Who is the beast? The portrayal of animals in multicultural folklore

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Abstract

Since ancient times, animals have played significant and complex roles in the lives of humans. Animals inhabited human’s living spaces as helpmate, sustenance, enemy, or companion, and they dwelled in people’s unconscious in dreams, as symbols, or as a reflection of self. Traditional literature that features animals can teach much about humanity and its place alongside its animal kin. This paper examines the multi-faceted relationship between humans and animals as reflected in the folklore of various cultures.

Key words: animals, folktale, traditional literature, culture

Introduction

In Keith Baker’s picture book, Who is the beast? (1993) a young tiger journeys through the forest, overhearing comments of fear and warning about a beast. “The beast, the beast, I hide from sight” (unp.). When the tiger arrives at a pool and looks at his reflection in the water, he wonders if he is the beast. Was everyone talking about him? He comes to realize that he has much in common with the other animals in the forest, the same whiskers, stripes, tail, and strong legs, and concludes that they are all beasts. Do animals and humans have similar questions about “who is the beast?”

Humans have had complex and varied relationships with the animal world since ancient times. They inhabited our living spaces as helpmate, sustenance, enemy, or companion. Animals dwelled in our unconscious in dreams, as symbols, or as our reflected selves (Smith, 2011). In some cultures, certain animals were glorified, while others were vilified. Humankind’s complex relationship with animals is reflected and projected in folk literature
where animal characters exhibit human strengths and frailties and teach lessons about how best to live our lives. This paper will examine the multi-faceted relationships between humans and animals as reflected in the folklore of various cultures.

**Child development perspective and the human-animal bond**

Animals play a variety of roles in human lives; they may be helpmates, family members, or objects of the hunt. Melson (2010) explored this contradictory relationship between humans and animals, and noted that some animals are tended and cared for and then slaughtered for consumption, while other animals are cosseted and pampered during their lives, then mourned when they die. For children, animals may be objects of fascination or best friends. According to Melson, the field of child development has been humanocentric, focusing on children’s relationships with other humans, parents, siblings, and friends. She argues that a biocentric developmental perspective is needed, and there is a need for research about children’s relationships with animals since the existing research is limited and dated. Melson points out that it is not only real animals that are such a prominent part of children’s lives. Children are also drawn to stories of animals in literature and folklore. In stories, animals play various symbolic roles. Sometimes they represent the beast within—a reminder of humanity’s kinship with animals and our animal nature.

**Psychoanalytic perspective and symbolism of animals in folklore**

Bettelheim (1975) also examined the symbolic nature of animals in folk and fairy tales. He contended that the critical responsibility in raising children is helping them find meaning in life. Bettelheim noted that if children learn to understand themselves as they develop, they become more able to understand others and form satisfying relationships. The fairy tale fosters this development because it helps children to make sense of their feelings. Bettelheim states that fairy tales “carry important messages to the conscious, preconscious, and unconscious mind on whatever level each is functioning at the time” (p. 6). Bettelheim notes the significance of animals in fairytales, in the way creatures great and small help children understand themselves and their world. To the child, an animal may represent freedom since animals are able to roam freely in the world and behave in ways that society would disapprove for the child, such as public excrement or sexual acts. In some stories,
these animals are able to serve noble purposes, such as a guide to the folktale hero with whom the child identifies. As the child begins to explore her own world, the notion of an amiable guide makes the world seem a more benevolent place. Bettelheim also remarks that the fairy tale gives dignity to small achievements, such as befriending an animal, which implies that remarkable rewards will follow, as in the tale of Puss ‘n Boots (Perrault, 1990).

Franz (1996) notes young children consider animal stories particularly appealing, and claims that they represent the “basic material, the deepest and most ancient form of tale” (p. 36). She uses a Jungian lens to interpret fairy tales and believes that animal stories represent archetypal human tendencies, so that a greedy tiger in a story actually represents our own tigerish greed. Melson concurs, noting that humans have long endowed animals with emotional power (2010). Animal symbols project our deepest fears, wishes and conflicts, so that our own image is mirrored in them. Even modern metaphors reflect that projection, according to Melson. Therefore, we use expressions such as “hogging the road,” “wolfin g food,” or “chickening out” (Melson, p. 145). These metaphors persist because animals played such a dominant role in the environment of human evolution that humans are hardwired to animals as a category of thought and emotion (Bowerman, cited in Melson, 2010).

Native North American’s perspectives on animals

Deloria, a member of the Standing Rock Sioux, argues that, in contrast to many of the world’s cultures, Native North Americans have traditionally perceived themselves as fundamentally related to all other living species, committed to treating animals and the natural world with respect, and carefully observing and learning from that world (Deloria, 1992). Bruchac (1992), whose heritage is Abenaki, explained this relationship by describing spiritual beliefs of American Indians and contrasting them with Western cultures. According to Bruchac, the creator deity often referred to as the Great Spirit or Great Mystery is all-present, and is part of all things. Since the Great Spirit cares equally for all aspects of creation, no hierarchy exists among living things that would place humans above animals and the natural world. Instead, humans have a responsibility to show respect to animals, even those that humans hunt in order to live. Some plants and animals are
considered ancestors, and stories of animals becoming human and humans becoming animal are a significant part of Native American folklore. Parents and elders frequently told children stories that taught them to respect the animal and plant world. They also told stories with animal characters whose behaviors showed children how the world came to be and how they should behave in the world. These teaching stories emphasize the virtues of the animals, and children are encouraged to be wise, gentle, or brave in a similar fashion to certain animals and birds (Deloria, 1992).

Since Native North Americans observe their environment and the creatures within it and model their behavior after them, the social systems of some tribes are patterned after the animal behaviors they observed, and the people organized themselves in clans identified with that animal (Deloria, 1992). In the northeastern United States, home of the Seneca Nation, clans are a traditional social unit. Groups of families in the mother’s lineage form the clans, which are named after animals that provide special assistance to the Seneca. They are divided into two categories, birds and animals (Seneca Nation of Indians, 2012).

**Folktales that feature animal characters**

Whether a culture holds great respect for animals and considers them relatives as do the native North Americans or view animals as subservient to humans, most cultures include animal stories in their body of folk literature. A listing of stories featuring animal characters can be found in catalogues of folktales that are classified by tale type. The *Index of Types of the Folktale* is the classic catalogue devised by Finnish folklorist Aarne Antti (1910) and revised by American folklorist Thompson (1961) that is commonly known as the Aarne Thompson (AT) tale type index. This index was further edited by Uther in 2004 (ATU) to include more international tales. Both catalogues assign numbers 1-299 to animal tales. The ATU list includes subcategories for wild animals, the clever fox (other animal), wild and domestic animals, wild animals and humans, domestic animals, and other animals and objects. Listed under the category of tales of magic is the category of supernatural husband or wife that assumes the shape of an animal before transforming to human. Perusing these tales reveals the similarities of stories told in countries around the world.
Literary forms

Animal tales assume a variety of literary forms, including fables, pourquoi tales, beast tales, and transformation tales, such as the animal bride stories. Fables, such as the story of the tortoise and the hare, are characterized by their focus on a moral. The objective of the fable is to teach a lesson, so they are, by their nature, didactic (Lukens, 2013). The characters are usually personified animals who display traits of human behavior. Their characters are not well developed because the point is to highlight how certain behaviors lead to consequences, as in the case of the greedy dog who wanted the bone he saw in the mouth of a dog that appeared in the water when he looked down. When the dog opened his mouth to snatch the bone of the dog in the water, he lost his own bone. The moral of the story is that greediness doesn’t pay.

Pourquoi tales explain how something in nature came to be, and these tales carry a strong lesson about behavior, even if they lack a stated moral (Keifer, 2010). In a story from the Muskogee people, the animals and the birds organized a game of lacrosse to settle the question of which group was superior. After the animals formed sides, bat flew to the animals to play on their side, but the animals pointed out that he had wings, so he should play on the birds’ team. However, when he flew to the birds, they mocked him and told him that his fur and teeth disqualified him for their team, so bat returned to the animal team. The animals allowed him to sit on their sideline and wait to play if they needed him. Although the birds and animals battled all day, no team scored, but at dusk, the animals had difficulty seeing to defend their goal, and birds were about to make the winning goal. That is when bat entered the game. Since he was able to see well in the dark, bat stole the ball from the birds and scored for the animals. As a member of the winning team, bat was chosen to determine what the losing team’s punishment would be. He decided that birds must leave the land for six months every year. As the story goes, since that time bats come out at dusk to see if anyone needs them to play ball.

In beast tales, such as the European tale of The Three Pigs, or animal stories from Africa, animals play a variety of roles. At times a clear message is conveyed—you must take precautions to avoid danger, such as the wolf; you must not give in to foolish rumors, as did Chicken Little’s friends; if you won’t help do the work, don’t expect any of the Little
Red Hen’s freshly baked bread. African folktales often feature the wise creature/foolish creature motif in which one animal, often a small one, outwits a larger animal (Kiefer, 2010). An example of such a story is *Who Lives in Rabbit’s House?* (Aardema, 1977). In this story, rabbit’s house has been taken over by a mysterious, malevolent creature. Several large and powerful animals, such as the leopard, rhinoceros, and elephant are arrogant in their attempt to oust the creature, but it is modest frog who solves the problem that the larger animals could not.

Joel Chandler Harris’ collection of Brer Rabbit tales from the American South (adapted by Parks, 1987) actually served as a narrative code in which animal tales would sound like amusing beast tales to slave owners who heard them, but had a different meaning for the slaves telling the stories. In many of these stories the clever trickster Brer Rabbit, who represented the powerless slaves, was able to outwit and humiliate the foolish bear and wicked fox who represented their owners and overseers. The classic example of such a story is the tale of Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby. In this story, Brer Fox created a figure made of tar, suspecting correctly that Brer Rabbit would get into a fight with the tar baby and get stuck in the gooey tar. However, when he came to retrieve the captured rabbit, Brer Fox began to speculate about the best way to kill him. Clever Brer Rabbit agrees with Brer Fox’s ideas to roast him, drown him, hang him, or skin him, anything but throwing him in the briar patch. Since the briar patch appears to be the fate Brer Rabbit most fears, the brutish Brer Fox does just that, only to hear Brer Rabbit sing as he capered away, “Bred and born in the briar patch,” and realize that Brer Rabbit had outsmarted him once again.

**Transformation tales**

Perhaps the most powerful of the folk tales featuring animals are transformation tales. Such transformations are evident in the French and German tales of Beauty and the Beast or The Frog King. Bettelheim (1975) suggests that the animals in these stories represent human’s bestial nature, and reflect a conflict that accompanies the integration and acceptance of sexual desires and behavior into the personality.

Von Franz (1996) analyzed the Russian tale of the Frog Princess, but this tale does not include an acceptance of the animal bride/groom’s nature. In this story, the tsar’s youngest
son must marry a frog, much to his dismay. However, when his bride is asked to weave fabric or bake bread to impress the tsar, she sends her husband to bed, sheds her frog skin, calls her handmaidens to assist her, and astounds everyone with the beauty of her work. Her most amazing accomplishments come at a formal dinner when she appears as a beautiful princess who dances beautifully and creates a picturesque lake on the dance floor-complete with swans- by waving her arms and loosing some wine and food she has hidden in her sleeves. Her husband is so delighted with her human form that he burns her frog skin so that she cannot resume her frog persona. Unfortunately, this act means that she must leave him because she is under a spell cast by her father, but she tells Ivan where he might be able to find her. After a long journey during which he is helped by an old man and by three animals to which he shows mercy, the young tsar destroys her father and wins back his bride in her human state. Von Franz comments on the female anima represented by the frog figure and her creative force and the conflict between the “upper father,” the tsar, and the “lower father,” the princess’ father (p. 110). The nature of the animals that assisted the prince’s rescue efforts are worth consideration. They included a bear, a falcon, and a pike, representatives of land, air, and sea. The prince’s kindness to the animals is repaid by their role in helping him to be reunited with the princess, in her human form.

In stories where there is a transformation from person to animal or vice versa, the change makes sense to children or to members of a culture who recognize that all beings are inhabited by the same spirit. In Native American tales, transformation tales do not typically represent being cursed or under a spell, most likely because there is not a sense of hierarchy between humans and animals. Norton (2009) describes transformation stories as threshold tales in which characters move in and out of the animal world and typically show the bonds between humans and animals. For example, in a tale from the Haida people of the Pacific Northwest titled Salmon Boy (http://www.firstpeople.us/FP-HtmL-Legends/SalmonBoy-Haida.html), a boy who ignores his parents’ teachings that he show respect to the salmon they caught and ate drowned one day and became one of the Salmon People. The Salmon People taught him how to be respectful, and eventually he returned to his own family as a healer who showed the people how to respect the gift the Salmon people give them. When he died, the people placed his body in the river as he had taught
them, then he circled four times--a sacred number--and returned to the Salmon people. In this type of story, animals teach people the proper way to behave.

**Conclusion**

Animals have played and continue to play important roles in the lives of humans, and this significance is reflected in the folk literature of the world. In fables, pourquoi tales, beast tales, and transformation stories, the fascination with and interconnections between humans and animals is given creative expression. How the relationship is portrayed is heavily influenced by the culture in which the tale originated. Readers and listeners of stories that feature animals can learn much about humanity and its place alongside its animal kin.
References


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