The Canis-lupus duality: A narrative history of the wolf

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Abstract

The literary depiction of the wolf has always been a reflection of the cultural regard for the Canis lupus. In Europe and Greece, the wolf was used to characterize unsavory qualities and was correlated to death or punishment. In religious references, the cunning viciousness of the wolf demonstrated how humans should behave themselves, as well as how to recognize and avoid such characters to prevent falling victim or suffering dire consequences. Asian, Russian, and Native American narratives portrayed the wolf as a noble creature that embodied a reverence for nature, family, and a higher power. The dual modalities of Canis lupus have continued to permeate modern narratives. Well-known fairy tales have undergone various revisions, and qualities of the wolf are embedded in characters of popular literature series including Harry Potter and Twilight. The duality of the wolf continues to be a means to illuminate the internal struggle between good and evil.

Key words: Fairy tales, myths, wolf, Canis lupus, animal, culture

The gift of narration has been a means of both representing and preserving a society’s culture throughout time. Animals have long been used in myths and fairy tales to both represent a variety of human characteristics and to teach moral lessons. Of all the animals to be employed for such a purpose, the wolf, or Canis lupus, has the unique distinction of having served antithetical roles. There is value in examining the utilization of the wolf to epitomize a disgraceful human flaw or a noble aspiration in that a lineage of moral thought and philosophy can be traced through the history of civilization. Across a multitude of civilizations, communities have sought to instill a ubiquitous aggregation of mores regarding acceptable behaviors and desirable qualities. Cultural values and beliefs, as well as how the wolf itself is regarded in certain societies, can be elucidated from stories that have been created and shared. A historian, educator, scholar, or curious bibliophile is able to peruse the annals of a country’s myths, fairy tales, and stories to determine the societal issues and expectations for its people. Whether the wolf is revered as the exemplar or rebuked as the converse offers definitive insight to a society’s collective regard for the Canis lupus.

As early as 600 B.C., Aesop fables and other short stories that teach a moral at the conclusion render the wolf as a character to be wary of and avoided. Unlike mythological tales or well-known fairy tales, the fabled wolves are not necessarily atrocious. However, the fables do use the wolf to symbolize less desirable behaviors. Time and again the wolf is out-witted or injured or destroyed. He practices deceitful measures to lure his prey into his heinous plots; however he is always outwitted or undone and is never able to achieve his goal. The morals typically refer to being aware of charlatans, advice to never try to take the easy way out, there are compromises to be made when choosing between security and freedom, and devious deeds often backfire in a painful way (Ashliman, 2003).

In examining the wolf’s use in narratives, it becomes clear that the history of the wolf and the history of the world are intertwined. Many nations claim to have been brought into existence due to the phenomena of she-wolves nursing and nurturing future rulers and heroes. The mere act of suckling the she-wolves milk embodied young men with advantageous and propitious endemic qualities of the wolf. Initial rules of Persia,
Rome, Turkey, and Chechnya were regarded as intelligent, resolute, intrepid, and tenacious. With the essence of the wolf coursing through their veins, Cyrus, Romulus, Ashina, and Turpalo-Noxchou each gave foundation to their respective countries and went on to expand their borders in a dynamic display of courage and cunning (Bingly, 2003; Chechen mythology, 2012; Strauss, 1993; The Turkish Legend of Derivati, 2004; & Wolfchild, n.d.). In this respect, it would appear that the people of these countries both recognize and revere certain qualities of the wolf.

Mythology has characterized and stigmatized the wolf in a negative manner by way of using Canis lupus as a means to mete out punishment. Greek lore includes the story of King Lycaon, who attempted to trick Zeus into revealing himself while partaking in a feast. Lycaon had deceptively intermingled human bones and flesh with the meat offered to Zeus. In a paroxysm of rage, Zeus transformed King Lycaon and condemned him to take the form of a wolf (Lupus the wolf, n.d.). Greek sentiment would suggest Lycaon’s insidiousness, coupled with the implicit references to cannibalism, conjure up an image that is commensurate with that of the wolf.

Norse mythology has also used the wolf in stories of castigation. The father of two beautiful children, Sol and Mani, was subjected to the worst possible torture a parent can suffer. His children were taken from him by the Asagods, for he had angered the Asagods with his constant boasting of his children’s beauty. The children were dispatched to the sky and commanded to drive the chariots pulling the sun and moon. The hag of death, Gulvieg, set loose two wolves to pursue the children across the sky (Strauss, 2003). The premise of the story may be initially founded in a desideratum to explain the passing if the day into the night. However, the notion of being dogged by a rapacious beast for all eternity would intimate the Norse narrators were inclined to hold the wolf in less-than-positive light when it suited their purpose.

Wolves have long held a prominent place in folklore with regards to eternity, purgatory, death, and religion. Greek mythology describe Charon, the ferryman charged with transporting souls of the dead across the river Styx, as wearing a pair of wolf ears. In Egyptian culture, the wolf has been regarded as both the god of death and guardian of the underworld. Hecate, the goddess of death, has been depicted wearing three wolf heads (Greek wolf myth, n.d.; Wallner, 1988). Whether directly involved with death or used in an ancillary capacity, the wolf has been connected to the cessation of human life in a way that propagated a deep-seated fear in the minds of an impressionable society.

Some cultures assert the wolf epitomizes pure evil and is a creature actualized by the devil himself; the anti-Christ. A wolf pays no heed to restraint or self-control, giving in to every whim without conscious thought of right or wrong. The wolf is the perfect example of a creature that must be tamed, feared, destroyed, and avoided. He represents all abominations that moral and religious people should strive to quell within their own hearts and minds.

Perhaps one of the most prominent stories that exemplify the power of God over evil is entitled “Saint Francis and the Wolf.” Set in the Italian city of Gubbio during the 12th century, a ferocious wolf wreaked havoc on the town. It devoured animals and humans alike and had terrified the townspeople to the point that they were incapable of venturing past the city walls. St. Francis volunteered to go out into the woods to meet the creature. Upon seeing it, he made the sign of the cross and spoke to the wolf in the name of Christ. Instantly, the wolf became meek and docile. It followed St. Francis back into the city where he was cared for, fed, and remained until he died of old age (Egielski, 2005). The lesson to be learned here suggests to readers that persons who humble themselves and endeavor to refrain from yielding to sinful compulsions will be embraced and cared for by good, moral people.

Even the most innocuous of fairy tales can be laden with religious motifs and connotations. Seventeenth century Europe was dominated by the question “what is the truth of the human heart?” It was a time when writers and storytellers strove to illuminate the exigency of decrying human passions over human reasoning (Literature, the 17th Century, n.d.). It was a time when the immoral enemy had to be named, and a simple story could condemn that enemy.
For instance, “The Three Little Pigs” is a tale that pointed out the vilest of creatures as that enemy—the wolf. Each pig built his own house, choosing different building materials that reflected their different levels of good judgment and preparedness. The first two pigs were compelled to build quickly and use unstable items, and they promptly met their demise by means of the edacious wolf. The third pig made a wiser choice and survived the attempted incursion by the wolf. However, the lesson to be learned is not the importance of being assiduous. The lesson in this tale is that the wolf is our most ferocious enemy because of what it represents: “asocial, unconscious, devouring powers we must learn to protect ourselves against” (Bettleheim, 1976, p. 42). We must control our ego and refrain from giving in to the pleasure principle.

The European version of “Little Red Riding Hood” mimics similar religious warnings. Perrault’s French version of the fairy tale depicts the wolf’s voracious appetite as being synonymous with gluttony. The use of phrases such as “the greedy wolf consumes them” is testament to the deadly sin represented by the wolf (Bettleheim, 1976, p.42). The German version, as recorded by the Grimm Brothers, also intimates the wolf is punished for his gluttonous behavior. The characters’ dialogue contains religious references such as referring to the wolf as an old sinner and speaking to sinful impulses (Cashdan, 1999). Not only do these renditions reflect the mores of the people, but they also explicate their opinions concerning the qualities of the wolf by using the creature to typify that which is most abhorrent. The consequences of giving in to such depravity are both a physical and a spiritual death.

Fenrir, a Norse deity, is connected to prophesy closely symbolic of a religious Armageddon. Loki, a Norse god and the son of two giants, was the father of Fenrir, who was a monstrous wolf. Legend has it that Fenrir was so vicious and frightening to all the other gods that it was decided he must be shackled or imprisoned in order for all others to remain safe. Consequently, no chain or rope was strong enough to keep Fenrir restrained. At the request of the gods, dwarves provided a magical ribbon that was strong enough to bind Fenrir. At the time of Ragnarok, an egregious battle between the gods and the giants likened to modern day Armageddon, Fenrir will finally break free and join forces with the giants to bring about the end of the world. It should also be noted that when this epic battle ensues, the wolves that had been chasing Sol and Mani will swallow the moon and sun (Fenrir, 2012; Lupus the wolf, n.d.). Only the most feared and diabolical creature could be used in this myth.

Japanese, Native American, and some Russian folklore have all but exonerated the wolf as the degenerate creature other cultures have made it out to be. These particular countries and cultures regard the wolf as a noble, intelligent, and courageous creature that deserves to be respected and revered. Their tales and folklore portray the wolf to be one that is protective of its family, helpful to those who need it, and capable of recognizing people’s true nature as opposed to the façade behind which they may hide. That is not to say Japanese, Native American, and Russian people disregard the potentially dangerous side of the wolf. They recognize and acknowledge the inherent malevolence a wolf may possess, while still understanding the wolf’s rightful place in the world.

Ôkami, the Japanese word for wolf, has been the subject of many folktales. According to the stories, the ôkami resided in the mountains and hills, and did not approach humans unless there was a need. Nonetheless, when a person became lost or had mistreated and turned away from society, ôkami appeared and lead the wondering souls to safety or offered refuge. The ôkami shared their gift of seeing humans in their true form by providing deserving people with wolf eyelashes or eyebrows. Such a gift made it possible for people to be a better judge of character when choosing friends or companions (Ôkami, 2010; Strauss, 1993).

The cultural norms of Japan center on the importance of achieving social harmony, and Japanese ôkami folklore is a mechanism for teaching that philosophy in that the ôkami may revert to violent behavior, but only in relation to how they are treated by humans. Even the Japanese version of “Little Red Riding Hood” has an alternate ending where the wolf survives and apologizes to Little Red for his wolfish behavior. She forgives him, and he promises to be good from that point forward. The lesson to learn in this version, and Japanese ôkami folklore all together, is that people are to be kind towards one another and forgiving (Cashdan, 1999).
Native Americans’ tales of the wolf demonstrate their reverence for the natural order of things, as well as their regard for the noble character of the wolf. As with Japanese and Russian culture, the wolf is a creature possessing potentially frightening qualities, but the wolf also has a plethora of powerful attributes that benefit those who respect the wolf for what it is. A Lakota tale speaks of an injured woman being nursed back to health and gaining gifts from the wolves that made her more powerful than her tribe’s medicine man. She was able to use the ways of the wolf to defeat him and become the tribe’s shaman (Strauss, 1993). Several tales from various tribes of Native Americans extol the same premise where the traits of the wolf can be taken in to gain strength and power to better help the people, as well as stories of wolves being helpful to the Native Americans by being intermediaries, nurturers, and protectors (Casey & Clark, 1996). The relationship between the Native Americans and the wolf is symbiotic in nature, and continually cultivated through the passing-down of ancient folklore.

Russia has fairy tales and stories that capture both the positive and negative mindset regarding the wolf. In shorter fable-esque tales, the wolf may be portrayed as gullible or deceitful, but numerous stories have been passed down from generation to generation where in the wolf is benevolent and valuable to the Russian people. One such tale is  “Ivan, the Firebird, and the Grey Wolf.”

This story narrates a course of events in which Ivan constantly finds himself in a dilemma because he will not listen to counsel and gives in to the temptation to attain material riches. The grey wolf saves Ivan at every turn, and in the end, the self-sacrificing grey wolf ensures that Ivan gets everything he needs in order to have a fulfilled life. Granted, the wolf ate Ivan’s horse early on in the story, but that was a choice Ivan had made. And the wolf helped Ivan destroy his brothers in an unsavory manner, but the grey wolf was loyal to Ivan throughout the story (Strauss, 1993). The interesting twist in this tale is that it is Ivan the human, rather than grey wolf the wolf, who cannot control his impulses. The twist effectively illustrates how the wolf delineates the most desirable qualities a person can possess.

This saga of using the wolf to characterize both admirable and unsavory characteristics continues to permeate modern literature, and the direction in which an author writes is contingent upon the morals and values the author wishes to illustrate. Many well-known fairy tales and stories have recently been adapted to reflect modern thought: Roald Dahl’s Revolting Rhymes (1982) finds the same greedy, gluttonous wolf fall victim to a modern-day, savvy Little Red Riding Hood who takes matters into her own hands. The same premise is found in James Thurber’s version of the tale where Little Red shoots the wolf with an automatic pistol (Cashdan, 1999). Religious veneration has been replaced with self-reliance, but the wolf is still used to characterize detestable qualities that need to be squelched.

Similar renditions of “The Three Little Pigs” have been published over the past few decades. In these, the wolf is continually demonstrating the desire to gobble up anything and everything in sight, but these contemporary piglets are armed with state-of-the-art artillery and have forged alliances with far craftier animals (Delessert, 2008; Osmond & Osmond, 1999). Children may be better able to relate to the more current settings and events while still understanding the lesson being offered.

The dichotomy continues as to the type of character a wolf should represent. On one hand, traditional tales are being revised to keep pace with the changing times, but a new genre of wolf tales has evolved in children’s literature. Humorous stories have been written or re-written from the wolf’s point of view that allows the reader to see into the mind of the wolf. The narratives give the wolf a human quality in that the wolf is able to express anguish over being misjudged or mistrusted because of prior events from its ancestors (Nickl, 1982; Taylor, 1996). The wolf struggles with the internal conflict of resisting the urge to behave instinctively like a wolf and behaving in a way that is socially acceptable, often resorting to defensive appeals (Scieszka, 1989; Shashkan, 2012). Finally, several children’s books now tell the wolf’s tale wherein the wolf makes peace with his own identity rather than being miserable trying to emulate the thoughts and behaviors of others (Krensky, 2007; Lee, 2000; & Lie, 2010). Old or new, these stories are still a valuable venue by which students can learn beneficial lessons necessary for everyday life.

Books for adolescents and adults continue to incorporate the wolf into the fabric of the story, often times infusing aforementioned suppositions about the wolf. Rudyard Kipling’s Jungle Book, first published in
1894, tells the story of Mowgli, the man-cub raised by wolves after he had been found in the jungle, which reflects directly back to both the nurturing instinct of the wolf and ancient myths, stories, and fairy tales that have communicated the same quality.

The Harry Potter series employs a unique treatment of two separate ancient mythologies. One of Harry’s professors happens to be a werewolf. His name is Remus Lupin, whose name harkened back to the Roman mythological story of Remus and Romulous. Professor Lupin tried desperately to refrain from becoming a vicious beast, and he sided with those fighting evil. His nemesis, on the other hand, joined forces with the evil side. A werewolf himself, Fenrir Greyback was a savage creature that willingly embraced his condition and made it a point to attack as many people as possible. His name and behaviors are aligned to that of Norse mythological creature Fenrir (Rowling, 2005).

The Twilight series by Stephanie Meyer is permeated with the Native American’s beliefs about the wolf, as one of the main characters, Jacob, is a Native American shape-shifter who transforms into a wolf in times of danger. The character of Jacob embodies the agility, strength, and protectiveness of a wolf who dedicates himself to protecting Belle, the female main character in the series. He struggles with taking his rightful place within the pack, but eventually resigns himself to the idea that he is destined to be a leader in his own right (Meyer, 2005, 2008). It is this acceptance of his destiny that helps him evolve.

The Canis lupus is possessed with a duality like no other animal. The wolf has imbued stories and tales across the world for centuries. Many cultures can be identified by their regard for the wolf and their subsequent use of the wolf to perpetuate the beliefs and values of the group. The literary conundrum occurs when deciding whether or not the wolf is to be adored or despised. At this point in the narrative medium, it may very well depend upon the purpose for calling upon the wolf in a story, for it can represent both good and evil and symbolizes the internal struggle between the two.
References


Biography

Dawn Bessee is a K-12 Literacy Specialist with the state of Arkansas in the United States, providing professional development training and instructional support for public schools and teachers. She holds a Bachelor of Music Education degree in both vocal and instrumental music, as well as additional endorsements for mid-level literacy education, through Arkansas State University. She has a Master of Education in Reading degree from Harding University, and is currently a doctoral student in the process of completing her dissertation through Arkansas State University.

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