



LUP

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## **Master's Thesis**

Bridging Fantasy Literature and Education: *Bildung*  
and Character Development in *A Song of Ice and*  
*Fire*

Lektorutdanning i språkfag

Spring 2023

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## I. Abstract – English

This thesis explores the application of the concept of *Bildung* (personal growth and development), in the Norwegian school system through the use of the series *A Song of Ice and Fire* by George R.R. Martin. The thesis examines how the narrative tools used in the book series can aid the development of critical thinking skills and empathy in pupils, with a particular focus on the themes such as othering and gender.

The thesis argues that the complex and multi-layered narratives of the book series offer a unique opportunity for pupils to explore different perspectives and challenge their own biases and assumptions. Through the lens of *Bildung*, the thesis suggests that *A Song of Ice and Fire* can be used to reach several of the core elements of the new curriculum in Norway, LK20.

The analyses use previous theory on the different topics to conduct a close-reading of the text. The themes and characters will be explored with the goal of using the findings in an Upper Secondary School classroom to reach learning goals from the Norwegian Curriculum.

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## II. Sammendrag – Norsk

Denne masteroppgaven knytter bokserien *A Song of Ice and Fire* skrevet av George R.R. Martin med *Bildung* (dannelse) i med mål å undersøke hvordan temaer som kjønn, andre-gjøring, og makt, kan være verktøy for å oppnå dannelse og empati hos elever i videregående skole.

Gjennom flere analyser av karakterer og tematikker blir det argumentert for hvordan *A Song of Ice and Fire* kan være relevant i henhold til den nye læreplanen (LK20), og hvordan teksten kan bli brukt tverrfaglig, utenfor engelskfaget. Denne oppgaven vil gå inn i lengre analyser av hvordan forfatteren bruker perspektiv for å etablere empati fra leseren samtidig som den opprettholder et didaktisk preg. Hensikten med oppgaver er å vise hvordan *A Song of Ice and Fire* kan bli brukt i klasserommet til å undervise om kritisk tenkning, analyse av tekster, og oppnå *Bildung*.

Oppgaven vil støttes av teori rundt temaene *Bildungsroman*, kjønnsteori, andre-gjøring, perspektiv, og fantasi litteratur. Læreplanen vil også spille en stor rolle i oppgaven da flere læreplanmål kan oppnås gjennom bruk av *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Det er også tematikk som er tverrfaglig som er et av kjerneelementene i LK20.

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## 1.0 Introduction and Thesis Statement

The morning had dawned clear and cold, with a crispness that hinted at the end of summer. They set forth at daybreak to see a man beheaded, twenty in all, and Bran rode among them... This was the first time he had been deemed old enough to go with his lord father and his brothers too see the king's justice done." (Martin, 1996, p 15).

The first lines in *A Game of Thrones* foreshadows both the themes and events that are to come in *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Firstly, "the end of summer" is another way of saying "winter is coming", the words of House Stark and a saying that will stay as an overall theme of the story. Winter represents hardship and potentially death, something that will haunt the Stark family throughout the series. After these first sentences, we are introduced to Bran Stark, a young boy who has been granted place among the adults as he is to witness an execution. This introduces the *Bildung*-aspect of the story, but it also foreshadows the death by decapitation of his own parent. Many of the characters we encounter are youngsters who must make the transition from childhood to adulthood. Many of them will succumb to winter.

After the beheading, and Bran's introduction to the harsh world of Westeros, six direwolf pups are found around the dead body of their parent. The pups are given to the children, one to each Stark child, as the characters are convinced that the gods have sent them. The cruel nature of the world of Ice and Fire is illustrated by the dead direwolf, which serves as a visual reminder of the opening line's warning that difficult times lie ahead. The theme of being an outsider is also brought into the parallel between the wolfs and the children. One of the children, Jon Snow, is a base-born child, which means he is deemed less by the society around him. There are originally only five pups, which means he does not get one. However, when they are about to leave the dead direwolf, a pup that has been chased off by the other pups are heard and found: an albino with red eyes. A man remarks that this pup will die first, but Jon Snow takes it personally and claims it as his own. The fate of the direwolf-pups is connected to the fate of the characters they represent, and they need to be resilient if they are to endure the thematical and literal winter that is about to entrap them.

The new Norwegian curriculum, LK20, makes it clear that, in addition to having the ability to read and extract information, pupils must also possess what is known as *Bildung*. These two elements are related. In this thesis I propose that the series *A Song of Ice and Fire* (hereby

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referred to as “ASOIAF”) by George RR Martin would be a valuable text for upper-secondary pupils to read in their last year of English education. By interacting with the texts by Martin, the pupils will encounter *Bildung*-stories, discussions of power, and the struggle of self-identity. The thesis will conduct a close reading of the text using theories of storytelling and Bildungsromane. I will argue for why these stories and characters would be intriguing for pupils, as well as discuss the themes, characters, allegories and how this can be used in the classroom didactically. The main part of the close readings consists of a longer in-depth analysis of gender in ASOIAF, where masculinity and femininity will be investigated.

Reading is a vital part of growing, both as a learner and as a person. In the curriculum it is stated that during their time in upper secondary school, students are to be taught not only information, but also *Bildung*. *Bildung* was earlier the idea of “being cultured”, but in the Norwegian school it is used as a way for adolescents to achieve self-discovery and grow as individuals. Literature is a great tool for involving students into the *Bildung* part of the curriculum as the many difficult subjects that we are to discuss in the classroom, such as gender-roles, our systems of power, and sexuality, are very closely related to the transition from a teenager into adulthood.

Fantasy experienced a resurgence with the HBO television series *Game of Thrones* in 2011, which had not occurred since the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy in the early 2000s. It was violent, had sexual themes and overall, was generally a much more mature story than some people may have expected from a show labelled “fantasy”. Other than having a dark and more grotesque tone, ASOIAF and *Game of Thrones* gained acclaim for its themes surrounding gender roles, othering, and hierarchies. Neil McGarry claims that: “In many ways, *A Song of Ice and Fire* is something of a response to *The Lord of the Rings*.” (McGarry, *In the Shadow of the Status Quo*, 2016, p 13). Where other fantasy works, such as LOTR, have deep roots in biblical tales and myths of Greece, ASOIAF based many of its stories in such subjects as European history and the Cold War. This said, ASOIAF still has its share of biblical and Greek influences.

Fantasy is a genre that has always been popular among adolescents, with series like *Harry Potter*, *The Wheel of Time*, and *Mistborn*. Given the nature of the genre, the stories within fantasy are very varied, making it challenging to identify the genre in concrete terms.

Mendlesohn describes fantasy as: “... not so much a mansion as a row of terraced houses, such as the one that entranced us in C. S. Lewis’s *The Magician’s Nephew*” (Mendlesohn, 2014, p 1). If one is to define fantasy however, a simple way to think about it is that fantasy is

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a genre where the impossible happens. One can walk into a closet, only to find oneself in Narnia the next minute. There is no scientific explanation for it, and it is not possible to do this in the real world. The fact that the character is able to do this in the story, defines it as a fantasy story.

Since ASOIAF has had such a significant cultural impact, one of the objectives of this thesis is to explore what draws modern audiences to this series and how it might be used in the classroom as a didactical teaching tool. The series tells many stories with themes that young people are engaged in. Through their encounter with ASOIAF, the pupils will be able to reach many of the competence aims they are to learn during the year. The pupils are to be able to read and reflect upon different types of text, both fictional and self-chosen, furthermore, they are to explore social issues and relate this to history, and to understand and explain different literary devices found in art. (Udir, 2023). Through reading about Robert Baratheon, pupils get to reflect on what a man should and should not be, and draw lines between Martin's fantasy world and our own. In that regard it also represents an opportunity to engage in the topic of leadership and the mechanisms of power. The threat posed by The Others, which looms over the entire world of Westeros, and renders the power struggles in King's Landing ultimately pointless, can be interpreted as the threat posed by climate change. This could be utilised for discussion about the contemporary world leaders that are not doing enough to combat the escalating threat brought on by global warming. As literature is an engaging medium which is supposed to entertain, the pupils will have a great opportunity to reflect and learn about the different issues which are presented in the text as well as working with the English language in an intense and engaging manner.

The thesis will contain several in-depth analyses of ASOIAF that will underline how the text is relevant for the Norwegian Curriculum in English subject class. It will also delve into how ASOIAF may assist the pupil in philosophical reflection on concepts such as power, duty, and respect. Many of the plots within the series is in many aspects like partial *Bildungsromane*, with young characters like Robb, Sansa, and Jon being thrown into the adult world. There is a great occasion for discussing choices and the inner conflicts of the characters that the pupils themselves are facing, as pupils in Upper Secondary School are as well in this transitional phase where they are expected to become responsible adults. The form of these discussions and the lessons they hold will be a significant part of the thesis, as this is the thesis aim.



## 2.0 Approaches

ASOIAF will be analysed with five themes used as lenses. These themes are gender, point-of-view, othering, power, and *Bildungsroman*. The thesis will analyse the text of ASOIAF to investigate how these subjects are represented and presented, and to discuss the didactic values of these findings.

### 2.1 Introduction to A Song of Ice and Fire

*A Song of Ice and Fire* is a series of five books written by American author George R.R. Martin. In order of release the five books are *A Game of Thrones* (1996), *A Clash of Kings* (1998), *A Storm of Swords* (2000), *A Feast for Crows* (2005), and *A Dance with Dragons* (2011). The first book was published by Bantam Spectra in New York City. The series is set to consist of seven books by its end, and in 2011 HBO produced an adaptation of the book series called *Game of Thrones*. The story is set in a fictional world called Westeros, and the series follows several powerful families such as the Starks and the Lannisters.

To understand the workings of gender relations, power, and othering in ASOIAF, it is necessary to understand and define what systems apply, and which problems with the system the author highlights. As Westeros and ASOIAF are heavily inspired by mediaeval Europe, it is no surprise that the system Martin presents is more or less feudalism. With some authorial liberties, the system functions much as it did in mediaeval Europe, with the king at the top of the power structure and lords beneath him. The lords of Westeros rule certain parts of the country in the name of the king. There are certain lords (or houses) that are more powerful than others, for example: House Stark in the North is more powerful than House Hornwood (often called a “lesser house”). This means that Hornwood answers to Stark in the North, if not the king were to meddle in their affairs. Which houses have the most power varies on many factors, like money, military power, history, and, of course, favour with the king. This system gives way to one of the most intriguing parts of ASOIAF, the scheming and un-easy alliances of Westeros. One of the major points one needs to understand in the ASOIAF series is that the smaller houses are often ambitious lords waiting for their chance to overthrow their lord for power. An example would be the betrayal of Robb Stark by Walder Frey and Roose Bolton in *A Storm of Swords*. Both Frey and Bolton are the second most powerful houses in

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the Riverlands and the North respectively. By betraying House Stark and House Tully (the most powerful house in the Riverlands) as a favour to House Lannister (occupants of the Iron Throne), Frey becomes the most powerful house in the Riverlands, and Bolton becomes the most powerful house in the North. There are numerous events like this throughout the series, which means the seats of power change often, making the series unpredictable and thrilling. Jaime Lannister makes this statement on the tension between the houses: “Every great lord has unruly bannermen who envy him his place,” he told her afterward. “My father had the Reynes and Tarbecks, the Tyrells have the Florents, Hoster Tully had Walder Frey. Only strength keeps such men in their place. The moment they smell weakness...” (Martin, 2000, p 573).

## 2.2 The genre of fantasy

Trying to define the genre “fantasy” is not straight forward. Many scholars find it hard to differentiate between fantasy and other genres as all written fiction is made up, and therefore, in a way, counts as fantasy. There is also confusion about whether science fiction is a type of fantasy, but in *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, it is proposed that “...fantasy is about the construction of the impossible whereas science fiction may be about the unlikely but is grounded in the scientifically possible.” (Mendlesohn, 2014, p 1). According to this definition, stories such as *Does Android Dream of Electric Sheep?* is not regarded as fantasy because what they depict could occur in the future. There is a closer kinship between fantasy and the old fairy tales of yore. In fairy tales, there is often something impossible that occurs with quite a frequency. When the faerie in the classical fairy tale *Cinderella* turns a couple of mice into a carriage, it is established that this is a fantasy story, as the reader knows that one does not create matter out of nothing. When Captain Kirk travels into outer space in a spaceship, it is more familiar as we in real life have been able to travel to Mars and the Moon in spaceships. The story of *Star Trek* simply pushes these ideas a little further. Mendlesohn stated the following on defining fantasy literature: “The debate over definition is now longstanding, and a consensus has emerged, accepting as a viable “fuzzy set,” a range of critical definitions of fantasy.” (Mendlesohn, 2008, p.1). This indicates that there are numerous definitions that can adequately describe fantasy literature. If we are to only use the “impossible” definition, there are several books that would not necessarily be considered fantasy that qualifies for the genre. It is impossible for pigs to talk (or stand up) as humans, so the political satirical book *Animal Farm* by George Orwell would by this

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definition be considered a fantasy novel. This would be misleading as *Animal Farm* does not share any other traits than talking animals with fantasy-defining classics such as *The Lord of the Rings* or *Harry Potter*. This example gives credence to Mendlesohn's statement that there would be a need for several definitions for defining the fantasy genre.

There are many fantasy stories that are worth using in school to teach, so it is necessary to talk about classic fantasy stories to prove how ASOIAF is different, as well as how these famous stories have created certain expectations of what fantasy literature is. The world of Middle-Earth created by Tolkien in his tales of Gandalf, Bilbo, and Frodo is frequently used as the definition of fantasy today. C.S. Lewis, a close friend of Tolkien, is the author of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, another significant and influential series of books in fantasy literature. The stories of Narnia and Middle-Earth created the idea that most fantasy stories would need a battle between good and evil. This is also the climax of The Bible in the book of revelations, which is where Tolkien and Lewis found most of their influence regarding the fight between good and evil. ASOIAF have their fair share of battles as well, but where Aslan (Jesus) fights the White Witch (Satan), the battles of Westeros are those of ordinary men who have been misled by their kings, and the feudalistic system that the kings represent. In *The Lord of the Rings* our heroes struggle against the dark lord Sauron which represents the dark side of the human condition, in ASOIAF the dark side is found within the characters we follow. In Narnia, the great lion Aslan works as the counterpart of evil, and he will be the champion to defeat it. In ASOIAF dark parts of life is inevitable, and therefore you cannot remove a single entity and save the world.

These older works of fantasy are heavily inspired by the stories and creeds of the Bible where Jesus will be the one that rises up against death and Satan. These stories shaped the way writers wrote fantasy for the years to come, and therefore we see many biblical ideas and doctrines within the genre of fantasy. Fantasy literature is often stories of courage, companionship, and sacrifice, as these are vital to defeating evil in the stories but also in real life. These traits are also heavily featured in the New Testament, which is a strong influence on the story of *The Lord of the Rings* and *Narnia*. Stories of heroes fighting a magical obstacle are not something invented by these specific authors of the genre, however, many of the oldest stories we have are stories of this kind. *The Epic of Gilgamesh* is a poem from the Mesopotamian civilization where the hero fights several monsters, and numerous plot points would come to echo in the Greek and biblical myths in the future. *Beowulf* is another ancient tale that is one of the oldest stories written in Old English, about a hero (much like

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Gilgamesh) that needs to slay a dragon. In Greece, heroes such as Jason and Hercules fight terrible creatures in almost all of their legends, so through time humans have enjoyed these stories about a hero who is representing the good in life, and a villain that represents the bad in life, whether this bad entity is something obvious like a rivalling country, or something more profound as faults in the human condition as pride or greed. This brings to mind the idea of othering, which appears frequently in the ASOIAF.

## 2.3 Polyphony and Perspective

One of the ways in which Martin challenges the genre of fantasy is his use of polyphony. Heen argues that as a result of its multiple contrasting voices, ASOIAF can be seen as polyphonic narrative which makes the series stand out in the genre of fantasy. Heen agrees: “*A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996 -) and how its polyphonic narrative questions several of the conventions within the epic fantasy genre.” (Heen, 2013, np). Martin tells the story in ASOIAF from the point-of-view of several different characters, so the narrative shifts from one character to the next. How one character views a situation could be viewed entirely different by another. This requires the reader to become a more active participant of the reading experience, as the reader needs to take into account who is watching, what their world-view is, and experiencing what ever is happening in the story. This is important to be aware of during the analysis of the text, but it also has didactical values as the pupils need to understand that they should not always trust the narrator as it has values, prejudices, biases, and other factors that weights in on how they are and view the world. By making the students aware of this artistic choice of the author, the students will have the opportunity to experience that people view the world in many different ways and this is true for the real world as well. These conflicting voices within the story does that the reader need to take the stance whether someone is right or wrong, as the narrative lacks a voice which tells who is right and wrong.

### 2.3.1 Point of View – The Choice of Narrator

ASOIAF is narrated through what is called a third-person limited. This indicates that the information is being conveyed to the reader through a third party, but the third party only has access to the character's knowledge. Martin tells the story through point-of-view characters. Point-of-view is described as: “...the narrator’s position in the description of characters and events.” (Al-Alami, 2019). So, as this is third person limited, if someone is standing behind a

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point-of-view character with a knife, the reader would not know as the character does not know this. The chapters in ASOIAF are not numbered but only have the first name of the character which the reader follows. This creates quite an engaging reading experience, as the reader needs to ask several questions when reading from a certain character's point-of-view. What are the motivations of this character? Does the character have a realistic view of a matter, or is it exaggerating? Is it reliable? There are several unreliable characters in ASOIAF, and to determine who are reliable and not would be a great exercise in class to research unreliable narrators. Additionally, some of the characters are quite young, so they do not understand aspects that adults (such as the reader) do.

One of the first major revelations in the first book *A Game of Thrones* is when Bran spies on Cersei and Jaime "wrestling" naked. The author tells the story with the limited understanding of Bran (who is eight years old), but the reader clearly understands that they are having sex. Not understanding sex is one thing, but what the reader understands as well is that Cersei and Jaime are twins, making this incest, something which is quite disturbing in our world but also highly blasphemous in the world of Westeros. The reader also knows that she is the queen and that she is being unfaithful to the king himself. Bran simply does not comprehend why someone would wrestle while naked, so all of this information that is presented to the reader simply passes right over his head. This is an exemplary case of the third person limited perspective. When Martin writes and chooses the point-of-view-characters, he says that his first criterion is that the character will need to have a story (Talks at Google, 2011).

Therefore, one could see the series of ASOIAF as many small novels which creates a broader narrative. Many of the stories do not affect each other, so the story of Jon Snow is more or less unrelated to the story of Daenerys Targaryen in the first novel. They only relation they have would be parallels (something Martin is extremely fond of) and thematic overlaps. The two stories both reach their conclusion by the end of the novel however, and there is sure to be some sort of connection later on in the series, for the time being though, they are separate stories that take place within the series. This implies that each volume of the series contains a number of unique stories with various themes. Therefore, the choice of the novel's point-of-view character affects its overall theme.

Martin's choice of narration style gives the reader a very intimate relationship with the characters of the novel. Al-Alami agrees: "Third-person limited offers closeness to the main character being described whilst allowing readers to investigate his/her mood, mentality, thought, feeling, perception and so on." (Al-Alami, 2019). As the choice of narrative invites

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to much activity from the reader, the students might end up with quite different analyses of the characters and the situation they are put in, which makes for great discussion in the classroom. The pupil may become aware of their own biases and prejudices as a result of being forced to examine situations from various points-of-view (as that is how the book is written). This is also connected to the process of *Bildung*, as it is a central value in LK20: “The subject shall develop the pupils’ understanding that their views of the world are culture-dependent. This can open for new ways to interpret the world, promote curiosity and engagement and help to prevent prejudice.” (Udir, 2023).

### 2.3.2 Historical Empathy and Othering

As ASOIAF shares many direct parallels with the history of Europe, and many characters have clear echoes of historical figures, historical empathy will give new perspectives for pupils that is valuable when working with history. Pupils are according to the curriculum to learn historical facts but also learn to empathise with the past as it gives insight into our world today and our place within it. Endacott states: “Exercises in historical empathy also can help students learn to establish connections between the past and the present, a skill that could benefit them for a lifetime.” (Endacott, 2013). This connects historical empathy with the *Bildung*-process as well.

Many of the themes in ASOIAF are relevant to modern society, and the pupil's ability to establish connections between these themes and real-world themes through relatable, sympathetic characters creates a powerful, personal learning experience that remains with them. Endacott says further about this:

In her study on the use of lecture to foster historical empathy, Sarah Brooks (2011) found that students who were encouraged by their teacher to draw parallels between historical events and present-day affairs were able to see aspects of the past and present as analogous and thereby better understand their current world. (Endacott, 2013).

However, ASOIAF is a work of fiction, not a biography written by a historical scholar. Moreover, it is a work of fantasy, set in an alternate universe. There could be an argument that ASOIAF does not qualify as a text to teach historical empathy. While this would be deemed true for most fictional works that take place in the past, ASOIAF is far stricter on the world's rules than other fantasy series based in the middle-ages, and as mentioned, there are strong

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parallels between Martin's universe and Europe of a few hundred years ago. To understand Europe during the Middle-Ages, one needs to understand feudalism.

The Feudal society that is presented by Martin in ASOIAF is a perfect illustration of the system, as it is true to the historical system found in Europe. Where stories like *The Lord of The Rings* and *The Wheel of Time* have vague and often inconsistent government systems, the world of ASOIAF has a strict and similar to reality system that does not bend whenever the author needs it to. The families in ASOIAF are large with a bewildering array of names, and these family members are always used to secure the line of succession and to create new alliances with other houses. These are key aspects of the feudalistic society. As the students learn more about the rules of feudalism, one learns also how the world of ASOIAF works and through this, how society in Europe functioned. As the feudalistic society was discriminating and unjust towards certain parts of the people who lived in it, pupils may empathise with characters that yearn to be a part of the world but are denied it for reasons beyond their control. In ASOIAF, these are often characters that are women, base-born (or bastards), and disabled. The thesis will return to this when discussing gender. As a result of these three groups' increased social rights, this is an opportunity for pupils to reflect on the changes the world has undergone. If for some reason they were unaware of the struggles these groups have faced throughout history and even today, these issues are now brought to their attention.

There are several important learning objectives about multiculturalism, imperialism, and indigenous people in the Norwegian curriculum. Conflicts between an established government and smaller groups of indigenous people are of great importance in the English class (Aboriginals and Native Americans) and the Norwegian class (The Sámi people). Such conflicts often stem from othering, a phenomenon which is brought up in a variety of ways in Martin's novels. To discuss othering in ASOIAF and how different cultures clash because of prejudice is interdisciplinary across several subjects. The story of Jon Snow is about "othering" and the conflict between the established culture, and the unknown culture. The setting of the story is very reminiscent of Hadrian's Wall between England and Scotland, and the conflict between The Night's Watch and the Wildlings is based on the conflicts between the inhabitants on each side of the wall throughout history. The reader is introduced to this conflict through Jon Snow, and through his perspective the reader is told about how barbaric and savage the people north of the wall are. Much of the first and second book is used to establish the dehumanizing of the Wildlings, and as the reader only get this side of the story,

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the part where The Night's Watch go on an expedition north of The Wall it is quite ominous and intense. As Jon Snow meets several wildlings during his journey north of the wall, the reader gets to see a whole new side of the story, as wildlings are ordinary people, just like the men of The Night's Watch. This is also a realization for the reader, as the reader has also been part of the othering of "The Wildlings". As the readers get to know The Wildlings, they realize that they have been tricked by the othering established in the previous volumes through their point-of-view.

Lindhé writes about this phenomenon: "Such a turn towards the ways in which readers themselves participate in othering processes provides an opening for the teaching of literature to encourage self-examination as well as to explore the troubled emotions that may have been activated vis-à-vis the new others." (Lindhé, 2021). This is also a great opportunity for the pupils to reflect on how the author manipulated them throughout the series to achieve this effect. The troubled emotions the readers feel when encountering The Wildlings are shared with the main character of this story, Jon Snow. Some of the wildlings Jon Snow encounters are quite brutal, but the same can be said of a number of the characters the reader encounters south of the wall. Gregor Clegane, Sandor Clegane, and Euron Greyjoy are all examples of characters that are violent and scary. These observations promote the idea that The Wildlings are not scary, people are scary. The Wildlings have a foreign culture to Jon Snow and the Starks, but with time he learns to appreciate and feel a belonging to them. The othering done by the Night's Watch is also shown in their name for the people north of the wall: "The Wildlings". The name makes one think of uncivilized people, and wild animals. When Jon Snow becomes a part of the society that exists north of the wall, he learns that their name for themselves is "The Free Folk". The Free Folk also have their own name for The Night's Watch: "Black Crows". It is very blatant that othering is what Martin wants to highlight as the main conflict between the two groups, as othering has taken place on both sides of the conflict. The othering has occurred for hundreds of years, and racist narratives, names that are derogatory (wildlings), and vague historical sources are all examples of how the othering affects one group's conception of others in ASOIAF as well as in our real world.

It is necessary to mention another group north of the Wall that most certainly is a part of the message about othering. The unknown people that are known as "The Others". In the prologue of the very first book, three rangers from the Night's Watch are attacked by something that seems not human, and is later claimed by a witness to be "The Others". The witness is the man that Bran is to see be executed in the beginning of the novel and this thesis.



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In the television series *Game of Thrones*, The Others are named White Walkers, probably because the name “The Others” was also used in the popular tv-show *Lost* (2004-2010). The Others are a people who many consider mythical, whereas some others think they are a people who have gone extinct thousands of years ago. Much of the information given about The Others is given by Old Nan, an old woman in Winterfell who tells Bran about them during her bedtime stories (again, establishing that they are more of a fantasy monster rather than an actual historical people). Throughout the series, the plot involving The Others has only been hinted at throughout the five books, as it is one of the most exciting and mysterious parts of the series. Whereas Jon Snow and the Wildlings believe in the return of The Others, the rest of Westeros does not even believe they exist. As othering has been such a big part of the story based in this geographical area of Westeros, it is worth considering that The Others are as well victims of othering. To name The Others “The Others” have several potential effects on the reader which the author wanted to have. Firstly, the name "The Others" for an undiscovered civilization is incredibly ominous. By providing no details and making them seem truly foreign, it makes their mere presence unsettling. This is the effect it has on the characters in the story, which is why it has the same on the reader. Considering the lessons taught by Jon Snow and his meeting with The Free Folk, is the reader again participating in othering? It could be that Martin named them “The Others” as a way of telling the reader that they are victims of the same treatment that The Wildlings were. Even though this is merely speculation, the ability to spot narrative patterns is a useful skill for pupils to have when learning about text apprehension considering character names are typically not chosen at random by the author. As othering is a core theme of ASOIAF, for the pupil to recognize these themes and how they echo through the story is an important skill to understand stories in any medium.

The conflict between the Free Folk and the Night’s Watch can be used to illustrate how Norwegians have untrue notions about the Sámi people, or how the Nazis misrepresented Jews in order to incite hatred for them during World War II. In the section called “Identity and Diversity” in LK20, it is stated: “Through the teaching and training the pupils shall gain insight into the indigenous Sami people's history, culture, societal life and rights.” (Udir, 2023). Considering that The Wildlings live in the distant North they share a striking similarity to the Sámi people The Wildlings struggles with The Night’s Watch could be used to cross with Norwegian history. As this story covers historical empathy and intercultural competence

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from the Norwegian curriculum, it is a prime example of the relevancy of ASOIAF in the classroom when teaching about intercultural competence and othering.

## 2.4 Gender in language and culture

Toril Moi's *Sexual/Textual Politics* focuses on how to read female stories. Her groundwork is not only necessary to have when reading and interpreting female stories and characters in ASOIAF, but also to understand what language is doing in literature and how interpretation, a core element of reading, varies greatly depending on context and intent. For example, Moi criticises the feminist critic Elaine Showalter for reading Virginia Woolf with an idea that Woolf should more clearly put her own experiences into the stories she creates if her work is to be authentic feminist literature. "Literature may have a feminist impact even if its authors do not identify themselves as feminist." (Goodman, 2013, p 4). Martin has stated that even though he has always thought of himself as a feminist, due to the change of definition with new waves of feminism, he has decided not to describe himself as a feminist because some people find that offensive. This demonstrates that Martin is acutely aware of the fact that he is an elderly man writing about women's roles in society and that he is not confronted with this issue on a daily basis. This should be part of the discussion with the pupils as knowing the source of the information is a part of the critical thinking aspect in school. It is important to ensure that pupils understand the author of ASOIAF is an elderly white American man, to ensure that they can develop their thinking skills. As a hippie, pacifist, feminist, and civil rights activist, Martin should come across as knowledgeable about the range of subjects he covers in his writing. It is however an opportunity for teaching students to be aware of the origin of the text and take it into account when reading and analysing.

However, in the field of gender studies, the topic concerning the suppression of women has grown significantly in recent years. The patriarchy is more widely recognised in current gender studies, and it also plays a significant role in the ASOIAF story. Evans argues:

While previous interpretations of the word might have emphasised the way in which it implied the authority of men over general populous, (or old men over young men, as in the expression "the rule of the patriarchs"), feminists used the word as the starting point for their study of women and their social subordination. (Evans, 2023, p 7).

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As the female characters that are examined in this thesis are struggling with the patriarchy it is necessary to understand the words place in modern gender studies. The male characters have been chosen as they are crucial components of the patriarchy.

### 2.4.1 Gender in A Song of Ice and Fire

One of the outstanding aspects about ASOIAF is how it questions traditional gender roles. Gender is an important part of the society of Westeros, and often in our story, we meet characters that do not fit into the role society has given them, which is both relatable for readers but also quite relevant to the questions regarding identity and sex in our society.

Although the genre contains many examples of sexism, contemporary fantasy authors have been some of the most adventurous and experimental in pushing the boundaries of categories like gender, sexuality, and even the bounds of human nature, again giving a voice to the silenced and representations of empowerment to the oppressed. (Fredrickson, *Designing a Course Integrating Critical Pedagogy*, 2016, p 58).

In recent times there is an ongoing dispute about whether gender is something simple as male and female, or something more complex. This relates to the discussion of *Fire and Ice* and duality, and how people prefer to view the world in opposites as a way of keeping definitions simple and prefers it to stay that way. In history, and therefore often in historical writing, the role of women is restricted, whereas in the fantasy genre, it is now allowed to play with the expectations of gender. This quotation discusses traditional fairy tales, nevertheless, it also applies to the fantasy genre:

The tales indoctrinate as much as they liberate. Some are designed to highlight women's roles in the home, but others exist to praise a woman who defies authority. The challenge for instructors becomes how to help students see the relevance of the fairy tale in part for its history and in part for its potential to alter perspectives. (Johnson-Oli, *Strong Women in Fairy Tales Existed Long Before Frozen*, 2016, p 80).

I would like to conduct a study of how both masculinity and femininity are portrayed in order to gain a greater awareness of how Martin approaches issues relating to gender roles. As ASOIAF is based in a world similar to mediaeval Europe (mostly mediaeval England), the characters are often met with very strict expectations and ideas of gender identity. These issues are much discussed today, as genders, and what we expect of them, are changing. I am going to begin by looking at how masculinity is portrayed in ASOIAF before proceeding on

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to femininity. To study masculinity I have chosen to have a closer look at three brothers who are three very different types of men.

### 2.4.2 The Baratheon Brothers

There are three Baratheon brothers: Robert, Stannis, and Renly. The age of the characters is played upon by the author visually, as the eldest, Robert, has a large beard, Stannis has a small beard, and the youngest Renly is clean-shaven. They are born into one of the major houses in Westeros, which makes them both wealthy and part of the highest class in the society in which the series is based. This means that they have more or less the same opportunities from an early age, which makes them ideal for comparison. The reason for choosing these three characters to analyse masculinity is because of their similar origin (family, wealth, class) and their stark differences in both life and personality as they have become men of their own. I will examine how the three characters exhibit masculine traits and how the author uses this to portray masculinity in his novels in a section for each of the brothers.

### 2.4.3 Robert Baratheon

When Robert Baratheon, the head of the house Baratheon, is presented in the first novel *A Game of Thrones*, he is the king of Westeros and sits on the Iron Throne. This gives him the highest position in the society that he is a part of. His position associates him with power, something that in the world of ASOIAF is a masculine trait. Women have very limited power, and the power they have comes solely through their lord husband. Westeros is a patriarchy and Robert its head. His appearance, as described to the reader, is also very rooted in the traditionally masculine. In his youth, he was exceptionally strong. With great muscles he became one of the greatest warriors in the land, wielding a large war hammer which he would crush his enemies with. According to Eddard Stark, Robert was: "...muscled like a maiden's fantasy" (Martin, 1996, p 40). When we meet him as an older man, he has become fat, red-faced, and very hairy. He consumes a great deal of beer and wine, and has sex with many women, with whom he has fathered countless children (a major plot point in the story).

As is frequently observed in literature, a character's appearance can reveal something about their personality. Robert is a large man and speaks loudly. He has become very fat, which tells us that he does not live a healthy life. Many of the things Robert enjoys are activities that are often associated with masculinity; hunting, fighting wars or fighting in tourneys, getting

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drunk on alcohol, and having sex with multiple prostitutes: “Robert Baratheon had always been a man of huge appetites” (Martin, 1996, p 42).

Martin has deliberately made Robert a stereotypical man, sharing the traits of what is deemed a successful man: “Action movies and professional sports... provide examples of successful modern masculinity.” (Goodman, 1996, p 251). In the story of Robert, he is an action hero. As a young man, he was extremely strong, and he was regarded as one of the strongest fighters in the realm. In the world of Westeros, being a strong knight or fighter would be the same as being a strong athlete in our modern world. In this way, he is both an action hero and an athlete. It is also worth remembering that he took his kingship by force, rather than diplomacy. What Robert represents is what is known as a “manly man” which is today more related to toxic masculinity rather than the ideal man. Cambridge Dictionary defines toxic masculinity as so: “Ideas about the way that men should behave that are seen as harmful, for example the idea that men should not cry or admit weakness.” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023). Robert is a horrible king in that he is lazy, does not attend council meetings, and is seldom engaged in ruling the kingdoms. His masculine ways are a great obstacle in his life as king, as diplomacy and economics are not among his strong suits and bores him. His drinking and infidelity towards his wife and queen are also destroying his marriage and he is an estranged father to his three children. Robert Baratheon’s good qualities seem only to be useful on the battlefield, as his blunt and simple ways fit poorly with his new occupation as king. He dies in a way that is quite predictable for his character; he drinks too much while hunting and gets killed by a boar. (This was in truth a plot created by his wife Cersei who hated Robert for how he disgraced her on multiple occasions.)

There are many historical figures and events that Martin based ASOIAF on, and there are aspects of Robert Baratheon that resemble Henry the VIII of England. Henry was never a strong warrior, but he was known for hosting large parties, having a great appetite for both food and drink, and having many women. Henry even looks similar and have the same attributes as Robert: “Six feet tall, powerfully built, and a tireless athlete, huntsman, and dancer, he promised England the joys of spring after the long winter of Henry VII’s reign.” (Henry VIII | Biography, Wives, Religion, Death, & Facts | Britannica, 2023). These parallels to history are common in ASOIAF, and Robert is certainly one of the characters that has its origin in British royal history.

It could also be argued that Robert has a mythological inspiration from the Greek god Zeus. This is based on his relationship with his wife Cersei who in this case holds the place of Hera.

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In Greek myths, the tale often starts with Zeus being unfaithful to his wife Hera, and Hera is in many of the myths a dangerous and jealous woman that brings grief to those Zeus has been involved with, which is true of Cersei as well. Zeus looks like a maiden's fantasy and Zeus overthrew a king of sorts when defeating Chronos and establishing a new order (the Olympian order) from the ashes of the old (the Titans). Robert defeats the Mad King Aerys II during his rebellion and establishes a new dynasty (The Baratheon dynasty) from the ashes of the old (the Targaryen). It could be interpreted that the young Robert is supposed to be like Zeus, and with time derailed into something that resembles Henry VIII. To go from looking like Zeus, to looking like Henry VIII shows a great decline in both body and soul, and the fall of Robert Baratheon is an important sub-plot of the first book in the series. Ned who remembers Robert from their youth and now sees him again after many years does not recognize Robert: "They went down to the crypt together, Ned and this king he scarcely recognized." (Martin, 1996, p 47) Playing on the reader's ideas of Zeus and Henry VIII, Martin makes the readers understand how far Robert has fallen as a man, and makes the reader emotionally connected with Ned who does not recognise his friend anymore and struggles with his emotions towards Robert.

One of the first introductions to the character of Robert Baratheon is when he and the main character Eddard "Ned" Stark are out horse riding in the wilderness. This scene provides a strong idea of Robert Baratheon's personality for several reasons. First of all, the two characters are close friends, which means that Robert, who is the king of The Seven Kingdoms, is less obliged to be vague, untruthful, and other things that could make his actions and pronouncements become questioned. This is one of the few circumstances where the king is able to be himself in every way possible. Another reason why this chapter contributes insights for the reader is that the author has on purpose put these characters together in contrast to each other, as they are quite the opposite of each other on the subjects discussed in the scene (infidelity, honour, responsibility). This creates compelling drama and prompts the reader to consider the characters' true natures in contrast to what has previously been revealed. This could be a section to discuss with pupils regarding point-of-view and setting, as characters act differently in different settings. Many of the topics during the conversation are also closely related to the man's role in the world of Westeros. Eddard Stark is someone who takes every aspect of himself seriously, whereas Robert Baratheon is less occupied with his ways. Curiously, Robert even says early in the chapter what he thinks a man should do: "...it

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feels good to get out and *ride* the way a man was meant to ride!” (Martin, 1996, p 122). This outburst from the king tells us about what Robert thinks a man was meant to be.

First, he misses the times when he was a soldier, and was out riding on horseback. Now as he is king, he uses a carriage filled with luxury and comfort. The plain life of a soldier who rides on a horse from place to place out in the free air is something Robert deems manly. It also reminds him of the times when he was strong and had a simple life, as he now lives in a castle and is bored with meetings and politics that are a part of his life as king. He enjoys the life of the soldier, a life filled with adrenalin as violence and feasting makes one feel the rush of life in his veins in a way that life in court never has given him. Another person who relishes the life of a soldier, Robert's brother-in-law Jaime Lannister, who finds life in the capital boring in comparison to wartime, frequently mentions this way of life.

Secondly, Robert scolds the life of luxury as something feminine, as he in the same line about what a man should be, mocks his wife for being reliable on travelling in a carriage: “I promise you, if that wretched thing breaks another axle, I’m going to burn it, and Cersei can walk!” (Martin, 1996, p 122). There are also other examples of Robert mocking luxury as something unmanly, as he mocks his brother Renly on several occasions (who is a homosexual and therefore not a man in Robert’s point-of-view. The masculinity of Renly Baratheon will be discussed later in this chapter) These thoughts are also of a nostalgic character, as Robert dreams of his youths when he was not married, and no duties and was free to explore the unknown world: “What do you say, Ned? Just you and me, two vagabond knights on the Kingsroad, our swords at our sides and the gods know what in front of us, and maybe a farmer’s daughter or a tavern wench to warm our beds tonight.” (Martin, 1996, p 122).

Robert Baratheon’s views on what makes a man a man are quite different from what his best friend Eddard thinks. As mentioned earlier, the scene serves as a contrast between the characters and Eddard Stark’s thoughts on what makes a good man comes from a very different place than Robert’s, which makes analysing Eddard a good way of finding flaws and deficiencies in Robert. Through Eddard, we could be finding what the stories want to tell us about Robert’s thoughts on masculinity, as Eddard is the main character and works as a moral compass for the reader.

It is clear from the start that Eddard Stark is more of a family man than Robert Baratheon. As Robert does not spend much time with his children, our introduction to Eddard Stark is him teaching his son, Bran, a valuable lesson that is defining not only for Eddard Stark but for the

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Stark family as a whole: be just and honourable. Where Robert often talks about what he wishes (Robert is not a point of view character, which means the reader never get to know what he literally thinks), Eddard Stark is more concerned about his family and how he honours them. Therefore, the fact that Eddard has a bastard son, Jon Snow, is a large stain on his character. Eddard is conflicted about his bastard son, as the boy is a living proof of his infidelity towards his wife Catelyn, and the boy lives with their family in Winterfell. In this scene with Robert and Eddard, Robert asks Eddard about the mother of Jon Snow (one of the large mysteries of the series) and Eddard becomes quite defensive and hostile towards the topic:

“...what was her name, that common girl of yours? Becca? No, she was one of mine, gods love her, black hair and these sweet big eyes, you could drown in them. Yours was . . . Aleena? No. You told me once. Was it Merry? You know the one I mean, your bastard’s mother?”

“Her name was Wylla,” Ned replied with cool courtesy, “and I would sooner not speak of her.”

“Wylla. Yes.” The king grinned. “She must have been a rare wench if she could make Lord Eddard Stark forget his honor, even for an hour. You never told me what she looked like . . . ”

Ned’s mouth tightened in anger. “Nor will I. Leave it be, Robert, for the love you say you bear me. I dishonored myself and I dishonored Catelyn, in the sight of gods and men.” (Martin, 1996, p 122).

This exchange gives the reader a lot of insight into the two characters and the differences between them. Eddard Stark is very hesitant about talking, even alone with his best friend, about this shame that is haunting him. As Robert does not find this topic either offensive or uncomfortable, it shows how the two characters are different on the topic of infidelity. Robert thinks it natural to be with women outside his marriage and that there is no shame in it, whereas Eddard finds it shameful and dishonouring not only for himself but to his family and the gods. The mention of gods is also noticeably important, as there is a religious side to morals in the world of Westeros. If Eddard Stark’s infidelity is a sin in the eyes of the gods, that would make Robert’s lifestyle and thoughts sinful in the world he inhabits. As Eddard is the character with most chapters in *A Game of Thrones*, he is the main character, which means



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that what the author wants to tell should revolve around him. This could be an argument for the book telling us that the life of Robert Baratheon, and that of the overly manly man, is something negative that is undesirable, even though it might seem intriguing at first. Robert has wealth, women, and alcohol to the brim, but he is not a happy man. Later in the story, the lifestyle he has chosen for himself leads him to an early death, which sets in motion the large civil war that takes place later in the series. Robert Baratheon's notion of what is manly is deeply old-fashioned and his story is a commentary that what many would consider a dream life, is not that necessarily, and it also corrupts you in many ways.

ASOIAF shows its more modern way of thinking when taking this type of overly used fantasy character (a wealthy king who is a strong fighter that is married to a beautiful queen and can do whatever he chooses) and shows us that he is lacking in many ways as a human being. It is his flaws that make Robert Baratheon such an interesting read, and his character puts a modern spin on the role of a man in society. Robert Baratheon resembles more the character of Sean Connery-James Bond when it comes to masculinity, which tells the audience "a real man can do what he wants, and there are no consequences". ASOIAF takes this idea into the real world and shows that this type of masculinity is both toxic to the people around you, and is self-destructive.

#### 2.4.4 Stannis Baratheon

Where Robert reflects one sort of masculinity, his brother Stannis represents another. The middle child, Stannis Baratheon has always been in the shadow of his elder brother Robert. Even though Stannis is both competent, resourceful, and intelligent, he is written as having difficulties making friends as he is dull, moody, and all over unlikeable. This gives a strong contrast to both Robert and Renly who Martin presents as charismatic and often funny. Why Stannis is so different from his brothers has much to do with his values, and values are often the deciding factor when people are especially different. One of the main traits about Stannis that makes him stand out from his brothers (and from most men in the world of Westeros) is his idea that the world should be truly just. This is the standard he sets for himself, and for the men around him, which is why he is not fond of his brothers, or any of the politicians in King's Landing. Stannis is not a point-of-view character, and we get his story through the eyes of one of his knights Davos Seaworth. Davos has a personal story about how just Stannis is, which tells a great deal about Stannis's character. Davos Seaworth was previously a

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smuggler, which in the eyes of Stannis (and the law) is a criminal. During the civil war called “Robert’s Rebellion” Stannis was under siege. As the attackers wished to starve Stannis and his men out, they were in dire need of food, as they had been holding the fort for an entire year. Davos Seaworth, on his own accord, smuggled a boat full of onions into the dungeons of Storm’s End and most surely saved the entire castle from starvation, making him a hero. The siege was lifted by the allies soon after. Robert and Renly would probably simply knight Davos and proclaim him a hero for saving the men inside the castle. Stannis, however, could not ignore the background of Davos as a smuggler, so Stannis cut off the tips of his fingers for being a smuggler and thief, knighted him, and gave him land for saving him and his men: punishment for the crimes, and reward for the heroics. As Stannis himself remarks: “A good act does not wash out the bad, nor a bad act the good. Each should have its own reward. You were a hero and a smuggler.” (Martin, 1999, p 527). This shows a more dedicated pursuit of justice than his brother Robert, who is the king at the start of the series. This idea of making Stannis truly just is also incorporated into the story of *A Clash of Kings*, as the reason for the clash of kings is that there is disagreement on the question of inheritance. As the king has no trueborn heirs, the law says that Stannis is king. The question of inheritance makes Stannis very similar to Richard the Third who was king at the end of The War of the Roses. Richard the Third as a king is very reminiscent of the values of Stannis: “Richard III presented himself as a reformer committed to justice and morality who would remedy the supposed misrule of Edward IV’s last years and the sexual license of his brother’s court. (Hicks, “Richard III - Usurpation | Britannica,” 2023). The problem Stannis faces is that no one want him as king, and they are willing to break the law to keep him from the throne. This shows that the people of ASOIAF have a disregard for the law, as they would rather follow their own interests than the law. Hence all the corruption, backstabbing, and political trouble that is so present in the world of Westeros.

What Stannis represents as a character, but also as a man, is the idea of being law-abiding, no matter the cost. Even though the entire world is against you and disagrees with you, you should stand up for your rights, not for yourself but because it is the law. It is as Stannis says, our duty: “I never asked for this, no more than I asked to be king.....We do not choose our destinies. Yet we must... we must do our duty, no? Great or small, we must do our duty.” (Martin, 1998, p 496). Duty is frequently linked to piety, however Stannis is one of the story's few atheist characters. He often frowns upon religious people and beliefs and therefore we can say with certainty that his actions are not powered by faith in gods (as Eddard’s actions

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probably were as we saw in the scene between Robert and him) but solely in his belief in what is supposed to be right. The masculinity we find in Stannis is that of independence, righteousness, and justice. Being just is of course heavily linked with wielding power, which is mostly only done by men in the world of Westeros.

Stannis is also one of the many “male mentors” of Jon Snow in his own personal *Bildungsroman*. Jon Snow goes from being a young boy with naïve thoughts regarding the world, but during his growth as a character learns that he needs to be rid of the boy inside himself if he is to become a man. Maester Aemon tells him: “Kill the boy, Jon Snow. Winter is almost upon us. Kill the boy and let the man be born.” (Martin, 2011, p 93). When Jon Snow is elected Lord Commander of the Wall, it is Stannis that teaches him that a ruler needs to be just no matter the situation, or else the subjects will revolt. This idea of being just could be interpreted as an adult man have to be consistent with himself, and not unsure of himself. “Kill the boy” is also a call back to Bran and the pups in the snow, where the theme of growing up for the sake of surviving the winter (or hard times) is introduced. These are ideas that adolescents are often told in school and probably by their parents as well, so to talk about how Stannis’s strict way of viewing the world could be applied to life is very linked with the *Bildung* aspect of this thesis.

### 2.4.5 Renly Baratheon

The youngest brother of the Baratheon family is a different type of man than we ordinarily find in the fantasy genre. When Eddard Stark first sees Renly in *A Game of Thrones*, he thinks twenty-year-old Robert has returned, as they are so similar in appearance. Renly is funny, charismatic, and a determined wielder of power. He sits on the Small Council (the group that governs Westeros) and shows a firmer mind when ruling than his brother King Robert. In the second volume in the series, he crowns himself king after the death of Robert (even though he is younger than Stannis). A big problem for Renly as both a lord and a king is the fact that he is a homosexual. This is shown very discreetly in the story as Renly is not a point-of-view character and therefore the reader is not granted access to his mind and thoughts. It is however heavily implied if the reader reads between the lines, which is how homosexuality is mostly handled in the series. McGarry writes: “In *A Song of Ice and Fire*, Martin again goes far beyond Tolkien and includes several characters who are gay or bisexual, even if not openly.

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Renly Baratheon is clearly involved in a relationship with the commander of his personal guard, Loras Tyrell..." (McGarry, *In the Shadow of the Status Quo*, 2016, p 20). Renly marries the sister of Loras, Margaery Tyrell, but never impregnates her, instead spending more time with her brother. This shows how Renly struggles with adapting to the gender roles of society, as he is expected to be wed to a woman and have children as quickly as possible. He is also frowned upon by his warrior brothers, Robert, and Stannis, for not being a great soldier and militarist which is what they deem manly. He is characterized as childish by the people who have known him the longest. The grandmother of Margaery Tyrell describes him so: "Gallant, yes, and charming, and very clean. He knew how to dress and he knew how to smile and he knew how to bathe, and somehow he got the notion that this made him fit to be king. The Baratheons have always had some queer notions, to be sure." (Martin, 2000, p 320). When he proclaims himself king, his childhood teacher thinks that this is yet one of his childish ideas, only this time it will have fatal consequences:

As a child Renly would say: "Look at me, I'm a dragon," or "Look at me, I'm a wizard," or "Look at me, look at me, I'm the rain god." The bold little boy with wild black hair and laughing eyes was a man grown now, one and-twenty, and still he played his games. Look at me, I'm a king! (Martin, 1998, p 4).

It could be argued that Renly is one of the most liberal characters in ASOIAF. Where his brothers would be categorised as more conservative and traditional, Renly names a woman as Kingsguard (first in history), suggesting that the feudal law of succession is old fashioned and in ill favour of the people and that the former monarchs have been too occupied with warfare. Even though he is homosexual, his sexuality does not define him as a man.; Martin largely avoids stereotyping the character. The Renly we meet is ambitious, clever, and a good player of what is called "the game of thrones". He is the first to voice an agreement to the assassination attempt on Daenerys Targaryen. This last point resembles more the characters of Robert and Stannis, which shows that Renly does have some of the determination that is valued in the Baratheon family.

Even though he would have lost in a physical fight with his brothers, Renly proves his own in the politics of King's Landing, and after the death of King Robert Baratheon, there is immediately created a conspiracy for putting Renly on the throne, as Robert's son Joffrey is not his son and Stannis is disliked by everyone and thought to become a horrible king if he got the chance. This makes Renly Baratheon one of the few gay kings in fantasy literature. This is quite revolutionary as kings in fantasy literature are often depicted with a beautiful

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queen, which is part of the male fantasy about being a strong warrior king who is just and has a beautiful spouse to have children with. The most obvious example of this is Aragorn in *The Lord of The Rings* who marries a beautiful elf and governs all men from his seat at Minas Tirith, justly with no faults. These are traits that ASOIAF breaks with characters like Renly Baratheon, and it is safe to assume that Renly Baratheon would never be found in the works of Tolkien.

The character of Renly shows that masculinity is found not only in the violent and the stubborn, but also in men who prefer men in the love life, and who are more interested in diplomacy rather than in warfare and conquest. The story of Renly also shows the length he needs to go to hide his true sexuality and self. Homosexuals throughout history have always been in hiding in nearly all societies around the world, as the sexuality has been deemed unnatural and foul. It is also something that has been mostly neglected in the fantasy genre, but a trait of modern literature and culture is that minorities and groups formerly forgotten or shunned are put in the spotlight of attention. The teaching and understanding of the diverse society we live in is in the Norwegian Curriculum: "School shall support the development of each person's identity, make the pupils confident in who they are, and also present common values that are needed to participate in this diverse society and to open doors to the world and the future." (Udir, 2023). Today there are several best-sellers that are about LGBTQ+ themes and homosexuality is very common in the literary world, which is why it is important to include this when teaching ASOIAF.

However, it is important to notice that Renly's sexuality is not what defines him as a man, it is simply a part of his manliness. What Renly represents as a character and as a brother to Robert and Stannis is an alternative for another type of man to govern the realm, asking the question of whether a man like Renly could bring something different to The Seven Kingdoms rather than what the traditional men like his brothers can. His sexual orientation is not a hindrance to his ability to become a great leader and king, and it is wrong if someone claims it does. ASOIAF shows through the character of Renly Baratheon that sexual orientation is irrelevant when picking leaders and when deciding what is a man, and therefore is a critic of older society's view on the subject and is especially a commentary on the people who would claim today that homosexuals would by default make bad leaders. Renly represents the liberal and progressive that challenges the status quo and is an important part of one of the larger questions asked by ASOIAF like "What makes a great leader?". Renly is

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killed suddenly and rather early in the second book, which illustrates how brutal and unforgiving the world of Westeros is.

The Baratheon brothers represent different aspects of masculinity, and the author uses this to convey thoughts on society as well as making the reader reflect on what men ought to be. The three are all part of the patriarchy that is established in Westeros, a system that often works in the favour of their sex. However, their stories are contrasted towards female point-of-view characters that want to change the system, and therefore it is necessary to examine the female perspective in ASOIAF.

## Women of Westeros

### 2.4.6 Women wrestling for power – Dorne

Houses throwing other houses out of the seat of power is a common event in ASOIAF. On many occasions, Martin likes to show this literally in small episodes that might seem random if not paid attention to. I will investigate one of these incidents now. At the start of *A Feast for Crows*, the reader is introduced to a new region of Westeros with very ambitious plans regarding women, and overthrowing an old and outdated system. However, the first chapter starts with the character Doran Martell watching some children play in a pool of water in a palace called “The Water Gardens”. In the pool, there are some children who are shoulder wrestling (a person sits on the shoulder of a person and wrestles with someone placed on another pair of shoulders), something that is very reminiscent of the powerplay that is going on between houses in Westeros. While watching the children fight in the pool, Doran is having a discussion with his niece Obara, who wants to go bone-headed to war against the Iron Throne. As the discussion takes place, a nut-coloured girl (Dornish featured, like Doran) topples a large and more powerful light boy (could be interpreted as a more Northern feature which represents the rest of Westeros) into the pool and wins the wrestle-fight.

An unthorough reader might not catch this parallel, as the focus in the chapter is on the fight between uncle and niece. However, here Martin shows one of the major themes of the books through the children, and it is of course an insight into what Doran is planning. It is also

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essential to note that it is a girl who topples a boy, and Doran Martell rules a house that is the only house in Westeros that does not discriminate against women towards men legally. The patriarchy is a common enemy of the women of Westeros, and returns in both the story of Cersei and Brienne (the characters that will be the focus of this section of the thesis). The definition of “the patriarchy” has been a topic of discussion in the academic world, as the patriarchy of men has been suppressing several groups in society.

The want for a systematic change is a major theme and plot point for the story of Dorne, Cersei, and Brienne and will therefore have a large role in the analyses. The fact that all this symbolism is shown on the very first page of the Dornish storyline shows clear intentions of future themes in the story, as well as the main themes of the series.

The nut-brown girl is a clear statement about women and diversity. As the Dornish people are far tanner than the rest of Westeros, there are throughout the series jokes made by Westerosi people about Dorne, something that makes us think of crude jokes about minorities with different appearances in our world. This is othering based in ethnicity. The Dornish people are said to be (according to our characters that live far away from them and are seldom acquainted with Dornish people), a hot-tempered, foul-smelling, and untrustworthy lot. These are of course stereotypes that are recognizable from our world as well. When the reader is introduced to Dorne it becomes quite clear that there is a large number of women in the picture, a lot more than what is usual elsewhere in the story. Other than the author might be wanting more female characters, it seems to be a remark on the different societies of Dorne and the rest of Westeros. Since ASOIAF is a polyphonic narrative, the reader will have the opportunity judge which society it agrees with more, as the author does not take side. There are many women in King’s Landing and Winterfell as well, but they are often set in the background as the patriarchy of Westeros does not allow them in the forefront. Even powerful characters such as Cersei Lannister are not powerful people in Westeros, as she is only the queen of King Robert, and even less later when she is only the king-mother. In Dorne, however, women inherit equally with men, they are sexually free to live like they want (having several lovers, intercourse with the same sex), and even get the title of lord if they are the eldest child. Many of the issues that characters like Cersei and Brienne face during their stories in ASOIAF could have been resolved if the entire continent of Westeros practiced Dornish Law.

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## 2.4.7 Cersei Lannister

Cersei Lannister is at the start of the series queen of the Seven Kingdoms, and wife to the king, Robert Baratheon. Cersei is said by many to be one of the most beautiful women in all of Westeros and is intentionally a play on the reader's idea of what a princess or queen is supposed to be and look like. In her appearance and outward personality, she fulfils all her expected norms, but the true Cersei contrasts this as the reader gets to know her vile, ugly, and dark side which is the source of many conflicts in the story. Early in the first book, we get a description of Cersei from a character (Jon Snow) that does not know her, and only judges her from the outside: "She was as beautiful as men said. A jewelled tiara gleamed amidst her long golden hair, its emeralds a perfect match for the green of her eyes." (Martin, 1996, p 56). This is how the world sees her, but as the reader learns to know Cersei and the characters she interacts with, other descriptions that are more in line with her true colours are shown. Her brother Tyrion describes her as so: "Cersei is as gentle as King Maegor, as selfless as Aegon the Unworthy, as wise as Mad Aerys." (Martin, 2011, p 350). In this quote, Tyrion compares Cersei to three Targaryen kings who are respectively known for cruelty, narcissism, and insanity. Aegon the Unworthy is more or less a direct interpretation of Henry VIII (a character that also is close to Robert Baratheon). Together with her twin brother Jaime and her son Joffrey, Cersei represents a twist on the beautiful and perfect heroes' stereotype, like Prince Charming, Arwen, and any other character that we meet in fantasy stories where the beautiful best the ugly villains. In stories like *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and even *The Wheel of Time*, beautiful people fight against ugly or deformed people, their appearance matching their moral code. In ASOIAF, the moral compass is mostly surrounding characters like dull-looking Jon Snow, stone-faced Eddard Stark, and "horseface" Arya Stark, where the villains (in a lack of a better word) are beautiful Cersei and Jaime Lannister, crown prince Joffrey Baratheon, and tall and proud Tywin Lannister. This is one of the first conflicts and intrigues we are introduced to in the first novel *A Game of Thrones*, where it is clear that the author wishes to make clear that appearances are not what they seem. Of historical figures, there is no clear candidate as to who resembles Cersei the most, but Isabella of France – "the she-wolf" – could be a good contender as she has been portrayed as a manipulating and overthrowing queen. This is of course not entirely historically accurate, but her legend has found its way into several books and plays written over the years, and has become a cultural person who has influenced many a writer representing these traits. Also, as mentioned when



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discussing Robert's similarities to Zeus, there are several overlaps between the mythical Hera and Cersei, especially the scolding of Zeus's many affairs with mortal women.

Cersei Lannister has many issues with the status of her sex in Westeros. She loathes the fact that she is under her twin Jaime in the line of succession and that she is a powerless queen instead of a king like her husband Robert, who she thinks is terrible at his job. When Cersei finds herself in a place of power after the death of her father, she considers seriously to making Dornish law a part of the laws of the whole of Westeros. The reason why this is significant is that Dornish law considers men and women equal in succession, and making this a part of Westeros would make Cersei Tywin's heir before both Jaime and Tyrion, as she is the eldest. If Cersei could have it her way, she would overthrow the patriarchy that her father and husband represent and be her own master. The idea that she is of less worth on the sole base of her sex is what makes Cersei one of the strongest examples on the questioning of gender roles in the series. Being treated differently because of gender is something that all women can relate to, as societies all over the world have systems that are sexist. It is relatable on a personal level and a societal level. Cersei's frustrations with the sexist society of Westeros are best shown in her relationship with her twin brother Jaime. Many of the important parts of Cersei's character are presented in her thoughts and feelings for her brother, which is why it is necessary to go into the depth of their relationship.

Cersei and Jaime are twins. Cersei was born first of the pair, but as they are twins, they are set equal in the line of succession if we do not consider gender. The author has most certainly made them twins with this in mind, as Cersei is incredibly angry about the discrimination she faces from her father, who clearly favours his son, Jaime, as he is taught with the intention of becoming a lord. In Westeros, the male inherits before the female, and through the point-of-view of both Cersei and Jaime, we learn about how gradually the different roles of Cersei and Jaime differentiated as they got older.

When Cersei and Jaime were young, they were so similar that many would mistake them. Their similarity in looks is the source of the anger Cersei feels towards her gender and what role that gender gives her. The children thought the servants' mistakes were funny, so they would play dress up and go to each other's chores without the adults noticing that Cersei was at Jaime's class, and Jaime was at Cersei's class. Another reason for the author to insist on this strong resemblance is that it is only their sex that is different, and in all else they are alike. As they get older though, their gender roles are imposed on them as Jaime is made to learn

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how to fight with sword and lance, where Cersei is taught how to be a lady so that she can marry a noble of her father choosing.

However, the one whom Cersei loves is her twin brother, Jaime. Incest in the world of Westeros is seen as blasphemy in the eyes of The Seven Gods. The revelation of this relationship gives the reader knowledge that Jaime and Cersei are not Prince Charming and Cinderella, but something much darker and dangerous. The readers get to see the true face which is hidden behind the beautiful and luxurious impression their appearance gives. As the author's intention of the incestual relationship is to shock and disturb the reader, it evolves into something quite profound as the characters are developed. The reason why Cersei is attracted to her twin is his strikingly likeness to herself. This makes the reader think about several characters from both mythology and the fantasy genre like Narcissus and even the evil queen in Snow White, who is associated with looking in a mirror. The parallel goes even further when the character Margaery Tyrell is introduced, a young woman who is betrothed to Cersei's son Joffrey and threatens to become the new and beautiful queen, which makes one think of Snow White. Her narcissism is, as said earlier, reflected in her brother Jaime who looks almost identical to her. In Jaime's story, he is forced to cut his hair and grow a beard to hide his Lannister appearance, and as he sees his reflection in the water he thinks: "I don't look as much like Cersei this way. She'll hate that." (Martin, 2000, p 78). The scene is again a reference to Narcissus. Jaime's story of evolving out of his former Lannister ways is paralleled in the fourth book *A Feast for Crows* by Cersei's self-destructive ways. The injustice Cersei feels towards her gender as a woman has made Cersei become a vicious, dangerous and evil person, who is willing to do almost everything to get the same respect and social place in the hierarchy as the men around her. For the pupils this character arc is an illustration of the anger and frustration that occurs when someone is being unrecognised and discriminated against, and could help explain the anger found in different minority groups in society. The story of Cersei makes the reader understand someone who is vile, but the subject-matter is such a human and personal struggle it is impossible not to empathise.

#### 2.4.8 Brienne of Tarth

Martin goes to great lengths to emphasise Brienne's struggles with gender displacement in the world of Westeros, and this is displayed already in her first appearance. The reader meets

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Brienne through the character of Catelyn Stark. There is a melee occurring as Catelyn comes across Renly Baratheon's camp, this is a part of a tourney. There are only two knights left standing, one of whom is clearly the well-known knight Loras Tyrell and the other is a giant knight whose face is concealed. The giant knight bests Loras, not by a trick but by physically tackling him and defeating him. It is revealed that the mystery knight is a woman by the name of Brienne of Tarth. The first scene of Brienne shows a woman physically bringing down a symbol of masculinity in Westeros (the symbol being knighthood). The scene is also very similar to the scene described earlier with the children wrestling in Dorne. This is demonstrated through the perspective of Catelyn, one of the more traditional women who serves as a main character. In contrast to Brienne, Catelyn is beautiful, a mother, and confident in her gender. Brienne is ugly, muscular, and uncomfortable with her gender role. McGarry writes: "Even those women that attempt to gain power by becoming more like men are judged for it. Brienne of Tarth's greatest barrier is not any internal vice, but her putative physical unattractiveness, which is remarked upon by everyone she encounters." (McGarry, *In the Shadows of Status Quo*, 2016, p 24). Brienne is aspiring to become a knight, which is similar to many of the young male characters in ASOIAF, but as she is a woman, she is laughed at by the society around her. Brienne, like Cersei and Daenerys, constantly battles a system that discriminates against women. The majority of the female characters in Martin's ASOIAF world are complicit in the system that surrounds them, in contrast to the main characters (point-of-view characters) who are fighting the system. The female fighting the patriarchy is a very deliberate and core theme of the ASOIAF series, and will be one of the stories most fitting when teaching about gender roles and diversity. In a way, the image is quite similar to the story of Rosa Parks; even though she was not directly opposing patriarchy, it is still a woman who challenges an entire system.

In the world of ASOIAF, women are expected to marry whomever her lord (often her father) chooses. Cersei married Robert on the command of Tywin Lannister, and Catelyn, who was supposed to marry the elder Brandon Stark, married the younger Eddard Stark as the alliance between house Stark and house Tully was the reason for the marriage. Women do not marry for love. Brienne was commanded by her father to marry on several occasions, but as she was uncomfortable around men, and as her appearance created great disgust with most men, her betrothals all fell apart quickly. Because of this, her father finally consents to let her participate in war in the hopes that she will change her mind and turn into the lady that he wants and needs her to be. However, Brienne first appears to the reader in a military

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environment. This indicates that toxic masculinity, such as that discussed in the Robert Baratheon analysis, is surrounding her. The idea of putting a female character in a military setting is nothing new, as Markasovic names Joan of Arc, Boudicca, and Athena as a couple of examples of female military women in human culture. (Markasovic, 2021). There are also echoes of Eowyn of Rohan from the *Lord of the Rings* series, another female warrior in fantasy literature. Both women defy their role as a woman in a patriarchy, and they also are associated with hiding their true gender: “She is represented as a skilled warrior, but the fact that she has to hide her true gender and identity shows that it was unacceptable for women to engage in combat.” (Markasovic, 2021). In the duel against Loras Tyrell, Brienne is a mystery knight, just as Eowyn when she is a Rohirrim. Because Brienne is dressed in full armour when Catelyn first sees her, her escort misidentifies her as a man. Eowyn hides herself in armour as well, posing as a regular Rohirrim before the battle on the Pellennor Fields. It seems more probable that Brienne is loosely based on Eowyn rather than any historical person such as Boudicca or Joan of Arc, as these historical women have little to none parallels to Brienne other than being women associated with war. There is also the problem with Joan and Boudicca that their actual historical persona have been smeared by pop-culture which have made them into something there is no way of proving was true.

A trait of Martin when wanting to discuss the values of characters are often to pair the character with a character with opposing values. Brienne, who is a woman wanting to be an honourable knight, gets paired with Jaime Lannister – a knight with no honour at all with sexist notions. This is obviously somewhat reminiscent of buddy-cop films, where two very different characters who initially dislike each other come to like each other through the course of the story. Brienne is tasked by Catelyn Stark to take Jaime to King’s Landing to be exchanged for her daughters, Arya and Sansa. This is done in secrecy, as King Robb has rejected the exchange of prisoners for sexist reasons. In this case it is Catelyn that rebels against the patriarchy. Jaime doubts Brienne’s skills as a knight in the beginning as she is a woman, and is spending a lot of their time together mocking Brienne by using the word “Wench” when referring to her. Even though Brienne proves herself capable as a knight and fighter on numerous occasions, Jaime will always use the word “wench” to undermine Brienne’s attributes. The excessive use of the word “wench” is also probably the author making a point about words for women are often derogatory. Some examples would be: the female counterpart for “Sir” is “Madam”, a word used for women managing brothels, or the female counterpart to “Master” is “Mistress”, a word used for women having sex with men

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outside of marriage. The author uses “wench” over and over to underline how sexism against women is also a large part of language, and this would be a very important point to learn in school as language is such a big part of the human experience. This is of course not limited to English, as this occurs in many other languages. In Spanish one is to use the male form of words if the conversation is about both genders, and there is no other reason for this other than sexism.

Men will throughout the story of Brienne remind her of her sex. The author does this to establish the theme of her story.

Martin is careful to note all of the physical imperfections of the female warriors: Asha Greyjoy has a prominent nose, Dacey Mormont a plain, long face, etc. The male knights and soldiers are sometimes barely described in a physical sense, yet the reader knows in excruciating detail the various physical shortcomings of Brienne of Tarth. (McGarry, *In the Shadow of the Status Quo*, 2016, p 24).

This serves as a reminder that in the world of Westeros, as is likely the case in our own, women are valued primarily for their beauty. Martin enjoys writing characters that are being suppressed in society like bastards, handicapped, and women. It is therefore quite thematically appropriate that Jaime Lannister gets his hand severed a couple of chapters later in the story in which he is the point-of-view character, as these two can bond over the fact that they will be deemed as less in society. It is also the same story structure as Bran Stark in the first book, which starts with him becoming handicapped at the hands of Jaime. There is a parallel and an echo of justice for Bran, as the hand he loses is the same that he uses to push Bran out the window with. As Jaime and Brienne are a man and a woman, this means that they have certain expectations set from birth. This also means that certain qualities will serve them well in a feudalistic and sexist society. Men need to be good fighters, which shows that they are physically strong, are brave, and capable. Beauty is a cherished quality for women because it appeals to men and assists them in marriage arrangements with other houses. Characters as Catelyn Tully, Margaery Tyrell, Daenerys Targaryen, Sansa Stark, and Cersei Lannister are never valued or appreciated for their qualities outside of their beauty (an exception here could be Dany when she has dragons, but then she is not what is being valued, the dragons are). The reason why this is necessary to have in mind is because these values are being played on throughout their journey together. Why Jaime’s loss of his fighting hand is significant to the Brienne story, is because Jaime loses what made him a man. He is a knight, a Kingsguard in fact, which are knights for life with no right to marry and sire children. Jaime is literally

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removed from his ability to be a man, strong, brave, and capable. As he is paired with Brienne, the author has created a fun visual jape at the different expectations that is related to their gender: Brienne is a strong, brave and capable person dressed as a knight, and Jaime is a beautiful weak person in need of protection (A damsel in distress, if you will).

As Brienne and Jaime are both representing a person outside the Westerosi gender role, the characters finally start to grow. They both discover a new self within themselves who holds values distinct from those society has taught them to hold dear. By losing his hand and his ability to be a knight, Jaime learns to be responsible and caring. By protecting a man she detest and who has everything Brienne lacks, she learns compassion and the inner strength it takes to help people, even when it is not asked of you. These traits Brienne learn is talked about earlier between Brienne and Catelyn, and Brienne calls this “a sort of woman’s courage”, presenting the idea that strength, bravery and capability is not trait only representing men, but to whomever shows them. In a later scene in a bathing tub, Jaime reveals his true thoughts on his life to Brienne as he is dazed from medicine and pain and gets sympathy from Brienne. Jaime has never gotten any sympathy or compassion from his girlfriend/sister Cersei, and therefore Brienne takes the unusual place of a womanly figure towards someone else. In a single scene, Brienne discovers her feminine side, and Jaime learns what kind of man he could become by shifting his values to those more in line with Brienne.

As discussed when talking about Renly Baratheon, Brienne is a part of a rather big and historical moment of Westeros in that she is named the first female Kingsguard. Even though she only bears the tittle for a short while, it is worth mentioning as it shows the shared revolutionary cause of both Brienne and Renly, as they both are characters that wants to drastically change the Westerosi system. The author makes what might be interpreted as a cynical artistic decision when he brutally murders Renly, who among the five kings stands for change, taking his ideas for Westeros with him. Brienne is accused of the murder, and is not believed when pleading her innocence, with many of the male accusers using her gender as reason for her capture. Catelyn, who is a woman grown and have experienced the world, becomes a sort of motherly figure to Brienne. As Catelyn has been just as naïve as Brienne in her youth, she helps Brienne in understanding the real world. Renly’s army and those who follow him are often called “children of summer” by the older characters, meaning that they are deemed ignorant of the world, and having ridiculous notions of power. This is probably a play on the hippie movement that Martin was a part of during the 60s. Even though Renly

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talks a lot about going to war, he never actually does it, and as Catelyn meets Renly for first time, she is astonished to see that they are only playing at war with tourneys and parties. This makes them feel more like a “peace and love” gang, as they are enjoying themselves more than doing any sort of warfare. It is also worth noting that the Kingsguard (the bodyguards of the king) has been redubbed “the rainbow guard” by King Renly and each of the knights have a distinct colour on their cloak. Given how prevalent it has been in the media, this may prompt the reader to reflect on the LGBTQ+ movement and, in particular, the symbolism of the rainbow flag today. Other than making a blatant statement on the sexuality of Renly Baratheon, if the reader for some reason did not understand this, it is more importantly a visual way of illustrating that diversity and unity are key factors in creating a peaceful society.

## Bears and Maidens

The bear is one of the most frequently mentioned animals in ASOIAF, both figuratively and literally. The bear is associated with many characters that appears in the story, as well as it is the sigil of House Mormont, a house that resides on the island “Bear Island”. In the story of Brienne, the bear is used as a metaphor for the patriarchy and is used quite heavily by Martin, as gender and fighting the patriarchy system are major themes in her story. However, there is a need to have an understanding of how the author uses the animal in the text before getting to the part where Brienne is literally fighting the bear.

There is not, ironically enough, a lot of songs in *A Song of Ice and Fire*, but when the reader is introduced to the character of Brienne the reader is simultaneously presented the song “The Bear and the Maiden Fear”. The song is a mirthful tune often sung in army camps and is a song that is meant to be funny if not read carefully. The lyrics of the song will follow, as it will be necessary to understand what is happening between the lines as well in the story of Brienne. The lyrics:

A bear there was, a bear, a bear!  
All black and brown and coloured with hair.  
The bear, the bear!

Oh come they said, oh come to the fair!  
The fair? Said he, but I'm a bear!  
All black and brown and coloured with hair!

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And down the road from here to there  
From here! To there!  
Three boys, a goat, and a dancing bear.  
They danced and spun, all the way to the fair!  
The fair! The fair!

Oh, sweet she was, and pure and fair!  
The maid with honey in her hair!  
Her hair! Her hair!  
The maid with honey in the her hair!

The bear smelled the scent on the summer air!  
He sniffed and roared and smelled it there!  
Honey on the summer air!

Oh, I'm a maid, and I'm pure and fair!  
I'll never dance with a hairy bear!  
A bear! A bear!  
I'll never dance with a hairy bear!

I called for a knight, but you're a bear!  
A bear, A bear!  
All black and brown and coloured with hair!

She kicked and wailed, the maid so fair,  
But he licked the honey from her hair.  
Her hair! Her hair!  
He licked the honey from her hair.

The she sighed and squealed and kicked the air!  
My bear! She sang, My bear so fair!  
And off they went from here to there,  
The bear, the bear, and the maiden fair. (Martin, 2000, p 59).



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From a literal reading of the song, it is quite a ridiculous song that reminds the reader of songs for children. It has humorous imagery, it rhymes, and it has a happy ending with the bear and the maid going off together happily. If the bear is the patriarchy, the song of The Bear and the Maiden Fair is a song about men talking women against their will. The song is about a young woman being raped, which makes the song's mirthful appearance extremely disturbing. The bear takes the maid against her will: "she kicked and wailed, the maid so fair" and "honey" is used as a sexual metaphor. The reader is made to consider both the sexual exploitation of women and the forced marriage of young women to strangers. It gives the idea that women are there for the pleasure of men rather than being people of their own. Despite the fact that this song has the appearance of a children's song, the song never appears around the characters of Bran or Arya, but around armies that are pillaging the country, and in weddings which will be discussed later. The song sexualizes women in a merry tune, something that is very reminiscent to modern pop-music and also "russeemusikk". To analyse this song could bring awareness to the pupils about how music could be quite deceiving in what they preach even though the music makes you feel good.

The song is frequently sung by soldiers. It appears as a component of feasting and marching, which are events closely related to the mistreatment of women in the ASOIAF story. Given that children's songs are uncommon at weddings whether they take place in our world or Westeros, the fact that it is frequently sung during weddings makes the occasion seem quite bizarre if one takes the song literally. The reason for this is to do with the bedding ceremony which is an event Martin often wants to highlight as something extremely uncomfortable for women. The male guests of the wedding will take the bride and undress her to "prepare her for the bedding", something which is humiliating for the woman, and makes the reader think of the maid in The Bear and the Maiden Fair. One of the first events that takes place in the first book *A Game of Thrones* is the wedding of Daenerys Targaryen which is quite an unpleasant affair where a thirteen-year-old girl is sold to a stranger in exchange for an army. It is a re-emerging theme in the story which hits the reader hard over the head about the way women have been treated in the history of our world. In the story of Daenerys, she is followed closely by a character called Jorah Mormont, whose sigil is a bear. He lusts for Dany throughout the series, a very uncomfortable relationship which is also a re-appearing theme of young girls being sexually wanted by elderly men (Jorah is in his late fifties). This makes Jorah a literal parallel to the bear. It is also worth noting that one of the first descriptions of Robert Baratheon, the head of the patriarchy, is that he looks like a bear. Other relationships

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that are between an elderly man and a young woman that is unconsensual is: Robert and Lyanna, Rhaegar and Lyanna, Littlefinger and Sansa, Tyrion and Sansa, and everyone and Daenerys. This is a clear theme throughout the book series. Even though paedophilia is not allowed within the world of Westeros, it is in a way allowed through the feudalistic system which they practice. Even though the story takes place in a fantasy universe, the author spends an extensive amount of time showing the reader how the system is used against women. This section has many parallels to real history of women. The last verse of the song seems to make the maid give in to the bear, as she falls in love with him, which makes the song end with the lesson that “women enjoy being harassed”, another myth that unfortunately is believed by some. As women have often been left out of the subject history, it is important for pupils to be aware of how long women have been victims of a system that has worked against them.

### Dancing with the patriarchy

Furthermore, the narrative in the song is also a retelling of Brienne's story from *A Storm of Swords*. During their journey from Riverrun to King's Landing, Brienne and Jaime are captured by a mercenary group called “The Brave Companions”. Their leader is a man called Vargo Hoat. As stated in the song:

“And down the road from here to there

From here! To there!

Three boys, a goat, and a dancing bear.

They danced and spun, all the way to the fair!”

Three of the members of The Brave Companions wishes to rape Brienne, which would make them the “three boys” in the song. “The goat” would be Vargo Hoat (Hoat rhymes with goat, and he also has the nickname “the goat of Qodor”). A running joke throughout *A Storm of Swords* is Tyrion trying to get a dancing bear to Joffrey's wedding (here is a clear connection with bears and weddings) and the bear that is provided is a bear from the Brave Companions. The companions throw Brienne into a pit where she must use a tourney sword to battle a bear because they are in want of some entertainment. She has also been dressed in a pink dress, as her captors deems it more fitting for her than armour, and pink is a very rare colour in the world of Westeros, which highlights the mocking effect of the dress. The fight is described as a melee, an activity that takes place during fairs, so the fair is also included into the scene. In the end, we have a woman who does not fit into her gender role fighting a symbol of the

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patriarchy with a tourney sword. The image reads that women are ill-equipped against a system that are rigged against them, as putting a woman against a furious bear is unfair. The author consistently describes Brienne using her sword to fight someone as dancing. Dancing is frequently regarded as being ladylike and is a play on Brienne's dual roles as a lady and a knight.

## Summary of gender in A Song of Ice and Fire

The characters that Martin has created are intended to make a statement on gender and how it is perceived in society. Throughout the story, the reader is presented with injustice and prejudice based on the perception of sex. In the classroom the pupils will be challenged on their own view on gender and could also realize that they are participating in something similar as in Westeros as well. If the discussion on gender is supported by theories related to gender studies, the pupils will be able to reflect on how women have been neglected in the system of power, both in history and modern times. Only by realising the social issues surrounding the topic of sex can students start to take part in a change towards a society where women can have the power to choose who they are themselves.

## 2.5 Power in Westeros

### 2.5.1 The concept of power in the Norwegian curriculum

There are several subjects in the Norwegian school that covers power. Power is a topic that is covered in English classes when studying the various political systems in the English-speaking world, colonialism, and evaluating sources. In the section “Democracy and Citizenship” the curriculum states: “The school is to stimulate the students to become active citizens, and give them the competence to take part in as well as evolve the Norwegian democracy” (Udir, 2020). This is across all subjects, making it cross curricular, and one of the core elements in the Norwegian curriculum. It is crucial that you clarify what power entails if your objective is for pupils to understand the concept of power. Everyone uses the term "power," which is very vague and hard to define if asked. By discussing power in class, pupils may transition from having a simplistic understanding of what power is to in fact realising the complexity of the subject at hand. Power may take a variety of forms; it is not always political and can also be social, as there is plenty of power play in social interaction. Simple definitions as “A makes B do something B does not want to do” is rather hard to use when describing the political power the government has, or the power wielded by kings.

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## 2.5.2 Power – wielders and victims

The concept of power in the ASOIAF will be investigated in this section through the analysis of three matters. Firstly, there is a reading of how ASOIAF portrays military power, and the commentary that is provided with it. Secondly, the Iron Throne needs to be understood as it is the true symbol of power in the series. In the game of thrones, it is the throne above all thrones, and is the main objective for many of our characters. Lastly, there is a part about power as an illusion, a complicated look into what power itself is, and how power is something vague and is often hard to define.

One of the major themes in ASOIAF is the question of power. Who wields power truly, and who will be the victims of these ideas of power? There are several references to agents of power in the titles of the individual books. The first *A Game of Thrones* implicates that the system of power in the world of Westeros (and probably in our world) is an elaborate game played by powerful people in search of more power. A throne is undoubtedly an effective symbol of power, particularly in Europe where kings and queens have occupied thrones of authority for centuries. The second book is called *A Clash of Kings* which shows the problems with the game presented in the first title. How can there be more than one king if the king is all powerful? The title indicates that the king is not all powerful as the king can be dethroned. It is established rather early in the series that kings are not heroes like Aragorn, they are unstable by the nature of their system which always threatens to throw one off the throne if one is not careful. The game of thrones is more similar to the children's game "King on the Hill" rather than "Simon Says". As the second book is about the civil war between five kings, it raises the question whether true power is found somewhere else, therefore the third book is titled *A Storm of Swords*. The swords in the title are armies and physical power. One of the more cynical views presented in ASOIAF is the idea that weapons are power. The person with the more swords, is the most powerful. This statement rings true on several occasions during the course of the series. Eddard Stark loses the power of the Iron Throne on the simple reason that he does not command the loyalty of the garrison (the soldiers of King's Landing) after the death of Robert Baratheon. Even though he has the law on his side, he is a respected and an honourable man, and is a firm leader of soldiers, he is betrayed because he did not properly secure the most vital source of power – the swords of the castle. Law, honour, and loyalty are all tossed out of the window in this climactic scene of the first book, establishing how the rules of the game of thrones work.

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The idea that physical power is everything is challenged often in the story. At the end of the storm of swords, and clash of kings, the only man standing of the five kings fighting for power of Westeros, is the one with the weakest army: Stannis Baratheon. The civil war is fought between the houses Lannister, Greyjoy, Stark, Baratheon (Renly), and Stannis Baratheon. Stannis Baratheon is outgunned mostly throughout the series. However, at the end of the third book *A Storm of Swords*, Stannis is the only king remaining of the original five as everyone has been killed during the civil war, their armies outspent and done. Fittingly, the fourth book is given the name *A Feast for Crows*, a reference to all the bodies that lays dead after the long war. The title of the fourth book might give some insight into what the series deems the winner of The War of the Five Kings: the crows. Stannis is not even able to claim the Iron Throne, as he is stuck at the Wall, and winter has arrived. It is very anticlimactic and in tone with the idea that there are no true winners of war, and that the power of the sword brings death, hardships, and certainly not any new progressive social policies. These are not the hopeful and optimistic themes found in Tolkien's work, this is the realistic lessons learned by Americans after the Vietnam War, a war that was heavily criticised for its lack of meaning and the enormous loss of life. It gives the opportunity for the pupils to draw these lines between the fictional Westeros and the real historical events that it mirrors, as the curriculum requires. Martin has history as a Vietnam-War protestor and his thoughts on the war comes through clearly in ASOIAF. The War of the Five Kings seems to be an allegory for several wars, but the outcome of the war and the lack of prizes gained from the war does bring to mind the Vietnam-War. Through learning about The War of the Five Kings and the Vietnam-War, historical empathy becomes relevant again, as the education of war give pupils insight into what war is like, and how complicated they are to make sense of.

### 2.5.3 The Iron Throne – symbol of power

As the Iron Throne is the centre of power in the world of Westeros, it is useful to take a look at the chair with which everyone in the story of ASOIAF is so fixated on. The term "The Iron Throne" is frequently used throughout the story to refer to "absolute power". Even though the title of the first book *A Game of Thrones* refers to the several seats of power within the world of ASOIAF the Iron Throne is at the centre of it, as in a feudalistic world, the king rules supreme. Therefore, it would be logical to search for the true core idea of power in ASOIAF in the symbol of power that is "The Iron Throne".

The Iron Throne is the seat of the king, and it is made of the swords of the defeated enemies

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of the thrones creator. In the television show *Game of Thrones* the Iron Throne has also been used as a symbol for the show itself, making the entire show about attaining the Iron Throne. There is, however, a great difference in the appearance of the thrones portrayed in the television-show and the books respectably. In the books, the throne towers over everyone in its presence, throwing long shadows across the room. With the shadows being in shapes of swords, the shadows represent an intimidating reach of power that will be forced with the power of the sword, which has been done on several occasions throughout the history of the Iron Throne. Only a couple of months after the coronation of Robert Baratheon, a rebellion took place in the Iron Islands which Robert (with the gathered forces of Westeros) crushed swiftly, making the Greyjoy family bow down to his weapons and throne. The swords of which the Iron Throne is made symbolize the amount of warfare needed to gain ultimate power, as well as the amount of warfare needed to keep the power. The title of the third book *A Storm of Swords* is also a reminder of the Iron Throne and its power.

The Iron Throne is on several occasions described as uncomfortable by the people sitting on it. It is made completely out of iron, and if you do not mind where you place yourself, the throne might cut you. The idea of the throne cutting its sitter is a returning image in the series. In *A Feast for Crows* it is Cersei Lannister who is in charge of King's Landing, following the death of her father and son (King Joffrey). As she struggles with the thought of her having the power of all the seven kingdoms, and the fear of the missing Tyrion killing her and her children, Cersei has several nightmares where she is sitting on the Iron Throne, being cut and stung by the blades. This scene visualises Cersei's fears of not being able to hold on to the power that has fallen to her and live up to her father who she desperately wishes she can live up to and even become better than. The throne is depicted as something terrifying, daunting, and as something that will probably, in the end, spill your blood.

A story which sheds light on how the throne functioning as a symbol within the country of Westeros is the story of the death of Maegor "the Cruel" Targaryen. He was another victim of the throne he was occupying. One morning he was found dead, impaled on the swords of the throne. As there was never found a guilty murderer, it was concluded by many that the throne itself had come alive to kill him. Another example of how the Iron Throne is shown to be an active piece in the story, is during the reign of Aerys Targaryen, known throughout the series as "the mad king". As Aerys was a terrible king with no control over his kingdoms, it is said that he would receive cuts from the throne daily. At the end, his arms and fingers were filled with scars and open wounds given to him by the throne. This is interpreted by the people

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around him as the throne is calling Aerys unworthy of sitting on it, as earlier in the history of the Iron Throne. The small cuts from the throne is a foreshadowing of his death that awaits in the future. Aerys “the mad king” Targaryan is killed by Jaime Lannister with a sword in front of the Iron Throne, which makes one think that Jaime finished the job for the throne itself (a throne made of swords). The Iron Throne is used by the author to show that power is dangerous, and that rulers who wield their power unwisely will in the end be taken down by it. It is also quite ugly in appearance. Whereas thrones in the fantasy genre usually are designed in a way to display purity, divinity, and control, the Iron Throne is designed to be chunky, ugly, and violent. It is made of war, therefore it looks like war. It is uncomfortable to sit on, because anyone with power should not sit lightly.

#### 2.5.4 Power as an illusion

There are many powerful players in the game of thrones, and it is not necessarily the king who is most powerful. Varys, the spymaster, gives Tyrion a riddle which is to teach him about how power works in the world of Westeros. The riddle goes:

“In a room sit three great men, a king, a priest, and a rich man with his gold. Between them stands a sellsword, a little man of common birth and no great mind. Each of the great ones bids him slay the other two. ‘Do it’ says the king, ‘for I am your lawful ruler.’ ‘Do it’ says the priest, ‘for I command you in the names of the gods.’ ‘Do it’ says the rich man, ‘and all this gold shall be yours.’ So tell me—who lives and who dies?” (Martin, 2000, p 36).

This riddle is introduced rather early in the book *A Clash of Kings* so it is necessary to stress the importance of this riddle as it is closely related to the major question of the book, which is “who truly has power?”. Tyrion, who is hand of the king and feels powerful and safe at the beginning of the book, becomes uncomfortable by the riddle, as it shatters his idea of power. We all have ideas of who has power in society. This could be a king, prime minister, teacher or a parent. The question the riddle begs, however, is “why do we create and follow these ideas?” These are relevant question to discuss in the classroom. The questions are also interdisciplinary as they are very important for subjects as social studies, politics and human rights, and are related to the core elements of democracy and human rights. (Udir, 2023). It also echoes the many times in history where people questioned why certain people followed these rules of power. There are several historical events that could be connected to this riddle,

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as people have realized that they had the sword themselves and could use it against their king. To ponder on these realizations that the king is not divine, and that no groups which holds power are eternal, gives the idea that the students are capable to be a part of and, maybe more importantly, be a change in the future of the Norwegian democracy.

To conclude this part about power being an illusion it is necessary to have a look at the conclusions that Varys and Tyrion reach when they discuss the riddle again later in the story. Tyrion claims that the sword has the power of life and death and therefore holds all the power, and Varys responds:

“Just so . . . yet if it is the swordsmen who rule us in truth, why do we pretend our kings hold the power?”

Why should a strong man with a sword ever obey a child king like Joffrey, or a wine-sodden oaf like his father?”

“Because these child kings and drunken oafs can call other strong men, with other swords.”

“Then these other swordsmen have the true power. Or do they? Whence came their swords? Why do they obey?” Varys smiled. “Some say knowledge is power. Some tell us that

all power comes from the gods. Others say it derives from law. Yet that day on the steps of Baelor’s Sept, our godly High Septon and the lawful Queen Regent and your ever-soknowledgeable servant were as powerless as any cobbler or cooper in the crowd.

Who truly killed Eddard Stark do you think? Joffrey, who gave the command? Ser Ilyn Payne, who swung the sword? Or . . . another?”

Tyrion cocked his head sideways. “Did you mean to answer your damned riddle, or only to make my head ache worse?”

Varys smiled. “Here, then. Power resides where men believe it resides.” (Martin, 1998, p 113).

Varys (and we will have to think through the author as well) claims that the answer to the riddle is that power is where people choose to place it. If people believe the power lies with



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the king, it is not because that is necessarily true, it is because the people believe it to be. If people believe that money holds all the power, that is not necessarily true for someone else; they might think that power resides elsewhere. There are several answers given to the riddle, and everyone reaches the same conclusion: that power is where people put it. If this idea is conveyed to the pupils, there are some great learning about relationships, society, and other systems that the pupils are participants. You as an individual choose where you believe power is, and therefore you have power over yourself. This is also a reminder of the idea Tyrion gave to Jon Snow about wearing that which gives other power over you (like being a bastard, or dwarf) like armour, so that no one can hurt you. If one chooses not to let the fact that one is bastard born have power, it will not. A very valuable lesson to understand as an adolescent that is closely related to *Bildung*.

## 2.6 The *Bildungsroman*

*Bildung* is a German word used in English for what we in Norway call “danning”. That pupils are to achieve a sense of *Bildung* during their time in Upper Secondary School is a big part of the LK20, and therefore it is very natural to use *Bildung*-stories when reading in school. This is one of the core reasons why *Bildung* has such a large part in this thesis: “When *Bildung* is used in pedagogical and didactic studies, it has a specific meaning; it aims to ensure the formation of well-rounded citizens through education.” (Lyngstad, 2019, p 15). The *Bildungsroman* has its origin in German literature and is a vast genre. It is often said that the first story in which scholars use the term *Bildungsroman* is Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. (Baker, 2002, p 279). Other examples of books within the genre *Bildungsroman* are *Jane Eyre*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and *The Cather in the Rye*. A *Bildungsroman* is a novel where the protagonist goes through a change that makes the character more mature or “grown-up” at the end of the novel. The story is often about self-discovery and educating yourself in a way that makes you a more mature person. Biesta writes: “*Bildung* refers, rather, to the cultivation of the inner life, that is, of the human soul, the human mind and the human person; or, to be more precise, the person’s humanity.” (Biesta, 2019, p 24). The major themes of these novels are almost always about the turn from adolescents to adults, which is why they are a great choice of genre in upper secondary school. There are, however, many who criticize the term “*Bildungsroman*” as almost all stories of merit are about a character that through experiences grows as a character and is different at the end. A *Bildungsroman* is what many would call “a well-told story”, as an arc of the protagonist is almost always a necessity for a story to work on any level. That said, this

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thesis will not delve into the many critics of the genre of *Bildungsroman* as the thesis will look more into how the genre can be used in the classroom with ASOIAF.

The novels in ASOIAF series are not a typical *Bildungsromane*, as *Bildungsromane* often have a single main character with a focused narrative on the character itself and its journey. However, I argue that ASOIAF has several stories that resemble a *Bildungsroman*. In ASOIAF we are presented with an entire gallery of characters where many are adults and therefore could be argued that they do not fit into the definition of the *Bildungsroman*. Several characters, however, fit the story of the youth that needs to take the step into adulthood. One of these would be Bran who was introduced shortly in the opening of this thesis. In the first book *A Game of Thrones* we have five young point-of-view characters who change drastically from the beginning of the book to the end. These characters are Jon Snow, Daenerys Targaryen, Sansa Stark, Bran Stark, and Arya Stark. The character of Robb Stark also goes through a great change in the first book, but as he is not a point-of-view character he is not such a major part of the overall story. In the next section, I will go more in-depth into one of the stories in *A Game of Thrones* to clarify and justify my arguments that there are several aspects of the *Bildungsroman* within ASOIAF. I will use Daenerys Targaryen as an example, as her story is the clearest example of a *Bildungsroman*, and it is her story I would consider using in the classroom.

### 2.6.1 Daenerys – From helpless bride to mother of dragons.

As it could be hard to accept the thought of ASOIAF as a *Bildungsroman*, I will use a little space here to address how the story of Daenerys has many of the elements of the *Bildungsroman*, and why it would be appropriate to read in the classroom.

When the reader is introduced to Daenerys (from now on referred to as Dany), she is fourteen years old and bossed around by her elder brother Viserys. Her story will take her from a place of oppression to a place of power: “Daenerys goes from the arranged bride of a Dothraki clan leader to a dragonlord and ruler in her own right. (McGarry, *In the Shadow of the Status Quo*, 2016, p 23). As the story starts, Dany is helpless and more of a bargaining tool than a person. With time, however, Dany discovers what she can be through the culture of the Dothraki and her status as Khaleesi (queen). This gives her the courage to stand up against her tormenting brother, as well as the confidence to order around men that are physically stronger than her.

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This personal growth is in line with the tropes of the *Bildungsroman*. Dany's story is also a literal one of self-discovery, as one of the major mysteries surrounding her narrative is why she has so many dreams throughout the book that attempt to make her realise who she truly is. If the dreams are referring to discovering the strong queen that Dany can be, or if the dreams are about a literal identity is unclear, however, they both support the idea that Dany needs to change into something else. With Dany being part of the Targaryen dynasty, she is also part of the old lineage of power, a trope that has been used in a lot of fantasy literature, and makes Dany a parallel to Aragorn (who is Isildur's heir, and derives from Numenor) in the *Lord of the Rings* series: "by hatching dragons from stone she restored to the world a fire and magic that had not been seen in an age. Like Aragorn, she too is an echo of a romanticized past." (McGarry, *In the Shadow of the Status Quo*, 2016, p 19). The question here is whether it is thematically fitting that the endgame of Dany's story is to restore the old dynasty like in *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Wheel of Time*, or *The Bible*. Considering how the author of ASOIAF enjoys subverting expectations and move away from fantasy tropes, there is a good argument that she will not, as her story is about growing as a person, not restore old empires.

Through her arc, Dany goes through many changes which transforms her from a girl into a woman. Firstly, she gets married. Even though she is in the reader's eyes a child bride, in the eyes of her brother Viserys and the rest of the world of ASOIAF, Dany is a woman grown who is fit to have children and therefore fit to be married away for a price. In her marriage with Khal Drogo, she becomes pregnant, another trait of womanhood, and introduces the idea of Dany as a mother, something a child cannot be. She also has a change of title and status, which shows how Martin uses language to change how the reader interprets Dany. At the beginning of the story, she is Princess Daenerys, whereas when she is married, she becomes Khaleesi which is Dothraki for queen. Princess is often associated with youth, and queens are more often an adult, so the title change turns the reader's perception of Dany from a girl to a woman. This is a significant change for the character of Dany, and it is paralleled to the story of Robb Stark who goes from being a boy to King in the North by the end of the first book.

Her brother Viserys uses a threat towards Dany that is returns throughout the book, which is "you do not want to wake the dragon, do you?" This is, in the beginning, working on Dany, as "the dragon" is the ire of Viserys who will beat her if she does not obey him. Later though, through gaining knowledge of what she can be, she understands that she has power as well, and can use it against her brother. This gives the threat of Viserys a double meaning, as "the dragon" that wakes in *A Game of Thrones* is not the rage of Viserys but the self-discovery of

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Daenerys Targaryen, a dragon which Viserys does not want to wake, as that would make him “not the dragon”. This is also another story of many in ASOIAF about a woman overthrowing a patriarchy, as Viserys is a king (often called “the beggar king, as he has no throne nor wealth) and by the end of the novel Dany stands as queen, and Viserys dies. This is not achieved through someone giving her power or from her being some sort of “chosen one” but through her self-discovery. Woman overthrowing the patriarchy will return several times in this thesis in the discussion about gender and the sexist system of Westeros.

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## 3.0 Using ASOIAF in upper secondary school

This following discussion will delve into how the different parts analysed previously could be used in the classroom. Topics such as gender roles, othering, and *Bildung* will be gone through in a way that shows the pedagogical worth and outcome of using ASOIAF as a literary text in upper secondary school.

### 3.1 Using ASOIAF in the classroom – some immediate issues

There are several tough questions that needs to be addressed surrounding the use of ASOIAF in the classroom. It is undoubtedly impossible to discuss and read the entire series before analysing it and using it in the classroom, as the text supported by this thesis is a series of five books, the shortest of which is 750 pages long. To read everything has never been the intention. There are, however, several ways of reading ASOIAF so that the topics of gender roles, othering, and the *Bildungsroman* are still covered. As there are several characters with point of view, there are also several stories that are more or less independent from the other stories in the same novel. An idea could be to only read the Dany chapters in the first book *A Game of Thrones*, as that story takes place on a different continent than Westeros, and she does not interact with the characters in the other point of views. Her story works perfectly well on its own. Dany has only 10 chapters, which gives a sum of approximately 96 pages, depending on which edition you use, which is a very digestible length for a book. The count was done on pages with the size of 4x\*7, which is quite small, so with larger pages the number will be reduced significantly. This suggests that it is perfectly practicable to use the stories from ASOIAF with pupils in the upper secondary school. It also opens the possibility for pupils to choose ASOIAF as their self-chosen literature, something that they are to do according to the LK20. Then they will be able to fully explore each of the themes mentioned, which could result in a longer analysis by the pupils.

Given the idea of splitting the books to create a focused main character like Daenerys, this opens the possibility for creating other characters as well. Jon Snow, Theon Greyjoy, and Brienne would all be suitable candidates for having their own downsized novel to read in school. If this is done, the students are now able to choose between several stories during the reading of ASOIAF. If some pupils choose Dany, some Jon, and some Brienne, the groups

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represent different part of the series which they can share with the rest of the class. This could also make for some fun tasks by looking for parallels between the stories to then pounder on what the artistic meaning of those are.

The language proficiency of the class in which the text will be used is a further issue that needs to be taken into consideration. Even though this thesis is concerned with pupils who have chosen to immerse themselves into the English language during their third year, research raises the question whether there actually is a difference in reading level: “There is research suggesting that the reading skills of pupils who study elective, advanced English courses in upper secondary school are not significantly better than those students who only complete the compulsory English course” (Hellekjær, 2009). Martin writes more complex language than what most pupils are used to, considering the small number of pupils that reads novels often, and the fact that ASOIAF has a medieval setting, which means many of words are words not used in everyday speech. Words such as “realm”, “scabbard”, and “trebuchet” are words seldom used outside of history books and therefore are probably unknown for several pupils. This is something good though, as challenging literature is important for there to be learning. Reading is a great way of learning vocabulary and therefore it is necessary that the literature one is exposing itself to is more difficult than the level one is currently at. If it is too easy, one is not becoming stronger within the field.

### 3.2 Robert Frost – Fire and Ice, and the title of *A Song of Ice and Fire*

Fire and Ice by Robert Frost should be a part of the analysis performed in the classroom as a companion piece to ASOIAF. This has been done before and has many potentially beneficial outcomes As Fabrizi argues, reading comparatively, or reading one work through the lens of another, can help us see more clearly:

...using *The Prince* as a lens through which to view the Harry Potter books can encourage pupils to read Rowling’s books from an ethical perspective, and when teachers frame characters’ choices as ethical dilemmas...they provide opportunities for pupils to engage with larger issues of the text, helping to make the text more significant to pupils and applicable to their lives. (Fabrizi, *Your’re a Prince, Harry*, 2016, p 41).

In the same way *The Prince* was used in the example, I want to use Fire and Ice. The title *A Song of Ice and Fire* is very reminiscent of the title of the poem, and the poem shares many of

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the anti-war themes as ASOIAF. The reason why it would be beneficial for the pupils to know about this poem while reading ASOIAF is because it helps shed light on what themes are and gives a helpful background to the story as well as the author. Martin said himself:

People say I was influenced by Robert Frost's poem, and of course I was, I mean...  
Fire is love, fire is passion, fire is sexual ardor and all of these things. Ice is betrayal, ice is revenge, ice is... you know, that kind of cold inhumanity and all that stuff is being played out in the books. (Guxera, 2014).

The title *A Song of Ice and Fire* is such a vague title that it can be played around with almost forever. Fire melts ice, but ice extinguishes fire. Fire is passion, but it is also destruction. Ice is the cold and death but is also water which is life. This gives, however, an opportunity for the pupils to understand how to think when analysing literature and poetry. The fact that the title is so ambiguous and open might be a blessing in that it gives the chance for pupils to draw multiple conclusions on the meaning of the title itself, and how the characters reflect fire and ice. This could come across as contradictive to the statements made earlier in the thesis about how complex and challenging ASOIAF is compared to the more classical works of fantasy, however. That said, the conclusion drawn in a discussion around Fire and Ice could be many. Both Fire and Ice and *A Song of Ice and Fire* play on figurative duality as in Ying and Yang, which is found in art everywhere. Dualism is, nonetheless, quite complex as it is associated with viewing the world in a way that is controlled and always logical. (Bleazby, 2013, p 9). It is simplifying a complex world. The world – especially the world Westeros - is not as simple as fire and ice, cold and warm, summer and winter, and therefore there is an opportunity to talk about this fact and apply this to the discussion of ASOIAF. The concept of duality is both simple and complex. This is why using Fire and Ice and limiting the world of ASOIAF to opposites of Ice and Fire, is neither proof of ASOIAF being shallow or not beneficial to pupils. This subject has philosophical properties regarding how humans view the world and gives the pupil insight into how writers use dualisms in an artistic sense that challenges our view.

The poem would work nicely as a companion tool for the pupils when analysing ASOIAF. This would require that the pupils understand the short poem, and therefore it needs to be talked about. Fire and Ice is related to the theological subject of eschatology which is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as: “the formation of ideas about the end of life, or the end of the world, and in Christian theology, the last judgement and resurrection” (Oxford Reference, 2023). It is apocalyptic and quite dire, which raises the question whether the title *A*

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*Song of Ice and Fire* is apocalyptic as well. The poem naturally has many historical implications that make it a relevant tool to understand the major themes of Ice and Fire in the series. As in the poem, the pupils will need to delve into the questions of “What is *Ice*?” and “What is *Fire*?”, which was just stated as could be almost everything. Some obvious contenders for the title are Jon Snow and Daenerys Targaryen. As Jon has Snow as a surname, and his story takes place beside an enormous wall of ice, it is natural that Jon would be one of the first characters related to the word “Ice” in the title. Dany is connected to fire because her story is filled with references to dragons and because, by the end of the first book, she is actually the mother of three dragons. She is frequently referred to as a dragon. It is also presented an idea when discussing dragons that is closely related to the question of what fire is: “For dragons are fire made flesh, and fire is power.” (Martin, 2000, p 228). This gives fire a physical form in dragons, and if Daenerys is a dragon, that means she is fire incorporated as well. Does this mean that Daenerys is an apocalyptic figure that will bring destruction to the world she lives in? The Others also have an apocalyptic presence, as they are related to freezing death, and raising dead creatures to do their will. This makes them an antagonistic force against humans, as most people in the world of Westeros would agree that the greatest enemy in the world is death. This leads further to analyses that could bring in Darwinism, Existentialism, and many other topical subjects that are related to ASOIAF and Fire and Ice. This will also be relevant when discussing how the characters within the story interprets prophecies and symbolism. It is a recurring theme about people trying to fit people and events into prophecy, which never works.

To point out to the pupils that what they are doing when discussing “What is fire?” is exactly what many characters like Melisandre tries to do in the books. In the books, there are no such thing as fulfilled prophecies, which is another way people change the truth so that it fits with their own beliefs or desires. When characters do this in the story it often leads to terrible things such as murder, death, and radicalisation, which certainly is a comment from the author. The addition of Fire and Ice will help bring forth these complicated themes in a natural way that the pupils are engaged with. Having Fire and Ice as a companion piece could provide a number of interesting interpretations of the different characters and themes in the story, as well as adding poetry to the multitude of different fields of learning the pupils will undergo under a project as proposed in this thesis. Fire and Ice was important for Martin when he named this series, and therefore it seems like a good idea to understand the rather small poem to get a grip on the title and the story of ASOIAF.



### 3.3 Gender roles

Gender roles is a subject that is closely related to several parts of the curriculum as well as other school subjects in upper secondary school. Social studies, Norwegian, and sociology is only a few of many subjects that investigate how gender is a part of our social systems, language, and the way people treat each other. It could be though appropriate to teach gender theory in the classroom with the pupils, however this could be very daunting for the pupils as this is material better suited for college-level, and the teacher should have competence within the field of gender-studies as well. Johnson-Oli agrees: "...it is better to embed the goals of feminist criticism: to explore the themes, labels, desires, and roles within each tale" (Johnson-Oli, *Strong Women in Fairy Tales Existed Long Before Frozen*, 2016, p 83). In this thesis the choices made is deliberate in which characters would be appropriate for a character study in which their personalities will be put up against expectations and civil rights related to their gender. The characters are often closely related to each other both in blood and position of power, so a comparison between them would be natural. Discussing how top leaders like Robert Baratheon and Cersei Lannister are limited and not limited (and maybe more importantly, how they are treated and viewed) on the basis of their sex will work as a solid groundwork for a discussion on modern leaders and how they are limited and treated. As the modern world has elected several female leaders like Erna Solberg, Angela Merkel, and Kamala Harris, it would be interesting to see if characters like Cersei and Daenerys encounters the challenges female leaders do in our world.

The topic of gender roles is also closely related to *Bildung*, as one of the major outcomes of reading a fictional novel is to create a sense of self-awareness and gain personal growth. Gender is also part of our everyday life: "Both females and males (pupils) need to appreciate issues of gender as one of many human social problems and participate in its resolutions." (Goodman, 1996, p 154). It is important for both genders to read stories about the different challenges that men and women struggle with during the story. It will bring insight into problems they might have never considered as well as they can discuss the issues with their fellow pupils. This discussion will also emphasise the pupil's ability to reflect, one of the most necessary skills one is to learn during their time in upper secondary school. To be

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exposed to literature that explores other genders and their position in life is also related to diversity. By examining the characters in our story, the pupils will view the world in a more inclusive way, which the curriculum promotes.

To reflect on gender is also to reflect upon oneself. Gender is closely related to how we judge and make decisions about other people, whether we like it or not. This is not necessarily a flaw in you, it is just a part of life: “The act of applying gendered interpretations is not always continuous. In fact, gendered interpretations are often applied quite subconsciously.” (Goodman, 1996, p 250). It is important for pupils to learn to be self-aware, so that they can in greater sense achieve self-growth and question themselves when they are thinking about gender. It is perfectly normal for people to have prejudices towards different genders and therefore it is important to make it clear that it is common. This way pupils will be able to see the world in a more diverse way, and apply what they have read about Daenerys and Robert Baratheon into both history and real life. If one shares some views and relates heavily to the character of Robert, what does this say about you, if anything? These are interesting questions to ask oneself during the teenage years. Does other pupils react differently to the character you liked? Then there is a basis for an interesting discussion based around gender roles and our own values. If one agrees that Robert Baratheon has some misogynistic opinions, does this make him a bad man? Should one be allowed to like and be friends with people that are similar to Robert?

### 3.4 Othering

The Norwegian classroom has over the years become a more diverse place to teach. In a single class one will most probably find several nationalities, ethnicities, religions, traditions, languages, and values. The modern world and society demand that there is a more substantial understanding of different groups of people, as well as reflection on how one views others themselves.

The analyses brought up several examples within the world of ASOIAF of othering. The Wildlings that live beyond The Wall, the rivalry between houses like Stark and Lannister, and the inclusions of The Others. In the narrative, The Others are kept as anonymous as possible, and are used as a carrot for the reader, as the information is so limited that there is a huge craving for more information about them. They are said to be worse than The Wildlings and are used in curses (The Others take them!) which makes them related to demons, or other dark

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creatures humans use in curses. As we know that The Wildlings are not cannibals and monsters as we were told through the characters of our story, this gives way for a common theme about how people vilify other groups that they do not understand. This idea makes us think about the Greeks, where monsters such as the hydra or sirens represented alien lands and people that the Greeks needed to fear and civilize. In current times it also applies to racism against different ethnicities. Othering has been a part of the genre of fantasy and storytelling in general for a very long time. Considering that othering is a phenomenon that is found in many different forms in life, it is important to stress to the pupils that othering is quite normal. It would be highly appropriate to mention the Sámi people and their history with Norway when discussing the Wildlings in the classroom. Even though the story of The Wall is an allegory to Hadrian's Wall and Scotland, it also fits with the historical struggle between the Sámi and the Norwegian people. It is however important to stress to the pupils that othering is not something illegal or necessarily bad in itself, it is a part of how humans work. This can be related back to the subject of "how people view the world", make the pupils reflect whether they are or have been a part of othering in their own life.

The Norwegian curriculum promotes the idea of diversity in the classroom, and the importance of using the diverse knowledge actively in teaching. Instead of focusing on how pupils with different ethnicity and backgrounds are different, one should rather embrace the learning opportunities this gives one as a teacher. Throughout the story of Jon Snow, it is the teachings of many different men that leads him to become a man, and this could be highlighted in the discussion about othering and diversity.

### 3.5 Power in the classroom

Military power, symbolic/systematic power (the Iron Throne), and power as an illusion were the three perspectives on power that were examined in the analysis of power. Even though it might at first seem strange to compare the power struggle of Westeros to the every day life of upper secondary school pupils many of the ideas brought by ASOIAF can be put into situations that the pupils will find relatable. Military power for one is quite obvious. Everyone has at one point in life been bullied around under the threat of violence, often in power struggles between kids. Violence is of course a way to exercise power, but often it is enough to threaten with to obtain power over someone. In the television show based on ASOIAF there is a line by Robert that discusses power: "Do you think honour keeps them in line, do

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you think it's honour that's keeping the peace? It is fear! Fear and blood!" (HBO, 2011). Robert proposes that it is the threat of violence (and maybe some exercising of violence) that keeps the peace, something that could be argued are why nuclear weapons keeps wars from escalating. In a world that often proposes that we are a unity of peace-loving humans, working together through organizations as NATO and the UN towards humanitarian goals, it rings quite hollow if the true reason for peace is fear. This is a very challenging idea to propose to pupils and gives them the opportunity to reflect on the world and the content of their education.

Power can often be hard to illustrate in a way that the pupils understand and engage in. Literature is extremely useful in order to engage with and experience an emotional journey while studying justice and injustice:

Through the pages of fantasies, students witness injustice, inequality, and privilege framed in fantastical societies that operate as grand metaphorical narratives about the world in which we live and the historical conditions in which they were written. By witnessing injustice, inequality, and privilege in impossible worlds, students can gain insight into those same conditions in the consensus reality. (Simone, *Magic as Privilege in Robert Jordan and Brandon Sanderson's Wheel of Time Epic Fantasy Series*, 2016, p 157).

In Jon Snow story, he arrives at the Wall believing the The Night's Watch is an honourable guild where he will feel at home and people will respect him. Rather quickly though he is named "Lord Snow" as he is seen as a privileged lordling. The reader remembers that Jon was treated differently at Winterfell, which is the reason he left, but at The Wall he can write and read, knows swordplay, and he speaks more formal than the thieves, rapists, and other criminals that are his new brothers. Jon, and the reader, feels that this is unjust towards him. Jon has not done anything; therefore, he should be treated better by his companions. After complaining about his current state, he is told that he is the privileged one, and should act accordingly. With his skills, he should be an example and help those who have been less fortunate in life. Jon needs to realise that even though he experienced hard things in life, he still comes from a background of privilege that the others do not. These realisations surrounding justice and privilege are very close to the lives of pupils in Upper Secondary School, and is therefore a great way to discuss how having skills and having been brought up

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wealthy comes with power, and with that power it is important to wield it correctly. This is also related to the process of *Bildung*.

### 3.6 *Bildung* – How ASOIAF could be interpreted

It is not obvious what is deemed as *Bildung* when reading the Norwegian curriculum. *Bildung* can be many things as reading Shakespeare, behaviour in a public space, or critical thinking. All these examples could be argued by a teacher in upper secondary school to be important values and are deemed *Bildung*. By arguing that ASOIAF can be used as a *Bildungsroman* this thesis challenges this term as well. This could make teachers all over Norway define *Bildung* differently, and the *Bildung* that pupils receive through their education could vary greatly. One teacher could force their class to read Charles Dickens, whereas another teacher takes the class out skiing, and both could give compelling arguments for why their educational choices is in concord with the *Bildung* definition. There is a document that is meant to make sure that pupils receive as similar education as possible: LK20. Regarding *Bildung*, LK20 states that: “The school's mission is the education and all-round development (*Bildung*) of all pupils... The teaching in school shall develop the all-round person and give each pupil the opportunity to learn and develop their skills and abilities. This process occurs when the pupils acquire knowledge about and insight into nature and the environment, language and history, society and working life, art and culture, and religion and worldviews.” (Udir, 2023). As *Bildung* is such a vital part of the pupil’s education, it seems logical to use the curriculum as a guideline for what *Bildung* should be defined as in school. Lyngstad agrees: “This view of *Bildung* can be expressed as concrete aims in curricula or as cultural canons that list the works that educational authorities require all students to know.” (Lyngstrand, 2019, p 16). As this thesis proposes the use of ASOIAF as a *Bildungsroman* in upper secondary school, the inclusions of words such as “language”, “history”, “art”, and “culture”, makes it absolutely clear that the Norwegian Curriculum underlines the importance of literature as a way to obtain *Bildung*. As we have discussed the Daenerys story as a *Bildungsroman*, ASOIAF contains several parts that are relevant to research all of these fields. The grounds to achieve *Bildung* through the use of ASOIAF is plentiful.

It is necessary to state that one does not receive *Bildung* automatically through reading literature. One can read many of the classics and still be rude, judgemental, or other traits that one wishes to develop away through *Bildung* in school. The pupils need guidance in the

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classroom to ask the questions needed to achieve some sort of inner reflection and apply the themes and situations they are reading into their own life. Not everyone will catch the fact that Sandor Clegane “The Hound” is a soldier with PTSD, and that “The Hound” is a persona he upholds to hide that he is actually a broken man with extreme mental problems. He is also an allegory for soldiers that came home from Vietnam after the war, and that the name is a name given to him by the wealthy Prince Joffrey, which uses The Hound for his violence. He is often in addition to “the Hound” called “dog” and other belittling names which takes away his humanity and makes him an animal. One reader may catch all of this and be aware of how Joffrey (which represents the higher class) exploit Sandor Clegane (the ordinary soldier) through cruel manipulation, while with other pupils, all this could go over their heads. This is why the teachers role in guiding the pupils attention to different aspects of the text is so important for the goal to be achieved. Without guidance, reading does not result in a sense of Bildung or improve one's character.

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## 4.0 Further research

As ASOIAF is such an extensive series with an overflowing number of different themes and commentary, this thesis leaves much to be investigated further as many topics needed to give way. This thesis has written some on the subject of historical allegories in the world of ASOIAF, but not sufficiently to give insight into what historical allegories are and how they can be used to teach history in the classroom. With parallels like Hadrian's Wall/The Wall, House of York/House of Stark, House of Lancaster/House of Lannister, there is a great potential to investigate how ASOIAF could be used as a companion piece when writing about The War of the Roses. There is also potential for having comparisons between different peoples and characters. How are the Iron Islands similar to the Vikings during mediaeval times, or the Dothraki to the Mongols? This could be quite useful as a way to understand the difference between fictional literature and historical literature, as one could study how Martin has taken inspiration from historical events, and then changed and formed them in a way that fits to his story and narrative. A problem with history is that many of the sources from our history are exaggerated, and there is a need to do excessive research before drawing conclusions about the past. There could be an interesting discussion on how fiction colours the readers view of history, as a lot of fiction (and especially fantasy literature) that takes place in the mediaeval age, and therefore gives the reader an impression of what mediaeval Europe was like.

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## 5.0 Conclusion

I stated in the thesis statement that the objective of this thesis was to research how ASOIAF could function as a text to teach various issues, such as gender, power, othering, and even stating that ASOIAF have many characteristics of a *Bildungsroman*. The analysis performed in this thesis have found an immense number of relevant topics that reaches goals in the English subject curriculum. Through reading ASOIAF one will, with guidance, receive *Bildung*, as well as reflect on themes that are important in the Norwegian curriculum.

ASOIAF can be used to receive a deeper understanding of history as well, making the use of ASOIAF interdisciplinary, a core element of the LK20.

As reading is in decline among the adolescents, the use and introduction of what literature is and can be is becoming more important. To be able to read and enjoy a story through analysis is one thing, but the ability to sit down for a longer period of time could be argued is an even more vital skill to have. Social media, apps, and smartphones in particular compete for users' attention, changing us in the process. To have the brain focus on one matter at a time is necessary for effective learning, but it could also be beneficial for a person's life outside of learning. This thesis set as a goal to promote reading in Upper Secondary School, as it is a learning tool worth championing. Even though this thesis uses ASOIAF as an example of literature, all the arguments for ASOIAF in the thesis applies to other works of literature as well.

ASOIAF questions many of its topics, such as gender roles, othering and the systems of power in society. Martin insists on having point-of-view characters that do not feel comfortable with their current state, which creates inner conflict within the characters. When asked about the moral of his characters Martin stated: "William Faulkner famously said in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech that only thing worth writing about is the human heart in conflict with itself, and I take that for my mantra." (Amazon Books, 2012). The struggles of the characters such as Brienne and Robert in ASOIAF makes the pupils empathise with them in a way that will give new perspectives on subjects less reflected upon. Contemplating on gender roles and othering will create an inner process of learning which is related to *Bildung*. One of the most vital parts of this process is for the pupils to realise that they are guilty of these issues as well. Whether this is using derogatory language towards a certain sex, or falling victim of false sayings about groups one is not part of, ASOIAF will be helpful in the pupils gaining self-awareness.



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The stories within ASOIAF gives solid groundwork to introduce a group of subjects that are diverse and in touch with modern society. The way the story portrays gender is challenging and makes pupil question their values and perception of the world, as well as developing an understanding of how gender roles have evolved through history and how a fear of other groups may be linked to it. The use of *Bildungsromane* is an important tool for the teacher to apply the aspect of *Bildung* in the classroom and *A Song of Ice and Fire* is a fantastic approach to accomplish this.

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