# PART IV

## FORESHADOWING

***Avengers: Age of Ultron*** by Joss Whedon
***Stranger Things*** by the Duffer Brothers
***Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*** by J.K. Rowling
***Save the Cat*** by Blake Snyder
***Undertale*** by Toby Fox
***A Game of Thrones*** by G.R.R. Martin
***The Old Man and the Sea*** by Ernest Hemingway
***Macbeth*** by William Shakespeare
***The Lord of the Rings*** by J.R.R. Tolkien
***Avatar: The Last Airbender*** by Michael DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko
***The Dark Knight*** directed by Christopher Nolan and written by Christopher and Jonathan Nolan
***Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*** by J.K. Rowling

Foreshadowing is not so much an element of the story as it is a tool in crafting the story. Most people have a pretty good idea on what foreshadowing is, but knowing where it is necessary and how to do it effectively is another question entirely.

In its simplest form, foreshadowing is using scenes earlier on in the story to build anticipation or understanding of events later in the story. In Joss Whedon's ***Avengers: Age of Ultron,*** Tony Stark uses the phrase, "Peace in our Time" to describe his latest invention, Ultron—an artificial intelligence capable of policing the whole planet and defending humanity from threats. This phrase is a reference to Neville Chamberlain's words in 1938, after striking a deal with Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany, that he had achieved "Peace in Our Time."

This peace lasted about eleven months.

Those viewers who knew this would anticipate not peace, but a war unlike the world had ever seen. Even so, foreshadowing is not just an interesting creative detail readers can look back on. It can help you as a writer structure your story, set the tone, and have more satisfying payoffs for the reader. There

are any number of ways to foreshadow, but we will be focusing on six extremely common ones: the pre-scene, irregular description, Chekhov's gun, symbolism, irregular action, and prophecy.

The pre-scene

A pre-scene is where a smaller version of a much more important moment happens earlier on. In the Duffer Brothers' ***Stranger Things,*** one of the opening scenes depicts the main characters playing a game of Dungeons and Dragons. In this game, they have to fight the Demogorgon, an incredibly powerful monster from another dimension. They then spend the season fighting a monster from another dimension. This pre-scene foreshadows a later plot event by mimicking what happens.

Irregular description

This is where the author descriptively highlights something that would not usually be examined, choosing to give it more detail that it would usually be given. The most obvious example most people would know is Harry Potter's scar in ***Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone,*** where we find this passage:

> "The only thing Harry liked about his own appearance was a very thin scar on his forehead that was shaped like a bolt of lightning. He had had it as long as he could remember, and the first question he could ever remember asking his Aunt Petunia was how he had gotten it."

Normally, a scar by itself would not warrant any major description. We all have them. This irregular description signals to the reader that something mysterious happened in his past, but it also foreshadows the tension that will arise from the relationship he has with Voldemort in the future.

Unlike the real world, where we see and hear everything in our life, but not all of it matters, writing forces an author to make conscious choices about what to include and what not to include. This means that to have a cohesive story that narrows the reader's focus to what the author wants them to see, every paragraph must serve a purpose in the narrative. Giving an irregular description to something sets it apart as an important focal point for the reader, signaling that something will come of it.

To break down the details of how to write an irregular description:

whereas ordinary elements are often described in a list, the irregular object might be contrasted by being set apart in its own paragraph or sentence. The closer to the list, the clearer this contrast will be. For example, that statement about Harry's scar is preceded by this phrase: "Harry had a thin face, knobbly knees, black hair, and bright green eyes." None of these things are pointed to as particularly important, because they are given in a list with no phrasing that distinguishes them. The statement about his scar has emotional dimensions ***and*** is in its own sentence.

A second method to set something apart is having a character interact with [x] in a way they don't interact with other things. Maybe they tell a story about it, get more worried about losing it, or have conflicting feelings about it.

## Chekhov's Gun

This is probably the most common and important type of foreshadowing. It comes from playwright Anton Chekhov, who noted that: "If in Act I you have a gun on the wall, then it must fire in the last act." To paraphrase screenwriter David Trottier in Snyder's book ***Save the Cat***: "A cup of coffee isn't important enough to describe, unless there's poison in it."

Chekhov's Gun is the principle that if something becomes consequential later in the story, then it should hold a foreshadowing presence earlier on; for example, a gun appearing on the wall in the first act when it is intended to be used in the third. This is a specific thing, usually an object, but it can be anything, that will return in the story.

This is extremely common in games, where you discover a specific item or ability that doesn't seem particularly important until further down the track. In Toby Fox's game ***Undertale,*** you can buy food from a spider bake sale and use that later on to get out of a fight with the Spider-Boss, Muffet. The item seems entirely useless at first, but it foreshadows the meeting with the spiders and the type of game ***Undertale*** is trying to be: one where killing those in your way is not the only option. Chekhov's Gun is often important in creating satisfying payoffs as you resolve conflict, particularly in science-fiction or fantasy. By setting up an element of the magic system, technology, or otherwise beforehand, the reader understands its capabilities in the story. This means it doesn't feel like a ***deus ex machina*** when it is used later on to resolve conflict.

## Symbolism

Foreshadowing can be anywhere on a spectrum between Anakin saying, 'This Jedi training is really going to cost me an arm and a leg' to Quranic crypticism. Whereas pre-scenes and Chekhov's Gun tend to be more obvious to the reader, symbolism tends to be a lot more subtle. A clear and favourite example of mine is the opening scene in G.R.R. Martin's ***A Game of Thrones,*** where the Starks chance across a direwolf who died killing a stag—the two respective symbols of House Stark and House Baratheon. The mutual death is a symbol that causes the reader to anticipate a coming war that would not just engulf both houses, but result in the death of nearly all of House Stark and most of House Baratheon.

Symbols can either be internal or external:

1. External symbols are ones we use in real life, like the figure eight meaning infinity. External symbols are useful when an author wishes to more clearly foreshadow future events with reference to things the reader will usually know.
2. Internal symbols are ones from within the world the author has built, such as Starks being direwolves. Internal symbols may be more subtle or creative because they draw on knowledge the reader must have gathered from the book itself.

There are extremely obvious external symbols like how gathering storm clouds equal something bad coming and crows equal death, but it can be more interesting to use subtle symbols that can be interpreted in a number of ways.

One of the more effective forms of symbolism foreshadowing is a motif, which often uses the ***repetition*** of a symbol throughout the story. It is that repetition that makes it both noticeable and effective. In Ernest Hemingway's ***The Old Man and the Sea,*** he repeatedly compares his main character to Christ, a symbol of self-sacrifice, to foreshadow that in the end, he would sacrifice his own life for others.

Of course, we cannot forget the fantasy genre's favourite type of foreshadowing: prophecies, visions, and dreams, which are often full of metaphors and symbols. They are technically foreshadowing, but they are definitely on the more obvious side of the spectrum. Very few characters doubt the importance of a prophecy, and even if they do, the reader certainly does not, so prophesying that, "One of your fellowship shall die watching communist propaganda" is less foreshadowing and more setting up a clear direction for the plot. Even so, there are good examples littered through fantastical literature, such as in Shakespeare's ***Macbeth.*** The prophetic idea that Macbeth cannot be killed

by a '[anyone] of woman born' plays a crucial role in his decisions throughout the story. The foreshadowing clues the viewer in to the fact that he ***will*** die, but it also clues the viewer in to who might kill him.[4]

Irregular action

This is where a character acts in a way that is inconsistent with their characterisation beforehand, causing the reader to wonder why**.** A great example is in J.R.R. Tolkien's ***The Lord of the Rings,*** where the otherwise very likable, bubbly, and friendly Bilbo suddenly becomes agitated and angry when Gandalf asks him to leave the One Ring behind. This out-of-character moment foreshadows the tension that will come from various characters struggling with the One Ring, and it foreshadows the greater evil of the Dark Lord Sauron himself. This tactic is most commonly used in the mystery threads of a narrative, where a character acts in a certain way that is only explained later on after the mystery is revealed.

Other methods of foreshadowing

Other ways to foreshadow include simple phraseology, like when Catelyn states in ***A Game of Thrones*** that, "Sometimes she felt as though her heart had turned to stone." This foreshadows her eventual transformation into Lady Stoneheart. Otherwise, characters irrationally worrying or joking about something happening, like in ***Avatar: The Last Airbender*** where Sokka hopes the Spirits will unleash a "…crazy amazing spirit attack on the Fire Nation". Lo and behold, the Ocean Spirit karate chops the Fire Nation Navy to pieces in the finale. These tend to be clever turns of phrase that a reader notices only on second reading. There are any number of ways to foreshadow effectively, some more subtle than others, and some more creative than others. Which style you use will be determined by the effect you want to achieve on the reader.

Narrative structure, tone, and payoffs

***Narrative structure***

Foremost, foreshadowing allows the author to emphasise certain dramatic threads in the story for the reader. This emphasis creates an expectation

for the reader about what the important dramatic events in the story will be, whether it is a divorce, a murder, or political machinations, and what kind of story this will be. These major events that frame your story will typically happen at the end of the first, second, or third act.

In Christopher Nolan's ***The Dark Knight,*** Harvey Dent says this famous line at the beginning of the film:

> "You either die a hero or live long enough to see yourself become the villain."

The viewer does not know ***who***, ***where, when, why,*** or ***how*** it would come to be**,** but this line creates an expectation that this idea will be central to the development of the tension in the story, which it does at the end of the second act when Harvey Dent himself, the hero of Gotham, becomes the villain Two-Face.

Foreshadowing shows the reader the shape of what is to come, but not precisely what happens. It acts as connective tissue in the narrative, linking the first, second, and third acts by creating an expectation for the reader of the dramatic moments that take place in each of them. A story will feel more cohesive when reader anticipates what could happen beforehand. It is, however, crucial to note that this does ***not*** mean they know what will happen. This means they know where tension will come from in the story. Whether it be a relationship breakdown, a mystery being solved, or Putin arriving with an army of bears. Foreshadowing guides the reader's experience.

### *Tone*

Foreshadowing allows an author to lay the foundations for a shift in tone that happens later in the story. In ***Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire,*** one of the opening lines is:

> "The old scar on his forehead, which was shaped like a bolt of lightning, was burning beneath his fingers as though someone had just pressed a white-hot wire to his skin."

This is a pre-scene that, despite the upbeat, happy beginning to the story with the Quidditch World Cup, foreshadows a much darker tone to the story which takes over soon enough with the attack of the Death Eaters. The shift in tone is representative of a tonal shift in the series more generally, as ***Harry***

***Potter and the Goblet of Fire*** is regarded as ending the whimsical, light-hearted stories and beginning the dark, conspiratorial stories. On top of this, this line is a pre-scene of one of the darkest moments in the series yet. Just as it describes Harry's scar, "burning beneath his fingers [like a] white hot wire", it mimics the event in the climax of the story where:

> "Harry felt the cold tip of [Voldemort's] white long finger touch him, and he thought his head would burst with pain."

It can be jarring for a reader to experience a dramatic shift in tone that comes out of nowhere. This does ***not*** mean plot twists should be expected by the reader, as they are often most effective when accompanied by shifts in tone. However, if the tonal shift itself is not foreshadowed, then the event that changes the tone can feel disconnected from the story beforehand. Foreshadowing tonal shifts also creates a sense of intrigue as the reader anticipates the important event. This can add suspense to parts of the book that feel less intense.

### *Satisfying payoffs*

Which events you need to foreshadow in a good story is a whole other question. Fundamentally, foreshadowing is not just giving information to the reader. Across all of the types, and whether used for tone or narrative structure, foreshadowing is only ***needed*** to make unexpected events believable. A lot of the rest of it is cosmetic. A satisfying payoff means the reader feels the resolution to the problem was set up in a way that made sense, and foreshadowing is a critical part of this.

This also means that the more important the event, the more it needs to be foreshadowed throughout the story. Pre-scenes are often used to make tonal shifts believable, irregular action is often used to make the reveal of the murderer believable, symbolism is often used to make climaxes at the end of an act believable, and irregular descriptions of an object are often used to make how a character solves a problem with that object later on believable (often coupled with Chekhov's Gun).

### <u>Summary</u>

1. One, there are any number of ways to foreshadow: pre-scenes, symbolism, Chekhov's Gun, irregular description, irregular action,

prophecy, and many more. They each have their strengths.

2. Two, foreshadowing can help to establish narrative structure by setting up expectations of where tension will arise in the future. It becomes connective tissue between the first, second, and third acts.
3. Three, foreshadowing can help establish tone and create intrigue and suspense during less dramatic moments in the story.
4. And four, while there are plenty of places foreshadowing works well**,** it is only ***needed*** to make unexpected events believable—whether it be tonal shifts, plot twists, character changes, or climactic resolutions.

# PART XII

## POLYTHEISTIC RELIGIONS

The ***A Song of Ice and Fire*** series by G.R.R. Martin
***Avatar: The Last Airbender*** by Michael DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko
The ***Dragonlance*** series by Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman
***The Way of Kings*** by Brandon Sanderson
***American Gods*** by Neil Gaiman
***Small Gods*** by Terry Pratchett
The ***Heroes of Olympus*** series by Rick Riordan
***The Elder Scrolls*** series by Bethesda
***Mythopoeia*** by J.R.R. Tolkien
***Supernatural*** by Eric Kripke
***Elenium*** by David Eddings
***Princess Mononoke*** by Hayao Miyazaki
***Fullmetal Alchemist*** by Hiromu Arakawa
Cthulu mythology
The Goblin Emperor

It is a staple trope of the fantasy genre to feature really interesting and intricate religions, and this part will focus on polytheism, where there are multiple gods. Examples include the Greek and Norse pantheons in western religion, and Japanese Shintoism and Hinduism in eastern religion. In discussing religion, its tendencies, and its place in history, readers should approach any generalisation made here with caution. Each part, adapted from a script written for YouTube, requires a brevity and style that will not always do the topic justice. However, I have endeavoured to remain neutral and factual. Above all, I advise you to do further reading in worldbuilding your own religion. We will be splitting this complex topic into twelve points:

1. The religious beliefs
2. Variation in religious beliefs
3. How polytheistic religions spread
4. Religion and culture
5. Polytheism and magic systems

6. Religion and politics
7. Religion and the economy
8. Narrative tension and mythopoeia
9. Religious tropes and models
10. The spectrum: superior or otherworldly
11. Character development
12. The gods do not exist

Religious beliefs

Most authors know that, when worldbuilding a religion, the religion needs to have some form of belief. But more importantly, it is critical to understand one thing when coming up with this religious philosophy: religion is complicated. All religions have a belief, value, or philosophy of some kind, and most worldbuilding religion resources I have come across focus on saying that a religion 'should' answer three questions:

1. How did the world come to be?
2. How should we act towards one another?
3. What happens when we die?

In Christianity, God brought about the heavens and the earth, we should do unto others as we would have done to us, and we either go to Heaven or Hell. To be clear, these questions are not requirements for worldbuilding a religion. This is a particularly reductionist way of approaching it, and it is unfortunately Euro-centric. In G.R.R. Martin's ***A Song of Ice and Fire*** series, the religion of the Many Faced God believes in the principle that death is a mercy, not a curse, but it has nothing to say how the world was created, where we go when we die, and it has little to say on how we should interact with one another. These three questions are almost entirely avoided, but it makes for an interesting religion nonetheless.

While it is true that many real-world religions focus on these three questions, that does not mean your fictional one has to answer all or any of them. Your religion may focus on only one of these questions or focus on other ideas entirely. Religion is not limited to these three questions, and limiting yours to them can, but will not certainly, make it feel cut-and-paste, as if you as the author are filling in blanks on a form.

Variation in religious beliefs

It is unlikely that all of the religion's adherents will agree on what these beliefs are, whether they answer the aforementioned questions or not—and this can play a critical role in worldbuilding. This can be because of interpretation of religious texts, accepting or denying certain prophets, one group emphasising certain values while another group emphasises others, or any number of other reasons. Even if the gods themselves came down and explained what they meant, the likelihood of everyone getting the same message is virtually nil.

This is only compounded by the nature of polytheistic religions because it is common for gods to represent different principles, values, or ideas, meaning followers naturally divide themselves into groups that align with certain gods with certain values. In the ***Dragonlance*** series, Majere represents faith and meditation while Kiri-Jolith represents courage and heroism. There is not a single religious institution, single religious authority, or single religious group. Rather, Majere has very few followers who are mostly monks and priests, while Kiri-Jolith has a large group of followers who are mostly warriors. We can also see the worldbuilding tying religion to the economy here: the continent of Ansalon is often plagued by war and conflict. The fact that so many are employed as soldiers means that the warrior god holds greater sway. And within these different sects, who is to say there are not different interpretations of the same god?

Depending on what your fictional society values, some gods in your pantheon may be portrayed as more important, and this may affect how much political power that group has, cultural capital, financial influence, and how ingrained their institutional traditions and practices are in society.

But what makes a society value certain things and thereby certain gods more? This is often simplified to what a society values morally, like wisdom or courage, especially where an author uses the 'warrior civilisation' Spartan trope, but history has shown it is more complex than that. The ***Avatar: The Last Airbender*** mythology does this extremely well.

### *Geography*

Often, it is simply to do with what makes living in a certain landscape difficult. In the episode ***The Painted Lady***, a small river village relies entirely on its fish supply from the Jang Hui river to survive, so they emphasise the Painted Lady, a fresh water river spirit who protects the river, over other spirits. Egypt is a largely dry and arid area, so during the time of the Egyptian pantheon, people revered Hapi, the god of the Nile who was responsible for the annual flooding that ensured a good harvest and a sufficient water supply. It is easy to focus on

the grand abstract morals or virtues of a society like honour, bravery, and community, but the average peasant is going to care less about that and more about whether they can feed their family. If sacrifices to the god of the forest ensure that more than sacrifices to the god of honour, then it is unlikely they will act otherwise. Not only are their personal realistic needs more connected to that kind of god, but the powers that be would be more motivated to use that religious idea to further their own goals. It is through this that one god takes precedence in a society.

***Economy***

In ancient Chinese mythology, Canshen, the god of the silkworm, rose to prominence because of how critical their control of the silk trade was to their prosperity as a people. They concluded it must be divine.

***Culture***

In ***Avatar: The Last Airbender***, the Water Tribes reveres the Moon and Ocean Spirits who gave them waterbending and embody the values of balance, yin and yang, and cooperation, which are important in their religious philosophy. At various points, we learn of the vital importance of community to the Water Tribe and how these spirits best reflect that.

An author can simultaneously demonstrate the diversity of gods and the diversity of culture within a people group by showing how different groups interpret the gods. A society may emphasise or worship a few gods of the pantheon more for economic, political, or geographical reasons, even if the mythology itself does not necessarily support this stronger emphasis. One figure may technically be the head of pantheon, but another may be more important to the people themselves. Just as religion shapes society, society helps decide the form that religion takes.

How much variation in belief should there be when worldbuilding your religion? Three important factors to consider are:

1. Territory
2. The number of followers
3. Age of the religion

The smaller the territory, the less variation there will be, because two different interpretations are unlikely to flourish in the same space. This is

why splits within the Christian church are also largely geographical, with Protestantism taking a firm grasp of northern Europe, Catholicism firmly grasping southern Europe, and Orthodoxy firmly grasping eastern Europe. Likewise, the fewer the followers, the more likely there will be agreement between them all on central principles and values. There are fewer to persuade and it is a lot more difficult to branch off when few adherents will go with you.

While one might think that the younger a religion is, the less time it has had for it to be challenged and evolve, there is a counterfactual element to remember. Religions also begin with a lot of uncertainty as they figure out things that may not have been explicitly pronounced on or dictated in their inception. They are quite literally still in the process of formation. Early Christianity did not have the Bible as a compilation of its scriptural beliefs, and it lacked any central institutional authority to give it a rigid structure. If your young religion has values it believes in, like loving one's neighbour as yourself, has it yet figured out how to structure its authorities, and what powers or interpretation or spiritual gifts do those authorities have? An older religion has had more time to figure these things out. This does not necessarily mean they ***will*** have, but there is a greater chance for it.

How do polytheistic religions spread?

The problem with answering this question with any real certainty is that many polytheistic religions did not spread or they grew in societies with few written records of their beliefs and practises. This makes it difficult to offer accurate generalisations as to 'how' they spread. Do not take this as saying that your religion ***needs*** to spread, at least not in the 'spread the gospel' fashion. Proselytisation is a relatively new trend in religion that really only took root in Judeo-Christian religions, but because they now dominate the entire world, it is an easy but fallacious thing to assume that when looking at how religion spreads, it should be through a Judeo-Christian lens. Many polytheistic religions did not require conversion or see conversion as a moral act. Their religion may have been true and others false, but their tenets did not usually drive people to spread it. Instead, assuming the religion was more of a requirement of integration into their society.

However, even if they did not rely so heavily on proselytisation, polytheistic religions ***did*** spread. The simplest example of how is that of Quirinus, a god of war that was also linked with dinkel wheat in the Roman

mythos. Quirinus was originally a god of the Sabines, a people neighbouring the Romans who were defeated in war. The Sabine people were absorbed into the Roman Republic, and the cult of Quirinius became part of the early Roman mythology, becoming connected to the story of Romulus, one of the founders of Rome.

The integration of new gods and beliefs, not wholly requiring people to reject them, but finding a new place for their gods in this new pantheon, makes integration of a people into the polytheistic religion a lot smoother. If there are already a large number of gods, especially if that number has changed over time, then it may be natural for its followers to let people add their own gods. Comparatively, if there are only a small number, say two or three, its followers may be less inclined to add new gods because followers all agree these are the only gods they accept.

## Interconnectivity: religion and culture

One of the most difficult questions is how to communicate your worldbuilding without info-dumping, but one excellent way is to show how it affects ordinary people on an ordinary daily basis. This is what culture is. For example, we say ‘bless you’ when someone sneezes, a remnant of religious practises from the past that have little practical value now, but we say it anyway.

In Brandon Sanderson’s ***The Way of Kings***, Vorinism has a strong belief in gender roles: that men are leaders and warriors and women are scholars and artists. Because of this, men are not meant to read and write but women are. One major outcome of this is that academia in his world is dominated by women. They are the ones who learn history, mathematics, and science, and this heavily affects political power dynamics within the society in relation to gender as well as the economy. Women are the engineers, they are political advisors, they are the innovators of society, allowed to occupy wealthy positions. At the same time, Vorinism places a huge emphasis on modesty. Women are expected to dress with a ‘safe-hand’ glove. It is against social protocol to look inside a woman’s glove. More importantly, the average citizen will not understand the nuances of their religion—the Latin and many liturgical rites— but the ideas that affect their daily lives, whether in their speech, how they hold themselves, and their morning rituals will represent the most ingrained and pervasive ideas of that religion without explicitly stating them.

When it comes to polytheism, it can be interesting to see how followers of different gods are affected differently on a daily basis. How polytheism works

in with the daily life of mortals is often tied to a cost-benefit analysis of the religion: what do they give up, and what do they gain? Perhaps it is eternal life, maybe eternal doughnuts, or maybe they have to kill their children. Religion plays into the things that the ordinary person values, that they are willing to give up, and those things that they would be willing to keep worshipping in order to attain. What these things are will vary between societies, geographies, and ages.

## Polytheism and magic systems

Fantasy worlds often have magic systems, and interconnecting this with the polytheistic religion is incredibly common.[29] If the gods are definitely real and they interact with people, then it is common for magic to be divine, coming from the gods themselves like in David Eddings' ***Elenium***. Within that, polytheistic religions typically divide powers up among the gods, meaning some have control of life, or death, or fire, or nature. Channelling or worshipping one god gives you certain types of magic. Polytheism provides a great way to play with the limits, costs, and weaknesses we discussed in parts XI, X, and IX. Perhaps using a god's power also exposes you to their weaknesses, or the god themselves limits how much power a person can have, or maybe you must bargain for magic from that god, putting a price on it like their soul, which we often see shows like ***Supernatural***. Likewise, if gods control the magic in the world, then it is subject to their decisions and whim. If they are very temperamental, then there is nothing to suggest magic has to be reliable or consistent. Perhaps it can be tied in with sacrifices. There are endless possibilities for an author playing with divine magic.

## Interconnectivity: religion and politics

Religion and politics have a longstanding and complicated relationship, but we will be focusing on a couple of factors that are particularly pertinent when worldbuilding polytheism. Firstly, religion has often been used to validate political authorities like the Chinese Emperor ruling via the Mandate of Heaven. Secondly, religion often comes into conflict with political authorities, such as during the Investiture Controversy in 1077, where Pope Gregory VII and Holy Roman Emperor Henry VI went head to head over the right to appoint bishops. It resulted in the Emperor himself trekking for days across Europe in a blizzard to beg the Pope for his absolution.

In contrast, political authorities in societies with polytheistic religions do not tend to rely as much on the religion validating their political powers, nor do they challenge political authorities as much as monotheism. This is because polytheism tends to create decentralised religious power.[30] This is because they tend to divide into smaller factions as groups of people emphasise one or a selection of the group of gods over others. Political authorities, be it a king or an emperor, have their power spread across all of their land. Monotheism is rarer than polytheism, but historically, it has more often manifested in a single or few unified factions able to garner the support, money, and widespread geographical institutionalism necessary to challenge the political powers in the land. Because of this, a certain unity is struck between the two powers, as it was in Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism, where the religious power validates the secular powers.

In contrast, the smaller factions in polytheism, each with their own hierarchies, are less likely to attain the support, money, and widespread geographical institutionalism necessary to challenge the political powers. This is because they do not as often have centralised power. Please see the notes for important exceptions to this. Instead, it is the factions within the religion that tend to exert influence over smaller areas or cities. For example, both Athens and Sparta recognised the whole Greek pantheon, but Athens took up Athena and emphasized wisdom while Sparta placed importance on Apollo and Artemis and emphasised the hunt, poetry, and archery.[31]

## Interconnectivity: religion and economy

In G.R.R. Martin's ***A Song of Ice and Fire*** series, the Faith of the Seven[32] plays the role of the social safety net in the economy. We see this variously through Brienne's experiences at the sept, the actions of the High Sparrow, and other remarks in the series. Through this role in the economy, the reader sees that the Faith of the Seven values humility and caring for the poor, opposes extravagance, and has a strong belief in justice.

Polytheism tends to split its followers into factions that emphasise certain values and gods, and one way to worldbuild all the different gods and their philosophies into your society is to show how they play different roles in the economy. Perhaps the faction that follows the warrior god runs a local militia to protect the town, or the faction following the god of judgement is the court of the

land, or the god of commerce uses its money to make loans to those who need it. To continue with the Faith of the Seven example, which is ***technically*** monotheistic, we see the seven different aspects playing different roles in society. The Warrior's Sons defend the faith and its followers, and the Silent Sisters, who take on aspects of the Stranger, care for the dead, sick, and dying. Giving your polytheistic factions different roles in society and the economy helps lay out the different values and beliefs surrounding each god without needing to explicitly state them. In the simplest fashion possible, this is showing and not telling.

## Narrative tension and mythopoeia

In 1931, J.R.R. Tolkien write a poem for his writing club ***The Inklings***, which also included notable fantasy writer C.S. Lewis. It was titled 'Mythopoeia', and it was about myth-making or creating and writing stories within an invented mythology. Tolkien's Middle Earth is written with a mythological backbone, as are the works of writers like H.P. Lovecraft. While this is the common definition of the word, it has in recent times been used to term the literary trope where gods derive their power from the worship, prayer, or attention of their followers, and so can become stronger or weaker depending on that.[33] If you can imagine Zeus buckling over, getting fat, and becoming exhausted because people have not been killing enough sheep for him, then that is our mythopoeia. The epitome of this is Neil Gaiman's famous work ***American Gods***, where the Old Gods like Odin and Loki are dying and the New Gods like that of the Internet[34] are rising in power, because people believe in them more. This trope is less common, but not impossible, with monotheism. This is because monotheism ***tends*** to have an omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent god-like figure. If you could undermine such a being, then why is it the only god?

This concept is a common source for conflict in a narrative that focuses on polytheism. In Terry Pratchett's fantastic book ***Small Gods,*** gods try to get their followers to undermine the other gods even within the same pantheon to help sustain themselves and boost their power. On the flipside, if people fear their god is dying, then will they naturally consider their options for how they will get more followers, more sacrifices, and more worship? This becomes a problem when a war god can be kept alive simply through violence. If gods live and die by worship, then an author has to consider how this affects the

interactions between different factions that emphasise different gods within the pantheon.

On another level, mythopoeia is sometimes reciprocative in that not only do gods live by belief, but they actually change depending on what their followers believe about them. In Rick Riordan's ***Heroes of Olympus*** series, two different groups with competing beliefs about what the gods should be like come into conflict. This renders the gods essentially mad and unable to intervene, and has consequences for the story and people at hand.[35]

## Religious tropes and models

Worldbuilding naturally draws on things we see and understand in our world to give our fictional worlds a sense of realism. Because of this, it can be easy to fall into the structural models we see in polytheistic religions like the Greek, Roman, or Norse pantheons we are familiar with in order to construct our own. This is only complicated by the fact that the structure of other polytheistic religions is largely unknown due to there being few records. There are any number of tropes that define these well-known polytheistic religions, but three extremely common ones are that:

1. they are based around a generational mythology.
2. they have families of gods with husbands, wives, sons, daughters, and so on.
3. the gods tend to have very human behaviour.

These are the case in Japanese Shintoism, Norse mythology, Hittite mythology, Greek mythology, Aztec mythology, Etruscan mythology, and many, many more. There is nothing inherently wrong with using these tropes, but one way to differentiate your polytheistic religion would be to draw on the tropes we see in other religious models, whether it be pantheism, monotheism, dualism, animism, shamanism, ancestor worship, and others. There's an interesting mix of monotheism and polytheism in Brandon Sanderson's Cosmere, where the original one god broke into sixteen different gods, meaning they are sort of individuals but also part of a greater whole. In Tolkien's mythology, Eru Iluvatar is the monotheistic One True God, but the angelic beings known as the Valar take elements of polytheism by operating like a family pantheon with husbands, wives, sons, and daughters. They are also made to be far more human while Eru is far more abstract. There is a fascinating mix

of shamanism and polytheism in Lovecraft's Cthulu mythos, where interacting with this pantheon often requires a state of madness or doing so causes you to go mad. The ***Dragonlance*** series has an interesting mix of dualism and polytheism (or more trinitarianism?): There is no supreme god, but there are three groups of gods—the good, the neutral, and the evil, existing in constant balance and conflict. Before Irish mythology was anglicised, it had an interesting mix of polytheism and dualism, where there were two groups of godlike-beings, the Tuatha de Danann, who were largely good, and the Fomorians, who were largely destructive gods.

## The spectrum: superior or otherworldly?

Some pantheons feature deities who consider themselves and actually appear to be superior and distinctly above humans, while others feature a collection of otherworldly and distant spirits that fulfill roles in the natural world, like in ***Princess Mononoke*** and ***Avatar: The Last Airbender.*** Your polytheistic religion could be at one extreme or somewhere nearer the middle of the spectrum. Perhaps there are even spirits who consider themselves to exist in ***service*** to humanity.

Be aware that relying too much on tropes we identify with major pantheons from our world can lead to fictional religious pantheons feeling unoriginal because the gods are just placeholder deities for Zeus or Poseidon, even if the exact powers, names, gender, or look of the gods differ a little. Mixing tropes from monotheism, mysticism, dualism, shamanism, animism, ancestor worship, as well as western and eastern conceptions of what polytheism is, can help your religion stand out as unique.

## Character development

Fantasy stories often have characters being born into a society with a dominant religion ingrained into it. The thing is, if this religion has any values or beliefs about how we should act with others, then this should be ingrained into most characters. If it is not, then it is not truly ingrained into society. This provides two avenues for character development:

1. This can restrict how characters are willing to act. One example is Scar in ***Fullmetal Alchemist***, whose religion prevented him from performing alchemy, which is the destruction and reconstruction of

matter. This meant that he had to figure out how to work around that, and he did so by just destroying without reconstructing. This does also mean that many characters, who are raised in the same society, may have similar morals, which can be less interesting, though it is important to note the moral diversity within very religious countries like the United States, or even medieval Europe.

2. This can also provide a point of tension where the character is forced into situations that challenge their morals, forcing them to change or become more resolute. The story of ***Daredevil*** is rife with this. Matt Murdock is repeatedly challenged in his faith, doubting God, and struggling with the desire to not kill—a tenet he has stuck to because of a rigorous religious conviction.

If a character does not follow these dominant religious values, then the author may have to explain why they do not when everyone else does. This can be as simple as saying they are rebellious, they do not like religion, or they simply were not convinced. There are tales of those in history who rejected religion for these reasons, even when religion was at its most prominent.

However, polytheism provides an easy way around this because different gods can have entirely different values, meaning characters can just pick whichever god they want. Alternatively, having a dominant religion that does not have laws on how characters should act, perhaps focusing on other questions, allows you to have characters who all grow up under the same religion and do so with a diverse range of morals.

<u>The gods do not exist</u>

We cannot dismiss the counterfactual: that the gods of your story do not exist but people believe them to exist. In some sense, this is an even more interesting avenue for a writer to explore because it relies on the influence of religion being wholly dependent on the psychology of your characters. That is what they believe to be the action of the gods, what they believe the gods are saying, what they believe the gods are punishing them for. When there is no objective standard to measure this against, religion can become both a cruel and blessed tool in the hands of the right people. Alternatively, you as the author could simply leave it ambiguous as to whether they exist.

Summary

1. While many real-world religions focus on the three questions of how the world came to be, how we should interact with one another, and where we go when we die, that does not mean your fictional one has to answer all or any of them.
2. Polytheistic religions tend to result in a lot variation in religious belief as people divide into groups that emphasise certain gods for geographical, cultural, and economic reasons. Variation is also dependent on territory, the number of followers, and how old the religion is.
3. Polytheistic religions tend to be more adaptable and can absorb other religions into them, allowing them to evolve over time.
4. One of the best ways to worldbuild your religion is to show how it affects ordinary people culturally on an ordinary daily basis.
5. Polytheistic religions tend not to compete with regional powers as much as monotheistic religions (though this is not to say they cannot) because they often have a decentralised religious power with multiple groups.
6. Demonstrating how these polytheistic groups all fit into society, and the economy in particular, is a great way to show the diversity of values and beliefs surrounding each god.
7. Where gods live and die by worship, this can be a great source of conflict within the narrative as factions compete or undermine one another.
8. When worldbuilding, do not be afraid to mix religious models and tropes. Purely relying on well-known polytheistic tropes can lead to a stale and unoriginal pantheon.

constituent scenes that lay a firm foundation for this scene laid down in a formula that follows the three act structure. This means that everything written down is intimately connected in hopes of constructing the most satisfying ending to the story.

While these three steps may seem more up an architect's alley, it is at this point that my inner gardener takes over. I know where my story begins, where it ends, and the core scenes that link those two points in between. As long as I keep these crucial points of development in mind when writing, the book is allowed to evolve organically. The problem a lot of gardeners face is not that their writing is bad, but that it lacks direction. Part of the problem that ardent architects face is that planning too heavily can be restrictive with the narrative feeling forced because they need to follow it for coherence, even though a change might actually work better. To put it simply:

1. The climactic scene → Detail a third act scene that is the culmination of dramatic and emotional threads throughout the story.
2. The core scenes → Determine 2-4 major plot points and 2-4 psychological changes required to make that climactic scene happen.
3. Three-act structuring → Order and structure these core scenes into the first, second, and third act climaxes, and the crisis point.

This planning method gives me the direction I need to form a cohesive narrative with a strong sense of cause to effect, and it has the flexibility to mean plans do not become too restrictive.

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[1] You are free to roll your eyes at this point.

[2] Some of you may have noticed an apparent contradiction between my first piece of advice around hooks and ***A Game of Thrones***—that the prologue there had no immediate relevance to the first chapter. What should be understood here is that there are numerous reasons a prologue might work or be 'necessary'. However, G.R.R. Martin may have also used his prologue to establish the fantasy thread of the story that he wished readers to know about before leaping into medieval realism.

[3] Also, if I might add a personal note, it is simply stupid. Overall, it feels out of sync with the rest of the story.

[4] Though, it should be noted that many regard the revelation that

Macbeth is to be killed by a man born of cesarean as markedly underwhelming. J.R.R. Tolkien was among them. This was partly his inspiration for the destruction of the Witch-King in ***The Return of the King.*** The Witch-King faced a similar prophecy about his death, and so Tolkien thought it more fitting to have him killed by a hobbit, not fully a 'man' in the sense it is often used—the race of Men—and a woman, Eowyn, not a 'man' in the sense often used—male. He also disliked Shakespeare's use of prophecy regarding how, "Macbeth shall never vanquished be until Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill shall come against him." He felt robbed to see an army simply dress up with branches. And thus, the Last March of the Ents on Isenguard.

[5] As a side note, the first season of ***The Legend of Korra*** would have been best adapted into a three-season long story with this moment placed later in the narrative. The first season would end with Korra defeating Amon in Republic City, but the ***way*** she defeats him would inspire more anti-bender sentiment across the world. We could almost make it such that Amon planned to be defeated as a way to inflame non-benders. More equalist revolutions would spark across the world, and the Avatar would have to travel as she tries to put them down. The second act would have a more classic journey structure. The second season would end with an attempt at defeating Amon, only to have Korra lose her bending. This would give the story more time to establish Amon as a threat (given that he actually ***wins***) to the world, but more importantly, it would change the third season. Korra would spend it learning to come to terms with being a non-bender after she had defined herself as a bender her whole life. This would lead to a spiritual enlightenment, which in turn would unlock her airbending abilities. In the first season, she unlocks them because Mako is in danger, and that is it. It feels cheap and unearned. She never truly had a spiritual awakening. This would make this moment ***far*** more powerful, Amon a more dangerous antagonist, and Korra's character arc clearer and more enlightening.

[6] This is what ***Superman v. Batman*** was based on but utterly failed to live up to. What frustrates me is that the mistake Snyder and DC are making with their films are simple writing mistakes. The entire Zod-Doomsday-Wonder-Woman-Luthor story could be wholly removed, and we would lose nothing of importance. It would have been a far more coherent and interesting story to have Batman legitimately believe Superman is a threat, Superman to be too cosy with the authorities, and to have them fight over these legitimate moral positions. The story could even end in 'Martha!' and I wouldn't be too annoyed if everything else made sense.

[7] I did not wish to include this in the main body of writing because I have

already used Batman and the Joker ***way*** too many times, but I truly do admire Christopher Nolan and Jonathan Nolan's writing in ***The Dark Knight.*** The Joker forces Batman to use a morally questionable system of surveillance that causes Lucius Fox to turn on him.

[8] Luke does also have a primary conflict: he has to resist giving in to the Dark Side and killing Darth Vader. He manages to do so, and this is what causes the Emperor to turn on him. In a sense, this did also decide the fate of the final battle, given that if he ***did*** give in, Darth Vader would be a smoking pile of electronics with a far more serious breathing problem. That is, not breathing at all.

[9] What does the Scouring of the Shire represent? While Tolkien despised allegory, let us not kid ourselves into thinking his books are devoid of thematic meaning. Some readers take the Scouring as the final testing of the hobbits. However, I prefer the interpretation that is far more subversive. The Shire was ***the*** utopia, untouched by far, unknown to all. Saruman corrupting it, bringing blacks mills to its fields, and turning it into a warzone, is far better read as Tolkien's rejection of that utopia. For those who fight in war, as Tolkien did in the First World War, its pain returns home. That dread and horror corrupts our inmost being. Though we might return to what was peaceful after the final battle, there is no 'happily ever after'. Trauma touches our inmost being, and it is not something we walk away from when the war ends.

[10] Albeit a manufactured one.

[11] Except for the bad guys, because it usually ends up with them dying.

[12] Or as I like to call it, Love Conquers All And I Swear We're Not Gay

[13] Tolkien thought this twist of Shakespeare's was terrible, and so decided to write a scene where the trees literally marched: the Ents on Isengard.

[14] It probably helped that the protagonist, Spyro, was ***also*** a chosen one purple dragon.

***[15]*** Which I do realise is a terrible film, but if you take the time to listen to what it is saying, it does deal with some interesting thematic concepts.

[16] Though it should be noted that this becomes less the case as the series moves forward.

[17] With the exception of the Avatar.

[18] Which, coincidentally, is also something you can say in a meeting room that everyone will agree with, whatever the context.

[19] I had 'lizard' here for about 99% of the editing process. Who wants to write a soft magic story from the perspective of a lizard?

[20] But, to be clear, Martin said: "Targaryens are not immune to fire. [This

seems unlikely. The far more cohesive and narratively interesting interpretation is that ***Bitter Work*** sets up a character arc point for Zuko and ***The Eclipse*** sees it through.

[27] It ***was*** explored in the first season, but given the isolated storytelling of Korra, referencing past character arcs, which are seemingly dealt with on a season by season basis, is not good storytelling.

[28] Well, not quite.

[29] Though the ***A Song of Ice and Fire*** series is a great example of a world where the gods might not be real but magic is seemingly channeled through them anyway.

[30] This generalisation should be taken as such: a generalisation. For the reasons detailed following, it is true that this ***tends*** to be the case, but there are enough examples of powerful polytheistic figures that anyone would be wrong to take this as an absolute rule. For example, Pharaohs often grew their legitimacy by reference to the Egyptian pantheon, either being a god incarnate or blessed by the gods. The position of Pontifex Maximus in Roman society was an immensely powerful (though not particularly political) position, especially in the absence of a secular leader.

[31] Yes, Ares was important, but remember how we were discussing that what really matters are the concerns of the average farmer on an ordinary day? They were far more concerned with Apollo, who was associated with the sun and music, and Artemis, goddess of the hunt, which brought them food.

[32] Otherwise known as discount Catholicism.

[33] Michael Kirkbride's lore writings for ***The Elder Scrolls*** series brought this definition to light for me. That series uses it brilliantly and is highly recommended to anyone with a passion for fascinating lore.

[34] The Internet: god of 'I'm pretty sure I read somewhere…'

[35] This series has a markedly unsatisfying ending.

[36] Writers often begin from the starting point that the 'normal' society has to be a mainstream human society that could be identified with today's modern culture, but this is not always the case. It would fascinating to see a world in which humans are the hidden society (e.g. ***Daybreakers***).

[37] Though it should be noted he at first wholly confirmed them by locking her up and basically torturing her. He was smart, though, so that part didn't turn out to be true. He later turned a little nicer.

[38] Even though the removal of memories, however trivial, is arguably an intense violation of personal liberty and rights in the Enlightenment tradition. Carr and Burkell would be rolling in their graves, except I don't think they're