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ENGL 310-D1

17 Feb. 2018

The Psychology of Folkloric Creatures

Creatures of folklore are not just spooky entities that skulk in the dark; they often represent elements of humankind—fears, desires, and vices—that we prefer not to acknowledge. Although many folkloric beasts are described as having sharp teeth, furry pelts, or supernatural powers, their qualities can be more human than we would assume. As displayed in "The Company of Wolves," "The Crookened Back," and "Sleeping Beauty," creatures from differing time periods and cultures are connected by common tropes and attributes of the human condition. Many old folk tales do not provide much character development or personality for a reader to glean from, but Ellen Handler Spitz argues, "since when is action exempt from psychological scrutiny?" The lack of insight into the minds of many folkloric creatures requires us to make sense of their behavior by projecting our own thoughts, feelings, and cultural customs onto them.

When Angela Carter introduces the wolves in "The Company of Wolves," she describes their eyes in vivid detail through examples of "candle flames," "moonlight," and phosphorescence (Carter). People across cultures usually consider eyes to be pathways to the soul and conveyors of emotion. This focus on the eyes humanizes the wolves to a degree and contrasts—whether intentionally or not—the animalistic descriptions of their "slavering jaws" and "grizzled chops" (Carter). Despite the wolves' eyes being the most humanlike aspect of their

makeup, they are also the only feature that stays unchanged after the metamorphosis from wolf to man. This fact encapsulates their dual nature. No matter how human they appear to be, they can never truly disguise their animal tendencies.

The wolves are ravenous, yet they are not entirely lost to reason. Just as people do, they can feel fear or sadness. They are not ignorant of the awful constitution of their earthly forms, but they are powerless to resist their instincts. Many of them are psychologically trapped within "a vast melancholy…infinite as the forest, endless as these long nights of winter" (Carter). Not all choose their fate; an entire wedding party is turned into wolves by a spiteful witch, and they are made to "sit and howl around her cottage" for days (Carter). The wolves' habitual melancholy and inner torment are comparable to the villagers and their constant state of fearful vigilance; one feeds off the other. Redemption and grace are what the wolves desire, but the humans can only grant it to them with the knives they use to kill them.

The wolves share traits with the villagers, but the darker, more predatory side of humankind displays itself in the wolf who targets the protagonist and her grandmother. He wagers a bet inconspicuous enough to avoid raising the protagonist's alarms, but the reward he requests of her is a kiss—a kiss from someone surely much younger than he and therefore more easily manipulated. Terri Windling explores Little Red Riding Hood's adolescent vulnerability through the pins and needles concept; she writes, "in some versions [Little Red Riding Hood] chooses pins, in other versions she chooses needles, and in a few versions the bzou chooses the path for her." With pins representing maidenhood and needles representing sexual maturity, we might say that the protagonist has chosen—or has been manipulated into choosing—the path of needles. Is the choice really hers, or is it the wolf's? Considering her receptiveness to his advances, the answer may be both.

At the end of "The Company of Wolves," the protagonist exerts control by throwing the wolf's clothes into the fire, forever trapping him in his bestial form. It is debatable how much agency she has in this situation. She "tames the predator by appeasing his sexual instincts," but there is no other choice afforded to her in which she would survive (Hammack). However, it is quite possible that she is not accepting the wolf because she has to, but because "she shares his hunger" and wants to join in his ways (Hammack). Even though he has killed her grandmother, perhaps she feels some sympathy for him. The line "she will lay his fearful head on her lap" suggests a connection between her tenderly grooming him and her awareness of how the wolves detest their own forms (Carter). Or maybe the wolf is fearful because she has just damned him to living a lifetime as a beast, wielding more power over him than he ever expected.

Similar to "The Company of Wolves" in the vein of females reclaiming their fear, Peggy Barrett in "The Crookened Back" controls the narrative through her regular retellings of the Phooka. Her usual calm demeanor differs from the distressed disposition she exhibited the night she encountered the creature; her home and family provide safety from the dangers outside. The Phooka's appearance on the eve of May Day is likely "a projection of her own strong emotion" due to her grief over losing her husband the Easter prior (Hammack). It is possible to say Peggy feels she has more power over the Phooka by telling her story of it, compared to how helpless she was to prevent the attack. Although Ragan writes that the Phooka is often characterized as a "mischievous goblin," it can also be associated with the Devil or malignancy—which more accurately portrays the intentions of the animal Peggy saw that night ("The Crookened Back" 25).

Peggy's story could also be her own justification for the condition of her back; rather than acknowledging the natural aging process, she credits an imaginary creature that rode upon

her shoulders until her back could not straighten again. In this case, the Phooka symbolizes fear of aging and losing vitality. This issue affects women in particular due to misogynistic pressure to stay young and beautiful. Once you are in your thirties and forties, you are considered defunct. It is worth noting that in her youth, Peggy was not only beautiful and "well-shaped," but she was known as "remarkable" for being a "thrifty housewife" ("The Crookened Back" 21). The loss of her husband and her status as a proper housewife, along with the subsequent disfigurement of her back, might have damaged her identity and self-worth. The Phooka manifests both as her grief and her fear of losing her place in the world.

The prince's mother in Perrault's "Sleeping Beauty" is a more extreme example of a woman who has an aversion to being replaced. By writing the mother as an ogre, Perrault emphasizes her envy and distaste of the princess; it is shown throughout the tale that she possesses "Ogreish inclinations" and can hardly control her desire for human flesh (Perrault). She is likened to a beast that has little reasoning and wants whatever it can have. She embodies one-half of the folkloric dichotomy depicting the evil mother (or stepmother) who longs to have her daughter's beauty and the respectable daughter whose desirability is threatened and sought after. This trope is another branch of the sexist belief that women have an expiration date. Perhaps Perrault rationalized this message by making the mother an ogre so the reader does not sympathize with her; we should be relieved when the mother kills herself by jumping into a vat of venomous snakes because goodness has prevailed.

The queen asks the kitchen clerk to cook the princess and her children so she can eat them for dinner; in many cultures, people believe eating certain organs will impart the characteristics or abilities of those organs to the person who consumes them (Windling). This is a reversal of the cannibalism that occurs in "The Grandmother's Tale," where Little Red Riding

Hood's consumption of her grandmother symbolizes "the necessity of the female biological transformation by which the young eliminate the old" (qtd. in Windling). By ingesting what she assumes to be the princess and her children, the queen eliminates the new generation and secures her role within the kingdom. This reversal cannot last, however, and the queen must die instead. The prince, though now without a mother, comforts himself with "his beautiful wife and his pretty children"; the cycle is complete (Perrault).

The literary tactic of creating symbolism from nonhuman creatures serves multiple purposes; it makes stories and characters relatable, provides moral lessons for young readers, and challenges the thought processes of older readers. "Fairy tales speak directly and indirectly to the psyche," and this is what makes it easy to connect fiction with reality (Spitz). When we understand how the big bad wolf is a warning against predatory men and how the ogre mother presents a statement about ageism, it becomes clear that folktales are dynamic models of life rather than meaningless narratives. Beasts do not just disturb us because of their savage nature; they disturb us because they are reminiscent of ourselves.

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