworm, a silent exchange that signals her resolve. He nods to another guard, leaving no doubt that she intends to reciprocate the masters' cruelty. It is at this pivotal moment that Barristan Selmy, played by Ian McElhinney, one of Daenerys' trusted advisors and protectors, makes a heartfelt plea. He

advocates for a response of mercy, suggesting that: "sometimes it is better to answer injustice with mercy", to which she counters, with absolute determination: "I will answer injustice with justice" (Season 4, Episode 4, 09:16-23).

[Framegrab of Daenerys and Barristan] (Season 4, Episode 4, 09:23 & 09:25)

The silent command issued by Daenerys may initially startle the audience, yet it evokes a complex mix of emotions rather than a sheer sense of revulsion. The targets of her order are wicked men who have committed heinous crimes, allowing the audience to find some understanding in her desire for retribution. There is a certain sympathy towards her pursuit of justice, however unorthodox it may be, as an argument can be made that the masters should not escape unpunished.

However, when Barristan openly challenges her choices, voicing his concerns both audibly and visibly, a new perspective unfolds. This perspective carries weight, particularly considering Barristan's reputation as a respectable and honourable character. It prompts the audience to reconsider their initial stance, raising significant questions about the moral complexities surrounding Daenerys' decisions and the potential consequences that may arise from her continuous pursuit of justice.

This scene is yet another pivotal moment in demonstrating the growing depth of Daenerys' characterization and the complexity of her moral standing. It accentuates the tension between her righteous intent and the violent means she employs, adding to the groundwork for future development in the following seasons. Simultaneously, the scene deepens our understanding of Barristan's role as a moral compass within the narrative, like that of Jorah's, with

them voicing their concerns for her decision making signalling the potential risks she faces if she chooses that path.

The above framegrabs draw strong parallels with those featuring Daenerys and Jorah from Season 3, Episode 7. Just as Jorah was then, Barristan is depicted as visibly disheartened in the scene. His eyes squint and shift, evading Daenerys' intense gaze. The creased brow and opening and closing of his mouth, punctuated by audible exhales, further illustrate his disappointment. He opts for silence in response to her conclusive statement, acknowledging the determination behind her words.

Barristan can be similarly described in terms used by Mittell as a "static and stable" character. This description aptly aligns with audience perceptions, acknowledging his steadfast adherence to his ideals and worldview. Such consistency stands in great contrast to that of Daenerys' character, which by this stage is recognized by the audience as dynamic and evolving. The audience has come to anticipate changes in her approach, as she continually reassesses her decisions as she grows – a growth that is influenced by her experiences, her advisors, and her innate personal quest for justice.

Daenerys' character is hence – while evolving and dynamic – effectively balanced by the presence of static and stable characters in her council. The unwavering and consistent nature of these surrounding figures, such as Jorah and Barristan, provides a reference point from which to assess Daenerys' development. It is their reactions and objections that draw the audience's attention to her decisions, especially when she steers towards morally ambiguous territory. This balance becomes a key element in the storytelling, as it subtly prompts the audience to question her methods and motivations, resulting in deeper engagement with the narrative. It is hence in the stable and trustworthy characters surrounding Daenerys, that the audience becomes aware of her shifting ideals and actions, forcing them to become more involved, putting her character under the microscope.

[Framegrab of Daenerys' retribution and herself standing on top of the city] (Season 4, Episode 4, 09:37 & 10:07)

The task of assessing audience allegiance to Daenerys – determining whether she is considered worthy of loyalty – proves to be a complex task. It would be misleading to conclude with certainty whether Daenerys has successfully garnered allegiance from the audience at this point, particularly given that the analysis so far has highlighted scenes that both promote and undermine allegiance.

This complexity appears to be a deliberate choice by the showrunners, as evidenced by the rapid sequences of diverse portrayals captured in the previous six framegrabs, which are all taken within a span of less than three minutes. These scenes highlight the multi-faceted nature of Daenerys' character: first, she is depicted as radiant and beloved, then as resolute, with an underlying intent for violence, and finally as a figure of supreme authority, aloof and imposing, surveying her newly conquered realm from above.

The final image reveals Daenerys atop Meereen, elevated far above the masses. As the camera pulls away and tilts upwards, her position of power and prominence is emphasized, evoking a sense of awe. The menacingly dark clouds brooding overhead and the imposing black Targaryen banner flapping in the wind above her, both serve as visual cues of her lineage and the potential threat she poses – underscored by the audible screams of the masters as well as the ominous-sounding score. This potent segment of images encapsulates the layered dynamics of her character, showcasing her charisma, determination, and potentially dangerous power.

The presence of allegiance within the audience cannot be definitively asserted, but it is important to acknowledge the inherent expectation generated by Daenerys' ongoing pursuit to

navigate her leadership; this expectation necessitates a continuous process of moral evaluation. At this juncture, the audience is prompted to introspect and re-evaluate their attachment to her character – a process that might lead some to question their loyalty, while others may find their devotion unshaken, reaffirming their attachment and support to her character.

Balancing vulnerability and power: a complex path to alignment

As the narrative arc of *Game of Thrones* crosses its halfway point, it becomes essential to re-evaluate the cornerstone of audience alignment with Daenerys – her vulnerability. Over time, as Daenerys displays her might as a leader, conqueror, and liberator, the image of a shy, fearful girl from the first season has incrementally receded. This evolution presents an intriguing dichotomy, as much of the initial support for Daenerys' claim to the Iron Throne was rooted in empathy for her traumatic past, and her determination to overcome it. However, as she grapples with the complex realities of governing Meereen, and the departure of her most trusted advisor, Jorah, viewers become acquainted with facets of her earlier vulnerability.

A particularly profound scene that showcases Daenerys' vulnerability unfolds in her intimate conversation with her lover, Daario Naharis, played by Michiel Huisman. As they lay in bed, she confesses the growing problem of her dragons killing innocent children and admits: "I can't control them [her dragons] anymore" (Season 5, Episode 1, 39:29).

At this moment, Daenerys is forced to confront a reality that challenges her perception of her own power: while she wields enormous influence, she struggles to control the very symbols of that power, her dragons. Seeking advice, she reveals a sense of uncertainty that we have rarely seen in recent times, given previous dismissals of counsel from her advisors. This moment then signals a re-emergence of her vulnerability, as she grapples with her loss of control and recognizes her need for support extending beyond mere military might.

[Framegrab of Daenerys] (Season 5, Episode 1, 39:30)

The framegrab above captures this potent display of vulnerability: Daenerys, partially bare, her hair devoid of the usual powerful braids, her gaze laden with sorrow and exhaustion. Under her eyes lies the evidence of sleepless nights, and her lips downturned in despair, a far cry from the joy and determined face we have seen before. This image reveals the toll of her struggles, standing in stark contrast to the image of a powerful and resolute queen.

Daario, in his attempt to inspire Daenerys, urges her to reclaim control of her dragons and reassert her dominion marked by intimidating power: "A dragon queen with no dragons? That's not a queen" (Season 5, Episode 1, 39:32-36). Encouraged by his words, Daenerys dares to reconnect with her dragons in the subsequent scene, only to be met with their fiery defiance as they react hostilely to her timid calls.

[Framegrab of Daenerys] (Season 5, Episode 1, 41:20)

The framegrab captures Daenerys in the immediate aftermath of her distressing encounter. Pressed against the wall, her body trembles, and her breath comes in quick, shallow gasps. Her fear is etched vividly on her face, reflecting the raw sorrow of having become estranged from her dragons – her children. The lighting in this scene enhances the emotional intensity – it alternates between light and dark, mirroring the flickering firelight and underscoring Daenerys' emotional turmoil.

Daenerys' change in her leadership approach becomes increasingly evident as she struggles with the complexities of governing Meereen. Reflecting on past decisions and the council of her advisors that she previously dismissed, she says: "Ser Barristan counselled mercy when I took this city, right up to the morning he died. Daario Naharis thinks I should kill the former masters and let the rest of the city fend for itself. What do you think?" (Season 5, Episode 5, 44:28-40). This dialogue unfolds three distinct perspectives that Daenerys is now willing to consider: Barristan's advocacy for mercy, Daario's promotion of violence, and the advice of her trusted aide Missandei, played by Nathalie Emmanuel, who encourages faith in her own judgment.

It is noteworthy that despite Daenerys' vulnerability at this stage, her struggles to maintain control over Meereen and navigate its' difficult political environment, that she continues to evaluate her options. A stark contrast to her earlier impulsivity, she no longer cavalierly dismisses suggestions of mercy, nor does she instinctively resort to violence. Deprived of guidance from her seasoned advisors, she deliberately considers her actions – instead of resorting to spontaneous actions. This evolution of her character signifies growth, fostering an increase in alignment with the audience.

Her definitive decision to exercise mercy, forgoing violence, and the intimidating display of her dragons, shows a diplomatic approach to her situation. It indicates that she has learned to reflect on the implications of her choices, demonstrating an openness to change. By considering the counsel of the now-deceased Barristan and the exiled Jorah, she showcases her adaptability while becoming self-critical. This marked shift in her behaviour, from disregarding advice and potentially threatening audience allegiance, to now demonstrating thoughtful decision-making, reinforces her bond with the audience, eliciting their empathy and encouraging allegiance.

Having explored Daenerys' vulnerability and her attempts to rule Meereen diplomatically, we now turn our attention to a pivotal moment nearing the end of the season. This

moment marks a culmination of the challenges she faces and serves as a catalyst for her further development. The following two framegrabs capture the intense and perilous moment where Daenerys faces a life-threatening situation at the fighting pits, as she becomes the target of an attack by the Sons of the Harpy.

[Framegrab of Daenerys] (Season 5, Episode 9, 46:53 & 50:13)

In the first image, we are presented with a close-up shot of Daenerys, seemingly facing imminent death, and surrounded with limited means of defence. Her facial expressions convey a sense of concern and fear, as her eyebrows tilt upwards, her eyes widen, her nostrils flare, and her mouth hangs open. These visual cues effectively communicate the gravity of the situation, evoking the audience to produce a strong emotional response.

Accompanied by a dramatic score, consisting of intensified drumming and escalating sounds, the scene builds a sense of urgency and tension. The increasing speed and volume of the score heighten the anticipation and convey the imminent danger she faces. Additionally, the amplified heavy breathing of her exhausted followers further emphasizes the intensity of the fight, underscoring the direness of the situation.

The combination of Daenerys' vulnerable facial expressions, the dramatic score, and the physical exhaustion of her followers create a powerful moment that resonates with the audience. It sparks concern for her character's well-being and raises questions about the outcome of her character arc. The conscious depiction of Daenerys' vulnerable state throughout the fifth season has been strategically employed to promote allegiance with the audience. The

showrunners have tactically exposed moments of her weakness and struggle, successfully manipulating the narrative to make the audience become aligned with Daenerys– resulting in a powerful scene, with audiences being drawn closer to her, strengthening alignment, and inviting allegiance.

In stark contrast to the former image, the subsequent frame showcases Daenerys post-rescue, reunited with her missing dragon. This shift in the visual presentation of her character is significant, as it reflects her reclaiming a position of power. Her facial features underscore this transformation: straight brows radiating determination, her eyes reflecting resolve, and a slight upturn of her mouth signalling the return of her confidence.

The score complements these visual cues, changing from the prior tone of impending doom – to one of hope and awe with Drogon's arrival. However, as the dragon intervenes, executing several of the Sons of the Harpy, the score parallels the on-screen brutality, enhancing the severity of Drogon's actions.

As the narrative progresses, Daenerys reaches out to Drogon and the score adjusts once more, adopting a melancholic, emotionally changed tone that mirrors the profound impact of their reunion. The concluding scene sees Daenerys soaring above the battlefield, astride Drogon, the score accompanying their ascent and escape, encapsulating a sense of awe, which ultimately fades to introduce a powerful roar of her dragon, marking a momentous end to the scene.

The violence enacted by Drogon appears justified to the viewers, considering the perilous situation she found herself in, a consequence of her striving to diplomatically rectify the plight of Meereen's enslaved populace. Given the audience's endorsement of her cause and newfound methods of liberating the oppressed, they are likely to forgive the dragon's violent display. It is particularly noteworthy that Drogon's act of violence was not commanded by Daenerys, and when presented with the opportunity for further carnage, she chose to retreat from the battlegrounds instead.

This resolution implies that by the end of the fifth season, Daenerys has successfully deepened her bond with the audience, bolstering her alignment and promoting allegiance to her character. Despite this, her struggles to peacefully navigate the political terrain coupled with the re-emergence of her strong, determined persona – all accentuated by the roar of her dragon – serves as a stark reminder of her past acts of violence and potential to recommit such acts. This

exemplifies the dichotomy inherent in her character, a dichotomy the audience is continually tasked with reconciling. It persistently invites viewers to engage in a moral appraisal of her actions, a process crucial in shaping and determining their allegiance.

After her dramatic rescue at the fighting pits, Daenerys' journey takes a pivotal turn as she finds herself captured by the Dothraki and brought to Vaes Dothrak. The fleeting sense of relief the audience experienced upon her escape from death is abruptly replaced by a new challenge. However, Daenerys defies the odds once again, turning the table on her captors and emerges from the flames of a fiery inferno – unscathed.

[Framegrab of Daenerys, Season 6, Episode 4, 56:38)

The framegrabs presents Daenerys in a medium shot. She appears strikingly naked, standing with an air of confidence, unphased by the blazing fires that surround her. Her gaze is directed outward, towards the Dothraki horde who now kneel before her, witnessing her miraculous survival. This framegrab captures a moment of Daenerys' seizing control of her power, showcasing her resilience and indomitable spirit.

The audience recognizes Daenerys' cunning and quick thinking, which enabled her to save herself and reclaim agency. If considering the fact of the absolute violence she exhibited, the viewers are not disturbed, as they have recently become further aligned with her, supporting her cause, and are at this moment glad to see her escaping a worse fate than she gave the Khals.

The burning of the Khals is a moment that initially strengthens the audience's alignment with Daenerys, rather than causing them to re-consider their allegiance. Viewers are pleasantly surprised as she manages to escape the dreadful fate that the Khals intended for her. This feeling of alignment is rooted in the recent display of her vulnerability and the trials she has faced, as well as her persistent ambition to help those in need. Daenerys engages in conversation

with the other "imprisoned" widows, gaining first-hand insight into the horrific acts they have endured, which mirrors the hardships she faced. This shared experience further deepens the audience's understanding of her motivations and actions.

However, it is important to note how the burning of the Khals was a decisive and calculated move, with Daenerys consciously choosing to resort to violence to secure her freedom and assert her authority. A key line of dialogue, "We can do more than that" (Season 6, Episode 4, 27:32), underscores her determination to take control, as she had the option to try and escape without challenging the leadership within the Dothraki. While the scene leans more towards strengthening the audience's alignment with Daenerys, it serves as a reminder of her capabilities when it comes to resorting to acts of violence. It highlights the duality of her character, navigating the fine line between being a compassionate leader and someone who is willing to commit ruthless acts for her goals. The narration of this particular scene, however, undermines the necessity for the audience to reflect upon her moral complexities, especially considering the final moments of the Dothraki kneeling for her – recognizing her as a miracle, but perhaps also as the liberator and leader she aspires to be.

A critical factor in promoting allegiance to Daenerys is the deep connections she forges throughout her journey. Her ability to rally vast numbers of followers who willingly devote themselves to her cause, rather than out of obligation or servitude, helps persuade the audience of her moral integrity. Her followers are acquainted with her actions, making their praise for her an implicit moral judgment – ultimately portraying Daenerys in a positive light. In essence, the audience's perception of Daenerys is informed not just by her actions, but also through the characters who closely align with her, a perspective that enhances her portrayal. Mirroring that notion makes the following framegrab noteworthy in terms of promoting allegiance:

[Framegrab of Daenerys] (Season 6, Episode 5, 28:10)

Daenerys, in a moment of genuine sorrow and regret, says, "I'm sorry" (Season 6, Episode 5, 28:11) to Jorah, realizing he has contracted a fatal, incurable disease. The close-up shot captures the raw emotion on Daenerys' face, revealing the depth of her feelings for her oldest advisor. Her emotional response, both audibly expressed and visibly conveyed, resonates profoundly with the audience. Jorah, being a character with whom the audience likely aligns, enhances this impact. Daenerys' evolution, from previously banishing Jorah to now expressing remorse, illustrates her capacity for growth and change. This nuanced depiction of her character serves to promote allegiance, as it emphasizes her willingness to reassess her judgments while acknowledging the sincerity behind Jorah's loyalty to her cause.

Upon her return to Meereen, Daenerys is resolute about her plans for the city. She declares, "I will crucify the Masters. I will set their fleets afire, kill every last one of their soldiers and return their cities to the dirt". However, Tyrion Lannister, played by Peter Dinklage, offers a measured alternative, pleading: "I'd like to suggest an alternate approach" (Season 6, Episode 9, 03:26-04:27).

This exchange compels the audience to engage in a moral evaluation of Daenerys' choices in her pursuit of justice. However, they find solace when she opts for a diplomatic approach, presenting the Masters of Meereen with an opportunity to surrender. But when this approach proves ineffective, she is forced to resort to her initial plan, resulting in a bloody aftermath.

Daenerys' actions in this scene represent a significant moment in her character arc that tests her moral balance. Despite the havoc wreaked in Meereen, her willingness to initially entertain Tyrion's suggestion indicates her readiness to adopt strategies aimed at minimizing loss

of life. This key point resonates with the audience, as it signifies that she is open to diplomatic solutions, even though she holds the power to take what she believes is rightfully hers – by force. This strategic restraint reveals a side of Daenerys that is calculated and considerate, adding depth to her character, and further strengthening the audience's alignment with her character.

Daenerys' trajectory up until this point in the narrative is both a testament to her resilience and a reflection of her capacity for brutality. Her actions in Yunkai, while dire, could be considered to be justified, given the context. In navigating the morally ambiguous waters of leadership, Daenerys often demonstrated violent impulses.

However, these impulses were balanced by the counsel of her advisors who preached restraint and caution. There is a tangible evolution in Daenerys' character, demonstrated by her shift in attitude towards the counsel of her advisors. While she previously ignored their words of caution, often acting unilaterally, her interaction with Tyrion marks significant growth. Here, she accepts his alternative approach, showcasing her willingness to adopt less violent strategies. This development serves not only to humanize Daenerys but also to strengthen the audience's alignment with her. By showing her capacity to listen, learn, and evolve, Daenerys' character becomes more relatable and grounded, effectively promoting allegiance. The audience, therefore, remains emotionally invested in her character and journey, despite her violent tendencies. This complexity and evolution of her character is what makes her storyline engaging and compelling, providing a nuanced exploration of power, morality, and leadership – an evolution that will see trial in the penultimate and ultimate season of *Game of Thrones*.

Navigating power and moral compromises as Daenerys takes on Westeros

Daenerys' arrival in Westeros marks a pivotal moment in her quest for the Iron Throne. As she navigates the complex dynamics of power and leadership, her character undergoes significant growth and faces moral dilemmas. Interactions with key players in Westeros, such as Jon Snow, deepen the exploration of aforementioned dilemmas and conflicting loyalties. Her journey becomes increasingly challenging, prompting the audience to question the justifiability of her actions, as the line between heroism and tyranny becomes increasingly blurred.

In her initial interaction with Jon, Daenerys establishes an intriguing dynamic in her

quest for the Iron Throne. She acknowledges past conquerors' wrongs and seeks reconciliation, candidly asking Jon: "On behalf of House Targaryen, I ask your forgiveness for the crimes he committed against your family, and I ask you not to judge a daughter by the sins of her father" (Season 7, Episode 3, 11:48-59). This surprising expression of regret, coming from a queen who wields immense power with three dragons and a formidable army, visibly stuns Jon. By acknowledging her family's past wrongdoings, Daenerys separates herself from the legacy of the Mad King, opening the way for potential alliances.

This scene humanizes Daenerys in a sense, displaying her ability for introspection and humility, attributes that resonate with the audience. The meeting of these two protagonists – a milestone moment after several years of separate storylines – is of significant narrative importance. Jon is a character who elicits strong allegiance due to his humble nature and righteous path. Therefore, their initial interaction, and how they perceive each other, hold considerable sway over a potential shift in audience allegiance.

Jon's response to Daenerys underscores the initial respect and fondness between them, while also presenting viewers with a comparative moral evaluation of the two queens. As he observes, Daenerys' hesitance to claim the throne may stem from a reluctance to kill innocent people, he replies:(...) Which means, at the very least, you're better than Cersei" (Season 7, Episode 3, 13:34-13:39). Beyond simply endorsing Daenerys' diplomatic tactics, this dialogue reflects the complex dynamics of audience allegiance in *Game of* Thrones, where characters are often evaluated relative to others. In this instance, Daenerys is seen as "the lesser of two evils". This ties into the concept of relative morality, which posits that moral judgements can vary based on context (Gowans, 2015). As viewers compare Daenerys' actions and intentions to those of other characters, their moral evaluation of her might change. For instance, despite her destructive actions in earlier seasons, some viewers might maintain their allegiance to her, perceiving her actions as justified in the context of her rivals' even more ruthless behaviour. Thus, the series prompts us continually re-evaluate our allegiances as characters evolve and circumstances change.

The long-awaited meeting of Daenerys and Jon could hence be categorized as mutually beneficial, as they both are characters that invite audience allegiance and that despite their differences – a friendship or an alliance seems likely to the audience. However, if you were to

consider the appearance of Daenerys, not from a tinted lens of allegiance, but from an unbiased perspective, there are several notions to consider as illustrated in the following framegrab:

[Framegrab of Daenerys] (Season 7, Episode 3, 09:38)

Daenerys is depicted in a commanding position, aloof and elevated on her grand throne, distancing herself from those who have come to speak with her. The scene's ambience is shadowy and dark, contributing to an atmosphere of foreboding, an effect that is heightened by the ominous score preceding her introduction. These visual cues alongside her demanding dialogue: "So I assume, my lord, you're here to bend the knee" (Season 7, Episode 3, 11:16-20), showcases a distinct contrast between the two protagonists, effectively positioning her in stark contrast to Jon – who does not care about titles, but only the survival of their world by defeating the Night King. While Daenerys is excused, as she is unaware of the plotline unfolding in the North, the contrast between their ultimate goals seems a deliberate and calculated move by the showrunners, to manipulate the audience's perception of Daenerys while setting the stage for a potential shift in her portrayal.

In the following episode, the audience is made aware of the failure of Daenerys' first military action in Westeros. Tyrion discusses their plans of action with Daenerys, excusing himself saying: "If I have underestimated our enemies…" to which she abruptly cuts him off: "Our enemies? Your family, you mean. Perhaps you don't want to hurt them after all" (Season 7, Episode 4, 26:45-53). This dialogue exchange shows Daenerys questioning her chosen hand's allegiance, highlighting the growing doubts about his loyalty. The altercation happened in front of multiple

characters, effectively undermining Tyrion and putting him on display, as she angrily yells at him as pictured in the following framegrab:

[Framegrab of Daenerys] (Season 7, Episode 4, 26:48)

In this close-up of Daenerys, her mouth hangs open, her eyebrows furrowed deeply, and her gaze piercingly locks onto Tyrion, as if she is unaware of anyone else's presence. The exterior markers of her facial expressions reveal a notable loss of control, an inability to contain her simmering anger – even in the presence of Jon and Ser Davos, played by Liam Cunningham. In an uncharacteristic move, she openly addresses the loyalty of Tyrion and divulges their private military plans, a departure from their usual practice of conducting such discussions behind closed doors. The intensity of Daenerys' reaction is mirrored in Jon's facial expressions, captured in the following framegrab:

[Framegrab of Jon] (Season 7, Episode 4, 26:56)

His head tilts slightly away from the conversation, his eyes briefly glancing downward, and then seeking to gauge the reactions of those around them. His expression clearly conveys a sense of surprise and unease, as he finds himself caught off guard by the display of intense rage, however, a display he intends to let play out and not interfere. Daenerys makes a hasty conclusion and exclaims: "Enough with the clever plans. I have three large dragons, I'm going to fly them to the Red Keep" to which she ignores Tyrion's counsel of caution, and in turn asks the advice of Jon, who says "(…) But if you use them to melt castles and burn cities, you're not different. You're just more of the same" (27:03-28:13).

This moment presents another striking contrast between the two characters, casting Daenerys in the light of impulsivity, struggling to wield her immense power with ethical restraint. On the other hand, Jon is displayed with concern for the inhabitants of Westeros, reiterating his ambition for a just transformation of the system, and envisioning Daenerys journey towards her goals without resorting to the intimidating force of her dragons. The divergence between the two then serves as a measure for the audience to contemplate, potentially prompting them to reassess their existing allegiance.

Despite Daenerys ignoring Tyrion, she – at the time – heeded the advice of Jon. Albeit, while not launching a full-on attack on the Red Keep, she took her dragons to the Lannister army, causing havoc and chaos. The following framegrabs represent the nature of the evolution of the battle.

[Framegrabs] (Season 7, Episode 4, 39:55 & 40:06 & 48:06)

At this point in the storyline of Daenerys, the audience has grown accustomed to her quest for retribution. Hence, the attack in itself was not surprising, however, the narrative structure in this particular scene is crafted to cast Daenerys' character in a more sinister light, achieved through a deliberate shift in perspective to the viewpoint of the Lannister forces.

The first framegrab captures the sight of the Dothraki horde charging relentlessly towards their adversaries, with Daenerys stride her dragon soaring above them. The visual imagery is striking, with the dark clouds overhead creating a foreboding atmosphere. The Lannister soldiers, fully aware of their disadvantage, display fear and unease as they witness the approaching army. The thunderous roars of the dragon further accentuate their terror, as they come face to face with a force beyond their comprehension.

The second framegrab presents Daenerys mounted on her dragon, her expression resolute and determined. The audience has come to recognize this particular look as a sign of impending trouble. Her mouth is wide open as she utters a single word that carries immense weight: "Dracarys!" (Season 7, Episode 4, 40:07). This command serves as a catalyst for the destruction that follows. The final framegrab captures the aftermath of Daenerys' order, depicting soldiers screaming while being burned alive, struggling for survival. This particular visual frame is intentionally diluted amidst the flurry of action in the nearly ten-minute-long battle scene. It serves

as a reminder of the immense devastation unleashed by Daenerys and her dragon, with the imagery of flames, smoke and destruction permeating the landscape.

It is important to note that the Lannister forces depicted in this scene have had limited alignment with the audience throughout the series, with only a few characters from their army receiving significant screen time. This context sets the stage for two contrasting approaches to analysing Daenerys' act of war. From one perspective, her attack can be considered a necessary act of retribution directed at an army that was already portrayed in a negative light, thus garnering little to no allegiance from the audience. In this view, the moral evaluation of Daenerys' violence becomes relatively straightforward, as it is considered a fair attack – a better alternative than the attack of the Red Keep – and resulting in no deaths to innocents, only that of soldiers.

On the other hand, the cinematic techniques employed in the scene manipulate the audience's perspective to align with the Lannisters. The ambience is dark and chaotic, emphasizing the sense of fear and desperation among the Lannister soldiers. The Dothraki mounted on their horses, ruthlessly cutting down soldiers who are shown running in terror. The fear-inducing roars of Daenerys' dragon amplify the display of violence and power, making the Lannisters appear helpless in the face of an overwhelming force. This portrayal casts the Lannisters as David against the Goliath figure of Daenerys, evoking sympathy for their plight.

The juxtaposition of Daenerys' violent display and the perceived helplessness of the Lannister forces demands a moral evaluation of her actions. The significant power imbalance between the two sides begs the question of necessity and proportionality in her use of force. The scene prompts the audience to critically examine the implications of Daenerys' actions, weighing her motivation for the throne against the potential for excessive violence and its moral implications. Ultimately, this scene becomes a catalyst for the final evolution of her character arc, with the showrunners effectively trying to portray the duality of Daenerys, with emphasis on the lesser half, as we are nearing her arc's denouement.

Daenerys surprising growth and measured response to tragedy

Following the morally contentious battle against the Lannister army, the alignment between the audience and Daenerys hangs by a fragile thread. However, the devastating loss of her dragon in a subsequent episode becomes a turning point that rekindles the audience's empathy and strengthens their bond with her character. This is amplified by her selfishness, as Jon expresses his

condolences to which she replies: "If we hadn't gone, I wouldn't have seen. You have to see it to know. Now I know (…) We are going to destroy the Night King and his army. And we'll do it together. You have my word (Season 7, Episode 6, 1:06:14-50).

This poignant dialogue reaffirms Daenerys determination and resolve to stand united against their common enemy, reminding the audience of the complexities that shaped her journey and the moral dilemmas she faced. The losses she endured, coupled with her undeniable commitment to protect the living, serve to manifest alignment and promote allegiance.

Daenerys' response to the loss of her dragon showcases a significant evolution in her character. In the past, she would have relied on the brute force of her dragons to retaliate against her enemies. However, her measured and thoughtful reaction to this loss surprises the audience and highlights her growth as a leader. Instead of impulsively seeking revenge or abandoning the cause in the North, she demonstrates caution and thoughtful thinking. This unexpected response resonates with the audience, as it defies their expectations and challenges their preconceived notions of Daenerys' character. It showcases a level of maturity and strategic thinking that was not present in her earlier impulsive acts. By handling the loss with restraint and selflessness, Daenerys reveals a newfound wisdom and a deeper understanding of where her focus needs to be. The audience, who have witnessed her morally ambiguous decisions in the past, finds themselves aligning more with this measured approach.

[Framegrab of Daenerys] (Season 7, Episode 6, 1:06:47)

The accompanying framegrab above captures the poignant moment, as it focuses on Daenerys in a close-up. Her face is shrouded in shadows, symbolizing the weight of her emotions and the gravity of the situation. The intensity of her gaze reveals a mixture of hope and sorrow, with her eyes welling up with tears. This visual composition effectively conveys the inner turmoil that Daenerys is experiencing. Despite the loss she has suffered, there is a glimmer of hope in her eyes, indicating her determination to press forward and overcome the challenges ahead.

The dialogue finishes with Jon pledging his allegiance to Daenerys, and when questioned about the potential resistance from other Northmen, he confidently replies "They'll come to see you for what you are", prompting Daenerys to answer "I hope I deserve it" (Season 7, Episode 6, 1:07:32-52). This brief yet impactful exchange encapsulates the evolving relationship between Jon and Daenerys. Jon's support and belief in her character signify the growing trust and mutual respect between them. His statement implies that he sees the true nature of Daenerys, recognizing her leadership qualities and her potential to bring about positive change. Daenerys' humble response reflects her awareness of the responsibility that comes with the allegiance and trust in Jon. It showcases her humility and reinforces the audience's alignment with her character.

The precarious thread by which audience alignment precariously hung has been strengthened once again. Daenerys is depicted as selfless, humble, and vulnerable, facing immense loss – and an immense challenge, a challenge that she has willingly taken up. Her commitment to assisting in the defence of Westeros, rather than focusing solely on her pursuit of the throne, is a significant pivot point in inviting audience allegiance. It underscores a deeper understanding and empathy for the inhabitants of Westeros, with her character subtly growing from a power-driven aspirant to a compassionate leader. This crucial development makes a profound statement about her priorities, highlighting her readiness to place the welfare of others above her personal ambitions, thus deepening the audience's emotional investment and reasserting alignment.

Daenerys' complex emotional response to victory

After the success of the battle against the Night King, one might have expected Daenerys to find solace and triumph in her victory. However, the aftermath of the battle leaves her with a sense of emptiness and sorrow. The cost of the battle weighs heavily on her as she mourns the loss of many of her Dothraki followers and her loyal advisor, Jorah. But there is another, and more pivotal, reason behind her discontent – the unsettling truth about Jon's true heritage: "I wish you'd never

told me. If I didn't know, I'd be happy right now" (Season 8, Episode 4, 0:29:10-15).

With the knowledge that Jon is not only a potential rival for the Iron Throne, but also her nephew, Daenerys is confronted with a complex web of emotions. She cannot allow the truth to come out, as she determines that the people of Westeros will demand Jon to sit on the Iron Throne, effectively casting a shadow over her ambitions and challenging her quest for power. When Jon denies her request of withholding the truth from the Stark sisters, Daenerys' demeanour towards him changes, as she adamantly proclaims that it is the only way.

As the audience has developed a strong connection with both characters, they understand the complexities of their relationship and the genuine love they share. While the issue of heritage may seem like a semantic debate to the audience, a mere technicality, it becomes the defining issue for Daenerys. This portrayal paints her as a power-hungry conqueror, willing to go to great lengths to secure *her* dominance over Westeros. This stark contrast between Jon's humility and trustworthiness in proclaiming Daenerys as his Queen, without any intentions of challenging her power, further highlights the divide between them. While the audience may view this as a minor obstacle, it becomes the crux of Daenerys' internal struggle and her path into a figure driven by an insatiable hunger for power.

In a heartfelt scene between Jon and Daenerys, they grapple with a complex interplay of love and fear, with Jon once again declaring his love and allegiance. As they share a passionate kiss, Jon finds himself forced to withdraw himself to the dismay of Daenerys, prompting her to announce: "Let it be fear" (Season 8, Episode 5, 0:17:35). With this ominous pronouncement, it becomes clear that Daenerys intends to execute a full-scale attack on King's Landing. This pivotal moment underscores the change in her character, from a hopeful liberator to a potential destroyer – as she faces rejection and isolation, only having few allies and followers left from before she crossed the sea.

The scene abruptly cuts and presents Tyrion pleading with Daenerys, however, to no avail. Recognizing this, he instead argues "If the city surrenders, they will ring the bells and raise the gates. Please, if you hear them ringing the bells, call off the attack" (Season 8, Episode 5, 0:18:43-52). The peaceful requests elicit no verbal response; however, Daenerys turns to Greyworm locking eyes with him for a few seconds, finally giving him a nod as to respect the request of Tyrion. The audience, however, has been met with this internal communication

between the two previously, potentially recognizing the outcome of Daenerys' silent commands, and if so, met with inner turmoil and conflict, torn between her desire for power and her initial intentions to liberate and bring justice to the people.

Daenerys' decision to commit to the assault on King's Landing, as devastating and violent as it is, carries an undertone of inevitability. From the moment she set foot on Westeros, she had the means to forcefully claim the throne with her dragons. Yet, she consciously chose a more measured path. She made significant sacrifices in her efforts to save Westeros from the Night Kings, even at the cost of one of her dragons and a large portion of her army. Furthermore, she persistently strived to deploy her dragons and foreign forces cautiously to minimize bloodshed.

As she stands at the gates of King's Landing, she finds herself bereft of her loyal advisors and friends and left with only one dragon. This culmination of circumstances could potentially invoke empathy from the audience, as they understand her choice to finally unleash the full might of her remaining dragon. After all, she sought to explore every other peaceful alternative before resorting to this course of action. This narrative thread might prompt the audience to remain aligned with her character, even amidst the chaos that follows.

Daenerys initiates the battle by launching a fierce assault on the fleet and the city's defences atop Drogon. With any threats to her dragon eliminated, her focus shifts to the city gates and walls, swiftly obliterating them to allow her armies to invade the city. The ensuing battle – which can barely be termed as such – bears striking resemblance to the previous assault on the Lannister army, as pictured in the following framegrab:

[Framegrab of Daenerys atop Drogon, Season 8, Episode 5, 0:39:04)

The air soon thickens with dark smoke, and the city becomes engulfed in flames, painting a grim picture of the scene. The image poignantly captures Daenerys' formidable power and the ensuing horror that befalls the city once she decides to use it. The narration of the attack

generates empathy towards King's Landing's defenders, their hopelessness amplified by their impending defeat. The graphic portrayals of the burning deaths they suffer, interspersed with close-ups of soldiers screaming in agony, being impaled by Unsullied spears, struck by Northmen swords, or decapitated by Dothraki arakhs, intensify the audience's distress and create an unpleasant setting.

Notably, the scene lacks any casualties on Daenerys' side, further highlighting the overwhelming force employed. This stark imbalance fuels a deep sympathy for Daenerys' enemies, accompanied by an enthusiastic hope that they surrender – to bring an end to the grim, one-sided massacre.

The massacre comes to a natural halt, as the Lannister soldiers are overwhelmed, meeting the force of Daenerys' army at a crossroads. The score heightens in tension, escalating incrementally in combination with close-ups of major characters and establishing shots depicting the destruction that has befallen the city. The score then abruptly falls silent, increasing the suspense, to finally reveal the Lannister soldiers surrendering by dropping their swords, accompanied by chants from both soldiers and civilians to ring the bells. The build-up continues, as the score resumes, this time more ominous, featuring close-ups of Tyrion longingly gazing towards the bell, and Daenerys aloof ready to attack:

[Framegrab of Tyrion and Daenerys, Season 8, Episode 5, 0:44:20)

However, the bells finally ring, offering a reprieve from the mounting suspense and evoking a collective sigh of relief from the audience, as they contemplate: how many more lives would have been lost? At this juncture, Daenerys has effectively claimed victory, having successfully seized the capital. It is challenging to definitively map out the moral evaluations her character invokes, but it is plausible to assert that Daenerys still garners alignment and perhaps

even cultivates allegiance at this point.

This victory is likely to elicit a sense of gratification among the viewers. After all these years, after all the trials she has overcome, and after all the moral quandaries she has navigated – Daenerys finally ascends to the Iron Throne, having conquered Westeros with a primary intent to minimize bloodshed. Although she did not fully realize this aspiration, the hardships she endured in her pursuit to do so, potentially outweigh the loss of the defensive combatants in King's Landing.

However, the sense of relief and triumph that might have been installed within the audience quickly dissipates. The camera narrows its focus onto Daenerys, revealing an expression entirely devoid of joy:

[Framegrab of Daenerys] (Season 8, Episode 5, 0:45:13)

Rather, her appearance is a tangled display of rage, despair, and disorientation – to the point of resembling a manic state. Her eyes, wide and unblinking, stay fervently affixed on the Red Keep, her breaths coming in short, uneven gasps, her cheeks smudged with ash from the destruction. Contrasting the sound of surrendering bells and the sight of white birds soaring against the grim skies, Daenerys' turbulent array of emotions comes as a surprise and does not paint the picture of a conqueror having succeeded in her greatest conquest.

Conflicting allegiances and tragic demise

Alas, visual cues transition into horrifying reality as Daenerys mercilessly decimates King's Landing, reducing it to ash and rubble, and in the process annihilating hundreds of thousands of innocent lives – soldiers, civilians, women and children. As Daenerys recommences her reign of terror, Greyworm seizes the moment to reignite the onslaught against the already surrendered Lannister

forces. The episode, with its harrowing and disturbing narrative, showcases Daenerys' descent into a tyrant. The darkness that permeates the episode is not only a visual element but also a reflection of the moral darkness that engulfs Daenerys' character as she embraces her innate ruthless and merciless approach.

[Framegrab of Daenerys attacking King's Landing] (Season 8, Episode 5, 0:46:19)

This behaviour raises questions among the audience regarding Daenerys' decision to disregard the sound of surrender, as the bells ring. It begs the question of if it was premeditated, and if she once again consciously decided to go against the pleas of mercy expressed by her advisors. Finally, her actions elicit the question: why?

One interpretation might frame this as a political statement – an exhibition of brutal power meant to instil fear in the remaining inhabitants of Westeros, and in doing so, cementing their loyalty. Yet, the disorderly nature of the scene, combined with Daenerys' outward display of rage, suggests that these atrocities may be a result of an emotional outburst, tapping into her fiery Targaryen heritage, and signifying her struggle with her dual identity – that of a compassionate liberator and a ruthless tyrant.

At this pivotal moment, the audience is left to grapple with Daenerys' moral decisions. Witnessing the harrowing massacre, the understanding and empathy once felt towards her become increasingly elusive. Years of alignment carefully fostered over numerous seasons, now hangs in a precarious thread. Her actions pose a challenge to audience allegiance – a challenge that brings into question the continuation of their support. Yet, the multifaceted journey

of her character, delicately unfolded throughout the series, may still retain a residue of allegiance, although wholesale shifts in allegiance seem more plausible.

The audience has become accustomed to performing mind-reading on Daenerys, trying to determine her actions behind her thoughts based on exterior markers such as her facial expressions and dialogue. Surprisingly, the lengthy latter part of the battle does not feature any frames of Daenerys revealing the reasoning behind her decisions. The next time we are presented with Daenerys is in the final episode, as she stands atop the Red Keep victorious, approaching her armies amongst the ashes of King's Landing.

[Framegrab of Daenerys] (Season 8, Episode 6, 0:14:12)

The narration intentionally distances the audience from Daenerys, leaving her character shrouded in ambiguity and providing little opportunity for her to justify her actions. The chosen framegrab captures her in a position of power, symbolizing her transformation into a tyrant, standing aloof overlooking her armies. The sombre imagery of the clouded skies, filled with smoke from the burning city, creates a sense of despair and destruction. The ground covered in ashes, resembling snow, further emphasizes the devastation left in her wake. These visual cues paint a bleak and unsettling picture, underscoring the gravity of Daenerys' dire actions and the consequences that follow. By initially capturing Daenerys from behind, it adds a layer of suspense, heightening the audience's anticipation of her facial expressions and their implications.

[Framegrab of Daenerys] (Season 8, Episode 6, 0:14:51)

When the camera finally reveals her face, a disturbing transformation is evident. Daenerys wears a proud expression, with a vague smile that carries an unsettling undertone. This demeanour, devoid of any signs of remorse or empathy, serves as a powerful visual representation of her resolve and conviction in pursuing her ruthless path. The audience is left with a chilling realization that Daenerys has fully embraced her role as a tyrant, extinguishing any lingering hope of redemption or remorse.

Through these deliberate visual choices, the showrunners effectively convey the depths of Daenerys' transformation and the consequences of her actions. The absence of remorse in her expressions solidifies her descent into darkness, leaving the audience to grapple with the moral complexities of her character and the repercussions of her choices.

The absence of remorse in Daenerys' expression is offset by the dialogue that unfolds, shedding light on her perspective and motivations. As she addresses her armies, she transforms their titles from former slaves to liberators, emphasizing a shift in their collective identity. In this pivotal moment, she poses the question: "Women, men and children have suffered too long beneath the wheel. Will you break the wheel with me?" (Season 8, Episode 6, 0:16:53-0:17:03). While this quote signifies further destruction in her quest for liberations, it also reveals her genuine concern for the suffering of the common people. Despite her morally questionable methods, her intentions appear to be driven by a desire to create a better world, free from oppression and injustice.

This genuine concern for the well-being of others is further exemplified in her final

conversation with Jon. When he questions the potential goodness of the world she plans to create, Daenerys confidently asserts: "Because I know what is good". Jon challenges her by raising the question "What about everyone else? All the other people who think they know what's good?" prompting the resolute response: "They don't get to choose" (Season 8, Episode 6, 0:36:07-29). This latter reply reveals a stark duality within her character. While her innate quest to help the less fortunate is genuine, her belief that she alone has the authority to determine what constitutes a good world is delusional and flawed.

The duality of emotions evokes a complex response from the audience. On one hand, they can appreciate Daenerys' genuine concern for the betterment of society and her commitment to liberating the oppressed. On the other hand, her authoritarian mindset and disregard for differing perspectives raise ethical questions about the nature of power and the right to impose one's vision on others. This moral ambiguity deepens the audience's engagement with her character and invites reflection on the complexities of her leadership and the pursuit of a just society.

As this comprehensive analysis nears its conclusion, the final, haunting image of Daenerys – lifeless with a trail of blood flowing from her nose and mouth – stands as a potent testament to the evolution of her character.

[Framegrab of Daenerys] (Season 8, Episode 6, 0:37:42)

This is not the simple tale of a noble queen fallen from grace, nor is it the vindication of a tyrant receiving their due. Instead, it captures the essence of a complex, deeply conflicted character whose passionate ambitions are punctuated by troubling moral transgressions.

The audience, having been witness to Daenerys' journey, finds themselves in a

maelstrom of emotions. For some, allegiance to her remains unbroken, still devoted because of her radiant moments of compassion and her innate nature of desiring a better world. Their sympathy might be embedded in the understanding of her long-fought battles, her heart-wrenching losses, and the noble intentions – although distorted in execution – underscored her pursuits.

Others, however, may have undergone a seismic shift in their allegiances, driven by the horrifying spectacle of King's Landing reduced to ashes and the seemingly needless slaughter of its inhabitants. The former liberator and breaker of chains, through her final acts, become a symbol of terror and tyranny, forcing the audience to re-evaluate their loyalties.

The ultimate precursor of her demise, Jon, serves to further complicate this narrative. His decision to end Daenerys' life signifies his moral judgment, suggesting that he found her beliefs and ethics misguided. He was forced to balance his feelings of love and loyalty against the grim reality of her destructive actions, a testament to the profound internal struggle he faced – a struggle that is likely mirrored within the audience. In conclusion, Daenerys Targaryen's character arc stands as a riveting exploration of the intricate nature of character alignment and allegiance. Her story paints a compelling, albeit grim, portrait of a well-intentioned leader corrupted by power and loss. It urges us to question our perceptions of heroism, righteousness, and the complex foundations of moral evaluation. As the curtain falls on her reign, the audience is left to ponder on the consequences of unchecked ambition and the perplexing dilemma of whether her end was an inevitable consequence or a regrettable injustice. Daenerys' story leaves us with thought-provoking questions about the price of power and the delicate balance between justice and tyranny, providing a resonating conclusion to a character who was, in essence, perhaps not a Mad Queen – but rather a Queen of Duality.

Discussion

In the aftermath of Daenerys' dramatic conclusion, one cannot help but reflect upon her journey and the lasting impact on the audience. Over the lengthy course of 8 seasons and 73 episodes, spanning from 2011-2019, audiences across the world have watched Daenerys evolution, from that of a timid young girl sold into marriage, to in her final moments, having achieved her ultimate goal of the Iron Throne, albeit cut short from seizing it.

It is unreasonable to determine that allegiance has been established, considering the implications of subjectivity, although it can certainly be said that her character invites it. This is in great part because of the aspect of relative morality, putting her up against worse contenders for the throne. However, it is also greatly in part because of *absolute* morality – Daenerys' notion of seeking to liberate slaves deeply resonates with the audience at home, while in the context of *Game of Thrones,* it is uncommon, and not necessarily as desirable a trait, as it is to the audience. This notion combined with the vast amount of screen time her character receives, hence allows viewers to study her exterior markers and attempt to read her mind, getting a better grasp on the morals of her character. Daenerys certainly garners alignment, in part because of her tragic origin story, in part because of her innate nature of the pursuit of justice and sense of kindness.

With this description of the relationship between viewer and character, it becomes interesting to consider her character's final moments. Surely the audience was shocked as she chose fear over love, however, the showrunners heavily foreshadowed her desensitization for violence throughout the entire series. These entries, while most certainly raising cause for a refinement of the moral evaluation of her character, could rarely be considered a necessity for wholesale shifts in allegiance – and why not? This is in turn because of the strategic narration of her character arc, constantly shifting between showcasing her desire for power and violence, with that of compassion and kindness. Likewise, the entries that could raise those questions often portrayed her actions as just, as illustrated by this quote from Tyrion: "When she murdered the slavers of Astapor, I'm sure no one but the slavers complained. After all, they were evil men. When she crucified hundreds of Meereenese nobles, who could argue? They were evil men. The Dothraki Khals she burned alive? They would have done worse to her. Everywhere she goes, evil men die, and we cheer her for it" (Season 8, Episode 6, 0:25:26-58).

It can then be argued, that despite committing multiple atrocities, the audience was

still aligned with her character, with viewers maintaining their allegiance despite this, resulting in the showrunners creating a vividly complex and morally ambiguous character that yet allowed the audience to root for them. However, the indiscriminate devastation of King's Landing marked a crucial turning point where her actions seemed incongruous with her established character, challenging viewer allegiance. To fully understand the ramifications of her decision, a quote from Mittell is most poignant: "(…) and [we] might be quite disappointed if they changed in ways that violate their initial connections and appeals – certainly a common complaint among television fans is when a character's actions seem unmotivated and inconsistent, a critique that speaks to the need for character stability" (Mittell, 2015, p. 141-42).

Emphasizing Mittell's phrasing of *unmotivated*, the disappointment of Daenerys' character arc starts to take form. While Daenerys is not a stable character, and we have analyzed her development recognizing how she changes and grows throughout the series, we have never explicitly stated that her character goes through a complete transformation, albeit it becomes evident with her final act of violence. This seconds Mittell's and Pearson's notions of the need for stable characters, as audiences' criticism of her character is a testament to this principle. Surprisingly, the journey for Daenerys to end up as a tyrant had seen plenty of foreshadowing and moments indicating her desire for violence, and lack of being able to consider the plea for peaceful solutions, creating a narrative storyline that would have been able to make her final stage seem logic in the eyes of the audience, however, the single word, *unmotivated*, is arguably what drives the dissatisfaction of her arc's conclusion.

Conclusion

The unravelling of Daenerys Targaryen's character arc in *Game of Thrones* offers a complex exploration of audience alignment and allegiance in the context of shifting narrative landscapes. Across eight seasons, the character of Daenerys Targaryen witnessed significant growth and transformation, marked by triumphs and atrocities alike. However, the concluding episodes and the abrupt descent into tyranny elicited a surprising wave of audience dissonance, highlighting the delicate balance in maintaining character continuity and audience allegiance.

The trajectory of Daenerys' evolution, from the vulnerable timid girl with no promising future or agency, to the woman momentarily on the verge of seizing the Iron Throne, by whatever means necessary, was not only captivating but masterfully constructed to invite and sustain viewer allegiance. The strategic oscillation between her desire for power and her empathetic tendencies facilitated a form of alignment and allegiance, one that would seemingly withstand, despite the atrocities she committed. This delicate equilibrium, however, was disrupted in the series' final stages when her actions starkly diverged from her established character traits, rendering her destruction of hundreds of thousands of innocents in King's Landing a moment of deep discordance for the audience.

The dissonance is arguably rooted in the abruptness of Daenerys' transformation. Despite a steady undercurrent of foreshadowing hinting at her potential descent into tyranny, the sudden execution of this transformation raised questions regarding narrative pacing and character motivation. The key criticism points towards the 'unmotivated' nature of her actions, as underscored by Mittell. The apparent contradiction between Daenerys' past and her ultimate act of violence tested the audience's acceptance of character instability and resulted in a profound sense of dissatisfaction among some viewers.

It is essential to acknowledge that audience allegiance is not uniform, and while many viewers might have experienced disillusionment with the denouement of Daenerys' character arc, others possibly maintained their allegiance. The latter group potentially perceived the pain and losses she endured as a viable catalyst for her final bout of rage – or by being blinded by the lens of early established sympathy, expanded upon for several years, reinforcing the intricacies of audience alignment and allegiance.

In conclusion, Daenerys Targaryen's character arc in *Game of Thrones* serves as a

testament to the power of narrative execution and the importance of character consistency in maintaining allegiance. While her journey was intricately crafted and peppered with substantial foreshadowing, the perceived hastiness of her descent into tyranny was enough to disrupt the long-nurtured allegiance of some viewers. This study underscores the nuanced demands of evolving narratives and characters within long-form television series, providing insights for future storytelling endeavours in the realm of complex television.

In the end, this paper raises an interesting question to ponder: In the grand narrative tapestry of a series like *Game of Thrones*, where character arcs span years, and contain multiple protagonists, and development can be both gradual and abrupt, can we definitively determine if allegiance is ultimately established or dissolved? Or does it instead lie in the eye of each individual beholder, shaped by their interpretation of the character's journey?

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