

The Werewolf: A Symbol of Nature

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As sometimes happens, the unconscious symbolism that lingers beneath the surfaces of the stories we tell harbors modes of thought that contradict our conscious desires. The substance of this unconscious symbolism is often lost in the pursuit of abstracting meaning and developing interpretations that align with what has already been unconsciously accepted. The werewolf narrative is not unlike any other story humans have been telling for thousands of years; and the meanings and interpretations attributed to the werewolf over its existence in folklore and literature have been, just like the creature itself, metamorphic. However, one major interpretation that continues to evoke interest to this day is the Christian interpretation which arose during the medieval period.

In his essay *The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crises*, Lynn White Jr. traces the influence that the Christian ecological perspective, and the biblical texts from which is derived, has had in the man-nature relationship over the past several hundred years that Christianity has been a dominant force in the occident. The focus of his analysis is Christianity's exploitation of nature for man's progression to God's proper ends, destroying pagan animism in the process, replacing it with a system where humankind is alienated from nature. White considers the medieval view of man and nature to still be very much a part of modern thought, inimical to modern existential concerns like climate change and pollution, thus concluding that "we shall continue to have worsening ecological crises until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve men." (White 14). By way of White's approach, I aim to make a similar conclusion, however, focusing instead on the underpinning effects this ecological

perspective has, and continues to have, on Christian interpretations of the werewolf. For the werewolf under the influence of Christian interpretation is itself a minor part in the greater misunderstanding of nature and animals in the occident.

The substance of the Christian ecological perspective that White dissects conceives nature and non-human lifeforms, animals, only as tools, serving no other purposes than those that serve men. The assumed dominance that man has over nature becomes easily justified, in the Christian mind, via reference to the earliest lines in biblical text. In Genesis, God commands newly created man to “fill the earth and subdue it, have dominion over the fish in the sea, the birds of the air, and every living thing that moves on the earth” (Genesis 1:28). Divine proclamation sets in order a hierarchy, where man occupies an upper strata and animals the lowest. Though the hierarchy thickens, expanding beyond simple subordination, “for whatever the man called each living creature, that would be its name,” thereby controlling the identity of animals; and by reigning over the identity of animals man also conceptualizes his own identity and animality (Genesis 2:19).

Having thus established himself as a dominant power in earthly affairs, man’s disassociation from that lowly position of animals becomes further refined in subsequent passages of Genesis, where after having bitten into the fruit of knowledge, Adam and Eve have their eyes “opened,” both suddenly realizing “they were naked; so they stitched fig-leaves together and made themselves loincloths” (Genesis 3:7). Their eyes are opened, specifically to a reality wherein, through nakedness, the knowledge of possessing genitalia, and the ancillary knowledge of the copulative functions that genitalia serve, is finally grasped. Until succumbing to temptations of knowledge, genitalia and sexual reproduction aren’t known in relation to men, but known only in the contexts of animals. Realizing now that they themselves share with

animals the fundamental function of sexual reproduction, Adam and Eve are shown as not that different from, not as superior to, animals then once thought; and both react by covering up the genitalia which remind them of that fact.

When man falls from his anointed, greatly elevated position and into the ranks of beasts – even symbolically – an abhorrence that defies the commands of God results. The symbolic fall from human grace developed in the medieval period as the dominant metaphor of the Christian interpretation of the werewolf narrative, where “wolves consistently represent those who had fallen so far from God that it was safe to say that they were damned” (Wiseman 141). The possibility of man degrading to a natural state, base animalism, thus disrupts the hierarchy. Likewise, Natural wolves in the medieval period were especially prone to negative interpretations in fictionalized accounts due to their assumed association with the devil, and general attributions of rapaciousness and brutality. Wolves served as easy targets, vessels into which medieval storytellers could dump human sin.

Literal, physical transformations of the werewolf were never entirely accepted by the church, and there was great debate on the subject of man-animal metamorphoses. At the heart of this debate was the church’s interpretation of souls. The human soul was seen as superior to those of animals, and that an animal and human soul might combine was an abomination to the mind. Likewise, man-animal transmogrification seemed theologically impossible. Literal transformations belonged mostly to the pagan world, where Christianity’s man-nature relationship held no authority. However, the werewolf concept still had use in Christian society, where Christian writers would deny pagan interpretations, adjusting the metamorphoses to a holier cause, “compelled to search for what these stories might mean or represent. Metamorphoses thus becomes metaphor... popular accounts stress the reality of the werewolf.

Clerical writings, however, insist on its illusory nature” (Sconduto 25). Pagan and other folklore werewolf stories, once strong, lost exigency to Christian interpretations of the time and their underlying metaphors, the fundamental convalescing of man (superior) and animal (inferior).

The 16th century tale *The Damnable Life and Death of Stubbe Peeter* is a fine embodiment of damnation through metamorphoses. Within this narrative, werewolves are said to be those individuals abandoned by the Lord, despising his proffered grace, and instead following their own hearts and imaginations; evil is almost exclusively connected with being in the likeness of a wolf, and it is in this state of being that the main character of the story, Stubbe Peeter, commits most of his vile acts.

Christian interpretations of the werewolf narrative additionally stem from unresolved views of man’s place in the dichotomy between natural and supernatural. Man is neither a part of the spiritual world or the natural world. He occupies an undefined realm that perforce leads to an unresolved state of being. This inability to sufficiently classify oneself within either of the two contrasting ends of reality leads to man’s de facto alienation from the natural world, from animals. In non-Christian thought alienation is impossible, and the natural wolf could not be made separate from humanity, thus could not be attributed to an inferior status, that of which Christian interpretations of the werewolf depend. In American Indian culture, for instance, wholeness is stressed, all things are equal, and man and beast are one. In this culture, the wolf does not serve as a horror story. Instead, natural wolves are used as story telling devices, not evil, but simply existing as a part of the wholeness, acknowledging the “essential harmony of all things... being of equal value in the scheme of things, denying the opposition, dualism, and isolation (separateness) that characterize non-Indian thought” (Allen 243). Pueblo culture saw in natural wolves a Wolf God, sometimes acting as a guardian spirit, possessing the power to cure

illnesses when called upon in religious ceremony. The wolf is a part of the harmony, able to assist the interests of man, his brother, not at odds with these interests. Christian ecological perspectives support the view that natural wolves and man's equalized state with animals are useful storytelling devices insofar as they provoke fear and anxiety – only possible with hierarchies in place – rather than cohabitation with creatures and nature.

The Christian interpretation of the werewolf contradicts the immediate, ecologically aware concerns that humans face today, existing as an anachronism of the medieval period. The werewolf then, is man's continued misunderstanding of wild animals – wolves – and the relationship he has with them, and his own animalism, all of which has hitherto been largely suppressed by man's domineering stance in all matters ecological. Beneath the surface of modern scientific understanding, we still, in a way, harbor fear of animals and nature. The Christian interpretation of the werewolf legitimates this fear, deeply in its metaphorical substance; and despite society's ostensible shift towards more secular perspectives, this deeper substance remains. It cannot be doubted that we possess the ability, the knowledge necessary for understanding what has been long misrepresented, yet a dominant view of the werewolf is still one of Christian condescension.

The werewolf need not be put to rest, but should be viewed more often with alternative interpretations, ones that remove themselves from the Christian ecological perspective. Rather than reinforce fears and misunderstandings of nature and animals, the werewolf should embrace something like the American Indian way of thought, where every story tells that “each creature is a part of a living whole and that all parts of that whole are related to one another by virtue of their participation in the whole of being” (Allen 247). Animals – wolves – are not things to which man can be debased; he is already on equal footing. Alternative werewolf interpretations

can show positive transformations, long-awaited reconnections of man with his natural environments after hundreds of years under Christian repression, thereby doing away with the interpretation where man is degraded by nature.