

From Innocence to Experience:

On the Significance of Sansa Stark's Costumes in HBO's *Game of Thrones*

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ABSTRACT

HBO's *Game of Thrones* is widely regarded as one of the most ambitious and sophisticated series in the history of television. Based upon the enormously popular historical/fantasy novels of George R.R. Martin, the series is admired for its epic scale and for its elaborate world-building. HBO's *Game of Thrones* is praised for its spectacular set designs and its skilful blending of CGI and location shots to create an instantly recognizable visual style. From the opening credit sequence to the richly textured and nuanced representations of the fictional worlds of Essos, Pentos, and Westeros, the *mise-en-scène* in *Game of Thrones* has played a significant role in winning the support of die-hard fans and scholars alike. To date, there have been more than a half-dozen monographs and/or collections of critical essays published on the landmark television series. Our essay aims to add to this commentary by exploring the significance of costume design in *Game of Thrones*. Inherently, costume design serves multiple functions. On one level, costumes help lend a degree of realism and historical accuracy to the characters and settings. They also help to define specific characters both as individuals and as members of specific social classes or groups. However, costume can also visually foreground narrative arcs and themes. This is the case for Sansa Stark. Through a dramatic transformation in costuming, the series showcases her character's growth from innocence to experience.

“When costumes and make-up act as narrative markers, their change or lack of change becomes a crucial way to understand a character and the development of the story” (Corrigan and White 57).

As the chief costume designer for HBO's *Game of Thrones*, Michele Clapton has contributed to the unique visual style of the series. From the distinctive costumes of the Wildlings, the White Walkers, the Dothraki, and the Unsullied, to the sigils, costumes, and armour of the Starks, the Lannisters and the other noble houses of Westeros and Essos, Clapton's costume designs are rooted in careful research into the clothing worn by men and women from all social classes during the Middle Ages. The costumes used in the series serve several functions. At one level, they help lend a degree of realism and historical accuracy to the characters and settings portrayed in the series. They also help to define specific characters both as individuals and as members of specific social classes or groups. The costumes frequently

foreground narrative arcs, and along with them, important developments in characters that occur over the course of individual seasons. Finally, the costumes serve at times to draw our attention to important themes in the series.

One theme of note in *Game of Thrones* is the fall from innocence to experience. The Oxford English Dictionary defines innocence as “freedom from sin, guilt or moral wrong in general” (OED). Miriam Ticktin expands on this definition by noting that the emphasis falls on absence of experience, thus making innocence “a state of moral and epistemic purity” (578). To be exposed to any opposing and potentially depraved state, such as knowledge, guilt, or sexuality, would tarnish the pure space that defines innocence and thus signifies an irreversible entrance into understanding and consequently, experience. This theme is closely related to another in the series: namely, that of the decline of the chivalric code of honour. The qualities associated with this code include “courage, honour, justice, and a readiness to help the weak” (OED). For George R. R. Martin, the author



Fig. 1 | Still from "Winter is Coming," 00:26:03. the Stark family awaits the arrival of King Robert Baratheon and the Lannisters. HBO, 2011.

of the *Game of Thrones* novels, the Wars of the Roses symbolize a breakdown of the chivalric code of honour that had unified both political and literary culture during the High Middle Ages. As Martin writes,

Chivalry in the Middle Ages was among the most idealistic codes of conduct the human race has ever come up with for a warrior. These are men who were sworn to defend the weak. And then you look at the reality, and their brutality was extreme. (qtd. in Johnston 142)

More than any other character in the series, Sansa Stark (Sophie Turner) embodies both of these central themes: the fall from innocence to experience and the gap between the idealism and reality associated with the chivalric code of honour. In the case of Sansa, costumes are used to draw our attention to significant transformations in her character that occur over the course of the series. More importantly, Sansa's changing costumes are used to make visible her character development and her embodiment of these themes. Sansa's appearance in the first four seasons of *Game of Thrones* is relatively stable, reflecting both her innocence and her continued attachment to chivalric and romantic ideals. It is not until season five that we begin to see costuming used to foreground a more dramatic development in her character. The roles of innocence and experience in the character arc of Sansa are not only clearly outlined, but they also have extremely profound effects on the character's growth into adulthood.

As Sophie Turner, the actress who plays Sansa Stark, observes, "Sansa is naive and quite vulnerable at the start. She's a complete romantic and lives in a fantasy world" (Nguyen). This is

It is clear that Sansa has learned from her experiences in King's Landing that the chivalric ideals that had meant so much to her as a girl are far from the brutal realities of life as a young noblewoman.

evident from the moment we first see Sansa in the scene in which the Starks and Lannisters meet for the first time (Season One, Episode One 00:25:44). In contrast to her younger sister, Arya (Maisie Williams), she is clearly enamored with the pomp and ceremony of the meeting of the two noble families, and with the trappings of power and status. More to the point, she is already infatuated with young Joffrey (Jack Gleeson) and imagines one day becoming his queen. Moreover, she remains infatuated with Joffrey long after she has witnessed his pettiness and cruelty. Joffrey's confrontation with the butcher's boy, Arya, and Arya's direwolf in "The Kingsroad" (00:44:40) serves as the first indication of his cruelty and maliciousness. Intruding on the children's play sword fight, Joffrey punishes the butcher's boy for disarming Arya with a wooden sword by inflicting a gash on the boy's cheek with a real sword. Yet, when Arya's direwolf reacts in defense to Joffrey's aggression by biting his arm, Joffrey cowers behind noble pretense and demands a trial to punish those responsible for his injury. In this way, Sansa witnesses Joffrey's maliciousness firsthand. In the trial that follows, she sees even more evidence of his failings as a prince (00:48:20). When he demands retribution for his injured pride and Sansa is pressed for her account of the incident, she sputters "I don't



Fig. 2 | Still from "Winter is Coming," 00:45:10, in which Sansa speaks to Queen Cersei Lannister for the first time. HBO, 2011.

know. I don't remember. It all happened so fast." In this short scene, she betrays her sister and re-affirms her support for Joffrey despite his cowardice. Ironically, Sansa's silence leads to the death of her own direwolf, aptly named "Lady", despite her wolf not being responsible for Joffrey's injury. She is willfully blind to reality, preferring instead to cling to her fantasies of honour, decorum, and chivalry.

Sansa's innocence is reflected in her clothing and her general appearance. During the first few episodes of the first season, she is dressed in long flowing gowns that are more elaborate than typical Winterfell dresses. As opposed to the dark, earth tone garments worn by other women in her family, Sansa usually wears a lighter pastel blue. In a sea of black, grey, and navy fabric, the lighter, airy colour immediately stands out, drawing attention to the juxtaposition of Sansa's idealism with the pragmatism of the other Starks (Fig. 1). By comparison, Sansa's dresses also seem to radiate a metallic, silver sheen. The pairing of pastel blue and metallic undertones not only creates a more feminine aesthetic, but it also bears more resemblance to the jewel tone palette of the dresses worn by the ladies of the court in King's Landing. As a result, the contrast makes her garment seem more ornate than the ones worn by other Northerners, particularly her family. In keeping with an ornate, feminine look, Sansa's hair is impeccably styled, often in complex braids such as waterfall braids, fishtail braids, and French braids (Fig. 2).

The time and effort Sansa spends on achieving a pristine, feminine look is indicative of her vanity, which is evident in the frequent shots of her scrutinizing her image in mirrors. As Valerie Estelle Frankel notes, such shots suggest "that she is considering herself as an object. Will her new gown please the men in her

life? Does she look pretty enough?" (Frankel 100). Such statements reinforce the idea of her vanity. Frankel quotes archetype scholar Wind Hughes on the figure of the Maiden: "She may be the dutiful daughter, her self-worth linked to pleasing others in order to receive their approval, [but] she has not developed a strong sense of self" (qtd. in Frankel 100). In this regard, Sansa completely embodies the maiden archetype, completely, especially in her insecurities regarding her appearance and her need for approval. In fact, in "The Kingsroad," Sansa admires the visiting ladies of King's Landing as they braid their hair (00:42:39). The scene emphasizes Sansa's vanity and her fixation on outward appearances. Because Sansa lacks a sense of self, she is able to quickly shed her Northern identity and adopt a new one through clothing: a visual representation of her shifting loyalties and ambitions. This idea is reinforced in "Lord Snow" as the eager-to-please Sansa is quick to alter her appearance once she reaches King's Landing. Slowly, she begins to abandon her Northern roots to conform to what she believes will make her more desirable for Joffrey. At first, she remains in her heavy knit Winterfell blue gowns, but changes her hair style to conform to the styles of the ladies of King's Landing. In "A Golden Crown," Sansa's Septa comments on Sansa's shifting appearance, remarking, "you wear

Sansa's journey from illusion to disillusion spans the entire seven seasons, ending with her transformation into a strong woman with agency, capable of reconciling the real and the ideal.

your hair like a real Southern Lady now,” to which Sansa replies, “Well why shouldn’t I? We’re in the South.” Septa responds by advising Sansa of the importance of remembering where she comes from (00:39:58). However, Sansa doesn’t consider this advice; instead she continues her needlepoint, a historically domestic task which highlights the traditional elements of her femininity. Conformity is not a question in Sansa’s eyes, but a duty or obligation that is necessary in order to fulfill her child-like romantic fantasies.

Sansa’s weak sense of self, coupled with her lack of agency, render her unable to comprehend the gap between her own idealistic view of life in King’s Landing and the brutal realities of Westeros. For instance, when she attends her first jousting tournament in “Cripples, Bastards, and Broken Things” (00:45:46), what she witnesses should strip away any illusions she holds about the chivalric code of honour. Still, she remains infatuated with the Baratheons and with the idea of one day becoming queen. In fact, the scene depicting the tournament is shot in such a way as to foreground the gap between the ideal and the real. In medieval literature and history, such tournaments were largely symbolic displays of martial skill for the amusement of the king and his retinue. Yet Gregor Clegane’s brutal murder of his opponent, Sir Hugh of the Vale, clearly violates the symbolic nature of the ceremony. The camera lingers on the gruesome scene, foregrounding the unsheathed lance that “the Mountain” has thrust through Sir Hugh’s throat, while the editing serves to highlight that we are meant to see this horrific scene largely from Sansa’s perspective. Like the others in the stands, Sansa is clearly shocked and traumatized by what she has witnessed, but the camerawork and editing also simultaneously allude to her disconnect with the events unfolding around her. Specifically, this is evidenced by the oscillation between the close up of her reaction and the shot of Sir Hugh’s body (00:47:12). The knight, who embodies ideal, romantic notions of chivalry that Sansa holds in high esteem, lays slain on the ground, with his shining silver armour covered in blood as he gasps for air. Interspersed are the shocked reactions of both Sansa and the tournament attendees, as indicated by wide eyes and slack jaws. Yet the sole focus on her in tandem with the blurred background infers a disassociation from the event, as though Sansa is not really aware of her surroundings. In addition, the two characters are never shown in the same shot, inferring Sansa’s inability to comprehend the brutality she has just witnessed. As an accompanying wake up call, “the tale of brotherly love¹” (00:48:20) that Petyr Baelish recounts to his young charge is another sign that King’s Landing is not the idyllic world that Sansa imagines. Ultimately, Sansa’s belief in the chivalric code distorts her perception of reality to such an extent that it takes abhorrent treatment from several

characters to force her to understand the brutal actualities of the Westerosi society.

The first and most impactful factor in her gradual loss of innocence is her relationship with Joffrey and the Lannisters. As mentioned earlier, she comes to know of Joffrey’s maliciousness and pettiness from her introduction to him in Winterfell, but her belief in chivalric notions distorts her perceptions of his cruelty. In fact, when faced with blatant danger due to the actions of Joffrey and the Lannisters, Sansa continuously reverts to an idyllic perception that the royal family will not harm her or her family because of her future position as queen. This tendency is first demonstrated when Ned Stark tells his daughters that their family needs to leave King’s Landing for their own safety. Though both Sansa and Arya strongly oppose Ned, Arya is aware of the threat the Lannisters pose and is intent on staying to learn how to fight. Sansa, on the other hand, complains to Ned that they can’t leave because she “is meant to marry Prince Joffrey. [She] love[s] him and [she is] meant to be his queen and have his babies” (“A Golden Crown” 00:44:45). The contrast illustrates that Sansa’s naivety is so deeply ingrained and aids her fantasy to such an extent that she cannot perceive harsh realities that even her younger sister is able to respond to.

The catalyst for Sansa’s awareness of these harsh realities is her father’s public execution, as ordered by Joffrey. This scene in “Baelor” serves as the climax of Season One. Preceding the scene, Sansa is confident that Joffrey will save her father’s life; he states, “your sweet words have moved me” (00:56:30). Due to Sansa’s naivety, she is unable to recognize that she has been enlisted into a piece of political theatre. Joffrey has convinced her that by persuading her father to confess to treason, she is saving Ned Stark’s life. In reality, Joffrey has scripted the confession to help legitimize his rule as king. Although he had originally refused to confess, valuing his honour over his life, Ned relents because he believes that by confessing he will be protecting his children. At the beginning of the episode, Sansa appears satisfied with her role in what she thinks will result in mercy for her father. However, during this scene there is an abrupt shift in Sansa’s facial expressions at the moment of realization that her father’s life will not be spared. To add to the horror of the scene, Cersei appears to be just as shocked by Joffrey’s sentencing as Sansa. This is worth noting as the series has portrayed Queen Cersei as a Machiavellian character thus far. Therein, Cersei’s reaction highlights Joffrey’s sentencing of Sansa’s father as capricious and malicious.

Witnessing her father’s execution is clearly a traumatic experience for Sansa and one that contributes to her loss of identity in the first seasons of the series. As Jenna Busch and Janina Scarlett observe, “Individuals whose identities are changed as a result of

1 Petyr Baelish to Sansa: “Has anyone ever told you the story of the Mountain and the Hound? Lovely little tale of brotherly love. The Hound was just a pup, six years old maybe, Gregor, a few years older, already a big lad already getting a bit of a reputation. Some lucky boys are just born with a talent for violence. One evening, Gregor found his little brother playing with a toy by the fire. Gregor’s toy. A wooden knight. Gregor never said a word. He just grabbed his brother by the scruff of his neck and shoved his face into the burning coals, held him there while the boy screamed, while his face melted.” (“Cripples, Bastards, and Broken Things” 00:48:20)

trauma are more likely to experience physical and psychological effects of the trauma than individuals who are able to maintain their own identity" (52). We can observe the effects of Ned's traumatic death through the way that Sansa isolates herself. Of course, Sansa's circumstances are unique in that she is forced to live with the people responsible for her father's execution, including Joffrey, to whom she pledged her love and loyalty only to be publicly betrayed and humiliated. As a consequence of the trauma Sansa faces, she also exhibits some of the symptoms of disassociation as she attempts to separate herself from her identity as a Stark. As Busch and Scarlett note, after her father's execution, "Sansa continues to call her late father and her brothers traitors to keep herself safe from Joffrey and Cersei" (53). For example, on Joffrey's name day, Tyrion offers his condolences to Sansa for her loss. "My father was a traitor," she says. "My mother and brother are traitors too. I am loyal to my beloved Joffrey" ("The North Remembers" 00:05:50). It is clear that Sansa is not being entirely genuine with these comments: rather, she is emotionless and calculated in her claims. While she may not identify entirely with being a Lannister, it is the only identity now available to her, which she clings to not out of genuine love for Joffrey but as a means of survival.

This loss of identity and need to conform as a means of survival are reflected in Sansa's costume. This is specifically illustrated in Sansa's mimicking of Cersei Lannister's appearance. This mimicking is a likely consequence of her fragile sense of self, coupled with her longing for the acceptance of others. Because she holds no firm identity of her own, she adopts the personae of others. Up until her father's execution, Sansa's changes in appearance had been limited to the mimicked hairstyles of the ladies in King's Landing. Now, Sansa mirrors Cersei in both in the way she styles her hair and the fit of her clothing. In fact, in "Baelor," Sansa wears her hair in a regal and elaborate style almost identical to Cersei Lannister. Her clothing too conforms to the jewel tone palette of the South, and mimics the fit and cut which Cersei wears throughout the first season. The dress is tapered to her body, with a cinched, thick belted waist, hanging sleeves and a deep 'V' shaped neckline. Even the necklace which Sansa wears, gifted to her by Joffrey, resembles the necklace which Cersei Lannister wears (Fig. 3).

Although she is clearly one of the most important characters in *Game of Thrones*, compared with other characters, Sansa Stark remains curiously static. For instance, Daenerys Targaryen, Arya Stark, and Jon Snow all exhibit more dramatic character growth than Sansa during the early seasons. To illustrate the static nature of her character, consider her relationship with Sir Loras Tyrell. Viewers will recall that Sansa had first seen Sir Loras in Season One, Episode Five, where he appeared, in her mind at least, as the quintessential knight in shining armour (00:06:40). Sansa was oblivious to the fact that his attentions were actually directed at his lover, Renly Baratheon, but chose instead to idealize him as the emblem of chivalry. In "And Now His Watch Has Ended," Sansa is once again enamoured with Loras when Margaery suggests to her that she consider becoming his wife (00:34:24). At the mere mention of this idea, Sansa becomes

giddy and excited, like she once was with Joffrey, which causes her to become fixated on her appearance: looking in mirrors and fussing over the garments she wears. At one point, referring to a gown for King Joffrey's wedding to Margaery, she asks her handmaid, "do you think people will like it?" ("And Now His Watch Has Ended", 00:44:34). "Loras likes green and gold brocade," she adds. It is surely no coincidence that Sansa utters this line as she stands in front of a mirror. Even more significant is the fact that in one shot in particular the mirror presents her as the subject of a stylized and perfectly centred portrait (Fig. 4). This scene in particular demonstrates that despite the lessons Sansa has learned about the realities of the Westerosi world, she still views herself as an object of desire for men.

Even after the promise of a relationship with Sir Loras never materializes, Sansa continues to hold on to the hope of a saviour, which leaves her to be taken advantage of again, this time by Petyr Baelish. In part, her trust in him is due to the fact that Baelish has been a close friend of her mother, Catelyn Stark, for decades. After her father's execution, Baelish is anxious to serve as a surrogate father to Sansa. Moreover, Little Finger, as Baelish is known, always behaves in a courtly and ingratiating manner when dealing with Sansa or the Starks in general. Given her own investment in the idealized world of the court, she is especially susceptible to this type of behaviour. For instance, in season 4's "Breaker of Chains," Sansa instinctively trusts Baelish to take care of her after fleeing the scene of Joffrey's murder. As he is the one to devise an escape plan to help Sansa flee King's Landing, she is quick to suspend all skepticism and is seduced by the false sense of security he provides. Though Sansa has clearly gained a sense of awareness from her experiences in King's Landing, her desperation in the moment, coupled with her naivety, make her unable to fully comprehend the dangers that await her once she leaves King's Landing. She remains oblivious to the true intentions of others, which demonstrates that she has not yet shed her naivety.

Ironically, Sansa's escape from King's Landing to the assumed safety of Baelish's guardianship coincides with a time in her life where she, at least superficially, is in possession of the noble life she fantasizes about. She seemingly has everything she ever desired, such as a position at court, the beautiful and elaborate garments of King's Landing, and a noble husband. Her costume reflects this irony. While fleeing King's Landing after Joffrey's murder, she is still dressed in her ornate purple gown that she wore during Joffrey and Margaery's wedding ceremony (Fig. 5). The color purple is, of course, indicative of royalty, thus illustrating Sansa's inclusion in the noble class. Her garment is also made up of luxurious materials, such as silk, alluding to her wealth and noble status. Even while fleeing King's Landing, Sansa's costume reflects her unwavering attachment to the romanticism of the chivalric code, despite experiencing the failures of such ideals first-hand.

The first sign of Sansa's transformation comes in "High Sparrow." Once again, we see her in the company of Petyr Baelish. The two have returned to the North so that she can reclaim her inheritance. Baelish tries to convince her of the



Fig. 3 | Still from "Baelor," 00:53:36. Sansa and the Lannisters await the public sentencing of Ned Stark. HBO, 2011.

Unlike her father, she has developed the ability to 'play the game.' After being a pawn in this 'game of thrones' for so long, she is finally a player.



Fig. 4 | Still from "And Now His Watch Has Ended," 00:44:36. Sansa appears in the mirror as a perfectly centred portrait. HBO 2011.



Fig. 5 | Still from “Unbowed, Unbent, Unbroken” 00:46:55. Theon/Reek walks Sansa down the aisle as she marries Ramsay Bolton. HBO, 2015.

strategic value of marrying into the House of Bolton, an idea which Sansa clearly finds revolting. “Roose Bolton murdered my brother. He betrayed my family” (“High Sparrow” 00:16:01) she says, referring to the Bolton family’s role in orchestrating the Red Wedding. Although she is unsuccessful in preventing the marriage, Sansa is now willing to challenge Baelish and his authority. However, she still remains naive to the fact that Baelish is more concerned with fulfilling his own self-interests than he is with her well-being. Nonetheless, we see Sansa slowly becoming less susceptible to Baelish’s violations of her good faith, which will foreshadow her eventual shattering of her trust in him.

Not only has Sansa become noticeably more assertive by this point in the series, but her appearance has shifted drastically. Her hair is darker now and she wears darker, more subdued costumes than those worn in earlier seasons (Fig. 6). The change in her hair colour and her clothing is motivated by Sansa’s desire to disguise herself so that she is not recognized in the North. However, it may also be interpreted as a defense mechanism she has adopted as a result of the suffering she has experienced since leaving Winterfell for King’s Landing. In fact, one could argue that Sansa’s change in appearance at this point in the series is a sign or symptom of dissociation. She is attempting to adopt a new identity to shield herself from the post-traumatic feelings she is experiencing as a result of her time in King’s Landing, yet her attempt to conceal and disassociate seems to be in vain. Even Little Finger himself comments, “You’re a Stark. Dyeing your hair doesn’t change that” (00:16:14). Interestingly, on the night before Sansa’s wedding to Ramsay Bolton, his mistress Miranda bathes her and rinses the dye from her hair, stripping her of the disguise and the protective shield she has attempted to build for

herself. Sansa does stand up to Miranda, informing her that she is Sansa Stark of Winterfell and not someone who will be intimidated or prevented from reclaiming her inheritance (Season Five, Episode Six 00:42:09). However, it is worth pointing out that this is just one of many scenes in which Sansa is represented in contradictory terms. On the one hand, we see her attempting to stand up for herself. On the other, she is being bathed, dressed or otherwise tended to by a female character, illustrative of her malleability at the hands of others.

Sansa’s transformation is by no means complete at this point in the series. On the day of her wedding to Ramsay Bolton, she reverts to the style of clothing she had worn in King’s Landing. In contrast to the plain, dark and heavy cape-coat that she wears in the scene with Petyr Baelish at her wedding to Ramsay, she is wearing an off-white wedding gown that draws attention to her figure. Her hairstyle is also reminiscent of the way that she had worn her hair prior to her return to the North (Fig. 7). Rather than being pulled back from her face, it has been carefully coiffed for the occasion. This jarring shift in appearance is suggestive of her regression from a woman in the process of developing her own autonomy, to essentially becoming Ramsay’s property. This is further illustrated through her rigid posture and hunched shoulders. The stance is indicative of defeat and resignation. With Petyr Baelish, Sansa is dependent, but she is able to voice her concerns regarding his plans for her. She is able to question his authority without fear of a violent reprisal. Once she marries Ramsay, however, Sansa knows that she will become a mere prop or plaything for him like she once was for Joffrey. Despite this apparent regression, it is clear that Sansa has learned from her experiences in



Fig. 6 | Still from “High Sparrow” 00:15:46. Petyr Baelish and Sansa discuss her proposed marriage to Ramsay Bolton. HBO, 2015.

King’s Landing that the chivalric ideals that had meant so much to her as a girl are far from the brutal realities of life as a young noblewoman. She appears to recognize that she is a mere pawn in this “game of thrones.”

The nadir in the series’ representation of Sansa appears in the rape scene in “Unbowed, Unbent, Unbroken” (00:48:26). The scene itself is one of the most important and most traumatic in the series, but it is also unlike other scenes depicting psycho-sexual violence. Rather than sensationalizing the violence or reveling in its graphic impact, the writers and director of this particular episode have chosen an uncharacteristically restrained approach. There is very little in the way of explicit sexuality or violence. Instead, what make the scene so disturbing is not simply Ramsay’s cruel and malicious abuse of Sansa but the fact that he insists that Theon/Reek remain in the room to witness the abuse. The ramifications of his presence are monumental as up until this point, Sansa holds naively in the faith that someone will rescue her. However, in this scene she realizes that despite the presence of Theon/ Reek—who Sansa looks at in a last-ditch effort for help—is not able to rescue her as a consequence of how crippled he has become as a result of Ramsay’s torment and emasculation. The absence of a male saviour, coupled with this horrifying abuse, leads Sansa to quickly shed her naive ideals and expectations of the world. Her physical trauma is compounded by the degradation and humiliation of having her “brother” witness the act, thereby making him both an accomplice and a victim. Through the lengthy shot on Theon/Reek, the viewer also takes part in the victimization as we too are unable to protect and preserve Sansa’s innocence. As Theodore Gioia notes, “we — the spectator — like Theon are an unwilling audience to this horrible

Her character growth over the course of the series is reflected not only in change of costume, but also in change in values as she makes the transition from innocence to experience.

event, yet watch, powerless to stop it” (Gioia). Ramsay’s haunting words, “watch her become a woman,” prove accurate, though not in the way he intends. As a consequence of trauma, Sansa finally recognizes the brutal reality of life in Westeros. This horrific event becomes the last straw for Sansa, causing her to shed her naive expectations of the world.

The trauma that Sansa suffers on her wedding night proves not only to be the breaking point of her naive ideal, but also the exacerbation of her PTSD as she exhibits the dissociative behaviour of the condition. She may not display the classic symptoms of PTSD— hypervigilance, involuntary memories, or the contradictory need to both repress and confront the traumatic experience -- but she does show the signs of a young woman who has witnessed and experienced horrific violence. Like many PTSD victims, Sansa is isolated due to her inability to form connections with others. She is unlike her younger sister Arya, for instance, who seems to find camaraderie with many around her (Busch and Scarlett). Aside from her handmaid and Margaery Tyrell, the only relationships Sansa is able to form are with men whom she uses for her personal protection, reinforcing the notion of her as a “damsel in distress.” Even Sansa’s passivity can be attributed to her experiences of trauma. Although this



Fig. 7 | Still from "Unbowed, Unbent, Unbroken" 00:46:55. Theon/Reek walks Sansa down the aisle as she marries Ramsay Bolton. HBO, 2015.



Fig. 8 | Still from "The Dragon and the Wolf" 00:55:17. Sansa presides over the trial of Petyr Baelish. HBO, 2017.

trait has been a constant in her personality, prior to her trauma, it seemed to stem from the desire to appease rather than from her helplessness. For instance, in the example of the direwolf confrontation mentioned previously, Sansa's lack of action was due to her belief that the Lannisters represented a courtly ideal. As the series progresses, however, and Sansa suffers one traumatic experience after another, she becomes even more passive, withdrawing further into herself.

Sansa's journey from illusion to disillusion spans the entire eight seasons, culminating with her transformation into a strong woman with agency, capable of reconciling the real and the ideal.

The layered fabrics piled on top of one another reflect traumatic experiences that have unrelentingly weighed her down, accumulating in a grave and burdensome understanding of the world.

We see signs of this transformation in "The Door" when Sansa confronts Petyr Baelish after she is freed with Brienne's help from the tower where Ramsay has held her captive. Sansa's demeanor in this scene is strikingly different than in previous scenes. She is sure of herself and more clearly in control of the situation. This is evident not only in the assertive way in which she interrogates Baelish, but also in her body language and her overall demeanor. She insists upon making eye contact with him throughout this scene even when he tries to avert her gaze. "Did you know about Ramsay?" she asks, beginning a flurry of rhetorical questions which ultimately act as an affront designed to not only to force Petyr to take responsibility for his actions, but to convey Sansa's true feelings about Baelish: "If you didn't know, you were an idiot and if you did, you are my enemy" (00:03:05). The sentiment illustrates both Sansa's awareness of Baelish's duplicitous nature and her newfound immunity to his manipulation. After questioning and goading Baelish, Sansa alters her tactics and confronts him with the brutal truth of the pain she has experienced because of him. "I can still feel it," she says, "I don't mean in my tender heart it still pains me so. I can still feel what he did in my body standing here right now" (00:04:35). Sansa's tone here is clearly ironic. In fact, it drips with sarcasm. By using the particular language she does, she is distancing herself from the romantic, idealistic views that she had subscribed to throughout the first five seasons of the series. But she is also performing one of the most important steps in post-traumatic growth: namely, taking ownership of her traumatic experience.

She acknowledges the trauma she has suffered at Ramsay's hands, but interestingly, she is no longer merely a victim. At this point she is clearly moving toward a greater degree of independence and agency than she has displayed earlier in the narrative. In fact, this is the first time we see Sansa dominate the scene and control the conversation. In other words, we see a clear shift in the power dynamic; once subservient, Sansa is now in control. Previously, she was unable to make decisions or assert herself on her own. She needed the guidance of an older, usually male,

figure, but now she has independence. Although she had once looked to Baelish for protection, she now asserts, "I don't believe you anymore. I don't need you anymore. You can't protect me" (00:04:55).

Sansa's initial confrontation with Baelish foreshadows the Season Seven finale, "The Dragon and the Wolf," in which she finally emerges as a strong character in her own right. We see her presiding over the trial of Petyr Baelish, levelling charges against him, and reasserting her recognition of the political machinations that he has orchestrated. It is significant that she conducts this trial not because she wants to but because, as she puts it,

"it's what honour demands" (0:55:46). In this regard, Sansa is clearly her father's daughter. She then proceeds to deliver a litany of charges against Baelish, refuting each of his feeble attempts at self-defence. When he claims, for instance, that he killed Sansa's aunt, Lysa Arryn, to protect Sansa, she is quick to reply, "You did it to take power in the vale" (00:57:02). The authority in her statement is striking, showcasing that she has finally become impervious to Baelish's charms. But perhaps the most important line in the scene comes when Sansa offers the following assessment of herself and her slow, painful development as an individual. "I'm a slow learner..." she says, "But I learn" (00:59:04).

It is worth noting that Sansa's wardrobe has taken a drastic shift from the ladylike attire she wore in earlier episodes. Her attire now has an element of weight, both literally and symbolically. Sansa is dressed in thick, dark layers, reminiscent of Ned's costume in Season One (Fig. 8). The materials used to fashion her coats--primarily furs and leathers--are not only thick and heavy on their own, but are layered on top of one another, creating a monumental weight. All of these materials are also black and grey, compounding the notion of heaviness through a dark, monochromatic, layered look. Of course, this change in aesthetic is, in part, adopted for practical reasons as the garments protect Sansa from winter in the North. However, the physical weight, as indicated by material and colour, also reflects Sansa's multitude of traumatic experiences. As Michele Clapton notes during a 2016 interview with IGN (Imagine Games Network), "the story is now getting darker, and more oppressive" (IGN); the costumes are intended to illustrate this. Thus, the layered fabrics piled on top of one another reflect traumatic experiences that have unrelentingly weighed her down, accumulating in a grave and burdensome understanding of the world. Reinforcing the notion of gravity and severity is the cut of her costume. Most prominent are the broadened shoulders of her garments. Prior to her dark, heavy attire, her gowns included delicate sleeves that draped off her

shoulders. The effect is both light and ethereal, connoting a 'damsel in distress' stereotype. In contrast, the sharp, defined shoulders of her new attire highlight her power without sacrificing or obscuring her femininity. This change in costume makes visible the change in character that has occurred as Sansa's idyllic view of the world is replaced by a darker, but more mature understanding of life in Westeros.

By the end of season seven, Sansa has finally shed the naive and idealistic world view that had defined her character for so much of the first Six Seasons. She has also emerged as the heir to her late father, significantly becoming Lady of Winterfell not through marriage, but by being one of the only surviving heirs of Ned Stark. Therefore, it is no coincidence that her change in costume highlights her physical resemblance to her late father, who had once served as an emblem of the chivalric code (Fig. 9 and Fig. 10). This resemblance in costume is only fortified though her adoption of the values her father once held, these

being leadership, justice, and family. Rather than simply becoming her father, however, Sansa is learning from his legacy. Her character growth over the course of the series is reflected not only in change of costume, but also in change in values as she makes the transition from innocence to experience. Sansa hasn't abandoned all faith in the chivalric code. However, she has shifted her expectations on how this code of life will play out for her. She does this by abandoning her fairy-tale-like visions of the world which paint her as a damsel waiting for a strong and powerful male figure to save her. Instead, she is able to embody the characteristics which she holds in such high regard: strength, loyalty, resilience, and family. She is able to grow as a woman, while still maintaining a sense of self. However, her experience makes her able to do this within the brutal realities of the world of Westeros. Unlike her father, she has developed the ability to "play the game." After being a pawn in this "game of thrones" for so long, she is finally a player. ■

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Fig. 9 | Still from "Stormborn" 00:46:09. Sansa watches John leave on a recruitment mission. HBO, 2017.



Fig. 10 | Still from "Winter is Coming" 00:13:00. Ned Stark's costume in the North. HBO, 2011.