

CORVIDS AND CANINES IN GEORGE R. R. MARTIN'S *A SONG OF ICE AND FIRE*

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ABSTRACT

The series, *A Song of Ice and Fire* by George R. R. Martin has become increasingly popular among readers even during a time when fantasy novels have decreased in popularity. This rise in readership and viewership (with the television series *Game of Thrones*), has effectively started several discussions about the methods and choices of the author in regards to the plot, symbols, and characters.

This paper will look at two characters within the novels, namely the corvids and the canines Martin uses as catalysts for furthering the plot and understanding the main characters. This paper examines the historical use of the two animals and their relationship with one another as well as how Martin uses them to engage with the reader.

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INTRODUCTION

The animals of George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* extend the storyline beyond the simple man vs. man conflict to what Martin has described as his "secondary universe" (a term taken from Tolkien), a world that is steeped in the history of medieval life yet has elements of fantasy (Hodgman). This fantastic secondary universe is made more familiar to the reader by Martin's reliance on mythic archetypes common to many cultures such as his giants, children of the forest, and whitewalkers. In using these archetypal elements, Martin meets the desire of the reader to be placed in a fantastic but imaginable landscape. The direwolf and the crow as characters may not be as magical in form as giants and dragons, but Martin uses them well to develop the characters and the events of his complex novels.

In the first part of the paper, I will show that Martin's inclusion of the direwolf as a character is rooted in a rich knowledge of wolf literature, myth, and even biology, and I will show how he uses the wolf as a character to add emotional weight to the plot. The direwolf is simultaneously a symbol of ice and fire, representing the hot blood of pursuit and the cold climate of the North and, because of its complexity, is as unpredictable as Martin's dragon. In this connection, I will explain how the wolves of the series parallel the *World-Wolf* as defined by S.K. Robisch in *Wolves and the Wolf Myth in American Literature* and have particular links to Robisch's "Ghost Wolf." I will analyze the use of the direwolf as a connecting mechanism between the reader, the characters, and the landscape (natural and unnatural) of Westeros. In the second part of the paper, I will explain Martin's use of the crow/raven as an additional device to further the plot. I will look at the historical placement of the crow/raven in literature and why such a choice would be made by Martin specifically as a tool of prophecy and fortune telling.

Why focus on the crow and the wolf? Historically, the two animals have built a dependence on each other and on man, yet their occasionally precarious position among humans has led to the ebb and flow of corvid and canine populations. The interaction among the three species is both intriguing and comforting as a representation of man's relationship with nature. Secondly, the two animals as archetypes foreshadow events to unfold in a fantasy narrative and in George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*, that symbolism is not overlooked. Martin uses the archetypes of the two animals to full effect, helping to outline the future of the characters and of the land of Westeros.

In the following pages, I outline much of the history, both mythic and real, of the corvids and canines present in Martin's tale and how his use of such animals provides the reader with a depth of meaning and a hint of plot elements to come.

THE DIREWOLF

We start with the wolf, a dangerous and brutish creature to be sure. Martin takes the image of the wolf and capitalizes on its mysteriousness, imagining a larger and far rarer thing than an ordinary wolf. He then creates a new myth with historic roots. The remains of the actual historical being, the direwolf (or rather, the dire wolf) have been found as far north as Alberta, Canada, and as far south as Bolivia, with a majority of the discoveries taking place in Mexico. The dire wolf (or *canis dirus*) lived from 300,000 to 12,000 years ago (during the late Pleistocene age) and coexisted with gray wolves for a time after they appeared south of the ice sheets (Dire Wolf Fact Sheet). The direwolf¹ of Martin's series, similar the actual dire wolf, is the size of a pony, and is a creature of the vast, unfriendly, and desolate North.

The word "direwolf" can be broken up and defined. *The Oxford English Dictionary* definition of "dire" is "fearful, awful, portentous, ill-boding" (OED). There is "dire" meaning serious or urgent, or "dire" constituting a warning or a threat. In the Latin, dire means "fearful" or "awful." A "wolf," of course, is the largest member of the canine family and the common ancestor of all dogs. The connotation of the word "wolf" is to refer to something or someone who is ferocious or rapacious. The word that often comes to mind with wolf is "wild," and it is to that wildness that Martin refers. It is also by means of these numerous references to the wolf and to wolf-like characteristics that one can infer the importance of the creature to humans, history, and culture. As S. K. Robisch puts it,

How much material do we need, really, before we recognize the force of this animal in our art? How much do we have to learn about how to approach the reality of wolves, when we have written so much for so long about something more representative of

¹ For the purposes of differentiation, "dire wolf" is used in reference to the historic usage and "direwolf" is used for the literary usage.

ourselves than of them? It sometimes amazes me that scholars of literature in America have spent so little time on the raw and living world from which we originate, even as its material for story accrues under our very noses over the centuries. The biota gives writers the content of their craft. (*Wolves and the Wolf Myth in American Literature*, location 581, par 1)

What Robisch is impressed by is the frequent appearance of this archetype in our literature and folklore and yet the infrequency in comment about its relevance.

The wolf is a recurring piece of the literary canon and appears in countless texts. In Canto IV of Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser writes, "And next to him malicious Enuie rode, Upon a rauinous wolfe." Here, the wolf is the harbinger of discontent as well as a symbol of fierceness. In Shakespeare's *Henry VI*, Queen Margaret says, "Seems he's a dove? His feathers are but borrowed, for he's disposed as a hateful raven; is he a lamb? His skin surely lent him, for he's inclined as is the ravenous wolf/ Who cannot steal a shape that means deceit?" (1355). The words "raven" and its linguistic variants and "wolf" are frequently coupled in literature, notably in the biblical reference in Genesis 49:27, "Benjamin shall ravin as a wolf: in the morning he shall devour the prey, and at night he shall divide the spoil" (*King James Bible*). The wolves in these examples are used as links to the personalities and intentions of men; the same can be said of Martin's direwolves and the Stark children.

In the story of *A Song of Ice and Fire: A Game of Thrones*, direwolf pups are discovered after Robb and Captain of the Guard, Jory, come across the mother, her jaw run through with a shattered antler. Theon Greyjoy calls the wolf a freak for its size before Jon Snow identifies it as a direwolf. Greyjoy comments that there has not been a direwolf south of the wall in 200 years. Jory takes it as an ominous sign, and Hullen, part of Lord Eddard's entourage, interprets the sight

as a bad omen. The Stark boys take the pups, six in all and born of a dead mother, one for each son and daughter of Ned Stark. The children raise their direwolves as constant companions, and the direwolves become an integral part of the series.

In the series, the direwolf can also be seen as an ominous indicator of what will happen among the humans of Westeros. In his book, *Direwolves and Dragons*, Pearson Moore compares the television series *Game of Thrones* with the book series. The direwolf not only becomes an extension of the fate of each child, but also of the larger political scene being played out. Here, Moore analyzes the first appearance of the direwolf.

The dead direwolf bitch poses a severe and troubling complication to our understanding of the symbolism and allusive significance of the scene. We are only too aware of the possibility of the Lannisters taking control of the kingdom, but the most likely cause of the stag's downfall [referring to the stag antler that kills the direwolf bitch] was not a mountain lion, but the dead animal who bore the antler fragment, embedded deep in its throat. More troubling, the direwolf is the sigil of the House Stark, and Eddard Stark has been a close friend—as close as a brother, in fact—to Robert Baratheon [whose sigil is the stag]. It seems to me unthinkable, based on the already detailed backstory we have for Robert and Eddard, that either of them could be persuaded by some bit of information or even outright treachery to turn on the other. We know only that someone representing House Baratheon was symbolically disemboweled by someone of House Stark, and the representative of House Stark sustained a symbolic lethal goring through the throat by someone from House Baratheon. (*Direwolves and Dragons*, location 757 par 2)

Moore's analysis of the scene is spot on with the events of the story as Eddard Stark's devotion to House Baratheon eventually leads to his beheading. When they come across the

fallen direwolf bitch, her throat gored by the antler, the author draws a connection between the fate of a sigil of Stark to the fate of Ned Stark himself. Like the direwolf who leaves pups behind, Ned goes south to meet his fate and leaves his children behind.

After a time, the direwolves begin to display behaviors similar to those of the children. Sansa Stark's direwolf, Lady, is dainty like Sansa; Nymeria, Arya's wolf, is named after the warrior queen of the Rhoynar and, like Arya, eventually finds herself alone, battling for survival. Robb Stark names his wolf Gray Wind, and they battle together during the War of the Five Kings. Jon Snow names his quiet wolf Ghost, and they go off to the Wall together, where he eventually develops skinchanger abilities. Bran Stark names his wolf Summer, and he, living vicariously through his wolf, is the first to discover his skinchanging abilities. Lastly, there is Rickon's Shaggydog who is as wild and unpredictable as the young child.

It is only later in the series that some of the children learn that they can take over their direwolf's consciousness. As stated above, Jon Snow, Arya, and Bran are the first to show a glimpse of this ability and only Bran is made fully aware of it. He is also the first to discover that the longer they take on that consciousness, the harder it is to go back to being human. This is especially challenging to Bran, who is made to feel free on four legs when in his human consciousness he is without the use of his legs. Later, Bran is coaxed by Jojen to take better care.

"I ate," said Bran. "We ran down an elk and had to drive off a treecat that tried to steal him." The cat had been tan-and-brown, only half the size of the direwolves, but fierce. He remembered the musky smell of him, and the way he had snarled down at them from the limb of the oak.

"The wolf ate," Jojen said. "Not you. Take care, Bran. Remember who you are," (LOC 33497 par 11 to 33521 par 1).

In this passage, the wolf companion symbolizes a connection between the human and the wild. It is all at once a taming of the wolf as well as a link to a wildness in the human, an untamed spirit that yearns for adventure. A human-wolf pair embodies a romantic connection to nature, respecting her boundaries and recognizing the connection to animalistic needs and desires as well as her overwhelming power over humankind. Bran's relationship to his direwolf embodies this relationship and shows the potential for what all the children can become. David Hunt who writes in *The Face of the Wolf is Blessed, Or is it? Diverging Perceptions of the Wolf*," states,

There are many Caucasus tales and legends in which the wolf behaves as expected; that is, as a beast of prey. [T]here are also tales and legends in which the wolf has a more anthropomorphic or zoomorphic character or in which the man behaves like a wolf. [...]

There seem to be four separate but intertwined themes in the folk literature of the Caucasus and Asia that link heroes to wolves. These themes are hunting, stealing (rustling) livestock, fighting and sheep-rearing. In the first three categories, the tales and legends show that the man admires the wolf and wishes to imitate his success. In addition, the wolf is perceived as a supreme survivor, especially under harsh conditions on the plains and in the mountains. (322)

A human-wolf pair cannot be absolutely under the thumb of someone who wishes to control the human. Even without the use of his legs, Bran is not helpless when he has his wolf. However, the human-wolf being can be overcome by the dominance of the wolf counterpart.

The magical companion of the wolf is generally an ideal character in a literary text. The wolf is mysterious, beautifully dangerous, yet capable of befriending man. This can happen outside of literary texts as well. It was several years ago now that a friend and I decided to take

part in a program at the Red River Zoo which took on volunteers to care for and play with the six gray wolf pups that were new to the zoo. I eventually had to bow out because of time constraints, but my friend played with those pups until they were too large to be safe to be around. Even today, when we go to the zoo together, the wolves will run to her at the sound of her voice calling, “puppy, puppy, puppy.” They whine and they lean against the fence. They remember her and it is apparent they want to be near her. The wolf speaks with the eyes and howls; those howls can be haunting and heartbreaking. Man and wolf have been companions since the day that the wolves realized that man left food behind after a hunt.

The wolf as a referent in idioms lends importance to its role among men. To “wolf something down” means to eat voraciously. To “keep the wolf from the door” means to have enough money to avoid starvation. To “have a wolf by the ears” means to be in a precarious position. To be “a wolf in sheep’s clothing” means to appear friendly or harmless despite a hostile intention. Because of the breeding of more docile wolves, the wolf as a species has even taken on features that have made it more friendly-looking to humans. The evolution of the wolf into the domesticated dog is a fascinating subject that has certainly benefitted man and has kept the canine fed.² The wolf’s eyes intrigue the viewer. They are not black as midnight as the eyes of the common dog. They are yellow, blue, gray, and they can appear to see right into you. For this, it has some human qualities that the reader can identify with.

The wolf as a magical companion emphasizes that characters don’t need to be human to be sympathetic. In fact, arguments abound that, when an animal dies in a film or book, the audience feels it more strongly than a human death as our exposure to human death in novels and

² The National Institutes of Health Public Access page has an article titled *Animal Evolution During Domestication: The Domesticated Fox as a Model* which explains what perhaps happened with the domestication of the wolf. There is also a video available on YouTube using the search terms “silver fox experiment.”

film has been desensitized and overexposed. There is an ironic humanity in the novelty of nonhuman death, especially when that death comes from the hand of a human. It emphasizes man's position in the food chain and on the world stage. The clash of man and wolf is one embodiment of industry invading nature.

The wolf is also an interesting subject because of the variations in canine species found over the globe from the large and extinct dire wolf all the way down to the small Ethiopian Wolf. The different varieties can mimic the varying races of humans. This is a testament to the adaptability of both species to their environments. Finally, because the wolves of the world have long been under threat of extinction, their presence remains special to the reader.

What is most familiar to us is the gray wolf of North America, the controversial champion of the United States Endangered Species Act. As of December 19th, 2014, D.C. District Court issued orders listing gray wolves in Wyoming as non-essential experimental animals, which means that they are only protected on public land. The Gray Wolf of Minnesota is again listed as threatened with special regulations with critical habitat status, which means that hunting lotteries are enforced. Gray wolves in Wisconsin, Michigan, North Dakota, South Dakota, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio are listed as endangered (*U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service*). When hunting was opened for the Gray Wolf in 2011 in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan, it became a hot button issue for ranchers and activists alike. The issue is emotionally charged with ranchers feeling the need to protect their stock and family from the predators. On the other side, there are several activist groups that hold funerals for those wolves slaughtered by hunters and farmers.

The direwolves are loved, hated, and feared in the novels. Martin's animals are captivating because they are unpredictable and dangerous. At any point, one of the Stark children

may decide that the wolf life is preferable to human life. Perhaps the best example of how affected the children are by their union to the direwolf is seen in Rickon. The youngest child of the Starks, Rickon best represents the wildness and danger of what the wolf-man relationship could become. While the other Stark children and their direwolves have more human personalities, Rickon, being the youngest child, is wild and personality-wise, takes after the wolf.

[Bran's] baby brother had been wild as a winter storm since he learned Robb was riding off to war, weeping and angry by turns. He'd refused to eat, cried and screamed for most of a night, even punched Old Nan when she tried to sing him to sleep, and the next day he'd vanished. Robb had set half the castle searching for him, and when at last they'd found him down in the crypts, Rickon had slashed at them with a rusted iron sword he'd snatched from a dead king's hand, and Shaggydog had come slaving out of the darkness like a green-eyed demon. The wolf was near as wild as Rickon; he'd bitten Gage on the arm and torn a chunk of flesh from Mikken's thigh. It had taken Robb himself and Grey Wind to bring him to Bay. (Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, Chapter 24, location 4504).

Rickon's Shaggydog has to be chained to avoid hurting anyone, and Rickon frees him. The idea of his chaining calls to mind the chaining of Fenrir from Norse mythology. Fenrir was the wolf that bit and removed the hand of Tyr (there are several similarities between Tyr and Jamie Lannister such as their legendary warrior status and the fact that they both lose their sword hand). Rickon and Shaggydog's wildness provoke an idea that the two are attempting to deal with an otherwise unforeseen dilemma. That Rickon is angry at Robb going to war and that Rickon and Shaggydog are found in the tomb guarding Ned who no one yet knows is dead tells the reader that some horrible fate may meet Robb. Like Shaggydog, Rickon is poorly socialized.

It is not until Rickon temporarily makes friends with the Walders that he plays with anyone but the direwolves.

The skinchanging abilities that Bran (and in part Jon and Arya) displays and which Rickon's human form takes on are reminiscent of the abilities the wearers of wolf skin-coats sought in Northern European tradition. The wearer wanted to acquire some of the wolf-like qualities such as magical protection and hunting skills. In some tales, the wolf is even the sole survivor.

There is a Chechen tale about a cataclysmic storm that caused all the animals to flee and take refuge, except for the wolf. After the storm had abated and the animals had returned, they found the blood-stained wolf sitting proudly, and he said to them:

“The earth on which I stand is my birth-place, and no matter what misfortune overtakes me here, I will never leave it.” (Hunt, 327)

The presence of the wolves south of the Wall in Martin's story hints at the oncoming winter. As readers of the series understand, the phrase “Winter is coming,” holds ominous meaning, bringing dark creatures closer to human civilization. That anticipation of winter to come is magnified by the fact that the seasons in Westeros are long, with the last summer having lasted several years. Because the summer that is ending at the advent of the novels has been uncharacteristically long, it is understood that an even longer winter is to come and that unusual, almost cataclysmic, events will follow in its wake. In reaching back through folklore, the reader gets a hint of how events may unfold. One large piece of folklore includes parallels to the long seasons of Westeros in the Eddas of Icelandic mythology.

“Then said Ganglere: What tidings are to be told of Ragnorak? Of this I have never heard before. Har answered: Great things are to be said thereof. First, there is a winter called

the Fimbul-winter, when snow drives from all quarters, the frosts are so severe, the winds so keen and piercing, that there is no joy in the sun. There are three such winters in succession, without any intervening summer. But before these there are three other winters, during which great wars rage over all the world. Brothers slay each other for the sake of gain, and no one spares his father or mother in that manslaughter and adultery.

Thus says the Vala's Prophecy:

Brothers will fight together

And become each other's bane;

Sisters' children

Their sib shall spoil.

Hard is the world,

Sensual sins grow huge.

There are ax-ages, sword-ages—

Shields are cleft in twain,—

There are wind-ages, wolf-ages,

Ere the world falls dead.”

(Sturluson, Chapter 16, location 1197, par. 2)

That winter is coming to Martin's world offers a possible catastrophic scenario, that with the wolf-age, the world will end. A reader can see this possibility in Martin's books as well as in the Eddas. In J. R. R. Tolkien's tales, that borrow so much from the Eddas, the age of man may come to an end, but it is not obvious whether this will in fact happen in Martin's series.

In addition to Bran's powers of insight through his direwolf, Summer, as well as his connection to the three-eyed crow, Bran is also guided by a young man by the name of Jojen

Reed, who presents himself at court, appropriately dressed all in green. He presents himself to Bran as a “greenseer” or one who can control the beasts of the woods and the birds in the trees. Greenseers have the ability to foretell future events through interpretation of dreams. Jojen is also visited by the three-eyed crow, which in a dream, shows him a winged wolf that was chained up. Jojen explains to Bran that the dream is a metaphor for his current situation. When Jojen meets Bran, he tries, in response to this dream, to convince him to leave his home of Winterfell.

Sitting cross-legged under the weirwood, Jojen Reed regarded him solemnly. “It would be good if you left Winterfell, Bran.”

“It would?”

“My brother had the greensight,” said Meera. “He dreams things that haven’t happened, but sometimes they do.”

“There is no sometimes, Meera.” A look passed between them; him sad, her defiant. (Martin, *A Clash of Kings* loc 23981 par 1-5)

Jojen’s dream of the winged wolf and the three-eyed crow further connects the canines and corvids in the book. Jojen convinces Bran that the three-eyed crow is found north of the Wall, and he attempts to convince Bran that he is the winged wolf and a warg (another Tolkien-esque word meaning one who sees through an animal’s eyes), but Bran, in his anger, demands that they stop talking of wolves, and Summer, joined by Rickon’s Shaggydog, lunges at Jojen. The direwolf snaps at Jojen and his sister Meera.

‘It was the wolves, it wasn’t me.’ He did not understand why they’d gotten so wild. *‘Maybe Maester Luwin was right to lock them in the godswood.’* (Martin, *A Clash of Kings* loc 24079 par 2)

Bran's resistance to his connection with Summer is indicative of a child who is not yet in touch with the power of his own emotions. He is ashamed and frightened by the behavior of Summer and Shaggydog, yet anytime he is approached by Jojen about his dreams, he becomes angry and defensive. Eventually, Jojen helps Bran to open himself up to the possibility that he is a skinchanger and that there is some great plan for him.

When Martin introduces the direwolves into the story, the episode offers a look into the children's lives. That the direwolf of the eldest girl Sansa cannot survive is a haunting inevitability when Sansa puts her trust outside of her family, her "pack." Bran's ability to see through Summer's eyes allows him to walk and run wild again as he did before he was pushed from the tower. His wolf allows him to experience the innate abilities and curiosity that made him Bran. Arya's wolf must be as independent as she is. After Arya banishes Nymeria to save her life, the two must find their way alone...disconnected from their original pack. Rickon's wolf, Shaggydog, is as wild as Rickon himself.

Though the direwolves of the story are identified with the companions here, the wolf used as a literary device is not the wolf of the real world but rather, what S. B. Robisch calls the "World-Wolf" in his book *Wolves and the Wolf Myth in American Literature*.

The World-Wolf is therefore not the real or earthly wolf, but the "wolf" of a world of our invention, a symbolic figure shaped according to our own desires—for prowess, material, nurture, conquest, or identity, our placement in the cosmos. Here is the idealist component in relation to the materialist component. In text we are codifying imagination, and symbolic language becomes part of the assemblage of our thought. This World-Wolf may be configured as the Nietzschean tiberwolf, the Emersonian transcendental Over-Wolf, or the platonic form of the Wolf—including their potential misuses (respectively

Aryanism, metaphysical mystification, and ontological idealism). (S.B. Robisch, *Wolves and Wolf Myth in American Literature*, location 471 to 483, par 2)

The direwolf is therefore a representation of the world view of the wolf but not all the real wolf attributes. Martin's direwolf also has links to what Robisch terms the "ghost wolf" (a subcategory of the world wolf) that has the added benefit of mystery and rarity as humans have sought to eradicate some wolf species from the earth. Robisch's ghost wolf has the ability to connect to an audience yet also shows a divided nature. What is meant is that the wolf is not a representation of good over evil or of evil over good but functions rather as an extension of a warring soul. It is this internal war that also parallels the external turmoil present in the Martin series. Robisch's ghost wolves are shaped in part by what we know about real wolves but are mainly formed out of the symbolism of the imagined wolf. Through the ghost wolf, our desires for prowess, conquest, mystery, and a connection to nature are realized, and so are the desires and needs of the Stark children. The wolf of literature is often an unlikely sort of wolf.

Nordic mythology, for instance, depicts the wolf with a knotty ambivalence, a composition at least equally malevolent and benevolent, perhaps calling into question the usefulness of such a Manichean distinction. (Robisch, location 543, par. 1. wolves)

The direwolves of *A Song of Ice and Fire* are second halves of their human companions. The child and the wolf are two parts of one whole character. The wolf of literature is an enhanced form of the wolves in natural life. The wolves of literature do not coordinate well into packs unlike in nature. This type of wolf is identified by Robisch as the "ghost wolf."

The ghost wolf is the human imagination making of the wolf what the mind wants or needs for its own comfort, reassurance, or even recreational challenge. The ghost wolf

has its own divided nature, which manifests itself with great moral complexity in literature. (Robisch, location 508, par.1)

Robisch further splits the ghost wolf into *Malevolent Ghost* and *Benevolent Ghost*.

- a.) The Malevolent Ghost is the half of the ghost wolf that casts the animal as a demon, a scourge. What Theodore Roosevelt called “the beast of waste and desolation” and “the archetype of ravin” had been its most powerful aspect for hundreds of years in Europe. That aspect was carried to the North American continent. It dominated the collective American consciousness, to the point of affecting some purportedly scientific premises for the study and alteration of entire ecological zones, even to the point of eliminating species. It is still present in certain political and emotional traps of thought, such as agribusiness or state-level fish-and-wildlife “management” policies.
- b.) The Benevolent Ghost has of late won a collective psychic battle with the malevolent ghost in America. This victory, however, is akin to the noble-savage or ecotopian design, which casts the wolf as a savior, not merely oppressed but transcendent. This aspect of the ghost wolf is the mythic wolf god depicted either primarily or exclusively as nurturing, calm, sociable, intelligent, and even wise, and is responsible for its own damage to the human psyche’s ability to confront reality. (Robisch, *Wolves and the Wolf Myth in American Literature*, location 508-520 par 3)

This rendering of the identity of various forms the wolf takes in literature allows for a deeper connection to the human character. The ghost wolf is a human’s emotional needs personified in a typically unaffectionate animal. The ghost wolf has a higher moral and

sympathetic personality than is believed to exist in nature. The direwolf typifies this higher moral and sympathetic nature as seen in its relationship with the children and also its wariness of those who wish to do the children harm. The direwolf can be further categorized as a benevolent ghost wolf that has the ability to help save the people of Westeros from whatever threat lies north of the Wall.

The direwolf characters in the series are complex in their relationship to the Stark children as well as in their relationship to unfolding events in the story. Yet, much of their complexity can be traced to all the allusions we find to literature and reality. The wolf, as a character, is a heavy-handed device that still maintains some mystery as to authorial intent. George R. R. Martin offers his readers so many symbolic and allusive references to the wolf in his text that they likely rival in quantity the combined number of characters he kills, or the number of times his characters repeat phrases such as “A Lannister always pays his debts” and “Winter is coming.”

THE CROW

That man is linked both with wolf and raven/crow is indicative of the deadly alliances he must make to survive. It is no accident that the alliances man makes with the crow and the wolf in *A Song of Ice and Fire* directly relate to their history as animals that feast on the dead. In Ezekiel 39.17 of the King James Bible, it is said, “And, thou son of man, thus saith the Lord God; Speak unto every feathered fowl, and to every beast of the field. Assemble yourselves, and come; gather yourselves on every side of my sacrifice that I do sacrifice for you, even a great sacrifice upon the mountains of Israel, that ye may eat flesh, and drink blood.” The corvine birds (ravens, crows, and jays) feast upon the dead and often indicate to man or to other animals that death lies near. The corvid is an ominous creature that has set its black talons into history and literature. It has long been associated with the wolf and with the hunt. As mentioned in the previous section, Theodore Roosevelt in a chapter called *Wolves and Wolf-hounds* called the wolf “the archetype of ravin, the beast of waste and desolation” (Roosevelt 213). Roosevelt’s use of the word “ravin” is from the latin “rapina” which means to pillage. “Ravin” is also the archaic spelling of “raven” (Oxford English Dictionary Online). As stated above in the direwolf section, that same connection is seen in Genesis 49:27: “Benjamin shall ravin as a wolf: in the morning he shall devour the prey, and in the evening he shall divide the spoil” (King James Bible). Where and how this etymological connection was originally established is uncertain, but the raven and wolf have been coupled in literature through such references.

As consumers of the dead, the cry and the presence of the crow indicate to the wolf that there is food to be had. Similarly, the wolf’s kill and leftovers become fair game for the crow. There is a Mongol proverb that is translated, “Like a crow following the wolf, like a dog waiting for the leftover bones” (Jila 168). Ravens and wolves work well together in the wild. The raven

helps the wolf to spot a kill or to anticipate oncoming danger. The wolf benefits from this relationship, and the raven benefits from the kill. According to research done at Yellowstone National Park, ravens and wolves can sometimes be seen working, side by side, on the carcass of an animal. Wolves and ravens can even be seen playing together on occasion (National Park Service).

Ravens and wolves are also creatures of war. “The raven, together with the wolf, is mentioned in practically all the descriptions of a battle in Old English poetry, and both were regarded as the creatures of the war god, Odin,” (Marzluff and Angell, *In the Company of Crows and Ravens*, location 1112, par. 3). In Irish mythology, ravens were the symbolic embodiments of two of the three war goddesses, Badb (representing war and death) and Morrigan (representing battle, strife, and sovereignty). It should be noted that Morrigan also appears as a wolf.

In *A Song of Ice and Fire*, Martin regularly mixes references to crows and ravens with references to wolves. For example, this occurs when Osha is accused of being an oathbreaker like Will (a character who left the Night’s Watch and was killed for it): “‘The black crows [a reference to the Night’s Watch] got no place for women,’ Theon Greyjoy sauntered closer. ‘Give her to the wolves.’”

But the crow has much of its own to crow about. In a *Saturday Evening Post* article dated 1955 and titled, “The Crow Has Outlasted Nicer Birds,” the author points out that “American crows—and their English cousins, the rooks, and those world citizens, the ravens—still have a lot to brag about. The crow family’s intelligent self-interest has frequently attracted the storytellers. In recent literary generations, Poe and Dickens featured the raven. [Poe, of course, used the raven in his poem *The Raven* and Dickens in his novel *Barnaby Rudge*.] O. Henry made

the crow's 'philosophy' a theme of one of his most famous tales "Roads of Destiny," and Wycherley's 'rook' is still accepted as a synonym for rogue and sharper" (*Saturday Evening Post* 12). Even the popular press recognizes the importance of the crow and its place in literature.

One feature of the raven/crow that is a common theme in literature is its place as the harbinger of doom. Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* includes the line, "The hoars Night-rauen, trump of dolefull drere," and Poe's creepy Raven screeches "Nevermore!" In *A Song of Ice and Fire*, the crow again functions as a dark soothsayer, hinting to Bran that the world in which he lives is entering into a time of war.

Crows and ravens hold a significant place in *A Song of Ice and Fire*. They are messengers between cities, being the main source of communication in the realm; the crow that comes to Bran in his dream becomes his spiritual advisor, asking him to open his "third eye" and to see what is happening all around him with particular attention north of the Wall; the men of the Night's Watch are regularly referred to as "crows." Thus, the crow is the other strongest connection, besides the wolf, to what is happening in the North.

Bran is not the only one who meets a crow in his dreams. Young Jojen, a greenseer,³ is sent to Winterfell after he has a prophetic dream similar to Bran's. In the dream, a winged wolf is bound to the earth in stone chains while a three-eyed crow tries to peck at the chains to help. The "wolf" is obviously Bran. Bran and Jojen have prophetic abilities and the ability to predict the events of war in the book. The series is filled with prophecy, hinting at Martin's plans for the events. Because of Martin's heavy use of the corvids, readers know to take their presence seriously, even if, in a bit of dramatic irony, the characters do not.

³ Martin's greenseer is one who receives prophetic visions in dreams. The dreams are called green dreams.

For instance, as Ned is recounting, for Robert, his version of how Jaime Lannister was found sitting in the throne before Robert arrived after the defeat of the Targaryens, Jaime tells Ned “Have no fear, Stark. I was only keeping it warm for our friend Robert. It’s not a very comfortable seat, I’m afraid.” Robert roars out his laughter and a flight of crows is startled from the grass, and “they take to the air in a wild beating of wing.” That Robert’s laughter is the thing that startles the crows implies that his downfall will be his inability to look at the people who are closest to him with a watchful eye. Robert ignored the omen and the crows departed. As a carrion bird, the raven is also a symbol of death or, at the very least, a condition between life and death. The great philosopher Cicero was warned of his death by a fluttering of ravens. Crows and ravens have significant ties with the theme of death and also with the theme of fortunetelling. Viking Chief Olav Tryggvason was called “Crowbone” because he used crow’s bones to predict the future. The raven is also a strong symbol of prophecy, and Martin uses the raven in such a way.

Martin’s use of this relationship between corvids and fate is not new to legend. During the reign of King Charles II, the legend began that the king was convinced, by royal astronomer Sir John Flamsteed, that six ravens be spared the same fate as other scavengers during the eradication following the London fire of 1666. Flamsteed informed the king that, if the ravens were killed, the kingdom would fall. Ever since that time, ravens have been kept in the Tower of London where they are attended to by a royal raven master and his assistants. Similar to this is a Sioux legend where crows ravaged corn fields and were killed off save one which was raised by the chief as a pet, informing him of all impending danger including the chief’s inevitable death by lightning. Because of this crow, the chief was able to meet his death in full ceremonial attire (Marzluff and Angell, location 1004 to 1009). There are several instances in the Martin novels

where a corvine bird helps indicate unfolding events. One such instance occurs when Arya Stark and Beric Dondarrion's men camp overnight at High Heart to meet with "the Ghost of High Heart," where an old woman tells them of a dream she had. "I dreamt of a man without a face, waiting on a bridge that swayed and swung. On his shoulder perched a drowned crow with seaweed hanging from his wings," (Martin, *A Storm of Swords* pg. 249). The drowned crow is likely a reference to a Night's watchman who is originally from the Iron Islands (whose people worship the Drowned God). Martin often narrates dream sequences that hint at forthcoming events, and it is a classic technique to use the crow as a foreshadowing device in such moments.

The raven of Native American Literature, and specifically of the Pacific Northwest, is a trickster much like the coyote is in other Native American and Norse folklore. As an archetype, the trickster is neither a morally good nor bad character but rather one that functions as a catalyst of events or as an omniscient narrator of human history. In an article in *Native Peoples Magazine* published in 2014, Richard Walker talks with Raven dancers from the Quileute Nation of Washington. "Raven is the watcher of our people. He sees all," says Harold Charles (Walker, 36). In some Native creation stories, the Raven or Crow even plays a significant if not primary role in the creation of the world. The raven is also featured in the old Norse Prose Edda with ravens Huginn (thought) and Muninn (memory) acting as the messengers of Odin. Odin learned about all events on earth through his ravens. In *A Song of Ice and Fire*, the ravens are also used as messengers, and large rookeries are set up to hold them for such a purpose. In the Martin novels, the phrase "dark wings, dark words" is used over and over again to indicate that a black raven often brings bad tidings. At a key moment, Bran Stark explains,

Dark wings, dark words, Old Nan always said, and of late the messenger ravens had been proving the truth of the proverb. [T]he bird that came back brought word that Uncle

Benjen was still missing. Then a message had arrived from the Eyrie, from Mother. [S]he did not say when she would return, only that she had taken the Imp as prisoner. Bran had sort of liked the little man [...] (Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, location 7509 par. 1).

Ravens and crows are similar in appearance but quite different in size, flight, and habitation. Though both species inhabit a variety of landscapes, crows are the ones typically embedded in human civilization (Marzluff and Angell, *In the Company of Crows and Ravens* Loc 525 paragraph 2). Still, both species have such an extensive ecological reach that both can be found from the Himalayas to Death Valley. Corvids, generally, have a rich historical reach as well. According to John Marzluff and Tony Angell, authors of *In the Company of Crows*, the Paleolithic people in the caves in France and Spain painted images in their caves depicting corvids surrounding burial sites. In the late 1400s, corvids in England were protected from destructions because they were effective at cleaning up city streets. In fact, King Henry VIII decreed that corvids be protected from sport by falconers. Coincidentally, however, this protection was severed by the beheading of Anne Boleyn (known to many as “the midnight crow”) (location 755 paragraph 1). Crow populations likely increased during the time of the bubonic plague (or Black Death) and began to drop off after the London fire of 1666. The ravens and crows flooded the streets picking at the dead and attempts were made to eradicate the scavengers. That and their reputation for feeding off the dead on battlefields secured their identity as harbingers of death.

The raven and the crow appear in all of their usual literary and historical roles in *A Song of Ice and Fire*. In George R.R. Martin’s legend of Bran the Builder, Bran was the creator of Westeros and Essos. The name Martin used was likely taken from the Welsh hero Bran the Blessed. In the Welsh tale, the giant Bran the Blessed (Bran translating as “raven”) has a

cauldron that can restore the dead to life. However, in the Welsh tale, Bran sacrifices himself inside the cauldron to prevent the Irish from returning to life. That the creation story in *A Song of Ice and Fire* features a person whose name means “raven” is unlikely to be an accident, especially considering Martin’s attention to familiar themes and figures from mythology in much of his tale.

Asia also provides cultural precedence for Martin’s use of the corvine archetype. In Tibetan Buddhist culture, Mahakala, the protector of Buddhist monasteries whose name means “Great Black One” appears often as a crow. In Parsis culture (those who have come to India from Iran), the body or an offering of food is left out for crows to consume. In another European instance of the corvid-death connection, the plague masks which were worn by doctors during the black plague as they treated patients had the long beak fashioned after the crow; a symbolic inversion of the crow’s habit of feasting on the dead. Martin even titles one of his books *A Feast of Crows*. It appears to be no accident and through no lack of imagination that a flock of ravens is called an “unkindness” and a group of crows is called a “murder.”

What Martin seems to attempt in his novels is a human connection to the corvid. There are continued indications that the Stark children share a more special connection to the crow, as they very clearly do to the wolf, than any other beings in the novels and are more able to discard the typically unsympathetic relationship between man and animal. This Martin motif of special people having positive associations with powerful nature figures also occurs in culturally significant tales. In Chinese chronicles *Shi ji* and *Han shu*, the ruler of the Wu-sun, survived childhood by being fed by a wolf and a crow (Jila 163). There is a similar story among the Mongols which features a crow and a wolf, and both stories resemble that of Romulus and

Remus. In all three stories, the abandoned child or children are taken in and cared for by a wolf and a bird (in Romulus and Remus, however, it was a woodpecker).

There are several abandoned children in Martin's series, but the child who most parallels the children in the traditional story of the child raised by wolf and crow is Bran. Bran's interest in the crows and his direwolf shapes him as a character.

Old Nan told him a story about a bad little boy who climbed too high and was struck down by lightning, and how afterward the crows came to peck out his eyes. Bran was not impressed. There were crows' nests atop the broken tower, where no one ever went but him, and sometimes he filled his pockets with corn before he climbed up there and the crows ate it right out of his hand. None of them had ever shown the slightest bit of interest in pecking out his eyes. (chapter 8, location 1550, par 1)

In fact, Bran's relationship with a particular crow helps the reader to infer that he will play a significant role in the outcome of the war beyond the wall. After Bran is paralyzed and while he is in a coma, a crow comes to him in a dream. The crow tells him not to cry but to fly. Bran, complaining that he cannot fly, is eventually cajoled into attempting the task. During Bran's fall the crow offers help in exchange for corn. Bran insists he is just experiencing a dream and that the fall will wake him. The crow says he will die instead. Bran begins to cry. *"That won't do any good, the crow said. I told you, the answer is flying, not crying. How hard can it be? I'm doing it.* Bran cries that he doesn't have wings and cannot fly. The crow says to him, *"There are different kinds of wings"* (Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, location 3058 par 1-15). This early encounter offers the reader a hint of the supernatural abilities several of the Stark children have. As the dream continues, the crow offers a look at what is happening in the world Bran lives in.

He looked south, and saw the great blue-green rush of the Trident. He saw his father pleading with the king, his face etched with grief. He saw Sansa crying herself to sleep at night, and he saw Arya watching in silence and holding her secrets hard in her heart.

There were shadows all around them. One shadow was dark as ash, with the terrible face of a hound. Another was armored like the sun, golden and beautiful. Over them both loomed a giant in armor made of stone, but when he opened his visor, there was nothing inside but darkness and thick black blood.

In this section of the prophetic dream, Bran sees his father Eddard Stark speaking with King Robert Baratheon. It is obvious that Robert is not taking Eddard's concerns for the realm and for his friend seriously. The shadowed figures that surround Arya, Sansa, and Eddard are meant to be those who will be directly connected with the fate of the characters. "The Hound" is Sandor Clegane who eventually leaves the employ of the Lannisters and becomes guardian to Arya. The second shadow is that of Jaime Lannister, who becomes linked with Brienne of Tarth and thus Catelyn Tully (Eddard's wife). The last shadow is probably Gregore Clegane (brother to Sandor) who is referred to as "The Mountain." This last shadow has no redeeming qualities and is perhaps the most sinister character in the whole series. Bran's green dream continues.

He lifted his eyes and saw clear across the narrow sea, to the Free Cities and the green Dothraki sea and beyond, to Vaes Dothrak under its mountain, to the fabled lands of the Jade sea, to Asshai by the Shadow, where dragons stirred beneath the sunrise.

Finally he looked north. He saw the Wall shining like blue crystal, and his bastard brother Jon sleeping alone in a cold bed, his skin growing pale and hard as the memory of all warmth fled from him. And he looked past the Wall, past endless forests cloaked in snow, past the frozen shore and the great blue-white rivers of ice and the dead plains where

nothing grew or lived. North and north and north he looked, to the curtain of light at the end of the world, and then beyond that curtain. He looked deep into the heart of winter, and then he cried out, afraid, and the heat of his tears burned on his cheeks.

“Now you know,” the crow whispered as it sat on his shoulder. “Now you know why you must live.”

“Why?” Bran said, not understanding, falling, falling.

“Because winter is coming.”

In this section of the dream, Bran sees the Dothraki princess and her dragons alive in Essos. His eyes then turn north to the Wall and beyond. There he sees the biggest threat to the people of Westeros and Essos. The whitewalkers, the reason The Wall was built in the first place, are coming south.

Bran looked at the crow on his shoulder, and the crow looked back. It had three eyes, and the third eye was full of a terrible knowledge. Bran looked down. There was nothing below him now but snow and cold and death, a frozen wasteland where jagged blue-white spires of ice waited to embrace him. They flew up like spears. He saw the bones of a thousand other dreamers impaled upon their points. He was desperately afraid. (Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, location 3114 paragraph 1)

Bran learns to fly within his dream and wakes from his coma. He feels a burning where the three-eyed crow pecked his forehead, between his own eyes. Martin chooses to put the hypothetical third eye squarely between Bran’s two eyes. One could speculate that he is choosing a Taoist third eye and not a Hindu third eye, which would feature in the middle of the forehead, but either would allow clairvoyance. The "third eye" or "inner eye" is a reference to the brow chakra, and being able to open the third eye is said to allow great spiritual insight, or even the

ability to enter into another's body (Taoism). Whatever the reason for the choice, the third eye hints at and he still believes that he cannot fly and that crows are all liars. At this point in the novels, it is unclear whether or not Bran will actually be able to take flight. Old Nan agrees, saying in language reflecting the negative connotations of the crow, "Already the suitors gather like crows on a battlefield."

In another dream, which combines corvid and canine symbolism, a crow leads Bran to the crypts to say farewell to his father. The three-eyed crow flies into Bran's bedchamber and asks him to follow and Bran does, flying. The crow takes Bran down to the crypts, and there Bran sees his father, Eddard, and the two talk. Bran does not know that his father was killed, only that he saw him in a dream. When Bran is taken down to see that his father is not in the crypts, Summer follows and stops to sniff the air and growl. As they get further and further into the cavernous crypts, Maester Luwin, who was accompanying Bran, is attacked by Rickon's direwolf Shaggydog. Summer attacks Shaggydog. The two wrestle around until little Rickon, who had been hiding in the crypts, calls to his direwolf. Rickon is seen standing at the mouth of Lord Eddard's empty tomb crying, "You let my father be."

It is here that Bran realizes that Rickon has had the same dream, and Martin continues intertwining his animal references, Rickon cries that father is coming home, as he promised. Later, as Maester Luwin tells the children a story of the First Men and the Andals, Summer gives a loud howl, as does Shaggydog.

[D]read clutched at Bran's heart. "*It's coming*" he whispered, with the certainty of despair. (Martin, *Game of Thrones*, loc 13949 par. 6)

A raven lands on the sill of the window, bloodied from an attack by hawks. The raven has the message of Lord Eddard's death. Here we see that the dreams, the direwolves, and the raven/crow are linked to further the events of the story and to add an ominous effect.

Later in the novels, in *A Dance With Dragons*, Bran's small party is joined by a raven. First the raven simply flies overhead, watching as Bran, his direwolf Summer, Jojen, Meera, the ranger, and Hodor make their journey.

From a nearby oak a raven quorked, and Bran heard the sound of wings as another of the big black birds flapped down to land beside it. By day only half a dozen ravens stayed with them, flitting from tree to tree or riding on the antlers of the elk. [...] Some would fly to the ranger and mutter at him, and it seemed to Bran that he understood their quorks and squawks. *They are his eyes and ears. They scout for him, and whisper to him the dangers ahead and behind.* (Martin, *A Dance With Dragons*, location 1242 to 1255)

The crow's ability to see what will happen in the future is one of the most interesting traits of its storied heritage. According to a Lakota Sioux legend, the crow would warn other animals about approaching hunters. As punishment, the Lakota threw the crow into a fire, and the crow, once white, escaped the fire but its color was changed to black (Marzluff and Angell, location 1004 par. 1). A somewhat different failure of the crow happened in Genesis of the Old Testament when Noah sent a crow to look for land and it never returned. Perhaps that biblical event is when its reputation for loyalty to man became permanently tarnished, though it is not obvious whether the crow failed because there was no land to see or if it failed because it found land and decided to abandon the Ark. The point is that its loyalty is called into question, whereas the dove survives in biblical history as a sign of love and peace. In a case of redemptive history, the corvids of Viking lore helped locate Iceland. The crow of Martin's novels tells Bran where to

go but because of the corvid's rich history in trickery (and Bran's crow's particularly unusual manners), it is not certain whether Bran is meant to guard against the danger or to play a part in events which will lead to his doom.

Though Bran's crow is the most referenced corvid of the series, there is another that features prominently in *A Song of Ice and Fire*, and that is the raven of Lord Jeor Mormont. Lord Mormont is the Lord Commander of the Night's Watch and his steward, Jon Snow, soon takes his position as Lord Commander. At first, Jon Snow is angered by his appointment as steward because he does not understand what Lord Mormont plans for him. This surliness is seen in his early encounter with Lord Mormont and the raven.

“He is a rare bird,” the master said. “Most ravens will eat grain, but they prefer flesh. It makes them strong, and I fear they relish the taste of blood. In that they are like men...and like men, not all ravens are alike.”

[...]Jon's fingers were in the bucket [with the raven's food], blood up to the wrist.

“Dywen says the wildlings call us crows,” he said uncertainly.

“The crow is the raven's poor cousin. They are both beggars in black, hated and misunderstood.”

Jon wished he understood what they were talking about, and why. What did he care about ravens and doves? If the old man had something to say to him, why couldn't he just say it?” (Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, loc 12453 to loc 12473)

Lord Mormont's raven, unnamed, often repeats one word of a heard conversation almost as if trying to communicate. For example, when Jon gets the news that his brother Bran has fallen and has become crippled but will live, the raven repeats “Live, live,” and when Jon asks for news of his father Eddard, the raven repeats “Father, father.” These utterances are in addition to the usual

requests for corn for which Lord Mormont will tell the raven to be quiet. Later, when Lord Mormont dies and Jon has his position as Lord Commander of the Night's Watch, the raven is cared for by Jon and the transition seems seamless. The only time the raven seems to speak of its own accord without a lent word is when Jon and Bowen Marsh are speaking and the raven says, "Corn, corn, kill." This appears to be a hint to Jon that he should kill Marsh or be killed himself.

Each crow in Martin's novels is placed with precision and purpose and reflects a tradition of such uses. It has long been a practice to place corvids as a catalyst to furthering the plots of stories. The large crow in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* broke up a fight between Tweedledee and Tweedledum so that Alice could get directions out of the forest, and Vincent Van Gogh's *Wheat Field with Crows*, the same field where Van Gogh committed suicide, shows a narrow path through the wheat field that also follows the course of the crows⁴ (Marzluff and Angell loc 1110 par 2). In the 1995 movie, *How to Make an American Quilt*, the crow leads two women (including Winona Ryder's character Finn) to their love interests. In the 1994 movie *The Crow*, a murdered man (played by the late Brandon Lee) is revived by a crow to seek revenge for his own death and that of his fiancée.

Martin skillfully capitalizes on the rich oral, literary, artistic, and filmic history of the crow and raven. The presence of the direwolf and the raven/crow in Martin's series is consistently purposeful. Martin uses these less fantastic and more imaginable animals to give the human, rather than the magical, more power. It is up to the humans to notice and use their resource. He also uses animals that are internationally steeped in so much mystery and myth that interpreting their intentions (if one is given to anthropomorphic tendencies) occasionally

⁴ Marzluff posits that this particular painting was meant to hint at Van Gogh's suicide as the artist dies a few months later near the same field he painted. The crows, the author suggests, were meant to represent the inevitability of death.

becomes problematic, but such ambiguities are inevitable. Still, the interactions of corvids and canines with humans and with each other offer much in the way of interpreting what is quickly becoming recognized as a masterpiece of the fantasy genre.

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