

2º CICLO
ESTUDOS ANGLO-AMERICANOS

“May the Others take them all”
Spirituality and the Supernatural in *A Song of Ice and Fire*

Melissa de Araújo Pinho

M

2022



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Dissertação realizada no âmbito do Mestrado em Estudos Anglo-Americanos,
orientada pelo Professor Doutor Jorge Bastos da Silva

Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto

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Sumário

Declaração de honra	4
Agradecimentos	6
Resumo	7
Abstract	8
Key to abbreviations	10
Introduction	11
1.The Old Gods.....	16
1.1. Origins and Symbolism	16
1.2. Totemism and the Spiritual Aspects of the Old Gods.....	18
1.3. Wargs and Skinchangers.....	21
1.4. More Spiritual Aspects in the Old Gods.....	26
1.5. Greenseers	34
2.The Lord of Light	40
2.1. Zoroastrianism.....	40
2.2. Azor Ahai’s Prophecy and The Long Night Myth	45
2.3. Visions in Fire.....	51
2.4. Resurrection	53
2.5. Sacrifices.....	54
2.6. The Supernatural in R’hillor.....	56
2.7. Lucifer, Son of the Morning and the Lightbringer	59
2.8. The Great Other.....	61
3.The Others.....	63
3.1. The Long Night Myth	66
3.2. The Wall.....	70
3.3. Wights	73
3.4. Craster and his Gods.....	75
3.5. Monsters	77
Conclusion.....	79
Works Cited.....	83

Declaração de honra

Declaro que a presente dissertação é de minha autoria e não foi utilizado previamente noutro curso ou unidade curricular, desta ou de outra instituição. As referências a outros autores (afirmações, ideias, pensamentos) respeitam escrupulosamente as regras da atribuição, e encontram-se devidamente indicadas no texto e nas referências bibliográficas, de acordo com as normas de referência. Tenho consciência de que a prática de plágio e auto-plágio constitui um ilícito académico.

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Melissa de Araújo Pinho

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Resumo

Apesar da relevância que a obra de George R. R. Martin, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, tem tomado nas mídias audiovisuais do mundo todo, pouco ou quase nada foi estudado sobre seus trabalhos em pesquisas acadêmicas. Esta dissertação foi concebida com a intenção de contribuir para que esta rica saga fosse estudada e analisada pela perspectiva literária. A espiritualidade tem um papel fundamental no desenvolvimento da narrativa n'As *Crônicas de Gelo e Fogo*. Em vários momentos, esta espiritualidade está intimamente ligada com o sobrenatural e ambas contribuem para desenvolvimento de personagens, assim como para que o leitor compreenda a criação de mundo feita por Martin. As duas religiões escolhidas para serem estudadas neste trabalho foram a religião dos *Old Gods* e a religião de *R'hllor*. Ambas têm características muito distintas e particulares, mas com traços em comum que as tornam relevantes para o estudo da espiritualidade e do sobrenatural. Para a criação do seu mundo, Martin usou o mundo real como inspiração, portanto há paralelos que podem ser encontrados quando comparamos estas religiões com as religiões do nosso próprio mundo. Sendo assim, semelhanças foram traçadas e discutidas ao longo desta dissertação. Além disso, as criaturas sobrenaturais que apresentam a maior ameaça ao universo da saga, os *Outros*, foram analisadas pelos parâmetros do sobrenatural, apontando-se a sua importância cultural para este universo e o modo como se trata de criaturas espirituais à sua própria maneira. Curiosamente, todos, os *Old Gods*, *R'hllor* e os *Outros*, se conectam, e existe uma grande possibilidade para que a solução desta ameaça seja encontrada nas crenças e ensinamentos das religiões estudadas.

Palavras-chave: Sobrenatural, Espiritualidade, Gótico, Religião, Fantasia

Abstract

Despite the relevance that the work of George R. R. Martin has taken on the audiovisual media around the world, little or nothing has been produced as a matter of academic research. This dissertation was conceived with the intention of contributing so that this rich saga could be studied and analyzed from a literary perspective. Spirituality plays a key role in the development of the narrative in *A Song of Ice and Fire*. At various times, this spirituality is closely linked with the supernatural and both contribute to character development, as well as for the reader to understand Martin's world creation. The two religions chosen to be studied in this work were the religion of the Old Gods and the religion of R'hllor. Both have very distinct and particular characteristics, but with common traits that make them relevant to the study of spirituality and the supernatural. For his world creation, Martin used the real world as inspiration, so there are parallels that can be found when comparing these religions with the religions of our own world. Thus, similarities were traced and discussed throughout this dissertation. Furthermore, the supernatural creatures that present the greatest threat to the saga's universe, the Others, were analyzed by the parameters of the supernatural, pointing out their cultural importance for this universe and the way in which they are spiritual creatures in their own way. Interestingly, everyone, the Old Gods, R'hllor, and the Others, connect, and there is a great possibility that the solution to this threat could be found in the beliefs and teachings of the religions analyzed.

Key-words: Supernatural, Spirituality, Gothic, Religion, Fantasy

Key to abbreviations

<i>ASOIAF</i>	<i>A SONG OF ICE AND FIRE</i>
<i>TWOIAF</i>	<i>THE WORLD OF ICE AND FIRE</i>
<i>AGOT</i>	<i>A GAME OF THRONES</i>
<i>ACOK</i>	<i>A CLASH OF KINGS</i>
<i>AFFC</i>	<i>A FEAST FOR CROWS</i>
<i>ADWD</i>	<i>A DANCE WITH DRAGONS</i>
<i>AKOTSK</i>	<i>A KNIGHT OF THE SEVEN KINGDOMS</i>
<i>TWOW</i>	<i>THE WINDS OF WINTER</i>
<i>ADOS</i>	<i>A DREAM OF SPRING</i>

Introduction

George R. R. Martin's massive saga of epic fantasy novels, *A Song of Ice and Fire* (ASOIF) was first released in 1996 with the book called *A Game of Thrones*. Martin started working with short stories in 1970, and later on with screenwriting as well. Getting frustrated that his TV pilots and screenplays were not getting made, in 1991 he decided to move on to novels, where he could write more complex, longer stories and go as far as his imagination allowed him to. Being a fan of fantasy since he was a child, due to J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, he chose his path as a novelist. In the summer of 1991, he took the first steps into what would become the first novel of the saga *A Song of Ice and Fire* (Hibberd, 2011, *Entertainment Weekly*). The saga is currently ongoing, with five books published between 1996 and 2011, *A Game of Thrones* (AGOT), *A Clash of Kings* (ACOK), *A Storm of Swords* (ASOS), *A Feast for Crows* (AFFC), and *A Dance with Dragons* (ADWD), respectively, and two forthcoming books, *The Winds of Winter* (TWOW) and *A Dream of Spring* (ADOS).

More than a decade later from its release, *A Song of Ice and Fire* became a hot topic in 2011, the year that the HBO TV show *Game of Thrones* premiered. Its success made the show become a game-changer for television, with its record viewership and enormous budget. What was previously said by TV producers to be "too big and too expensive" and, what Martin heard as a TV writer that he needed to "lose characters and lose the settings" was now the reason why the show started to become successful. The show's premiere was watched by 2.2 million, and the first season averaged 2.5 million viewers per episode. By seasons 7 and 8 the audience was always higher than 9 million viewers in the USA. The HBO network is currently with a spin-off that premiered in August 2022 which was highly expected by viewers. This tremendous success and the imaginary universe would not have been possible without George R. R. Martin's creation. Martin's narrative and characters are, in my opinion, what make this story fascinating, and for that reason, I chose to work solely with his work. Having said that,

besides the information above, I will not mention the TV show in the course of this thesis.

Unlike other well-known fantasy sagas, such as *Harry Potter*, Martin chose to go deeper and wider into character development, which has proven to be only comparable with *Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien. We, as readers, are presented in-depth with characters that might have been considered minor in other sagas. The chapters are narrated by different characters, most of the time following a certain chronological order. These characters might or might not be in the same region or sub-plot. This allows the reader to get a better sense of the world that Martin created in its entirety, including the spiritual aspects of this world. Each sub-plot or region of Westeros, the continent in which most of the narrative takes place, has a distinctive and characteristic aspect that differentiates that people from other peoples.

The fictional continental kingdom called Westeros was originally divided into several smaller kingdoms until they were conquered and united by a dynasty of dragon lords, called Targaryen, into one single kingdom called the Seven Kingdoms. This event is called The Conquest and hundreds of years after, a rebellion arose due to an alleged abduction of Robert Baratheon's betrothed, Lyanna Stark. This Rebellion is known as Robert's Rebellion, or The War of the Usurper. The winner of this war, Robert Baratheon, was crowned and reigned peacefully from 283 AC (After the Conquest), until around 298 AC, when his most trusted counselor and Hand of the King (a title given to the second most powerful person in the realm, after the king, appointed and authorized to make decisions on their behalf) Jon Arryn, died of unknown causes. King Robert decides to appoint his oldest and closest friend, Eddark Stark, to be his new Hand of the King, and to do so he travels from King's Landing, the capital of the Seven Kingdoms on the east coast of Westeros, to Winterfell, the ancestral castle and seat of power of House Stark, considered the capital of the north region. As readers, this is the starting point for the plot, and the characters start to narrate the story from this point forward. Robert's arrival in Winterfell had several developments that will initiate our long journey within Westeros. Despite we as readers having been introduced only to around three years of narrated story, at least for now while the last two volumes are not released, the general

plot and backstory of this continental kingdom go back to 12.000 BC (Before the Conquest).

Having created an imaginary world, Martin has stated in interviews how the real world has served as a source of inspiration, one event the War of the Roses (Gilmore, 2014, *Rolling Stone*) is particularly significant in the work. The Yorks and the Lancasters loosely inspire the Starks and the Lannisters. The story itself is mainly about the dispute for the throne between families, or as the novel describes it, houses, that can showcase the inspiration and its effect on this world's creation. The religions of Westeros have similarities with the real world, for example, the Old Gods can be compared to some aspects of totemism; the religion of the Lord of Light with Zoroastrianism; and the religion of the Seven Gods resembles Christianity. Such religious and spiritual aspects of the story are particularly interesting and relevant to this present thesis.

The spiritual aspect of *A Song of Ice and Fire* might seem subtle at first glance, but on a more detailed analysis, it is possible to notice how much spirituality plays a role in the narrative, character development, and plot development. As a case of study, we can mention Melisandre, one of the narrative's most spiritual and religious characters. She is a red priestess of the Lord of Light, R'hllor, that has joined the court of Stannis Baratheon, the second son of House Baratheon, and younger brother to King Robert. Melisandre directed all of Stannis's actions into what she believed was for the best of the realm, according to prophecies and her faith (*ASOS*, 559). Eventually, among the five self-proclaimed kings that were disputing power, the only one to survive was Stannis. Not coincidentally, Melisandre performed a blood offering using leeches that had fed of the blood of Edric Storm, Robert Baratheon's bastard son, "a king's blood" (*ASOS*, 335), for these deaths to happen.

Another very important event that was shaped by spirituality and the supernatural is Bran Stark's narrative. With his formative experience with the Three-Eyed Crow about things that are, were, and are to come (*ADWD*, 340). Beyond the Wall, he will probably manage to get answers about the origins of the Others, and how to defeat them.

Last but not least, the ultimate event that was shaped by the supernatural was Aegon's Conquest. Daenys the Dreamer had a strong prophetic dream and visions that Valyria would be destroyed twelve years before the Doom (*TWOIAF*, 52). She persuaded her father to flee Valyria before the calamity because she foresaw it happening. The House Targaryen sailed an island in Westeros with their possessions and their five dragons. This eventually resulted in Aegon ruling over Westeros with his dragons, unifying the seven kingdoms, and becoming king.

Being a fantasy saga there is a strong, but not frequent, use of supernatural elements. Interestingly, the characters themselves dismiss it when the possibility of the supernatural is presented to them by someone. The supernatural is usually approached as myths, legends, or children's stories. Over the course of my thesis, I will highlight the subtle portrayal of the supernatural in the narrative and give my reasons to believe that most of the time, the supernatural is connected with spirituality in the *ASOIAF* saga. Consequently, whatever differs from the religious and spiritual perspective of one character is potentially disregarded and even frowned upon by a different character.

Spirituality might be one of the ultimate aspects to shape a narrative in any sort of storytelling. What can unite a group of people is usually also the reason to create a barrier between peoples, and it could not be different in this saga. As an example, we can mention the choice of names that the Westerosi, people of Westeros, use to trace a distinction between the major religions in *ASOIAF*. There are the Old Gods and the New Gods, and this distinction is quite literal, the reason why the Old Gods are called this way is that they were the first known religion in Westeros, worshipped by the native population, the Children of the Forest. Consequently, the second major religion to appear in Westeros was defined as the religion of the New Gods. There is an interesting aspect we can analyze, something that has become a sort of idiom when wanting to express how serious one is about a promise, the people in Westeros often say: "I swear it by the old gods and the new" (*ACOK*, 204). Another example is the Red God, the name chosen for the religion of the Lord of Light, R'hllor. The reasoning behind this is the choice of color used by the priests and priestesses of this religion: red. The fictional history of Westeros illustrates the growth of each religion. Each religion reflects the

character of its respective culture. No religion seems to be presented as the only legitimate belief system or as the only source of morality, but by analyzing them individually, we will be able to acquire a deeper understanding of this universe.

Regarding conceptual tools, I will mainly deal with what we know about several different religions that might have influenced Martin in this work, and how these actual religions relate to *ASOAI/F*. Spirituality and the supernatural will also be very frequently used to analyze this saga. The last conceptual tool will be gothic wherever there is the opportunity to study through this prism.

My approach will focus more on the spiritual aspect than dogma and religiosity. What I intend is to not only analyze two of the main religions of this fantastical world but also make sense of the cultural characteristics they entail.

The first religion we are going to dive into is the Old Gods. The most ancient religion, and at the same time the one we have very little information about. I hope to be able to highlight old traditions and myths that might have been forgotten over time, but that could potentially answer important questions of the narrative.

The second chapter will be focused on R'hllor, the Lord of Light. Given the fact that this is a relatively new religion on the Westeros continent, I will quickly give some information about The Seven Gods as a counterpart in this *conversion*.

Nevertheless, both the Old Gods' religion and R'hllor's are heavily concentrated on questionable, and at times immoral, acts, such as human sacrifices and cannibalism. For that reason, I will also highlight how this can be compared to the real world and the anthropologic motivations behind these acts.

The last chapter will exclusively analyze the common enemy of humanity, which was named by Martin the Others. This imminent threat has the potential to be responsible for an Armageddon on Westeros and the rest of the known world. In my opinion, this enemy has been foreseen by more than one religion, but given their differences in beliefs, their devotees might not be aware that at the end of the day they are all fighting for the same cause without noticing it yet.

1. The Old Gods

The Old Gods' thematic in *A Song of Ice and Fire* is by itself one of the most fascinating aspects of the work. Nevertheless, the Old Gods as a sort of religion, or spiritual guidance to some of the characters takes the narrative to another level. The complexity is such that I believe we have only seen the tip of the iceberg in what Martin has published so far. According to George R. R. Martin himself, the old gods are "based on animism and traditional Pagan beliefs of Wicca and several other Celtic systems and Norse systems" (Talks at Google, 2011, n.p.). These he claims to have combined into one construct. Druidism and primordial faiths influenced Martin as well.

1.1. Origins and Symbolism

The most symbolic and visual aspect of the Old Gods as a spiritual stance in the *ASOIAF* narrative is a heart tree, a face-carved tree where devotees of the Old Gods offer prayers, frequently in what is called a godswood. The worshipers of the Old Gods do not have intricate rituals, sacred writings, priestly hierarchies, or substantial places of worship. It's a common belief in the *ASOIAF* universe that no man can tell a lie in front of a heart tree because the ancient gods can sense when a man is telling the truth.

Originally, the first group of devotees to have worshiped the Old Gods were the Children of the Forest, a mystery non-human race that lived on the continent of Westeros before the First Men, during the Dawn Age, around eight and twelve thousand years before the narrative of *ASOIAF*. This name is given to them by the First Men thanks to their lower stature compared to humans. Although smaller than humans, they are not childlike. According to Bran Stark, "little wise men of the forest would have been closer" (*ADWD*, 336) when trying to compare the Children with humans. They frequently sing in their native tongue, the True Tongue, and in their native language, they call themselves *those who sing the song of earth*. Their singing voice is said to be but "as

pure as the winter air” (*ADWD*, 336) and “as sounding like the song of stones in a brook, or the wind through leaves, or the rain upon the water” (*TWOIAF*, 25). They are described as graceful, quick, and slender with nut-brown skin that is speckled with whiter areas like a deer. Their hands have just three fingers and a thumb, and in place of nails, they have pointed black claws. They have big ears that can pick up sounds that men cannot. They typically have big, gold, and green eyes with cat-like slits that enable them to see in dimly lit areas. They dress in leaf cloaks and weave flowers, vines, and leaves into their hair. From what is known about them, their lifespan might be much longer than that of humans.

Weirwoods were typically the chosen ones to be heart trees. With five-point leaves and a red sap that is reminiscent of blood, the weirwood trees have smooth and white trunks that can resemble bones (*AGOT*, 24). Weirwoods are revered by worshippers of the Old Gods, and Children of the Forest believe that weirwoods themselves are the gods (*ADWD*, 336). Through the eyes of weirwoods with carved faces, the Children of the Forest's greenseers can see into the past or present while gazing through a tree's eyes because trees have no concept of time (*ADWD*, 340). Weirwoods are also utilized as witnesses at significant events like weddings and vows. The Old Gods' religion is more individualized and loosely structured than other religions in *ASOIAF* (*ASOS*, 465), yet it forbids some common social sins including kinslaying (*TWOIAF*, 214) and incest (*ACOK*, 292). Also, more than any other religion, it upholds the rules of hospitality (*TWOIAF*, 214). In the real world, there are a few trees that might have inspired the weirwood tree creation. Ash trees have leaves that turn red in the fall, and a white bark; Sycamore trees, one of the most important trees in Ancient Egypt (Azzazy & Ezzat, 2016), are associated with the gods Hathor, Isis, and Nut, where their symbolism is associated with a resting place for the soul.

The whole symbolism of these gods being represented by trees is significant in itself, a living being with roots is certainly fitting for the symbol of Westeros's oldest religion, and the one most connected with nature and all living beings. Trees are frequently mythologized as being essential to life and existence. Trees are often viewed

as symbols of life, knowledge, strength, and prosperity (Crews, 2003). Some argue that trees are observers, watching as people and the environment around them evolve.

The First Men were the actual first human race to have inhabited the continent that would be called Westeros later on. When the Children of the Forest met the First Men, the first outsiders on their land, they welcomed the newcomers but disapproved of the First Men's use of rainwood and other forest products as firewood. When the First Men destroyed and burned the big weirwoods, the Children's totem for the Old Gods, a conflict started between the two races out of fear that the Children were using heart trees as spies (*TWOIAF*, 23). In time both sides were able to reach an agreement and forge a pact. The First Men would then adopt the Old Gods as their own gods (*TWOIAF*, 24). Worship of the old gods remained until the Andals arrived with their Faith of the Seven (*TWOIAF*, 39). Consequently, many of the heart trees in the south were destroyed, with a few exceptions to prevent religious uprising (*TWOIAF*, 39). It is thought that the Old Gods no longer have any influence in that region because their power only extends as far as the heart tree faces can see (*AGOT*, 347).

However, the North has kept this ancient religion, its gods, and its symbols. Amongst them is the House Stark, one of the oldest, most important families in the narrative of *ASOIAF*, and the appointed Guardians of the North.

1.2. Totemism and the Spiritual Aspects of the Old Gods

The first aspect I would like to address in this chapter is the similarities between the religion of the Old Gods and a religious belief called totemism. According to the *New World Encyclopedia*:

Totemism is an aspect of religious belief centered upon the veneration of sacred objects called totems. A totem is any animal, plant, or other object, natural or supernatural, which provides deeply symbolic meaning for a person or social

group. In some cases, totems may imbue a particular person with a feeling of power and energy. In other cases, a variety of totems can serve to demarcate particular groups or clans subsumed within larger tribes. Often, totems are seen as representative of desirable individual qualities, or the natural power from which a given social group has descended. Thus, totems help to explain the mythical origin of the clan while reinforcing clan identity and solidarity, and as such, killing, eating, and even touching a totem is often considered taboo. (Totemism in *New World Encyclopedia*, n.p.)

Totemism, together with the idea of taboo, evolved into the symbol (or maybe the "totem") of primordial thought or religion, serving as both its distinguishing feature and the solution to its alleged irrationality for later cultural evolutionists (Jones, 2005). After analyzing the passage above, the parallel we can find in *ASOIAF* would clearly be the heart tree. It is said and believed that the blood of the First Men flowed in the veins of the Starks (*AGOT*, 20). This aspect of the origin of House Stark also invokes the definition of totemism in what regards "the mythical origin of the clan while reinforcing clan identity". This belief is significant to introduce one of the fantastic elements of this religion. In the first chapter of the first book, we are introduced to the Stark family. They encounter a female direwolf that was badly hurt and died. In the real world, dire wolves are extinct canines closely related to wolves. In *ASOIAF* they are much bigger and more powerful than wolves. The book series describes mature direwolves as being strong and powerful animals (*AGOT*, 22). Despite being considered extinct south of the Wall (*AGOT*, 21), six orphaned direwolves pups are found by Robb Stark and Jon Snow, Eddard Stark's firstborn and bastard, respectively. Eddard Stark is the Lord of House Stark and is commonly known as Ned Stark. Jon argues with his father that Ned Stark has "three sons, two daughters. The direwolf is the sigil of your House. Your children were meant to have these pups, my lord" (*AGOT*, 22). Later in this same chapter, Jon Snow notices an albino pup that strayed away from the others.

The symbology of this whole encounter could not be any more obvious, especially when we consider the direwolf being present in House Stark's sigil and the

detail of Jon Snow, a bastard, finding an albino pup that was strayed from the rest of the litter. The direwolves are then adopted as pets. The Stark's children in age order, Robb, Jon, Sansa, Arya, Bran, and Rickon named their direwolves, Grey Wind, Ghost, Lady, Nymeria, Summer, and Shaggydog respectively (*AGOT*, 59). In the course of the narrative, the connection between the Stark children and their direwolves surpasses what would be considered normal between a pet and its owner. We can understand why by analyzing the passage below, a conversation between Robb Stark, known as the Young Wolf, and his mother, Catelyn Stark.

“He is a part of you, Robb. To fear him is to fear you.”

“I am not a wolf, no matter what they call me.”

(...)

“I am not going to banish him just because my wolf doesn't seem to like the way he smells.” (...) He frowned. “Should I have Grey Wind sniff all my knights? There might be others whose smell he dislikes.”

“Any man Grey Wind dislikes is a man I do not want close to you. These wolves are more than wolves Robb. You must know that. **I think perhaps the gods sent them to us. Your father's gods, the old gods of the north. Five wolf pups, Robb, five for five Star children.**” (*ASOS*, 142-143, my emphasis)

As we can see, the Starks came to the same conclusion and both believe that the direwolves were sent as their protectors by the Old Gods, and it was not just some serendipitous coincidence that there were the exact amount of pups for each Stark child. Bran is the Stark child that has the strongest connection with Summer, his direwolf, and the very fact he is alive might be something to do with Summer. Due to a fall, he was in a coma for a long period of time. In other words, during his forced coma sleep, his spirit might have been able to depart the physical body and go around, better connecting with his godsent guardian Summer (*AGOT*, 114). The fall was actually a consequence of

another character pushing him, and when those responsible for this act find out that Bran is still alive, they send an unknown assassin ordered to kill Bran with a knife. The only reason Bran escapes is because Summer senses that Bran is in danger and goes to his room and cuts out the assassin's throat to stop him from continuing to attack (*AGOT*, 93). We can then clearly see that Summer indeed acted as a guardian for Bran.

1.3. Wargs and Skinchangers

When we get a sense of this relationship and what it entails, it becomes possible to see the direwolves from a spiritual perspective rather than simply as pets. This connection is, in my opinion, also related to totemism in the sense of a system of belief in which humans are said to have kinship or a mystical relationship with a spirit-being. A human with the capacity to enter an animal's mind and direct its behavior is called a skinchanger in the *ASOIAF* universe. Bran thinks about communicating with the direwolves “in a language he had once known and somehow forgotten” (*ACOK*, 49). In Bran’s case, due to the strength of his powers, he is considered a warg because he has the ability to access his wolf mind. When he gets even better control of his powers he is able to access Hodor’s mind, a human. Bran also describes his perspective on this ability as having wolf dreams, in which he can “smell things, and sometimes I can taste the blood” (*ACOK*, 51) when Summer is hunting. I also believe this can be read as an aspect of spirituality, when we think about the possible inspiration of totemism for this religion, especially because of the implied fact that the direwolves were actually sent to the Starks.

He is the one with the stronger warg power probably because he is the one most comfortable with it (*ACOK*, 198). He can to a certain extent control Summer’s actions. Their connection is so strong, or perhaps their minds are so intertwined with one another over the course of the narrative, that their feelings are affected and reflected by one another:

A low rumbling growl rose from Summer's throat, and there was no play in it. He stalked forward, all teeth and hot eyes. Meera stepped between the wolf and her brother, spear in hand. "Keep him back, Bran."

"Jojen is making him angry."

Meera shook out her net.

"It's your anger, Bran," her brother said. "Your fear."

"It isn't. I'm not a wolf." Yet he'd howled with them in the night, and tasted blood in his wolf dreams.

"Part of you is Summer, and part of Summer is you. You know that, Bran."

(*ACOK*, 258, my emphasis)

Just like Catelyn Stark affirmed that Grey Wind is a part of Robb, Jojen is saying the same thing to Bran. Summer is a part of him. Rickon, the Stark youngest, due to his age is the one that has the least control over his emotions, and consequently, the one that reflects most of his feeling onto his direwolf, Shaggydog: "'You can't,' said Rickon angrily. 'No you can't.' Beside him, Shaggydog bared his teeth and growled" (*ACOK*, 566). The supernatural connection is not exclusive to the wargs in the Stark family. The wolfpack is connected as well. In the passage below we can explicitly notice this in a wolf dream Bran narrates. Another very interesting point in the passage is the fact that Ghost, Jon Snow's direwolf, has no voice, which is significant in the literal sense for the animal of a bastard, who has no metaphorical voice:

His brothers and his sisters. They had smelled alike, had smelled of pack, but each was different too.

His angry brother with the hot green eyes was near, the prince felt, though he had not seen him for many hunts. Yet with every sun that set he grew more distant, and he had been the last. The others were far scattered, like leaves blown by the wild wind.

Sometimes he could sense them, though, as if they were still with him, only hidden from his sight by a boulder or a stand of trees. He could not smell them, nor hear their howls by night, yet he felt their presence at his back ... all but the sister they had lost.

His tail drooped when he remembered her. *Four now, not five. Four and one more, the white who has no voice.* (ASOS, 94-95)

Even so, we get many more details from the wargs perspectives on the course of the narrative. And, although Bran is the Stark that has the strongest connection with his warg powers, they are not exclusive to him. Both Arya and Jon Snow have wolf dreams. Jon is completely aware of the connection he has with Ghost, and makes him feel worried when he cannot sense him:

Jon wondered where Ghost was now. Had he gone to Castle Black, or was he running with some wolfpack in the woods? He had no sense of the direwolf, not even in his dreams. It made him feel as if part of himself had been cut off. Even with Ygritte sleeping beside him, he felt alone. He did not want to die alone. (ASOS, 374)

However, Arya seems to be oblivious of the real connection, and the fact that she can warg into Nymeria's skin. Her comprehension is that she simply had wolf dreams, maybe justifying to herself that it was a coping mechanism to make her feel safer and stronger: she was no little girl in the dream; she was a wolf, huge and powerful. (ASOS, 49). The only exception may be when she becomes aware of her mother's death by seeing her corpse through the direwolves' eyes:

That night **she went to sleep thinking of her mother**, and wondering if she should kill the Hound in his sleep and rescue Lady Catelyn herself. When she

closed her eyes she saw her mother's face against the back of her eyelids. **She's so close I could almost smell her ...**

... and then she could smell her. The scent was faint beneath the other smells, beneath moss and mud and water, and the stench of rotting reeds and rotting men. (...)

She sniffed the air again. There it was, **and now she saw it too, something pale and white drifting down the river** (...)

They broke their fast in silence, until Sandor said, "This thing about your mother ..."

"It doesn't matter," Arya said in a dull voice. **"I know she's dead. I saw her in a dream."** (ASOS, 565-566)

On the same night that Lady Catelyn Stark is murdered, Robb Stark, the firstborn is also killed. Arya gets a chance to experience the grief unaware of who had died:

Somewhere far off she heard a wolf howling. It wasn't very loud compared to the camp noise and the music and the low ominous growl of the river running wild, but she heard it all the same. Only maybe it wasn't her ears that heard it. The sound shivered through Arya like a knife, sharp with rage and grief. (ASOS, 454)

In this passage, there are three major points I would like to point out. The first and most obvious is that Grey Wind is the wolf that howled and the one grieving Robb's death. The second point is that Arya is not sure "her ears that heard it", which means, in my opinion, that she heard the howling via her own skin, and Nymeria's skin, given that the female direwolf was close enough to spot Lady Catelyn in the aforementioned passage a little after the death. Last but not least, why had the howling "sounded sharp with rage and grief"? Why was Grey Wind enraged? Or was it Robb slipping into Grey

Wind's skin after his death by assassination and treason? My guess is on the second option given what we're introduced to by the character Varamyr Sixskins.

Varamyr Sixskins is a warg and a wildling, this means that he was a part of the group of people that are culturally and physically separated from Westeros, and that is considered "savage". In other words, apart from Westeros civilization. Beyond the Wall, where the wildlings lived, wargs were much more common than in Westeros. In the passage below we can see Varamyr's first impression of Jon Snow:

"He had known what Jon Snow was the moment he saw that great white direwolf stalking silent at his side. One skinchanger can always sense another. (...) The gift was strong in Snow, but the youth was untaught, still fighting his nature when he should have gloried in it." (*ADWD*, 19)

Despite the implied possibility that the Stark lineage has multiple wargs when Bran affirms that Old Nan used to say that "the Starks had wolf blood. (...) Though it is stronger in some than in others" (*ACOK*, 49), being a skinchanger or a warg is not exclusive to the Starks.

Beyond the Wall, they were respected, and powerful, and their ability was used as a weapon in strategizing (*ADWD*, 17). I believe that this is not just because Beyond the Wall the belief in the Old Gods is strong, but mainly because the free folk is more connected with nature, with their old beliefs, and are not afraid of the "supernatural" or mystical (*ADWD*, 18). Varamyr Sixskins is the character that manages to give us more information regarding skinchangers. The explanation behind his name is literal. He is a skinchanger that has the control to access the mind of six animals: three wolves, a snow bear, a shadowcat, and an eagle.

When Varamyr was six years old he became envious of his younger brother, then he took the form of one of the three family dogs and controlled his mind to murder his own brother. His father not knowing which dog had killed his son decided to kill all three

(*ADWD*, 16). Varamyr's father and his mother became aware that he was a skinchanger when he entered one of the dog's consciousness just before he was slain and screamed when the axe split the skull. Varamyr's father told him that he belonged with his own people, then as a punishment, he dragged Varamyr through the forest until they saw Haggon, an old warg (*ADWD*, 16). Haggon introduced him to other skinchangers and taught him the right techniques for his ability. Along with teaching him basic survival techniques, he also explained to him the advantages and disadvantages of certain species (*ADWD*, 18).

Varamyr died eight more times throughout the years while warging in various animals (*ADWD*, 16). But as his strength increased, he became known for riding into battle on the back of his female snow bear which was close to 4 meters tall. Twelve villages paid him honor as he rose to the status of a ruler. He would send his shadowcat to stalk a village lady until she came to him, whether she wanted to or not when he wanted to have sex with her (*ADWD*, 17).

In the first pages of the prologue of *ADWD*, we can see Varamyr on a hunt with his six animals. He refers to them as brothers and sisters, and sometimes as packmates (*ADWD*, 13). But what is more interesting is the fact that his consciousness seems to have merged with the ones of the animals, and some of his descriptions of other humans while in the mind of his animals are closer to the animals' perspectives than from a human in control of an animal body, such as: "One had a tooth as tall as he was" (*ADWD*, 13) probably referring to a spear or a shaft; referring to the baby the wolves encountered as a pup; and the woman's breast as "dugs full of milk" (*ADWD*, 13). Varamyr manages to control all six animals all at once while giving them commands, such as "leave her for last" (*ADWD*, 13).

1.4. More Spiritual Aspects in the Old Gods

Varamyr goes into detail about his gift of being a warg in the prologue of *ADWD*, in which we read the chapter from his point of view. One of the most interesting details

regards the true death that leads to the second life (*ADWD*, 15). If the skinchanger slips into an animal's skin and then this animal dies, they experience the animal's death. Varamyr has died nine deaths when he narrates his story (*ADWD*, 16). By the end of the chapter, we get a glimpse of Varamyr's true death before he finds one of his wolves to *warg* into:

He was in the snow and in the clouds, he was a sparrow, a squirrel, an oak. A horned owl flew silently between his trees, hunting a hare; Varamyr was inside the owl, inside the hare, inside the trees. Deep below the frozen ground, earthworms burrowed blindly in the dark, and he was them as well. *I am the wood, and everything that's in it*, he thought, exulting. A hundred ravens took the air, cawing as **they felt him pass** (...) His wolves would save him, he told himself.

That was his last thought as a man.

True death came suddenly; he felt a shock of cold, as if he had been plunged into the icy waters of a frozen lake. (*ADWD*, 20-21)

Interestingly, but not surprisingly, the second life is similar to what the wildlings, the free people who reside beyond the Wall, believe the Old Gods used to do with their dead, taking them into the earth and trees. This custom of offering the dead to the Old Gods is apparently still followed by the Skagosi, an isolated people that live in the northern region of Westeros (*AFFC*, 172). The rest of the Northmen typically dislike the Skagos people. They consider the Skagosi to be little more than barbaric tribes, akin to the wildlings (*AFFC*, 172). From Varamyr's description, we can even argue that the living beings he "passed by" could to a certain extent sense his presence. Since he describes being in inanimate nature elements, such as snow and clouds, he might not be specifically *warging*. This is specifically significant in the spiritual aspect of the narrative, and although totemism is the religious belief that most resembles the Old Gods, this connection with natural elements and animals fits more, in my opinion, with a

miscellany of religions and spiritual aspects such as animism, pantheism and the nirvana. Starting with the latter, the warg Varamyr Sixskins seems to have reached nirvana (Jones, 2005), signifying his transcendence to a state of freedom achieved by the extinction of his desire, individual consciousness, and carnal existence (*ADWD*, 20-21). In other words, he would have transcended his human skin, along with his animal's skins, and went to the spiritual realm. This spiritual realm in my reading of the narrative would be a conjunction of animism, pantheism, and panpsychism.

Starting with the topic of pantheism, the scenario carries the idea that the universe is equivalent to or identical to God, in this case, the Old Gods. This perspective of the Old Gods would then be an impersonal force that is made up of all things and creatures in the natural order rather than a particular being separate from the creation itself. In other words, everything is connected to the Old Gods, and the Old Gods are everything. This idea gains strength when we analyze the following passage:

“The singers of the forest had no books. No ink, no parchment, no written language. Instead they had the trees, and the weirwoods above all. When they died, they went into the wood, into leaf and limb and root, and the trees remembered. All their songs and spells, their histories and prayers, everything they knew about this world. Maesters will tell you that the weirwoods are sacred to the old gods. **The singers believe they are the old gods. When singers die they become part of that godhood.** (*ADWD*, 336, my emphasis)

This perspective could be articulated with panpsychism while carrying some traces of animism. Panpsychism in the sense that the entire universe would be an organism that has a mind ("cosmic consciousness" or "universal consciousness"). It is important to point out that panpsychism is sometimes connected with pantheism in "the attribution of consciousness to nature as a whole" (*Pantheism in Britannica*, 2006). While at the same time it is said to be distinct from animism, "the study of 'the deep-lying doctrine of Spiritual Beings, which embodies the very essence of Spiritualistic as

opposed to Materialistic philosophy” (Jones, 2005). Although considered distinct, as mentioned above, given that we do not have more information about the experience Varamyr Sixskins had, and also the fact that this is referring to a fantasy saga, the idea that Varamyr could to a certain extent transpose his own consciousness to other beings, inanimate or not, and even make his presence noticed by the animals, mentioned above, could mean that in order for this to happen these beings had to be able to share this consciousness with the warg.

Varamyr Sixskins was "worshipped" by some, despised by others, and deserted by his own parents. Could this mean he was a spiritual figure due to his gift? As in most religions, there are the believers and the ones that think of certain aspects as heresy. According to Haggon's principles (*ADWD*, 14), his mentor to a certain extent, Varamyr commits abominations and goes against several of his teachings. One of Varamyr's worst acts was an attempt to escape his true death, by "possessing" his paramour:

He summoned all the strength still in him, leapt out of his own skin, and forced himself inside her.

Thistle arched her back and screamed.

Abomination. Was that her, or him, or Haggon? He never knew. His old flesh fell back into snowdrift as her fingers loosened. The spearwife twisted violently, shrieking. His shadowcat used to fight him wildly, and the snow bear had gone half-mad for a time, snapping at trees and rocks and empty air, but this was worse. "Get out, get *out!*" he heard her own mouth shouting. Her body staggered, fell and rose again, her hands flailed, her legs jerked this way and that in some grotesque dance as his spirit and her own fought for the flesh. She sucked down a mouthful of the frigid air, and Varamyr had half a heartbeat to glory in the taste of it and the strength of his young body before her teeth snapped together and filled his mouth with blood. She raised her hands to his face. He tried to push them down again, but the hands would not obey, and she was clawing at his eyes. *Abomination*, he remembered, drowning in blood and

pain and madness. When he tried to scream, she spat their tongue out. (*ADWD*, 20-21)

Spirit possession is generally described as a strange or altered state of consciousness and related actions that are thought to be brought on by the possession of a human body by ghosts, spirits, demons, or gods. Numerous civilizations and religions, such as Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Wicca, have adopted the idea of spirit possession. Possession may be seen as voluntary or involuntary, and it may be thought to benefit or harm the host, depending on the cultural environment in which it is encountered.

Jones says that: "Spirit possession may be broadly defined as any altered or unusual state of consciousness and allied behavior that is indigenously understood in terms of the influence of an alien spirit, demon, or deity. The possessed act as though another personality—a spirit or soul—has entered their body and taken control. Dramatic changes in their physiognomy, voice, and manner usually occur. Their behavior often is grotesque and blasphemous." (Jones, 2005). However, eventually, Thistle, Varamyr's paramour, bites her own tongue in order to commit suicide and force Varamyr out of her body.

Even though Varamyr is able to transcend his carnal body, it does not necessarily mean that he was blessed by the Old Gods for being deserving. The Old Gods are nameless (*AGOT*, 24) and the wildlings hold the belief that the gods can be found anywhere, including in rocks, streams, birds, and other animals: "The gods are all around us, in the rocks and streams, in the birds and beasts." (*ADWD*, 20). If the old gods are intrinsically and intimately related to nature, are those acts really abomination? Or is this so-called abomination just a social construct of what morality should be?

Human meat. Had he sunk so low as to hunger after human meat? He could almost hear Haggon growling at him. "Men may eat the flesh of beasts and beasts the flesh of men, but the man who eats the flesh of man is an abomination."

Abomination. That had always been Haggon's favorite word. *Abomination, abomination, abomination.* To eat of human meat was abomination, to mate as wolf with wolf was abomination, and to seize the body of another man was the worst abomination of all. *Haggon was weak, afraid of his own power. He died weeping and alone when I ripped his second life from him. Varamyr had devoured his heart himself. He taught me much and more, and the last thing I learned from him was the taste of human flesh.*

That was as a wolf, though. He had never eaten the meat of men with human teeth. (ADWD, 14)

This social contrast or different perspectives on morality can be related to the idea of taboo. Through the broad adoption of a socio-centric interpretation, the concept of taboo has over time acquired some ambiguity. The punishment for it will therefore be either divine and intrinsic or human and social, depending on whether one accepts a formal, cultural, or sociological reading of the prohibition (Jones, 2005). Since the religion of the Old Gods has been associated with totemism in the course of this chapter, it makes sense for us to analyze the customs that are frowned upon in the narrative through the *taboo lens*.

Only a partial understanding of the uniqueness of this form of prohibition is required to address the question of the sanctioning power behind taboos. Taboo is different from abstract, codified legislation in that the forbidden item or action is more clearly defined and developed into a symbol—or even a fetish—of the prohibition itself. According to Jones “the early theorists who saw “totem and taboo” as interlinked bases of “primitive thought” drew attention to a significant relation between them. For taboo designates items in order to prohibit them, whereas totemic representation is based on affinities between social units and phenomenal entities” (Jones, 2005). In contrast to totemic representation, which is founded on affinities between social units and perceptual entities, taboo designates things in order to forbid them.

Of the *abominations* committed by Varamyr, the one I would like to highlight is cannibalism, given that it can be interpreted as a spiritual aspect. According to Britannica, “although there are cases of people eating human flesh to avoid starvation, cannibalism has also been undertaken for ritual or religious [beliefs]. Even in cultures in which actual cannibalism has never been practiced, religious rituals may symbolically refer to cannibalism” (*Cannibalism* in Britannica, 2006). The whole concept of cannibalism carries several many layers of meaning and potential connections. For example, the act of eating Haggon could be interpreted simultaneously as an act of revenge, superstition, or just a human with a broken moral compass. Varamyr could also be trying to incorporate Haggon’s powers and become stronger. “Among the Asmat, the consumption of enemies was associated with the construction of masculinity through head-hunting and initiation rituals” (Jones, 2005).

Last but not least, the act of “cannibalism” can be associated with the spiritual: “In some cultures (notably the Aztec) cannibalism was a means of incorporating the divine. When the victim was offered to the gods, he or she took on the nature of a god. Thus, when the flesh of the victim was consumed by other humans, it transmitted this divinity to the eater” (*Cannibalism* in Britannica, 2006). This reference is to a spiritual ritual that involves sacrifices, namely human sacrifices. In the Old Gods religion, “the practice of blood sacrifice to the old gods” (*TWOIAF*, 18) was common in the Dawn Age.

Given that the Dawn Age dates around a thousand years in the history of *ASOIAF*, one way we can analyze this is by looking at the Skagosi people. There are songs that add common belief to the rumors that the Skagosi are cannibals, still perform blood sacrifices to the old gods, “supposedly their warriors ate the heart and livers of the men they slew” (*AFFC*, 172), lure passing ships with false lights, and participate in cannibalism in the winter. Considered a backward folk, it makes sense to say they follow old rituals and customs, meaning that we could affirm that not just the human sacrifice, but cannibalism might be intertwined with the worshippers of the old gods, especially if we go back to paganism.

According to Jones, W. Robertson Smith developed a theory connecting sacrifice in the totemic religion as a communal meal. “Smith proposed a theory of sacrifice

whereby the earliest form of religion (among the Semites and elsewhere) was the belief in a theriomorphic tribal divinity with which the tribe had a blood relationship. Under ordinary circumstances, this totem animal was not to be killed, but there were rituals in which it was slain and eaten in order to renew the community. In this rite, recipient, offerer, and the victim were all of the same nature; the sacrifice was thus originally a meal in which the offerers entered into communion with the totem” (Jones, 2005). Given that the weirwood trees had faces carved on them, we can conclude that the totem was a representation of humans or some kind of anthropomorphic creature. Thus, blood sacrifice and cannibalism made sense in the worship of the Old Gods according to Totemic beliefs as they can be explained by this theory by Smith.

Another evidence of blood sacrifice is seen in a chapter narrated by Jon Snow:

And there were folks fiercer even than Varamyr, from the northernmost reaches of the haunted forest, the hidden valleys of the Frostfangs, and even queerer places: the men of the Frozen Shore who rode in chariots made of walrus bones pulled along by packs of savage dogs, ***the terrible ice-river clans who were said to feast on human flesh***, the cave dwellers with their faces dyed blue and purple and green. (ASOS, 150, my emphasis)

The terrible ice-river clans are formed by wildlings and having said that, it also makes sense for them to be more accustomed to old rituals given they are “savage” and do not follow the morality and culture of Westeros. It is said that after being put to death, outlaws and traitors' guts and bodies used to be hung from weirwood trees. A chapter narrated by Davos Seaworth describes a conversation he has with a northerner about the old customs of his people:

He took the Wolf’s Den back, stripped the slavers naked and gave them to the slaves he’d found chained up in the dungeons. It’s said they hung their entrails

in the branches of the heart tree, as an offering to the gods. The old gods, not these new ones from the south. Your Seven don't know winter, and winter don't know them. (*ADWD*, 288)

It is interesting to notice how the character describes the harshness of the winter, of living in the North, in the Land of Always Winter, and how this might influence the organization of society, and perhaps even their spiritual beliefs. As mentioned above, cannibalism is usually a direct result of hunger. In a land with so little to offer, it is feasible to conclude that this social aspect might be a product of their environment.

1.5. Greenseers

In *TWOIAF*, on the North section, we can read:

The North is a cold land - much of it rising moorlands and high plains giving way to mountains in its northern reaches - and this makes it far less fertile than the reaches of the south. Snow has been known to fall there even in summer, and it is deadly in winter. (*TWOIAF*, 213)

The unbound nature in the North has kept its secrets. The Old Gods in their weirwood trees were able to pass on their knowledge and teachings through generations because their trees remember.

"What do the trees remember?"

"The secrets of the old gods," said Jojen Reed.

(...)

"Truths the First Men knew, forgotten now in Winterfell ... but not in the wet wild. We live closer to the green in our bogs and crannogs, and we remember. Earth and water, soil and stone, oaks and elms and willows, they were here before us all and will still remain when we are gone. (*ADWD*, 334)

Wargs with greensight are known as greenseers. The First Men believed that they were the ones that had carved faces into the weirwoods that made the heart trees something through which they could look through, control the behaviour of animals and plants, and perhaps even see into the past and future (*ACOK*, 259). The reason for that is because:

Time is different for a tree than for a man. Sun and soil and water, these are the things a weirwood understands, not days and years and centuries. For men, time is a river. We are trapped in its flow, hurtling from past to present, always in the same direction. The lives of trees are different. They root and grow and die in one place, and that river does not move them. The oak is the acorn, the acorn is the oak. And the weirwood ... a thousand human years are a moment to a weirwood, and through such gates you and I may gaze into the past. (*ADWD*, 340)

Given this unique and special ability, they were chosen as the wise men and leaders of the Children of the Forest so that they could use their magical powers to guide them (*TWOIAF*, 18). Greenseers are alleged to have transformed trees into warriors and sent monsters against humans during the conflict between the First Men and the Children of the Forest.

Only one in a thousand people are born skinchangers, and only one in a thousand skinchangers are born greenseers (*ADWD*, 335). The eyes of greenseers are said to be red or green, as opposed to the golden eyes of other Children of the Forest (*ADWD*, 335). Although they are weak and short-lived, they can persist in weirwoods.

"Only one man in a thousand is born a skinchanger," Lord Brynden said one day, after Bran had learned to fly, **"and only one skinchanger in a thousand can be a greenseer."**

"I thought the greenseers were the wizards of the children," Bran said. "The singers, I mean."

"In a sense. Those you call children of the forest have eyes as golden as the sun, but once in a great while one is born amongst them with eyes as red as blood, or green as the moss on a tree in the heart of the forest. By these signs do the gods mark those they have chosen to receive the gift. The chosen ones are not robust, and their quick years upon the earth are few, for every song must have its balance. But once **inside the wood they linger long indeed. A thousand eyes, a hundred skins, wisdom deep as the roots of the ancient trees. Greenseers.** (ADWD, 335, my emphasis)

At the beginning of the chapter, I mentioned how the Children of the Forest believed that the weirwood trees were not only sacred, but they were the Old Gods themselves and worshiped as such. Having said that, the greenseers besides wise men and leaders can also be considered prophets if we were to make a parallel with our own world. The last greenseer to exist is called Lord Brynden: "I wore many names when I was quick, but even I once had a mother, and **the name she gave me at her breast was Brynden.**" (ADWD, 333, my emphasis). According to the description below and the name Brynden, he might probably be Lord Brynden Rivers, a bastard son of King Aegon IV Targaryen:

His pallid skin and bone-white hair made him look a living corpse. Across his cheek and chin spread a winestain birthmark that was supposed to resemble a

red raven (...) He had one eye, and that one red. The other was an empty socket.
(*AKOTSK*, 157, my emphasis)

The same striking characteristics of Bloodraven are mentioned by Bran Stark to describe the Three-Eyed Crow:

Seated on his throne of roots in the great cavern, **half-corpse and half-tree**, Lord Brynden seemed less a man than some ghastly statue made of twisted wood, old bone, and rotted wool. **The only thing that looked alive in the pale ruin that was his face was his one red eye**, burning like the last coal in a dead fire, surrounded by twisted roots and tatters of **leathery white skin** hanging off a yellowed skull.
(*ADWD*, 337-338, my emphasis)

This would mean that Lord Brynden would have around 125 years (*TWOIAF*, 161) and lived beyond his years thanks to the weirwood tree he was literally intertwined with:

“Most of him has gone into the three,” explained the singer Meera called Leaf. **“He has lived beyond his mortal span**, and yet he lingers. For us, for you, for the realms of men. Only a little strength remains in his flesh. He has a thousand eyes and one, but there is much to watch. One day you will know. (*ADWD*, 333, my emphasis)

Bran is told that “Lord Brynden drew his life from the tree (...) He did not eat, he did not drink. He slept, he dreamed, he watched” (*ADWD*, 333). When Bran falls and becomes a paraplegic, he goes into a coma probably for months. During his comatose state, he dreams about a Three-Eyed Crow that tells him to fly (*AGOT*, 111). Bran’s entire journey in the narrative of *ASOIAF* leads to the moment when he will finally meet this

crow, and in his childish innocence, he believes he will be able to fly. However, the gift the Old Gods decided to give him was that of greensight.

"You are a winged wolf, but you will never fly." Jojen got up and walked to the window. "Unless you *open your eye*." He put two fingers together and poked Bran in the forehead, hard.

When he raised his hand to the spot, Bran felt only the smooth unbroken skin. There was no eye, not even a closed one. How can I open it if it's not there?"

"You will never find the eye with your fingers, Bran. You must search with your heart." (ACOK, 307)

It is also interesting to notice how Jojen says Bran must open his eye. Singular. In another passage, we get more information about green dreams and greensight, and Jojen specifically says that Bran has three eyes. Just as Bran calls Lord Brynden Three-Eyed Crow, a result of his dreams in a comatose state, Bran also has a third eye. He is a Three-Eyed Wolf.

"Open your eye."

"They are open. Can't you see?"

"Two are open." Jojen pointed. "One, two."

"I only have two."

"You have three. The crow gave you the third, but you will not open it." He had a slow soft way of speaking. "With two eyes you see my face. With three you could see my heart. With two you can see that oak tree there. With three you could see the acorn the oak grew from and the stump that it will one day become. With two you see no farther than your walls. With three you would gaze south to the Summer Sea and north beyond the Wall." (ACOK, 256-257)

Having a third eye is especially significant in Hinduism and Buddhism. This third eye would then be similar to a mystical invisible eye, usually shown as being on the forehead, and that allows its carrier perception beyond what is normally seen. The gateway to the inner realms and spaces of higher consciousness is referred to as the third eye. The third eye is a common spiritual emblem of enlightenment. It is frequently connected to clairvoyance and religious visions (Hale, 1999). All of this can be related to what we are presented in the Old Gods religion in *ASOIAF*.

From all that has been presented in this chapter, we can notice how this ancient religion in the *ASOIAF* universe characterizes a devotion that is deeply and intimately connected with the spiritual realm of believers, through possession of the third eye, the ability of wargs and skinchangers, the greensight – all of this while living in harmony with nature.

2. The Lord of Light

The Lord of Light, also known as R'hllor, the God of Flame and Shadow, the Heart of Fire, has few devotees in Westeros, where he is known as the red god, but is a well-known deity in Essos, Westeros's neighboring continent. His emblem is a burning heart. R'hllor, as the god of light, heat, and life, has an opposite and nemesis, the Great Other, the god of frost and death. The Lord of Darkness, the Soul of Ice, the God of Night, and Terror are all names for this being, whose name may not be spoken. This dread about the Great Other is also carried in the main saying of the devotees: "The night is dark and full of terrors" (*ACOK*, 22). As a counterpoint, we can read "Life is warmth, and warmth is fire, and fire is God's and God alone" (*ASOS*, 357), according to Thoros of Myr, a priest of R'hllor.

All of this forms the foundation of this religion's dualistic and Manichean worldview, with the fundamental belief that there is a struggle between light and dark, and that matter is dark and evil.

2.1. Zoroastrianism

Zoroastrianism was said by Martin himself the religion from which he took his inspiration: "You have the Red God, Lord of Light across the sea, which has a certain Zoroastrianism element to it, the fire worship and so forth and the duality (...) they had the fundamental belief, a dualist religion, that there were two gods, a good and an evil god. And the world we live in was created by the evil god." (Talks at Google, 2011, n.p.)

According to Jones: "Zoroastrianism, known to its followers as the Zarathushti din (Zoroastrian religion), developed from the words, ideas, beliefs, and rituals attributed to a devotional poet named Zarathushtra (...) Zarathushtra eventually came to be regarded as the founder and prophet of the devotionally monotheistic, doctrinally dualistic faith named after him." (Jones, 2005)

Devotees began to see the physical world as more than just a place where people battle evil. According to Zoroastrians, it was the trap that the evil spirit was drawn into. The recompense of heaven is given to believers' souls who have defended virtue and fought evil during their lifetimes, though on a gender-differentiated basis. According to Zoroastrians, after someone passes away, their physical body loses its life energy and becomes a corpse that demons attack and let rot, causing pollution. The immortal soul departs from the body as well, spending three days and nights next to the corpse's head.

Fire is viewed in Zoroastrianism as a symbol of righteousness and truth as well as a purifying agent. This is explained by the fact that fire burns ever upward and cannot pollute itself. Atar, Atash, or Azar is the Zoroastrian idea of holy fire. Despite the fact that Zoroastrians revere fire in all its forms, the temple fire serves as a symbol of ritual purity along with clean water (Jones, 2005). In the passage below we can clearly see references to duality, fire, and shadow, that is very easily connected with Zoroastrianism:

"The way the world is made. The truth is all around you, plain to behold. The night is dark and full of terrors, the day bright and beautiful and full of hope. One is black, the other white. There is ice and there is fire. Hate and love. Bitter and sweet. Male and female. Pain and pleasure. Winter and summer. Evil and good." She took a step toward him. "*Death and life. Everywhere, opposites. Everywhere, the war.*"

"The war?" asked Davos.

"The war," she affirmed. "*There are two, Onion Knight. Not seven, not one, not a hundred or a thousand. Two! (...)* On one side is R'hllor, the Lord of Light, the Heart of Fire, the God of Flame and Shadow. Against him stands the Great Other whose name may not be spoken, the Lord of Darkness, the Soul of Ice, the God of Night and Terror. Ours is not a choice between Baratheon and Lannister, between Greyjoy and Stark. It is death we choose, or life. Darkness, or light." (ASOS, 237)

A very important aspect of the Lord of Light religion in the *ASOIAF* narrative is the contrast between this new religion and the Faith of the Seven Gods. One striking difference regards the faith and devotion of the believers. While in the religion of the Lord of Light, there is a very strong and noticeable devotion, in the Faith of the Seven Gods, the devotees seem to be following a playbook, and the religion seems to have been secularized over time. When there is an example of devotion in the narrative, it is one that assumes a fanatic stance – for example, in the Militant Faith uprising (*TWOIAF*, 90). Given that this religion does not carry almost any of the themes of this thesis, such as spirituality, the supernatural, and gothic, I will only give information about its main characteristics and make a few comments before we continue with R'hllor's spiritual aspects. The majority of the Seven Kingdoms practice The Faith of the Seven, also known simply as The Faith (*TWOIAF*, 339). In the north and in the Iron Islands, where the Drowned God and the Old Gods' respective cults are still potent, there aren't many adherents of the Faith (*TWOIAF*, 44). To distinguish them from the traditional gods of the First Men, the gods of the Faith are sometimes referred to as the new gods (*AGOT*, 473). The Seven Who Are One, a single god with seven faces or facets, is worshipped by followers of the Faith, not very different from Christianity, from which Martin admitted (Talks at Google, 2011, n.p.) as his source of inspiration. Worshipers pray to specific Seven Faces depending on their needs. These Seven Faces are:

- The Father, who is also known as the Father Above, is pictured as a man with a beard and a commanding visage (*ACOK*, 92). It is stated that the Father has the right to judge. He also looks out for "his children." He is frequently invoked in prayers for justice, as well as asking for him to defend someone in conflict (*ASOS*, 421).

- The Mother, also known as the Mother Above, is one of the Seven's nurturing and guardian aspects (*ASOS*, 421). She is frequently begged for mercy and for protection for loved ones (*ACOK*, 384).

- The Warrior is always shown with a sword and defending the Seven from their enemies (*ASOS*, 421). Before a battle, the majority of men make presents to the Warrior,

and some may even pray for courage. It is common to say, "may the Warrior defend you" and "may the Warrior strengthen your sword arm" (*ASOS*, 38).

- The Smith, who is represented holding a hammer, is the one who mends broken things and sets the world of men straight (*ASOS*, 355). The Septons advise sailors to give presents to the Smith before launching a ship in order to keep their ships safe. Septons also advise praying to the Smith for strength (*ASOS*, 421).

- The Maiden, often known as the Maid, is a lovely, innocent-appearing young lady (*ASOS*, 421). If an acceptable marriage proposal is made, a bride may burn candles in gratitude, and a mother may pray to the Maiden to give bravery to her daughters and protect them while they are innocent (*ACOK*, 291).

- The Crone is represented as an elderly (*ACOK*, 92), wise woman who frequently has a light raised in one hand. The Crone is prayed to for advice and knowledge (*ASOS*, 421).

- The Stranger is simultaneously neither man nor female, but both (*ACOK*, 92). The Stranger embodies death and guides the recently deceased into the afterlife. Those who feel like outcasts might burn a candle for the Stranger (*ASOS*, 421).

The Seven Faith is an extremely dogmatic religion with almost no spiritual aspect, it is all about the rituals and appearances. There is an obvious disregard and disbelief in the common enemy, which we will further analyze in the next chapter. If we were to study this religion from a cultural aspect we would affirm that it is a secularized religion, with frequent fanaticism from its believers, and a very strong relationship with politics bearing on affairs between the Church and the State. Again, since Martin affirmed he got inspiration from Christianity, we might even say, more specifically, that he did so from Catholicism when we consider the parts in which the "church" is divided: the High Septon (*TWOIAF*, 76), a figure that might be compared with the Pope in Catholicism; holy brothers (*AFFC*, 111), similar to monks; and the silent sisters (*AFFC*, 102), a parallel for nuns.

Regarding the dogma in R'hllor's faith, it is a striking and obvious characteristic we can notice when we analyze passages regarding this religion. In the way, the priests

and priestesses dress and talk, how they carry their message across to the devotees, the symbolism they use to enhance the perception of their god's power, and the frequent use of sacrifice in order to please the Lord of Light. Even so, supernatural occurrences are undeniable. But let us start with the dogma. In the passage below there are very interesting aspects for us to analyze. The first one is the fact that this is obviously communal worship. This worship is done by the use of fire, and the adoration through the use of words referencing warmth, light, and of course, fire:

Davos looked down from an arched window in the gallery above. He watched Melisandre lift her arms, as if to embrace the shivering flames. "R'hllor," she sang in a voice loud and clear, "**you are the light in our eyes, the fire in our hearts, the heat in our loins. Yours is the sun that warms our days, yours the stars that guard us in the dark of night.**"

"Lord of Light, defend us. The night is dark and full of terrors." Queen Selyse led the responses, her pinched face full of fervor. (ASOS, 554, my emphasis)

In this part above, we can clearly notice the parallels between light vs darkness; the warmth that represents life; and the stars guiding their path. We can also notice below how R'hllor, the Lord of Light, is mentioned as their creator:

"R'hllor who gave us breath, we thank you," sang Melisandre. "R'hllor who gave us day, we thank you."

"We thank you for the sun that warms us," Queen Selyse and the other worshipers replied. *"We thank you for the stars that watch us. We thank you for our hearths and for our torches, that keep the savage dark at bay"* (ASOS, 554, my emphasis)

We can also notice symbols usually associated with Christianity, such as white for purity and a sword of justice:

Melisandre cried, "We thank you for Stannis, by our grace our king. **We thank you for the pure white fire of his goodness, for the red sword of justice in his hand, for the love he bears his leal people.** Guide him and defend him, R'hllor, and grant him strenght to smite his foes." (*ASOS*, 554, my emphasis)

The ritual we are described in the passages above is a nightfire. Usually, on this communal worship, R'hllor devotees pray, giving thanks to R'hllor for calling an end to the day and pleading with him to usher in the dawn and drive out the night. The prayers continue for more than an hour after the nightfires are lighted at dusk. Each morning at dawn light, fires are also lighted by the red priests to welcome the sun. Other priests might spend the entire night tending to their fires.

2.2. Azor Ahai's Prophecy and The Long Night Myth

R'hllor's religion has a sort of Armageddon coming the way of his devotees, like many other religions. Centuries before the narrative of *ASOIAF*, there was a dreadful period of darkness that took hold of the entire Known World. The Westerosi called it "The Long Night." It took place about eight thousand years before Aegon's Conquest, during the Age of Heroes, and in the midst of a severe winter that lasted for years. A generation was destroyed by famine and terror during the Long Night. So long has passed since the Long Night, that its events are told as children's stories:

"Oh my sweet summer child," Old Nan said quietly, "what do you know of fear? Fear is for the winter, my little lord, when the snows fall a hundred feet deep and the ice wind comes howling out of the north. Fear is for the long night, when the

sun hides its face for years at a time, and little children are born and live and die all in darkness while the direwolves grow gaunt and hungry, and the white walkers move through the woods (...) So, child. This is the sort of story you like?"

(*AGOT*, 164)

Legends in Westeros claim that in the midst of this gloom, a race of what appeared to be demons known as the Others emerged from Westeros' far north, the frigid regions of the Lands of Always Winter. They summoned wights to battle the living and fought with razor-sharp ice swords.

"The Others," Old Nan agreed. "Thousands and thousands of years ago, a winter fell that was cold and hard and endless beyond all memory of man. There came a night that lasted a generation, and kings shivered and died in their castles even as a swineherd in their hovels. Women smothered their children rather than see them starve, and cried, and felt their tears freeze on their cheeks." (*AGOT*, 164)

The First Men and the children of the forest battled bravely against them, but their advance forced them south. It was later discovered that weapons fashioned from dragonglass could kill them. The Others are towering and languid, with milk-white flesh. They have cool, blue eyes that have been compared to blue stars or searing like ice. Martin has described the Others as "a different sort of life... inhuman, elegant, dangerous" (Martin, 2012). Legend has it that there was one single and crucial hero that helped humanity surpass this dark period. According to old prophecies, their eternal conflict for the future of the world won't be resolved until Azor Ahai, the messianic figure, and Prince that was Promised, reappears brandishing the red sword of heroes, the Lightbringer, which can summon dragons from the ground.

"In ancient books of Asshai it is written that there will come a day after a long summer when the stars bleed and the cold breath of darkness falls heavy on the world. In this dread hour a warrior shall draw from the fire a burning sword. And that sword shall be Lightbringer, the Red Sword of Heroes, and he who clasps it shall be Azor Ahai come again, and the darkness shall flee before him." She lifted her voice, so it carried out over the gathered host. **"Azor Ahai, beloved of R'hllor! The Warrior of Light, the Son of Fire! Come forth, your sword awaits you! Come forth and take it into your hand!"** (ACOK, 94, my emphasis)

Azor Ahai spent thirty days and thirty nights working at the sacred fires of a temple to complete the task of forging a hero's sword. The sword, however, broke as he attempted to temper it in water. He didn't give up lightly, so he began again. To create a second sword that was superior to the original, Azor Ahai needed fifty days and fifty nights. He abducted a lion and plunged the sword into its heart to temper it this time, but the steel cracked once more. Azor Ahai labored on the blade for a hundred days and nights the third time, with a heavy heart since he knew what had to be done in order to complete it. This time, he called his wife Nissa Nissa and asked if she could expose her breast. He pierced her with his blade, merging her soul with the steel to create Lightbringer, the Red Sword of Heroes. Lightbringer was now comfortable to touch and carried Nissa Nissa's warmth (ACOK, 97). Azor Ahai did not fight alone despite possessing Lightbringer; rather, he led honorable men into battle so that the darkness might be vanquished (TWOIAF, 433). The monster is said to have erupted into flames as the hero slashed his sword through it. Azor Ahai will reincarnate as a champion sent by R'hllor, according to old texts (ADWD, 116). This will take place when terrible, icy darkness envelopes the planet following a protracted summer (ADWD, 477). Azor Ahai will allegedly face off against the darkness while wielding Lightbringer once more, and if he fails, the entire world will also fail (ADWD, 218).

In Jones' *Encyclopedia of Religion*, we can read that "Devotees do not doubt the basic reality of Zarathushtra's existence. Yet one line of modern scholarship has been to view Zarathushtra as a legendary character" (Jones, 2005). The last point is an

interesting fact when we think about the whole symbolism surrounding R'hllor, and Azor Ahai, being a historical figure loaded with myth. In this parallel Zarathushtra would have been divided between his divinity, represented by R'hllor, and his historical and legendary aspect represented by Azor Ahai in the role of a hero.

Besides the Long Night being prophesied by red priests and believed by R'hllor's devotees, there are two very interesting aspects that connect this myth with the Lord of Light religion. The first one is the obvious dichotomy between Ice and Fire. These fantastical creatures with characteristics of ice, R'hllor, the God of Light, the God of Flame and Shadow, and the Heart of Fire. The second connection is the unnamed god of Darkness, the Great Other, whose name may not be spoken. This is the same name chosen by Martin to describe these fantastical and supernatural creatures.

What about Azor Ahai being reborn? Who would be this mythical hero in the story? Melisandre believes that Stannis Baratheon is the new Azor Ahai that will defeat the Great Other with his Lightbringer. In the passage below we can see the moment in which the sword is "forged", or rather, the moment in which he takes a somewhat common sword and plunges it into the fire. It is also interesting to note that the first thing he does with his Lightbringer is to destroy a statue of one of the Seven Gods. It is symptomatic of his decision to abandon the Faith of Seven once and for all.

The king plunged into the fire with his teeth clenched, holding the leather cloak before him to keep off the flames. He went straight to the Mother, grasped the sword with his gloved hand, and wrenched it free of the burning wood with a single hard jerk. Then he was retreating, the sword held high, jade-green flames swirling around cherry-red steel. Guards rushed to beat out the cinders that clung to the king's clothing.

"*A sword of fire!*" shouted Queen Selyse. Ser Axell Florent and the other queen's men took up the cry. "A sword of fire! It burns! A sword of fire!" (ACOK, 94)

However, there are two different characters that had never had any contact with one another, who are convinced Stannis' sword is not a new Lightbringer, but just a sword with some kind of enchantment. The first one is Maester Aemon, a very old, wise, and respected member of the Night's Watch, that studied to become a Maester, an order of scholars, scientists, healers, and messengers. Aemon notices that the sword carries no heat. Given that the original Lightbringer had been forged with the sacrifice of Azor Ahai killing his own wife, Nissa Nissa, legend has it that the blade of Lightbringer burned fiercely hot during conflicts, and Lightbringer was from that point on always as warm as Nissa Nissa had been.

Steel scraped against wood and leather, and radiance filled the solar; shimmering, shifting, a dance of gold and orange and red light, all the bright colors of fire.

"Tell me, Samwell." Maester Aemon touched his arm.

"It glows," said Sam, in a hushed voice. "As if it were on fire. There are no flames, but the steel is yellow and red and orange, all flashing and glimmering, like sunshine on water, but prettier. I wish you could see it, Maester."

(...)

Maester Aemon was lost in thought as Sam helped him down the narrow turnpike stair. But as they were crossing the yard, he said. **"I felt no heat. Did you Sam?"**

"Heat? From the sword?" He thought back. "The air around it was shimmering, the way it does above a hot brazier."

"Yet you felt no heat, did you? And the scabbard that held this sword, it is wood and leather, yes? I heard the sound when His Grace drew from the blade. Was the leather scorched, Sam? Did the wood seem burnt or blackened?"

"No," Sam admitted. "Not that I could see." (ASOS, 692-693, my emphasis)

The second character to question the legitimacy of Stannis's sword is Salladhor Saan, a pirate, smuggler, and trader:

"...That sword was not Lightbringer, my friend."

The sudden shift in subject left Davos uneasy. "Sword?"

"A sword plucked from the fire, yes. Men tell me things, it is my pleasant smile. How shall a burnt sword serve Stannis?"

"A *burning* sword," corrected Davos.

"Burnt," said Salladhor Saan, "and be glad of that, my friend. Do you know the tale of the forging of Lightbringer? (...) Be glad that it is just a burnt sword that His Grace pulled from that fire. Too much light can hurt the eyes, my friend, and fire *burns*." (ACOK, 97)

Both characters, Salladhor Saan and Maester Aemon, reach the same conclusion. Stannis is not carrying the new Lightbringer. Consequently, he is not Azor Ahai reborn. The legendary hero should be the bearer of a sword of fire, with warmth, and the embodiment of life due to the sacrifice of Nissa Nissa. We can then conclude that Stannis' sword is pretty, it shimmers and glows, but it is just a trick for the eyes. Stannis is not the only character to carry a version of the Lightbringer. Another character that carries a flaming sword is Beric Dondarrion:

Unsmiling, Lord Beric laid the edge of his longsword against the palm of his left hand, and drew it slowly down. Blood ran dark from the gash he made, and washed over the steel.

And then the sword took fire. (ASOS, 314)

Not much detail is said about this sword beside that it took fire, as we can read in the passage above. However, given that none of the other characters surrounding Dondarrion question its legitimacy, we cannot know if there is an eliminatory fact about it. The one aspect that rules out Beric as Azor Ahai reborn is the fact that he dies in *AFFC*.

2.3. Visions in Fire

Fire is essential for the worshipers of the Lord of Light not only for adoration but linked to life itself according to the red priests of R'hllor, that are dressed in flowing red robes in accordance with this symbolism of fire. As the servants of light and the offspring of fire, they hold the belief of shadows being the Lord of Light's creations. However, the importance of fire does not stop with symbolism. Red priests are trained to see visions in flames and are taught prayers and spells.

“Fire is a living thing,” the red woman told him, when he asked her to teach him how to see the future in the flames. “It’s always moving, always changing ... like a book whose letters dance and shift even as you try to read them. It takes years of training to see the shapes beyond the flames, and more years still to learn to tell the shapes of what will be from what may be or what was. Even then it comes hard, *hard*. You do not understand that, you men of the sunset lands.” Davos asked her then how it was that ser Axell had learned the trick of it so quickly, but to that she only smiled enigmatically and said, “Any cat may stare into a fire and see red mice at play.” (*ASOS*, 555)

To perceive the shapes beyond the flames and to learn how to interpret them requires special training. They train a large number of priests in their red temples, both male and female. The priest may experience visions of the past, the future, or events occurring geographically distant from the priest’s current location. In this sense, the

visions are similar to the greensight, in which the greenseer is able to experience his visions without a real perception of the passage of time. But even if they are convinced that their visions are always correct, it is not always simple to see the vision in the flames. Years of practice are required to perceive the shapes beyond the flames, and even longer to learn to differentiate between visions of the past, a certain future, and a possible future. Even with such extensive training, it is still challenging, and priests may still misinterpret it. There are three characters that we are presented in the narrative with this ability: Melisandre of Asshai, Thoros of Myr, and Moqorro from Volantis. Interestingly, given the fact that this religion is still not particularly widespread in Westeros, with many seeing R'hllor as an alien god to their Seven Gods, it is significant that the main priests we are presented with are all from the neighboring continent of Essos. From these three, Moqorro might be the most experienced red priest as we can see in this passage, being able to read details and specific events of the future:

“Why do you say this man is a wizard? I see only a ragged red priest.”

“I thought the same, lord Captain ... but he knows things. He knew that we made for Slaver's Bay before any man could tell him, and he knew you would be here, off this island.” (*ADWD*, 547)

Melisandre is also skilled but even she admits that her visions may come with errors:

“When I gaze into the flames, I can see through stone and earth, and find the truth within men's souls. I can speak to kings long dead and children not yet born, and watch the years and seasons flicker past, until the end of days.”

“Are your fires never wrong?”

“Never ... though we priests are mortal and sometimes err, mistaking this must come for this may come.” (*ADWD*, 52)

The least experienced in seeing the future in the flames is certainly Thoros of Myr. His visions, as we can read below, come occasionally and it is never really explicit if there is any vision that ended up becoming true.

They built a great fire atop the hill, and Thoros of Myr sat crosslegged beside it, gazing deep into the flames as if there was nothing else in all the world.

"What is he doing?" Arya asked Ned.

"Sometimes he sees things in the flames," the squire told her. "The past. The future. Things happening far away."

(...)

"Can you truly see the future there?" he asked suddenly.

Thoros turned from the fire, sighing. "Not here. Not now. But some days yes, the Lord of Light grants me visions." (*ASOS*, 391)

2.4. Resurrection

Like many others in the *ASOIAF* universe, Thoros of Myr became a red priest because he was sold to a red temple at a young age. Because of his preferences for fighting, drinking, and women, he was ordained as a priest but never particularly holy. After failing to persuade the fire-obsessed King Aerys II Targaryen into converting to the Lord of Light, Thoros was banished and began to doubt his own beliefs. Then, one day Thoros resurrects Beric Dondarrion for the first time, accidentally, while giving him the last kiss, a religious ritual performed by priests on the deceased. The priest puts fire on his lips and exhales it into the corpse, down his neck to his lungs, heart, and soul.

"Thoros, how many times have you brought me back now?"

The red priest bowed his head. "It is R'hllor who brings you back, my lord. The Lord of Light. I am only his instrument."

"How many times?" Lord Beric insisted.

"Six," Thoros said reluctantly. "And each time is harder. You have grown reckless, my lord. Is death so very sweet?"

"Sweet? No, my friend. Not sweet."

"Then do not court it so. Lord Tywin leads from the rear. Lord Stannis as well. You would be wise to do the same. A seventh death might mean the end of both of us." (ASOS, 356)

This event served as a spiritual reawakening to Thoros that managed to improve his abilities as he continues to revive Beric five other times, a fact that is beyond his comprehension, but that he believes is because R'hllor still has plans for Beric. Of all of his abilities, resurrection is certainly the one he is the most skilled in. So far, we have not been given much detail about the resurrection itself, despite the fact that it happens as a consequence of the last kiss. However, an important aspect to be highlighted is that, as we read above, death does not leave without a price. Beric tells Thoros that "Fire consumes. It consumes, and when it is done there is nothing left. *Nothing*" (ASOS, 392) and that six resurrections are too many. Thoros of Myr says that "Lightning comes and goes and then is seen no more. So too with men. Lord Beric's fire has gone out of this world, I fear. A grimmer shadow leads us in his place" (AFFC, 471), referring to the light of Beric's life, and consequently his seventh and final death.

2.5. Sacrifices

The other side of death for the red priest is the ritual of sacrifice. Sacrifice rites are highly connected to rituals and are present in several different religions across the globe. In the Encyclopedia of Religions Jones explains that "The term sacrifice, from the

Latin *sacrificium* (*sacer*, “holy”; *facere*, “to make”), carries the connotation of the religious act in the highest, or fullest sense; it can also be understood as the act of sanctifying or consecrating an object” (Jones, 2005). Melisandre, the red priestess, says that “only death can pay for life” (*ASOS*, 465).

However, the sacrifices made by Melisandre for King Stannis Baratheon are not exactly being done in order to resurrect someone. The last kiss is responsible for that, and there is no life taken away in order to be transferred to someone else’s body. The sacrifices she makes for whom she believes is the Azor Ahai reborn, are to kill his enemies and make an easier way for him to be proclaimed king. Since they are in a war for the Iron Throne, if one, or several of your competitors and enemies dies, you in theory would have an easier path to your coronation. Besides the sacrifice itself, the blood that must be shed for Stannis to see himself rid of his enemies is the blood of his brother’s bastard son, Edric Storm. It is interesting to note how Stannis seems to be battling with his decision. He is not comfortable at all with taking a boy’s life. One of Melisandre’s arguments is the fact that signs point to Stannis being Azor Ahai reborn, including a red comet that appears in Westeros’s sky, in the first book of the saga.

"Edric Storm," Davos said.

Stannis rounded on him in a cold fury. "*I know his name*. Spare me your reproaches. I like this no more than you do, but my duty is to the realm. My duty ..." He turned back to Melisandre. "You swear there is no other way? Swear it on your life, for I promise you shall die by inches if you lie."

"You are he who must stand against the Other. The one whose coming was prophesied five thousand years ago. The red comet was your herald. You are the prince that was promised, and if you fail the world fails with you." Melisandre went to him, her red lips parted, her ruby throbbing. "Give me this boy," she whispered, "and I will give you your kingdom." (*ASOS*, 558-559)

Melisandre convinces Stannis that all of this is necessary in order to stop a new Long Night and that Stannis should make sacrifices, not only in the literal sense but also metaphorically by making difficult decisions, just like Azor Ahai had to sacrifice his own wife Nissa Nissa.

"Stannis ground his teeth again. "I never asked for this crown. Gold is cold and heavy on the head, but so long as I am the king, I have a duty ... If I must sacrifice one child to the flames to save a million from the dark ... Sacrifice ... is never easy, Davos. Or it is no true sacrifice. Tell him my lady."

(...)

"I am speaking of a boy, your daughter's friend, your brother's son."

"A king's son, with the power of kingsblood in his veins." Melisandre's ruby glowed like a red star at her throat. (ASOS, 559)

Stannis eventually believes in the red priestess's words and decides to act for the good of Westeros and perform what he believes to be his own duty. Although born a bastard, Edric carries a king's blood in his veins. In the end, the reasoning is that if a metaphorical sacrifice was easy, then it would not be a sacrifice at all

2.6. The Supernatural in R'hllor

Sacrifice is mainly explicit for the believers of the Lord of Light, as for everyone that might catch a glimpse of what's happening during the sacrificial rite. Nevertheless, the biggest sacrifice Stannis had ever had to do in order to accomplish his goal was to kill his own brother, Renly Baratheon. Martin never writes all the details of what happened, but he gives several clues and three specific characters that testify to what happened on the night of the murder.

In *ACOK*, Renly Baratheon is in his tent taking off his armor by a member of his Kingsguard (the royal bodyguards in Westeros) named Brienne of Tarth, alongside Catelyn Stark that is representing her son Robb Stark in a sort of diplomatic mission to reach peace. All of a sudden, an animated shadow with a striking resemblance to Stannis Baratheon appears in the tent and slays Renly. In the next passage we can see what happened when both survivors of this attack blamed Stannis for the killing:

“The shadow. Something dark and evil had happened here, she knew, something that she could not begin to understand. *Renly never cast that shadow. Death came in that door and blew the life out of him as swift as the wind snuffed out his candles.*

(...)

"I swear it, you know me, it was Stannis *killed* him." (*ACOK*, 295)

Even after the shock of what happened, Catelyn Stark continues vouching for the same story, that Brienne was not responsible for Renly's death, and that the one who killed Renly was Stannis, with "Sorcery, some dark magic, there was a shadow (...) A shadow with a sword" (*ACOK*, 296). In the following book, *ASOS*, Brienne of Tarth also corroborates this version of a shadow. She says that "There was a *shadow*" (*ASOS*, 540) and that "It was Stannis (*ASOS*, 540). This shadow that both of them refer to, was literally birthed by Melisandre of Asshai, Davos Seaworth was the only other person present at this moment, and his description is the same, a shadow in a form of a man Davos knew:

Melisandre had thrown back her cowl and shrugged out of the smothering robe. Beneath, she was naked, and huge with child

(...)

Panting, she squatted and spread her legs. Blood ran down her thighs, black as ink. Her cry might have been agony or ecstasy or both. And Davos saw the

crown of the child's head push its way out of her. Two arms wriggled free, grasping, black fingers coiling around Melisandre's straining thighs, pushing, until the whole of the shadow slid out into the world and rose taller than Davos, tall as the tunnel, towering above the boat. He had only an instant to look at it before it was gone, twisting between the bars of the portcullis and racing across the surface of the water, but that instant was long enough. **He knew that shadow. As he knew the man who'd cast it.** (ACOK, 366-367, my emphasis)

The anthropomorphic shadow shaped like Stannis was not the only supernatural artifice of Melisandre. Stannis's Maester Cressen, the man who had known him all his life, and to a certain extent felt like a father figure to him, was an overprotector and worried about Stannis's new god, and new priestess. The fact that Melisandre had burned all of the statues of the Seven Gods of Westeros did not help the perception he had of the red woman. He made a decision to kill her in order to protect Stannis, but it backfired:

"As you will." Melisandre of Asshai took the cup from his hands and drank long and deep. There was only half a swallow of wine remaining when she offered it back to him. "And now you."

(...)

Cressen tried to reply, but his words caught in his throat. His cough became a terrible thin whistle as he strained to suck in air. Iron fingers tightened round his neck. As he sank to his knees, still he shook his head, denying her, denying her power, denying her magic, denying her god. And the cowbells peeled in his antlers, singing fool, fool, fool while the red woman looked down on him in pity, the candle flames dancing in her red red eyes. (ACOK, 25)

As we can see, she drank most of the poison he gave for her to drink and gave the rest to him. According to her, R'hllor protected her, but it is interesting to note that before his death, Cressen sees a ruby she always wears in a red gold necklace that fits perfectly around her neck, and this ruby shimmered. What we can conclude with the information that Martin has given to us, is that Melisandre uses protection spells, that are somehow connected to this ruby around her neck.

2.7. Lucifer, Son of the Morning and the Lightbringer

There is no doubt that any other religion different from the Seven Gods of Westeros is not seen with good eyes by the Westerosi. All the same, R'hllor is the one who feels most alien in the narrative. Is this red god truly the Lord of Light? Or are all the things the priests preach sorcery and witchery? The Lord of Light is said to be the bringer of life, but so much of what his priests teach relates to death. One cannot help making the connection between the Lord of Light and Lucifer, the Son of the Morning, the Lightbringer, before his fall from heaven. Not surprisingly, Lightbringer was also the choice Martin made to refer to the Azor Ahai's sword of fire. The duality that is present in the image of Lucifer, the fallen angel, can be traced to R'hllor and its antithesis, the Great Other.

Lucifer's fall from heaven motif as morning star cast down from heaven with the desire to raise to a throne above the stars of God. According to Jones, his fall was a result of his refusal to accept the light principle inside himself and his search for the guiding fire of light. Temporal creation was created at the time of Lucifer's fall. Adam, who represented the ideal harmony of the four elements—fire and light, masculine and female—was standing at its peak.

The will of the nothing looks out to the something as light (love) and returns into itself as a desiring fire (wrath). In the knowledge that results, eternal nature has

its being. The two fused principles of fire and light reflect in themselves a third, the being of the universe. (Jones, 2005)

Lucifer, as a complex figure in Christianity, embodies both the light motif and the darkness after he fell and became known as Satan. This connection between the Lord of Light and Lucifer is suggested by the perception that Davos has of the former. He seems to have several doubts about R'hllor, and the sort of power that this god gives to the red priestess (*ACOK*, 101). Davos questions this red god throughout the narrative. The lack of trust he directs to R'hllor may be a sign that this Lord of Light might not be exactly what the red priest and priestess preach to the devotees. There is a possibility that the figure of the Lord of Light might be a complex figure like Lucifer. Davos feels conflicted about having helped Melisandre to a certain extent while maintaining his own devotion to the Faith of the Seven. There is a very interesting passage in which Davos Seaworth is adrift after his ship is destroyed, and he has a dream about the Mother reprehending him for helping Melisandre with whatever she is doing with her Lord of Light, including profaning the Seven by burning them:

"It was her!" Davos cried. "Mother, don't forsake us. It was her who burned you, the red woman, Melisandre, *her!*"

"It was her work," Davos said again, more weakly. ***Her work, and yours, onion knight. You rowed her into Storm's End in the black of night, so she might loose her shadow child. You are not guiltless, no. You rode beneath her banner and flew it from your mast. You watched the Seven burn at Dragonstone, and did nothing. She gave the Father's justice to the fire, and the Mother's mercy, and the wisdom of the Crone. Smith and Stranger, Maid and Warrior, she burnt them all to the glory of her cruel god, and you stood and held your tongue. Even when she killed old Maester Cressen, even then, you did nothing.***

The sail was a hundred yards away and moving fast across the bay. In a few more moments it would be past him, and dwindling.

Ser Davos Seaworth began to climb his rock. (*ASOS*, 62, my emphasis)

It is extremely significant how Davos begins to climb his rock after the dream, not just any rock, but his own, like penitence for his sins after his “confession” to the Mother. Davos Seaworth is the main character to show us this contrast between The Seven Gods and R’hllor, the Lord of Light.

Given everything he has seen, Davos has a point in feeling anxious and not able to trust this new god, at one point he explicitly says that his heart is “full of doubts” (*ASOS*, 237). He questions his king Stannis on several occasions. He understands that this so-called Lord of Light might bring much more darkness than what it seems at first glance. Christians have interpreted the devil (former Lucifer) as the embodiment of evil, the one who spreads lies and encourages wickedness, as well as a metaphor for human evil. Like the devil in Christianity, often called “liar and father of lies”, R’hllor may have deceived his believers.

2.8. The Great Other

The Great Other is sometimes referred to as the Other, the Lord of Darkness, the Soul of Ice, and the God of Night and Terror (*ASOS*, 237). This god is considered the enemy of R’hllor. His real name is never revealed and “may not be spoken” (*ASOS*, 334). The fact that we have little information about the Great Other may be another clue that the Lord of Light might not be what the devotees believe. The Lord of Light and the Great Other, according to followers of R'hllor, are the only two deities engaged in an ongoing conflict for the fate of the entire universe. Could these deities be only one in eternal conflict? Shadows are thought to be the slaves of R'hllor, while darkness, cold, and death are thought to be the servants of the Great Other.

On one side is R'hllor the Lord of Light, the Heart of Fire, the God of Flame and Shadow. Against him stands the Great Other whose name may not be spoken, the Lord of Darkness, the Soul of Ice, the God of Night and Terror. (*ASOS*, 237)

Red priests think they have the ability to recognize lies told by the Other's agents (*ASOS*, 237). Melisandre thinks that her adversary has black eyes and that no man could endure gazing upon the icy, terrifying face of the Great Other (*ADWD*, 306). Melisandre feared sleep, because "Sleep is a little death, dreams the whisperings of the Other, who would drag us all into his eternal night" (*ADWD*, 306). She also believes that if the Great Other wins the battle with the Lord of Light, "the dawn will never come again" (*ADWD*, 306). All of what represents the Great Other, including his epithets, the Soul of Ice, the God of Night, and Terror, are reminiscent of the common enemy, the Others.

3. The Others

The Others are undoubtedly the aspect of the narrative with the largest amount of supernatural characteristics. Unfortunately, we have not yet been given much information about them, but just some glimpses of their appearance and myths and legends about their purpose. They are "demons made of ice and snow and cold," according to Stannis Baratheon (*ASOS*, 692). Melisandre, the red priestess, thinks that the Others are the "cold children" of the Great Other (*ASOS*, 692) who is thought to be a terrible god of death, ice, and darkness, nemesis of the Lord of Light. Nevertheless, these creatures are the very first imagery presented to the readers of the saga. The prologue of *AGOT* is focused solely on the experience of a few men of the Night's Watch with an Other, and this is highly significant for their importance to the narrative. The Others are a species of humanoid creatures that live in the northern regions beyond the Wall. They are sometimes referred to as white walkers, cold gods, white shadows, and cold shadows. The flesh of the Others is described as milk-white and they have tall and lean figures. Their eyes have been described as "bright as blue stars" (*ACOK*, 219) and "deeper and bluer than any human eyes, a blue that burned like ice" (*AGOT*, 16). Others have "pale blue blood" (*ASOS*, 177) and "bones like mikglass, pale and shiny" (*ASOS*, 177). Martin affirms that the Others are similar to the supernatural creature in Irish and Scottish folklore called Sidhe. These creatures could be said to be the fairies of Gaelic folklore: "They are not dead. They are strange, beautiful ... think of Sidhe made of ice, something like that" (Martin, 2012). It is interesting to note how Martin affirms that they are not dead, given that these creatures are so intertwined with death in myths. In the passage below we can see a children's story told by Old Nan regarding the others:

Old Nan nodded. "In that darkness, the Others came for the first time," she said as her needles went click click click. "They were cold things, dead things, that hated iron and fire and the touch of the sun, and every creature with hot blood in its veins. They swept over holdfasts and cities and kingdoms, felled heroes and

armies by the score, riding their pale dead horses and leading hosts of the slain. All the swords of men could not stay their advance, and even maidens and suckling babes found no pity in them. They hunted the maids through frozen forests, and fed their dead servants on the flesh of human children” (*AGOT*, 164)

For their weapons, more specifically their swords, Martins says in an interview that their swords are made of: “Ice. But not like regular old ice. The Others can do things with ice that we can’t imagine and make substances of it” (Shaw, 2013). In the prologue of *AGOT*, we get more details about these weapons, and their aesthetics: “The Other slid forward on silent feet. In its hand was a longsword like none that Will had ever seen. No human metal had gone into the forging of that blade. It was alive with moonlight, translucent, a shard of crystal so thin that it seemed almost to vanish when seen edge-on. There was a faint blue shimmer to the thing, a ghost-light that played around its edges, and somehow Will knew it was sharper than any razor” (*AGOT*, 16)

The armor the Others wear is fragile, reflective, and color-shifting with each movement. They appear to have so much skill as swordsmen, that when in combat they seem “almost lazy” (*AGOT*, 16) and their movements are fluid like a dance. The pale swords are incredibly sharp and can cut through ringmail like silk (*AGOT*, 17). Instead of hearing the sound of metal striking metal when the sword strikes a steel blade, all that can be heard is a high, thin sound that sounds like an animal screaming in agony.

The Others move so carefully and lightly over the snow that they do not leave any tracks behind them (*ADWD*, 135). They are accompanied by extreme cold. However, it is unclear if the Others only appear when it is this cold or if they carry the cold with them (*ASOS*, 301). When they are nearby, a white mist rises (*ADWD*, 566). They might emerge during snowfall or fog, then vanish when the weather clears (*AFFC*, 71). Some myths assert that they bring the night, and some that they remain hidden from the sun's rays and only come out at night (*AFFC*, 71). Besides their elegant aesthetic and graceful movements, we can also highlight they are able to communicate not merely with sounds, like an animal, but in a construct of some kind of language: “The Other said

something in a language that Will did not know; his voice was like the crackling of ice on a winter lake, and the words were mocking” (*AGOT*, 16). It is interesting to notice how a tone of mockery when the Other speaks indicates intelligence and a feeling of superiority with “laughter sharp as icicles” (*AGOT*, 17) after he defeats one of the rangers of the Night’s Watch without much effort.

Nevertheless, the Others are regarded as extinct and have not been sighted in eight thousand years in the history of the saga. Apart from the information we have in the prologue of *AGOT*, their presence is mainly surrounded by mysticism and legends passed from generation to generation. The choice Martin made to name these creatures is interesting by itself. Other is generally a term used to describe the process of dehumanizing one’s adversaries, and from all the information we have been given in the five novels published so far, the Others are in a simple term, the common enemy of all religions. Stannis Baratheon calls the Others “the only enemy that matters” (*ASOS*, 692). The dehumanization Martin has made is quite literal, the Others are not human, and could be considered an enemy to humans and all that is alive. The fact that they pose a threat to the *ASOIAF* universe remains unknown, and consequently, the sense of its inhuman evil continues to grow. The first time we are actually given some kind of context to their threat is in a scary bedtime story told by Old Nan to Bran Stark:

They were cold things, dead things, that hated iron and fire and the touch of the sun, and every creature with hot blood in its veins. They swept over holdfasts and cities and kingdoms, felled heroes and armies by the score, riding their pale dead horses and leading hosts of the slain. All the swords of men could not stay their advance, and even maidens and suckling babes found no pity in them. **They hunted the maids through frozen forests, and fed their dead servants on the flesh of human children.** (*AGOT*, 164, my emphasis)

A very striking aspect of the Others is the gothic theme throughout the saga. According to Fred Botting in his work *Gothic*:

Gothic signifies a writing of excess. (...) Gothic atmospheres – gloomy and mysterious – have repeatedly signalled the disturbing return of pasts upon presents and evoked emotions of terror and laughter (...) Gothic condenses the many perceived threats to these values, threats associated with supernatural and natural forces, imaginative excesses and delusions, religious and human evil. (Botting, 2005)

We can find all of these in the conception of the Others. Given that they are referred to as “dead things” (*AGOT*, 164), according to Martin himself, this is not the case. We can then conclude that in this case, in particular, these supernatural creatures in a gloomy environment are so deeply involved in mystery, that their existence and characteristics have been escalated by an imaginative excess. Their existence is even put into question by some characters, regarded as childish fancy, trivial tales of ignorance and superstition: “The Others are as dead as the children of the forest, gone eight thousand years. Maester Luwin will tell you they never lived at all. No living man has ever seen one” (*AGOT*, 26). This questionable existence is only answered by a few characters that have encounters with Others. However, the people that share this experience with others are not taken seriously by the majority of the listeners.

3.1. The Long Night Myth

The most important myth involving the Others is the Long Night Myth. The Westerosi people refer to “The Long Night” as a time when horrible darkness blanketed everything known to men in a great cold that lasted for years, during the Age of Heroes, around eight thousand years before Aegon's Conquest, and the history of the saga. According to this myth, a whole generation was destroyed by famine and fear.

Legends in Westeros claim that amid this gloom the Others emerged from Westeros' far north, the frigid regions of the Lands of Always Winter. We could even propose the possibility that the gloom was a consequence of the Others emerging, and not the other way around if we take what has been discussed already. The Others created an army of wights, dead men, or creatures resurrected by Others through necromancy (*ASOS*, 692), to battle the living.

The First Men and the children of the forest, which were presented in the first chapter of this thesis, battled against the Others but were forced to advance south, creating a safe distance between the Others and them. The Starks, the descendent of the First Men, have chosen as the words of their house Winter is Coming. What at first might seem related to the fact that they live in the Northern region where it is consistently cold, even during summer times, acquires a new meaning when we analyze the Long Night myth, and what may happen again in the narrative. Jon Snow highlights this in the passage below:

“It would seem there were only the two of ... of those *creatures*, whatever they were, I will not call them men. And thank the gods for that. Any more and ... well, that doesn't bear thinking of. **There will be more, though. I can feel it in these old bones of mine**, and Maester Aemon agrees. **The cold winds are rising. Summer is at an end, and a winter is coming such as this world has never seen.**”

Winter is coming. The Stark words had never sounded so grim or ominous to Jon as they did now.” (*AGOT*, 424-425, my emphasis)

To ensure that the people would never be caught off guard by an invasion coming from the north, measures were prepared, and the Wall was created. The Wall is an immense construction of solid ice and magic spells that stretches throughout the whole continent of Westeros for three hundred miles (*AGOT*, 337) and is approximately seven hundred feet tall (*AGOT*, 126), separating the Lands of Always Winter from the rest. This vast wall that forms the northern frontier of the Seven Kingdoms is held by the Night's

Watch; a military order tasked with protecting the human realms from what is called beyond the wall.

The Night's Watch men are referred to as "black brothers" because they solely wear black clothing, because of that it is said that recruits who join the Watch "take the black". Recruits make their vows either in a sept, an altar for the Seven Gods, or in front of a heart tree, the symbol of the Old Gods when they have finished their training and are deemed prepared to take the black. A man's transgressions and obligations are absolved once he takes his vows, consequently when given the opportunity, many outlaws choose the Night's Watch over being executed.

The Night's Watch brother's vow is for life, so it is usual to say, "And now his watch is ended" (*ASOS*, 304) at the conclusion of a black brother's eulogy. Knights may be buried in historic tombs or burned on a pyre at Castle Black, the Night's Watch main building, and where the Lord Commander of the Wall has his headquarters. The vows are described in a chapter narrated by Jon Snow when he takes the black:

Night gathers, and now my watch begins. It shall not end until my death. I shall take no wife, hold no lands, father no children. I shall wear no crowns and win no glory. I shall live and die at my post. **I am the sword in the darkness.** I am the watcher on the walls. **I am the fire that burns against the cold, the light that brings the dawn,** the horn that wakes the sleepers, **the shield that guards the realms of men.** I pledge my life and honor to the Night's Watch, for this night and all the nights to come. (*AGOT*, 338, my emphasis)

Not surprisingly, the vow taken by the Night's Watch relies heavily on symbolism: cold and darkness; fire and light. Given the main characteristics of the Others, they seem like creatures made of ice that come during the darkest hours of the night. Consequently, the ones to stand against them would be associated with light and fire. This is also reminiscent of the Lord of Light, which we will analyze later in this chapter.

The existence of the Others is doubted by many, including some Night's Watch men. The Wall is believed to be the only construction to separate Westeros from the wild lands, a mainly unknown, and untamed territory. The free folk, the wildlings that live beyond the Wall, are divided into many cultures, tribes, clans, villages, and raiding parties, each with its own unique traits and traditions. Some are somewhat civilized, while others are uncivilized and violent.

Nevertheless, the Wall was made to guard the realms of men:

We never knew! But we must have known once. **The Night's Watch has forgotten its true purpose, Tarly. You don't build a wall seven hundred feet high to keep savages in skins from stealing women. The Wall was made to *guard the realms of men ... and not against other men*, which is all the wildlings are when you come right down to it. Too many years, Tarly, too many hundreds and thousands of years. **We lost sight of the true enemy.** And now he's here, but we don't know how to fight him. (ASOS, 303, my emphasis)**

We can clearly notice in the passage above the realization of one of the characters about the disparity between protection and the alleged threat. It does not make sense to have an enormous construction or to create an entire order of guards and watchers to take a vow for life, only to keep "savage people" away from civilization.

For generations, the Night's Watch has targeted the wildlings as their enemy trying to invade their territory. However, this supposed enemy could be easily killed by the Night's Watch men on the top of the wall, and even if some of them managed to reach the Wall, it is almost impenetrable given its enormous height and impressive width. A wall this size is meant to protect the realms of men from a different kind of threat, one so great and ominous that required a construction of this size.

3.2. The Wall

According to legends, the Wall is magically warded to stop the dead from passing through. This is important because it is probably the only reason the Others and their army of wights haven't tried to cross it yet. There is a chapter in which Bran Stark crosses the Wall with the help of Samwell Tarly, a man of the Night's Watch, and we are presented with one of the probably many spells used to protect the Wall and its safe passage from the Others:

The Black Gate, Sam had called it, but it wasn't black at all.

It was white weirwood, and there was a face on it.

A glow came from the wood, like milk and moonlight, so faint it scarcely seemed to touch anything beyond the door itself, not even Sam standing right before it. The face was old and pale, wrinkled and shrunken. *It looks dead*. Its mouth was closed, and its eyes; its cheeks were sunken, its brow withered, its chin sagging. *If a man could live for a thousand years and never dies but just grow older, his face might come to look like that.*

The door opened its eyes.

They were white too, and blind. "Who are you?" the door asked, and the well whispered, "*Who-who-who-who-who-who-who-who.*"

"I am the sword in the darkness," Samwell Tarly said. **"I am the watcher on the walls. I am the fire that burns against the cold, the light that brings the dawn, the horn that wakes the sleepers. I am the shield that guards the realms of men."**

"Then pass," the door said. Its lids opened, wide and wider and wider still, until nothing at all remained but a great gaping mouth in a ring of wrinkles. Sam stepped aside and waved Jojen through ahead of him. Summer followed, sniffing

as he went, and then it was Bran's turn. Hodor ducked, but not low enough. **The door's upper lip brushed softly against the top of Bran's head, and a drop of water fell on him and ran slowly down his nose. It was strangely warm, and salty as a tear.** (ASOS, 494, my emphasis)

Besides the dichotomy between fire and ice, which is reminiscent of the Lord of Light, it is also highly significant that the Black Gate from which the characters take passage is not only a weirwood, but it has a face carved in it. In the first chapter of this thesis, I presented more detailed information about the Old Gods and explained how important the carved face weirwood is for the devotees of this faith. The chronology in the construction of the Wall also makes sense to be related to the Old Gods, because, at that time, the Faith of the Seven was not yet known to the people of Westeros. These same Seven Gods are said to “have no power beyond the Wall”:

His own mother was a thousand leagues south, safe with his sister and his little brother Dickon in the keep at Horn Hill. *She can't hear me, no more than the Mother Above.* The Mother was merciful, all the septons agreed, but **the Seven had no power beyond the Wall. This was where the old gods ruled, the nameless gods of the trees and the wolves and the snows.** "Mercy," he whispered then, to whatever might be listening, old gods or new, or demons too, "oh mercy, mercy me, mercy me." (ASOS, 168-169)

The threat imposed by the Others is so great, ancient, and grim, that only the old gods, the gods that existed before the First Men went to Westeros, can protect humanity. The Wall presents some characteristics of the Gothic:

Gothic **landscapes are desolate, alienating and full of menace.** (...) Drawing on the myths, legends and folklore of medieval romances, Gothic conjured up

magical worlds and tales of knights, monsters, ghosts and extravagant adventures and terrors. Associated with **wildness**, Gothic signified an overabundance of imaginative frenzy, untamed by reason and unrestrained by conventional eighteenth-century demands for simplicity, realism and probability (...) Craggy, **mountainous landscapes**, the Alps in particular, stimulated powerful emotions of terror and wonder in the viewer. **Their immense scale offered a glimpse of infinity and awful power**, intimations of a metaphysical force beyond rational knowledge and human comprehension. In the expansive domain opened up the sublime all sorts of **imaginative objects and fears situated in or beyond nature** could proliferate in a marvellous profusion of the supernatural and the ridiculous, the magical and the nightmarish, the fantastic and the absurd. (Botting, 2005, my emphasis)

The Wall is isolated, literally at the edge of the Westeros kingdom. A construction that is deeply rooted in legends about the Others, the threat they present to humanity, and on an immense scale. The thoughtful care with creating an enormous barrier to keep the Others away, enhancing it by using protecting spells. But, how to defeat the Others if anything goes wrong? There are a few weaknesses in the Others that we have been presented so far: obsidian (*AFFC*, 71), sometimes known as dragonglass or "frozen fire," (*ASOS*, 692) is one of them. A weakness to "dragonsteel," which is believed to be Valyrian steel, is also mentioned in ancient manuscripts. The Others are reported to be put off by fir (*ASOS*, 692). The Wall, in the opinion of Mance Rayder and his wife Dalla, stops the Others from entering the Seven Kingdoms (*ASOS*, 654). The mysticism and knowledge of children's stories can also give some clues about how to defeat this threat:

In that darkness, the Others came riding, she used to say, dropping her voice lower and lower. Cold and dead they were, and **they hated iron and fire and the touch of sun, and every living creature with hot blood in its veins**. Holdfasts and cities and kingdoms of men all fell before them, as they moved south on pale

dead horses, leading hosts of the slain. **They fed their dead servants on the flesh of human children.** (*AGOT*, 362, my emphasis)

There is a lot of death surrounding the image of these creatures. What might have contributed to this was the fact that they are said to resurrect dead people, and from what we can gather so far, they do so in order to create a sort of army of the dead. The free folk that lives beyond the Wall think that the wights and Others can smell warmth or, more specifically, life. When the Others raise dead people or other creatures to life these new creatures are called *wights*.

3.3. Wights

There are legends of Others riding dead creatures' bodies, including horses, bears, direwolves, and mammoths (*AFFC*, 71). Some legends describe Others riding enormous ice spiders (*AFFC*, 71). Samwell Tarly describes the wights as “slow clumsy things (*ASOS*, 176), while the Others are “light as snow on the wind” (*ASOS*, 176). Because they are essentially dead creatures raised to a pseudo-life, they can have “cold black hands” (*AGOT*, 374), probably because of the rotting process in their flesh. While the Others can be seen speaking in an indistinct language, the wights “don’t have tongues, or they’ve forgotten how to use them” (*ASOS*, 501). The only way to stop the Others from raising the dead to life is to burn their bodies before the Others get to them (*AGOT*, 366-367). In the prologue of *AGOT* we can read about the very first wight in the narrative. The character that narrates this chapter describes that when the corpse transforms, the “pupil burned blue. It **saw**” (*AGOT*, 17, my emphasis). The eye of the wight had transformed into a burning blue, reminiscent of the aesthetic of an Other. The same is described about Thistle, the paramour of Varamyr Sixskins, a character that was analyzed more in-depth in the first chapter. In the passage below Varamyr is confronted not only with Thistle becoming a wight, but also with several other of these creatures, and when that happened, he states that “the world turned to ice”:

Below the world had turned to ice. Fingers of frost crept slowly up the weirwood, reaching out for each other. The empty village was no longer empty. **Blue-eyed shadows walked amongst the mound of snow.** Some wore brown and some wore black and some were naked, their flesh gone white as snow. A wind was sighing through the hills, heavy with **their scents: dead flesh, dry blood, skins that stank of mold and rot and urine** (...) The last to look was the thing that had been Thistle. She wore wool and fur and leather, and over that she wore a coat of hoarfrost that crackled when she moved and glistened in the moonlight. Pale pink icicles hung from her fingertips, ten long knives of frozen blood. **And in the pits where her eyes had been, a pale blue light was flickering, lending her coarse features an eerie beauty they had never known in life.**

She sees me. (ADWD, 21, my emphasis)

Although dead creatures, with scents of rot, their eyes are described as being able to see. Unfortunately, we have not been given all the information about the Others, and even less about their wights and their purpose, so it is impossible to affirm if they are being controlled by an Other or have an intelligence of their own. Nevertheless, it is significant that Martin has chosen to highlight the fact that these creatures see, on more than one occasion.

Undoubtedly there is a reason why the Others are creating this army of wights. Curiously, according to the Long Night myth, this might not be the first time they have done something similar to this. There is a very common swears habit in Westeros, mainly for the people that are not much connected with the legends and myths surrounding these creatures, in other words, people geographically distant from the Wall. In order to curse someone, the Westerosi have the habit of saying "The Others take them" (ASOS, 34), "I hope the Others get him" (ACOK, 168) or even "May the Others take them all" (AFFC, 158). This curse habit is said in several different regions of Westeros, by people from various social classes and "political" spheres. This habit is so rooted in their language, that in my opinion, it must have come from a historical stance.

If the Others create the wights, perhaps during, or in the period previous to the original Long Night, they have taken people to transform.

3.4. Craster and his Gods

Craster is a wildling that lives close to the Wall. He has a grim custom of giving his male-born sons to the Others as an offering. If Craster has a daughter, he will marry her when she is old enough to carry a child. When the white cold arrives, he offers the infant to the Others if it is a male to appease them. One of his wives, Gilly, says this is an offering to Craster's Gods.

"It it's a girl, that's not so bad, she'll grow a few years and he'll marry her. But Nella says it's to be a boy, and she's had six and knows these things. **He gives the boys to the gods. Come the white cold, he does, and of late it comes more often.**" (...)

"What gods?" Jon was remembering that they'd seen no boys in Craster's Kepp, nor men either, save Craster himself.

"The cold gods," she said. "The ones in the night. The white shadows."

(...)

"What color are their eyes?" he asked her.

"Blue. As bright as blue stars, and as cold."

She has seen them, he thought. (ACOK, 219, my emphasis)

Although Craster's wives think that the baby boys Craster gave to the Others are converted into new Others (ASOS, 308), there has been no proof of what exactly happens to the babies so far. The women call them Craster's sons. However, according

to the Old Nan's tales, the Others only feed human children to the wights: The wildlings were cruel men, she said, slavers and slayers and thieves. They consorted with giants and ghouls, stole girl children in the dead of night, and drank blood from polished horns. (*AGOT*, 18). Independently of what happens to the babies, the sacrifice Craster does seems to work:

There had been no attacks while they had been at Craster's, neither wights nor Others. Nor would there be, Craster said. **"A godly man got no cause to fear** such. I said as much to that Mance Rayder once, when he come sniffing round. He never listened, no more'n you crows with your swords and your bloody fires. That won't help you none when the white cold comes. **Only the gods will help you then. You best get right with the gods.**"

Gilly had spoken of the white cold as well, and she'd told them **what sort of offerings Craster made to his gods.** (*ASOS*, 299)

From what we can notice in the passage above, Craster does not associate the white cold with the coming of the Others. What he believes to be his gods are protecting him from whatever this white cold may bring. He, then, considers himself a godly man with no cause for fear.

Craster may not be the only one to offer sacrifices to the Others. In the tales told by Old Nan, the wildlings "women lay with the Others in the Long Night to sire terrible half-human children" (*AGOT*, 18), and "they carry off women and sell them to the Others" (*AGOT*, 20). In *TWOIAF*, in the section about the wildlings, there is a passage that affirms that some wildlings might worship gods of snow and ice, like Craster: "Some accounts say that there are those who worship different gods: dark gods beneath the ground in the Frostfangs, gods of snow and ice on the Frozen Shore" (*TWOIAF*, 231). For Craster, they are his gods. their origins, purposes and mere existence may be so distant from the people in Westeros that all the tales are wrong.

3.5. Monsters

Another interpretation of the Others is as monsters. They might be a sign of a lack of morality and a representation of the imbalance between the natural and the stability of identity or society. A monster can be taken to be a natural or supernatural creature that appears to showcase this imbalance. In *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, Victor Frankenstein's failure to comprehend that his acts have consequences poses the main source of conflict in the work. Victor ignores how his actions can affect others in favor of concentrating only on his own objectives. The monster serves as the clearest illustration of Victor's failure to accept responsibility for his actions in disobeying nature's laws. His obsession with achieving his goals prevents him from considering anything else. After animating the monster, he responds with shock and disgust and flees the room, signaling the culmination of his reckless quest to create life. This occurrence serves as an example of Victor's battle with moral responsibility because he created the monster and gave him life, yet he rejects the outcome when he doesn't like it. The setting of this classic novel also carries some characteristics present in the Others: the snowy mountains, a hellish winter of cold, "unexplored regions" (Shelley, 4), and "the land of mist and snow" (Shelley, 4).

The word "monster" can be traced back to Latin in the noun form of "*monstrum*", and a "divine omen, supernatural occurrence" with the intent to warn. *Collins Dictionary* defines a monster as "a large imaginary creature that looks very ugly and frightening". The idea of ugliness apart, since Martin has defined the Others as beautiful creatures (Martin, 2012), an imaginary creature that is frightening is reminiscent of the Others. Fred Botting has explained in his work *Gothic*, an interpretation of monsters as a theme in literary works with gothic characteristics:

The term monsters also applied in aesthetic judgments to works that were unnatural and deformed, that deviated either from the regularity attributed to

life and nature or from the symmetry and proportion valued in any form of representation.

(Botting, 2005)

If the Others are monsters that represent the unnatural, or the opposite side of the natural, we can affirm that they are consequently, the antithesis of life. Melisandre affirms that the god of darkness, or the Great Other, is the enemy of all that lives (*ACOK*, 365). In this respect, he is similar to the Others that “hated (...) every living creature with hot blood in its veins” (*AGOT*, 362).

Melisandre believes that the enemy is beyond the Wall and that he “grows stronger, and should he win the dawn will never come again” (*ADWD*, 306). Having said that, the association between the Great Other and the Others, as supernatural creatures, is possible according to the information we are given in the work. The red priestess believes the Others to be "cold children" of the Great Other (*ASOS*, 692). No matter what the Others are, the embodiment of evil, the children of the Lord of Darkness, or simply supernatural creatures, what we can affirm is that the Others have a very important part in the unraveling of the narrative.

Conclusion

Modeled in our real world, culture in Westeros is deeply intertwined with spirituality. It influences how the characters dress, talk, behave, and relate to one another. Most importantly, it shapes that person's beliefs and consequently politics. As I stated in the introduction, what can unite a group of people, can and probably will be the reason to separate these people from different peoples. Sometimes in cultural, spiritual, geographic stances, and perhaps even politically. These are the reasons I felt drawn to study Martin's work *ASOIAF* from a religious perspective.

When I started doing my research, I noticed that there were several aspects of the saga that I initially just thought of as fantasy aspects. However, with this religious prism that I was aiming for, I begin to make some connections between the fantasy, or simply the supernatural, and the spiritual. The religion of the Old Gods and of the Lord of Light was not solely focused on dogmas or rituals that are followed and perhaps have lost their true meaning.

Specifically, in the case of the Old Gods, there are essentially no rituals associated with the worship, no priests, no holy books, and no songs of praise (*ASOS*, 265). It is a folk religion that has been handed down through the generations. Prayers are said in silence and the spiritual aspect is individual. For the Lord of Light, the main ritual, a nightfire, has a very specific reason to be done. In a nightfire, R'hllor devotees offer prayers, thanking him for calling an end to the day and pleading with him to usher in the dawn and drive out the shadows (*ASOS*, 554). This ritual is a way the devotees have found to feel protected during the night, because according to their faith, "the night is dark and full of terrors" (*AFFC*, 22). The same cannot be said for the faith of the Seven, the third religion I aimed to study in this thesis. What is presented to us as readers is a religion that has become secular. At times in my readings, I thought that the characters were sometimes following what would be expected of them to be upright citizens in Westeros. The devotees perform the rituals they have been taught, but faith, devotion, and spirituality seem to have been lost. With the approach of spirituality, I had decided

to take on my work, there was not much in the Seven Gods for me to study. Because of that, I decided to shift my attention only to the Lord of Light and the Old Gods.

The main reason that drew my attention to focus on the Old Gods and the Lord of Light, was the fact that both religions carried so much of the supernatural in them. But at the same time, this striking characteristic of both is not well-known by Westeros society. For example, the only people that are aware of the existence of wargs and greenseers are the wildlings. In the case of R'hllor, the sacrifices Melisandre does in order to fulfill the Azor Ahai prophecy are only known by Davos Seaworth and Stannis Baratheon, both of whom are interested in having Stannis on the Iron Throne. It is also because Davos is aware of this that he feels so conflicted (*ACOK*, 101) and tries to convince Stannis to stop listening to the red priestess. The spiritual conflict (*ASOS*, 62) between his own faith, the faith of the Seven, and the faith of his king, the Lord of Light, and everything that entails, takes its toll on Davos.

What I noticed by studying both religions was that, besides the supernatural and spirituality in them, one point in common was the Others. Given that the saga has two unpublished volumes, we do not have either the conclusion to the story or all the information about these supernatural figures. However, in my interpretation, the Others are the common enemy for the devotees of both religions, as well as for the rest of the population in Westeros, as I tried to present in this thesis.

Nevertheless, this was not the only reason why I chose to write a chapter exclusively to discuss the Others. My motivation to focus on these figures also derives from their supernatural aspects, and from the fact that to some characters, like Craster, they are worth worshiping, and consequently a religious stance on their own. In the story, the Others and all they represent can be studied from the gothic perspective. As Botting said in his work *Gothic*, "social transgression, mental disintegration, and spiritual corruption" (Botting, 2005) can be aspects found in gothic writing. In my reading of the story, the Others are a representation of social transgression and spiritual corruption, a sign of lack of morality and of the imbalance between the natural and unnatural. The Others are the supernatural creatures that appear to showcase this imbalance.

Unfortunately, since we have only been able to take a deeper analysis of the Old Gods' religion, and the religion of the Lord of Light, we have not been able to fully grasp the spirituality in *A Song of Ice and Fire*. A turning point for the spiritual aspects in this story is the geographical characteristics of the region of Westeros, as they frequently dictate, or at least shape, aspects of these people's religions. Both religions I chose are examples of how deep Martin has gone in his world creation. This choice was made based on the amount of information we have in the books, in other words, those were the religions which had more passages and events in the saga, and consequently had more material to be analysed.

The faith of the Seven Gods which was briefly discussed in contrast with the religion of the Lord of Light in the second chapter might be studied further in future research. I believe there is still much to be said about this religion. It might be approached in comparison with Christianity, for example, the main source of inspiration for Martin, analyzing its different doctrines and practices. One particularly interesting aspect is how much the faith of the Seven plays a role in politics (*TWOIAF*, 101), and how it can influence the direction of the story (and history) in the books.

Another possible study that would be extremely interesting in my opinion, would be an anthropological approach to the Drowned God religion. The people that are adept of the Drowned God faith are located on an archipelago called the Iron Islands, and due to their beliefs, have developed a particular culture and society. The devotees have no temple, holy books, or idols to worship their Drowned God (*TWOIAF*, 268). Similar to the Old Gods, the Drowned God's religion is ancient, existing before the Andals arrived, and all of the Andal invaders' attempts to replace it with the Seven Gods were unsuccessful.

Apart from the religious and spiritual aspects, this universe's society itself would be an interesting object for future studies. Martin's *ASOIAF* universe is rich enough to give material for different approaches and perspectives.

This created universe much like our real world is not black and white. There are several shades of gray in between, and sometimes right or wrong are divided by a very

fragile line. What I have attempted to do with this dissertation was to analyze the multitude and diversity of this universe through the lens of spirituality. By studying the religious structure that is deeply rooted in sociopolitical issues, we are at the same time studying our very own. While we understand how different beliefs, cultures, and customs interact in *ASOIAF*, we can also transpose this to the real world and gain a new perspective on society. Themes that are often taboo, or simply too sensitive to be studied in real life, such as cannibalism and human sacrifices, might be more palatable when approached through the lens of fantasy. Despite everything that has been analyzed and suggested, one might as well continue exploring the saga's unusual religions using the methods I have employed because there is still plenty to learn and some of the stories have only been briefly touched upon.

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