

THE WEREWOLF: AN EXPLORATION OF MYTH AND LEGEND

Abstract

Some modern researchers have tried to explain the reports of werewolf behaviour with recognised medical conditions. Dr Lee Illlis of Guy's Hospital in London wrote a paper in 1963 entitled On Porphyria and the Aetiology of Werewolves, in which he argues that historical accounts on werewolves could have in fact been referring to victims of congenital porphyria, Stating how the symptoms of photosensitivity, reddish teeth and psychosis could have been grounds for accusing a person of being a werewolf. This is however argued against by Woodward, who points out how mythological werewolves were almost invariably portray as porphyria victims. Others have pointed out the possibility of historical werewolves having been people with hypertrichosis, a hereditary condition manifesting itself in excessive hair growth. However, Woodward dismissed the possibility, as the rarity of the disease ruled it out form happening on a large scale, as werewolf cases were in mediaeval Europe. People with Down syndrome have been suggested by some scholars to have been possible originators of werewolf myths. Woodward suggested rabies as the origin of werewolf beliefs, claiming remarkable similarities between the symptoms of that disease and some of the legends. Woodward focused on the idea that being bitten by a werewolf could result in the victim turning into one, which suggested the idea of a transmittable disease like rabies. However the idea that lycanthropy could be transmitted in this way is not part of the original myths and legends and only appears in relatively recent beliefs. Lycanthropy can also be met with as the main content of a delusion, for example, the case of a woman has been reported who during episodes of acute psychosis complained of becoming four different species of animals.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Werewolves, also known as lycanthropes, have been a fascinating aspect of folklore and mythology across cultures for centuries. These mythical creatures, human beings who transform into wolves during full moons, embody a mix of fear, fascination, and primal instincts. The origins of werewolves can be traced back to ancient times, with various cultural interpretations and beliefs surrounding their existence. This essay delves into the history, origins, cultural representations, psychological aspects, and modern-day influences of the werewolf myth.



Figure 1

II. HISTORICAL ORIGINS

The roots of the werewolf myth can be found in ancient cultures, dating back to prehistoric times. Early tribes believed in shape shifting abilities and the existence of humans with the power to transform into animals, particularly wolves. These beliefs were often intertwined with animism and nature worship, where animals were revered for their mystical qualities.

The Ancient Greeks were among the first to embrace the werewolf myth, attributing its origin to the legend of Lycaon, a king cursed by Zeus for serving him human flesh. The term "lycanthropy" itself is derived from this myth. The notion of werewolves spread throughout Europe during the Middle Ages, with various legends and stories emerging in different regions, each adding unique characteristics to the creatures.

III. CULTURAL REPRESENTATIONS

As the werewolf myth traveled through different cultures, it evolved and adapted to reflect the beliefs and fears of each society. In Scandinavian folklore, the concept of the "berserker" arose, warriors believed to transform into bears during battle, paralleling the werewolf concept. In Slavic and Balkan regions, the "vukodlak" was a werewolf figure associated with dark magic and malevolence.

Native American tribes also have their own versions of werewolves, such as the "skinwalkers" of Navajo mythology, who could transform into any animal, including wolves, to cause harm and chaos. The diversity of cultural representations adds richness and complexity to the enduring fascination with these mythical beings.

IV. PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS

The werewolf myth touches on several psychological aspects of the human mind. One prominent theme is the duality of human nature. The transformation from human to wolf symbolizes the conflict between civilization and the primal instincts inherent in every individual. It reflects the human struggle to reconcile the conscious, controlled self with the wild, untamed subconscious desires.

The idea of uncontrollable transformation during the full moon may also represent the human fear of losing control over one's actions and identity. This fear of losing oneself to external forces or inner demons resonates deeply with the human psyche, making the werewolf myth a powerful allegory for inner struggles and personal transformation.

V. MODERN-DAY INFLUENCE

Despite the advancement of science and rational thought, the werewolf myth continues to capture the imagination of contemporary society. The concept of werewolves has thrived in literature, movies, and popular culture, cementing their place in the modern zeitgeist. Films like "An American Werewolf in London," "The Howling," and the "Twilight" series have contributed to the werewolf's enduring popularity.

Furthermore, the werewolf's allure persists in the realm of psychological and philosophical studies. The metaphorical implications of the werewolf as a symbol of transformation and the inner struggle between good and evil have been explored by scholars and writers alike. The werewolf myth remains relevant as a means to understand human nature and confront our primal instincts in the face of societal norms.

VI. CONCLUSION

The werewolf myth is a timeless tale that transcends cultural boundaries, originating from ancient beliefs and evolving throughout history. This mythical creature continues to captivate our imagination and speaks to the intricate relationship between humanity, nature, and our primal instincts. From its historical origins to its diverse cultural representations, the werewolf myth has left an indelible mark on human consciousness.

The psychological aspects of the werewolf narrative remind us of the inner conflicts and transformations we all face as individuals and as a society. The persistence of the werewolf in modern-day literature and pop culture is a testament to its enduring power as a symbol of fear, transformation, and self-discovery. As we continue to explore the depths of the human psyche, the myth of the werewolf will undoubtedly remain a poignant and thought-provoking reflection of our complex nature.

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