

# Truth and Symbolism: Mythological Perspectives of the Wolf and Crow

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*Truth and Symbolism:  
Mythological  
Perspectives of the Wolf and  
Crow*



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Abstract:

This thesis explores crow and wolf symbolism within the mythology of Western Tradition, focusing on the Bible, Greek and Roman mythology, Native American folklore, Shakespeare, and Aesop's fables. Much of the animal imagery in literature is negative and does not truthfully represent the animals symbolized. This thesis investigates why these negative associations are formed, how they relate to the biological lives of wolves and crows, and explores their ambiguity in relation to the positive symbolism that exists. Negative symbols acquire strength as cultures grow further away from the land they live on and focus on industry and humanity instead of the world around them. The behavior of both wolves and crows is secretive, causing people to create stories to explain their actions. Furthermore, humans use these animals as a "shadow" to themselves, bestowing characteristics upon them which are found in human nature but are generally considered unacceptable.

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## *Table of Contents*

Acknowledgements	2
Introduction	4
Why Crows and Wolves Together?	7
A Note on the Mythologies Explored	8
The Importance of Symbolism: Freud and Jung	9
Questions Answered	11
A Note on Crows and Ravens	13
A Note on the Biology	13
The Evil Symbolism	15
Evil and Death Symbolism of the Crow	18
Evil and Death Symbolism of the Wolf	26
Reflections	35
The Trickster	37
The Crow as Trickster	40
The Wolf as Trickster	46
Reflections	53
The Good Crow and Wolf	54
The Good Crow	56
The Good Wolf	61
Reflections	68
In Conclusion . . .	69
The Effect of Sedentary Societies on the Relationship Between Humans and Animals	71
The Effect of Uncertainty	73
Additional Reasons for Wolf and Crow Symbolism	74
Crow and Wolf Symbolism Today	75
Timeline	80
Endnotes	81
Bibliography	85

## *Introduction*

Throughout literary history, authors have used animals to express meaning. Primitive drawings made thousands of years ago, the first recorded symbols humans used to express themselves, show a proliferation of animal imagery, and ever since that time the litany of animal symbolism has done nothing but grow in scale and complexity. Much like the myths found in every culture, this symbolization operates to make sense out of the uncertainty of the natural world. To represent an animal through symbols, humans have often taken the most obvious characteristics that animal displays as representative of the animal and have then infused them with meaning congruent with the human culture. This process takes thousands of years, and since the first creation of animal symbolism, each culture has added its own twists before passing it on to the next generation. However, the symbols that are eventually created are often more arbitrary than accurate, frequently layered with negative stereotypes that are not wholly deserved.

The crow and wolf are two such victims of this trend. Both animals were and are common in many parts of the world and so it is not surprising that they appear in such disparate settings as the Bible and Native American tradition. Both have been given reputations as black as the crow's feathers, and ones that are not wholly deserved. Why is it that these two remarkable animals have been blacklisted by much of Western mythology when in reality they do no measurable amount of harm to the human race? What purpose is served by painting the wolf as a vengeful killer and the crow as a harbinger of violent death?

The only image that comes to many people's minds when they think of wolves (*Canis lupus*) is as a group of rapacious killing machines, ravaging the countryside for

the next easy prey to rip into shreds. For centuries, wolves have been feared by humans, hunted down nearly to extinction in many parts of the world in the name of protecting people against the hungry wild that stalks their doorstep at night. People fear for the lives of their cattle and sheep, domestic pets, and even their children and themselves when they know wolves live in their area. They feel that they are fighting an evil force, their own personal battle waged in the name of good. By and large, however, the hysteria surrounding wolves is undeserved, a misunderstanding perpetuated throughout the ages by oral tradition and, later, mass media. Despite the widespread fear of wolf attacks on people, there is not a single documented case of a human being attacked or killed by a wolf anywhere in the United States, ever, which gives one the basis for assuming that the same trend is true in the rest of the world as well.<sup>1</sup> The wolf from stories such as “Little Red Riding Hood” and “Peter and the Wolf” is largely an imaginary creation that exists only in fairy tales and stories.

In light of this, what has fueled the hatred and fear of wolves for so many centuries and in so many parts of the world? Is it their teeth and claws, and the simple fact that a wolf has the power to take a human life if he so chooses? Is it simply part of a tradition that goes back so many centuries that it has become a part of the collective human unconscious? Or does the answer lie deeper, buried under layers of resentment and competition for food sources and final dominion of the animal kingdom?

The common hatred felt towards the American crow (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*) is an even more difficult enigma to tease apart. While the common crow can hardly be called a threat to humans or to their livestock, it has acquired an equally unpleasant reputation. The crow is not as famous as the wolf, but its reputation has become just as

distorted. If one were to poll a large group of people on their opinions regarding crows, the most common reaction would probably be a shudder and a response of, “I hate those birds.” Ask why and the likely response is, “I don’t know. They’re just unsettling.” Once again, the bad reputation of the crow exists mainly because society has “chosen” to view them negatively. The most common household mythology today, the Walt Disney movie collection, has used the crow in many ways to further this evil imagery. What other bird could fill the place on Malificent’s shoulder in *Sleeping Beauty* besides the crow? The recent movie entitled *The Crow* has also continued the trend of negative association for a whole new generation.

But what is it about the crow that brings images of death and destruction to people’s minds? The answer to why crows have been blacklisted is less obvious because they can’t be said to pose any direct threat to human life. However, as with the wolf, certain aspects of the crow make it an eligible candidate for castigation and misunderstanding. Is it their obvious black color and haunting caw that associates them unpleasantly with death and carnage? Is it their frequent visitations to the carcasses of dead animals? Or do they, like the wolf, suffer now in legend and stories because they offered competition to humans long ago?

However, the images in mythology are not always bleak. Outside of more recent Western mythology, many societies have not had such a negative association with wolves and crows. Crows are important messengers, in the Greek culture as well as in Celtic and Scandinavian societies. Wolf symbols denote power and nobility to those who wear them in some corners of the world, including the Asiatic and Greek peoples. This mix of positive and negative associations, sometimes even in the same culture, complicates the

symbols that are formed. What is it about these cultures that allow positive crow and wolf imagery into their mythology that is different from those who view crows and wolves negatively?

### *Why Crows and Wolves Together?*

Crows and wolves are intertwined in that the reality of their lives and behaviors have been shifted into a completely different form by human perception and the resulting symbolism. Their lives in legend and literature have become completely separated from the truth about their behaviors, simplified to stand for one facet of complex lives and re-imagined for the benefit of stories and myths. While most people take the legends about these animals as fact, their lives are significantly more elaborate than most people care to imagine or explore.

Biologically as well as culturally, these two animals rely on each other for their very lives. Crows are not capable of ripping through the tough skin of most animals available as carrion and so rely on other canids in the dog family to do this for them. The wolf and coyote in particular are called on to tear a carcass apart so the birds can reach the meat inside the skin.<sup>2</sup> Conversely, wolves use the calls of crows and ravens to find carcasses to feed on. With their sharp vision and ability to fly, crows can spot dead animals much more quickly, and are known to caw loudly until a carnivore appears to help them reach the meat inside. This mutual dependence on each other helps to bind the two species together and provides a basis for the connections found in literature and human culture.



Crows and wolves are also connected in that they are little understood or appreciated by humans. The misunderstanding of these complicated animals serves to fuel untrue myths as people create reasons for what they do not understand. Of course, many other animals, if not most, share this fate to some degree. The shark is another animal that has been castigated by society and vilified by movies such as *Jaws*. Other animals have been given very positive images when in fact they may deserve less respect; the male lion is considered the “king,” but in reality it is the lionesses that do most of the hunting, although only when there is not enough carrion to keep the pride alive. Even beyond these facts, more reasons exist which tie the crow and wolf together. They appear in several literary texts together, as far back as *Beowulf*. A line from this ancient poem reads, “...but the black raven, eager for the doomed ones, as he shall say much to the eagle of what success he had at feeding, when he, with the wolf, plundered the corpses.” This line does much to explain the link between the two animals that exists in cultures as well as in the minds of many people and is perpetuated in influential texts. The crow and the wolf are placed in the same category: the symbolized threat of death and destruction.

### *A Note on the Mythologies Explored*

The literary sources used for this purpose have been chosen with an eye towards which mythological sources have been most influential and lasting in the cannon and therefore have had the greatest impact on succeeding generations. Greek mythology has had an immense impact on Western thought and literature and includes crow and wolf symbolism in a variety of ways. Aesop’s fables are perhaps the most famous writings ever to focus specifically on animals. His personified animal fables are a perfect example

of the characteristics that early culture designated to them, making them an invaluable resource for exploring animal symbolism. Many of the parables and stories in the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, include crows and wolves, and due to their interpretive aspect are likewise very important for designating how people would consider these animals as they enter the next two thousand years. Both also come up time and again throughout Shakespeare's plays. Shakespeare had a particularly important role in defining the literature of the next few hundred years, and his references to animals in a different time period give a different angle on much of the earlier symbolism. Native American myths prove important to this investigation because the Native Americans were so invested in the natural world around them, and so come at the development of wolf and crow symbolism from a significantly different viewpoint. They give concrete standing for their positive imagery and offer an argument to explain what might otherwise remain obscure, showing how the ambiguous nature of crow and wolf symbolism can be explained.

### *The Importance of Symbolism: Freud and Jung*

While the relationship between humans and nature as a whole is growing increasingly more distant, today's animal symbolism has been infused with the interactions, points of view, and fears of all the people who have come before our time. As Freud says, symbolism is an ancient way of expressing something both in and in waking consciousness.<sup>3</sup> The same symbolism can be found in all areas of life within a given culture and can be seen in the fairy tales, folklore, songs, and poems of that culture.<sup>4</sup> Symbols are handed down from generation to generation and preserved in oral

and written tradition. They may be expanded upon and changed to fit the needs of the culture, but their inherent value stays the same. The symbols of crows and wolves in Western culture serve a unique purpose in the collective cultural psyche. The mythology that has created the foundation of literature is vitally important because it can reveal interesting expressions of the psyches of these earlier people and provide a basis from which to judge ourselves.<sup>5</sup> Aged forms of “psychic life” represent an earlier form of that which is now possessed by people today.

Using the same basic philosophy, Jung expands on this and broadens it by using the concept of the “collective unconscious,” a layer of unconsciousness in which all people share and is present in everyone on earth. This deep connection ties humans together and helps to explain why the same images and symbols are important in many different cultures.<sup>6</sup> He then ties this idea into the importance of myth in these societies:

Primitive tribal lore is concerned with archetypes that have been modified in a special way. They are no longer contents of the unconscious, but have already been changed into conscious formulae taught according to tradition. . . . Another well-known expression of the archetypes is myth and fairytale. . . . The archetype is essentially an unconscious content that is altered by becoming conscious and by being perceived, and it takes its colour from the individual consciousness in which it happens to appear.<sup>7</sup>

This quote describes how commonly held beliefs and fears that have become part of the collective unconscious then ascend into myth.

Put together, the philosophies of Freud and Jung explain why symbolism and mythology are important even in today’s society. It explains a part of who we are and who we were, binding the human race together through commonly held desires and fears. Mythology then is the vehicle through which these ideas are freely discussed in the real world and as such becomes an important window into human nature in the past and present, and offers hints about where we may be headed in the future.

## *Questions Answered*

Originally, the negative connotations surrounding crows and wolves may have come from the simple fact that they competed with humans for food sources. Wolves actively attack many of the same animals that humans have hunted for sustenance and entertainment. Deer are an especially important example of this. Even today, hunters lament the introduction of wolves out of fear that the game populations will decrease. Crows eat many of the same vegetables, fruits, and nuts which were so important to gathering societies, as well as being a constant threat to grain farmers today. The sense of competition may have been integral to the development of a negative relationship between humans and their wild counterparts. Later, they began to take their fill from farms on a much more consistent basis than that with which wolves have attacked domestic livestock, as attested to by the prevalence of scarecrows even today.

Wolves and farmers have always had a competitive relationship that has done nothing but increase in animosity. Wolves are still vilified by farmers in many countries for killing livestock, even though statistics show that wolves are one of the lowest causes of mortality with which farmers need to concern themselves. Parallel to this perception is the fact that when humans live closer to the land, they have more respect for the animals that share their world. Prior to farming, most societies appreciated the positive attributes of these animals alongside the negative. Since modern society has settled down and become dependent on farms for food, humans have grown further away from the animals and protected their stocks of food ferociously as a sense of ownership has grown. The

result is a more adversarial relationship now than ever existed when man and animal were hunting together for similar food sources in using similar methods.

Humans may also feel threatened by the striking resemblance of these animals to humans. There are very few animals that have as many human characteristics as crows and wolves possess. Crows are one of the smartest bird species, and are even capable of creating simple tools to reach food sources they wouldn't be able to otherwise reach. Similarly, wolves have a very complex society and have been shown capable of advance planning and pack maneuvering to bring down large prey. The complicated social structures of both animals are yet another reason why humans feel uncomfortable with them.

Finally, the root cause of much of the confusion lies in the simple fact that most people do not understand these animals and their complicated behaviors. Wolves have become better understood in recent years as ecologists have struggled to return them to their important niche in the wild. Projects such as the reintroduction to Yellowstone National Park and other areas have increased awareness and proven the importance of predators in maintaining a healthy balance of other populations. However, this information still needs to get to people for it to be effective.

Crow behavior and society is still largely a mystery to even the most interested biologists. Few studies have been done until recently and still lag behind studies done on equally populous species. Although many people see their behavior as annoying and abrasive, the truth is that most of crow behavior happens in secret, behind the cover of trees where it is very difficult to observe what is happening. Because of this, people have

needed to make up reasons to explain the behaviors they witness, much as Native Americans did to explain natural phenomenon in their myths.

### *A Note on Crows and Ravens*

Crows and ravens share many characteristics, most notably their dark plumage. Although their behavior and lifestyles are somewhat different, the birds are basically identical except for their size; ravens are noticeably larger than crows. Because these two birds look so much alike, they are often used interchangeably in stories, especially in Europe, and so crow and raven myths have been considered in the same category here as well.<sup>8</sup> Native American mythology gives the raven and crow distinct characteristics, but beyond this very little distinction is made in literature. In the following pages, “crow” is used unless a myth specifically mentions ravens. All biological information refers to the American crow.

### *A Note on the Biology*

The biological facts and references in this thesis are by no means meant to be a comprehensive exploration of the complicated stories of these animals. These facts are used to explore the symbolism in mythology, debunk untruths and shed light on the reality of both their positive and negative attributes, and give the reader an appreciation of wolves and crows just as they are. Much more can be said about every part of the lives of these animals and an attempt to draw a complete picture of their existence based on the facts presented here will be incomplete. Please refer to the biological sources listed in the Bibliography for more information on wolves and crows.

This thesis attacks the perceptions of wolf and crow symbolism in two ways. First, the development of the symbols have become nearly divided from the truth of the animals throughout Western culture. The texts mentioned above have been examined to yield answers as to why crows and wolves have been symbolized in the way they have been. The aspects of the animals have been explored and compared to these myths in an attempt to understand why the symbols developed as they have. By taking a closer look at the factual lives of crows and wolves, one can locate which facets of these animals have been focused on for symbolization, and which have been ignored as unimportant or inconsistent with the images society wished to create. In doing this, an accurate picture of the fiction and falsehoods surrounding both crows and wolves can be formed so that each can take responsibility for their true behavior, apart from how society has decided they act apart from the true facts.



## *The Evil Symbolism*





Jung's theory of the shadow is very useful in explaining why the wolf and crow have been associated with negativity. They have been delegated the task of serving as scapegoat for the problems we see in ourselves but wish not to admit. Instead of recognizing that while the wolf and crow have some violent, less appealing characteristics that we, as fellow animals, share, society has burdened them by castigating them for their faults, in essence expunging them from our own culture. "The shadow is a living part of the personality and therefore wants to live with it in some form. It cannot be argued out of existence or rationalized into harmlessness. This problem is exceedingly difficult, because it not only challenges the whole man, but reminds him at the same time of his helplessness and ineffectuality."<sup>1</sup>

Jung refers to the dark unconscious in every person that is ruled by primal desires as the shadow, the part of human nature that most people turn away from and pretend not to recognize even though it is an integral part of the human psyche. Every human is responsible for this to some extent, and because of this the shadow has become part of the collective unconscious. Once a part of the collective unconscious, the shadow is eligible to become symbolized through mythology, and it has been. The shadow has been well developed in virtually every mythology around the world. It is important to note, however, that the collective unconscious reveals itself in completely different ways in separate cultures. It therefore makes sense that the wolf and the crow are not as villainized in other parts of the world as they are in Western tradition: for example, in Native American tradition, the wolf and crow are seen in a much more positive light. However, the unique experiences of this culture and the values it holds have caused the negative energy expelled from the subconscious to light upon the wolf and crow.

This process allows humans to continue believing themselves to be inherently good while providing an outlet for their otherwise frustrated unconsciousness that is more “user friendly” than repression or denial. Jung also notes that the process of shifting the shadow onto another entity is likely to result in “paranoia, suspiciousness, and a lack of intimacy.”<sup>2</sup> This is exactly what has occurred with the crow and wolf. The reality has been distorted by culture to reveal feelings of fear, revulsion, and distrust when neither animal truly deserves these reactions.

## *Evil and Death Symbolism Of the Crow*

The crow has been used as a sign of evil and death for thousands of years, especially by European and American culture. Others seem more forgiving of the crow and include more positive aspects as well. However, Europe was the first home of “civilization” and has been further away from the earth for longer. Aside from this, the obvious reason for the trouble crows and ravens find themselves in is simply because of the color of their feathers. In a medieval world paralyzed by superstition and fear of the unknown, these black birds came to be considered as representatives of evil in the same way that black cats became associated with witches. As priests and other leaders praised the “light,” warning their parishioners away from darkness, the crow became an unwitting victim to society’s habit of taking religious instruction very literally. Many of the superstitions from hundreds of years ago have never died and still circulate prevalently today in modern society.

Myths based on the evil presence of the crow have been present in Western tradition for thousands of years, passed down through generations. Ancient folk tales claim that crows can smell death through the walls of a house, and a crow flying into or perching on top of a house indicates that someone living there will soon die.<sup>1</sup> English legend says that if ever the ravens kept at the Tower of London should fly away, the current reign of the king or queen would end in the very near future. To this day, the ravens at the Tower of London have their wings clipped to keep them prisoners within the Tower grounds.<sup>2</sup> Although this may seem like an inverted compliment to the crow, their departure is responsible for ringing the death knell of an entire monarchy, signaling

not only the demise of one individual but also a time of change, mourning, and transition for the country as a whole.

The human tendency towards this view of crows and ravens is nowhere better symbolized than in the names that culture has given groups of these animals: a group of crows is called a “murder” while a pack of ravens is referred to as an ‘unkindness.’ These titles are based, once again, on the myths of European culture. It was believed that groups of crows would try other crows that had come onto their territory, as if in a court proceeding, and would then kill them if they were found guilty.<sup>3</sup> There is a certain amount of truth in this belief, for crows can be very territorial in the summer months and will often chase vagrant crows and neighboring groups from their territory. Between 1981 and 1983, Kilham witnessed forty-five aggressive territorial encounters with a particular family group he had been studying for years. While he documented a large amount of vocalizations, diving attacks, and “swooping melees” between the two groups, not a single crow was injured, let alone killed.<sup>4</sup>

One of the most concrete reasons that people have associated crows with death is that crows constantly ally themselves with death and decay of their own accord. Crows and ravens are both scavengers and will indiscriminately pick at road kill, corpses on battlefields, or even other dead crows. It is not uncommon to be driving along a road and see a black cloud of crows surrounding a freshly killed animal off to the side. Field hospitals and cemeteries, described in eerie images by disgusted onlookers, are also notoriously favorite haunts of crows. While from a biological viewpoint, the crow’s willingness to eat virtually anything is very helpful in terms of survival, it does nothing to improve its reputation with the human race.

One of the oldest and most respected sources of symbolism, church teachings and beliefs offer an insight into the opinions of thousands of people with regard to crows. Ukrainian Christians have tied the story of Adam and Eve to the crow's blackness; they believe that before the Fall, crows were entirely white and had a very sweet call, but immediately after the expulsion of the chosen pair, they began eating carrion, which turned them black and soured their voices.<sup>5</sup>

While the crow symbolism present in the Bible covers quite a large range, including some very positive imagery, aversion to crows is by far the most common reaction of the writers. The Old Testament in particular, with its typical fire and brimstone approach to life, has its share of evil crow symbolism:

But the desert owl and hoot owl shall possess her,  
The screech owl and raven shall dwell in her.  
The Lord will measure her with line and plummet  
to be an empty waste  
for satyrs to dwell in.<sup>6</sup>

In this passage, God issues the judgement on Edom, and its punishment is filled with death, blood, and rage against the enemies of Zion. In the midst of this horrific description, the raven is given a special mention. Although no humans are allowed to pass through the cursed land, it is declared the haunt of several infamous creatures, including owls, jackals, and wildcats. This is a country filled with death and decay: no water runs, nothing can grow, and people have been forbidden to enter. However, the animals named all have a special significance, and none more so than the raven.

While day still comes to this land, one can only picture it in half-light, as the smoke from the incessant burning clouds the sun out of the sky. The raven is thought of as a creature of the night, associated with death and decay, and because of this it is

natural that he is given a home in the most forsaken of locations. The Lord has cursed Edom, and will only allow His enemies admittance to its hellish landscape. In naming the raven as God's enemy, this imagery makes a connection between ravens and the Devil. Both are associated with evil, dark, godforsaken places, and Edom certainly fits this description.

The writer of Isaiah does not include the raven by accident in choosing these animals. It is the raven's tendency to scent out decaying flesh that brings it into this particular context. Ravens and crows are part of the decomposition process in that they will more than willingly eat the flesh of any available dead animal. They are, in essence, creatures of decay. While the raven's presence in any landscape is not an imminent threat to most living animals, once a creature is dead its earthly matter falls within the realm of the raven's diet, and the bird will take full advantage of the meal provided.

More recent allusions to the crow in literature continue the growth of the death and evil symbolism of crows and ravens. Shakespeare, not an admirer of crows by any means, included quite an array of crow references in his plays and poetry, very few of which are positive. His writing shows the length to which many of the myths discussed above had traveled and their influence on the public at large, as well as creating just one more source of defamation for the crow. In Shakespeare's poem "The Phoenix and the Turtle," negative crow allusions come thick and fast:

And thou treble-dated crow  
That thy sable gender mak'st  
With the breath thou giv'st and tak'st  
'Mongst air mourners shalt thou go.<sup>7</sup>

The first line refers to crows as treble-dated, an allusion to their long life. While many species of birds live for a relatively short time, crows are one of the few birds that can

live for over 40 years.<sup>8</sup> This fact alone may add to the ambivalence that people feel towards crows and ravens; it seems almost uncanny for an animal to be able to live as long as some members of the human race.

Because they live for such a long time, it is especially important that they are capable of remembering and learning. Crows can acquire an extremely large amount of information, including when and where people put out the trash or which days of the week hunters are more likely to bring home a freshly killed deer: enough details to make any family feel as if it is being stalked by a black shadow. In a very real way, this is exactly what crows do. At Barnstable High School on Cape Cod, the custodians put out the trash from lunch in the early afternoon every day. The crows in the area have caught on and now wait anxiously as the appointed hour approaches for a fresh crop of garbage from which to feed.<sup>9</sup>

According to a note on the poem, the next two lines of this excerpt refer to the belief that crows were able to conceive and lay their eggs through the mouth, creating a new generation of “sable gender,” or black offspring.<sup>10</sup> In these lines, Shakespeare acknowledges the power of crows, even as he describes them as frightening, unnatural creatures, in that they have the ability to both make and destroy life with only their breath. While virtually every animal is capable of both reproducing and ending lives, few are able to do it as easily as with a “breath.” The use of this word implies that the crow is of a higher power, almost deity-like in its ability to play with the life-span of other creatures. There is a sense that the long life of the crow gives it the wisdom to decide when new generations should be born, and when old animals should die. The crow is elected above the normal system of life and given a power over the animals it oversees.

Even if the crow is not directly responsible for death or involved in the decomposition of dead things, his appearance in literature and myth is often a symbolic representation of tragedy. Authors are drawn to the crow as the figurehead for terrible events, certainly because of his tendency to visit the last earthly resting place of dead animals and feed on them. Finally, the last line is an example of the crow's association with mourners, and those who have lost someone to death. It is unclear in this passage whether the crow is there as merely an onlooker or as a symbol of death once again. Based on the crow's reputation, it seems likely that the latter has the stronger case. Due to their coloring, the crow matches the mourners in the cemetery as well, as all are dressed entirely in black.

Another piece of the raven's infamy lies in its raspy, dissonant call. Shakespeare noted the harshness of the raven's vocalizations in his play *Macbeth*. After being told that Duncan is on his way to the castle, she uses this analogy: "The raven himself is hoarse / that croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan / Under my battlements."<sup>11</sup> This comment begins Lady Macbeth's "Unsex Me" speech, and sets the tone for her evil plot to unfold. Because of its death iconography, the raven is the perfect bird to announce to the world that the king will soon be dead.

Ravens and crows, both possessing a very large vocal range with perhaps as many as fifty different calls, are one of the few birds whose songs are not listened to with joy by most people. Crows have a huge variety of vocalizations and have been recorded mimicking owls and even humans: crows in captivity can be taught simple words in the same manner as parrots.<sup>12</sup> However, the fact that the crow's vocalizations are extremely complex to the point of not being understood at all by researchers doesn't seem to matter;



by and large, crow vocalizations are merely “haunting.” Their most common call, the abrasive caw, however, can be very obnoxious, especially early in the morning when people are trying to sleep. As everyone with a family group of ravens or crows near their home knows, these birds do not get hoarse. Their vocalizations can last for hours without the birds seeming to be affected in the least. The fact that the raven which “croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan” becomes hoarse shows not only that something unusual is going to happen, but also that the death of a king is an event that the raven will have much to say about as a figurehead for death and change in monarchy. The very fact that the raven has been chosen as the messenger of the news reinforces his association to evil deeds.

Conversely, a hoarse raven cannot be as loud, if he can continue vocalizations at all. The fact that Lady Macbeth’s plot to murder the king is powerful enough to cause even the raven to become quieter and eventually stop vocalizing clearly indicates just how evil her plan really is. The raven is a symbol of amoral activities and Lady Macbeth has the power to silence him; this is a powerful comment on just how depraved her plan is.

Finally, the crow’s caw, in its harsh, grating way, is a sound of conclusiveness. It’s cackle, so often like a laugh, is not a sound anyone looks forward to regardless of the occasion. Far from the image of crows flocking to graveyards because they can smell death, the birds instead congregate here because of the multitude of trees and open areas: cemeteries provide ideal territories. However, their familiar mocking tone is just one more reason for people to become aggressively opposed to them, as it serves as a reminder of the question that haunts so many: what is the purpose of our existence if the

only certainty we are given is that we will die? The mocking caw of the crow denotes that it may know the answer, and as a whole people never enjoy others' knowing more than them, especially when the "other" is supposed to be stupid and uninformed. The possibility that the whole scenario is just one more joke played on the human race is as intricately a part of the human aversion to crows and ravens as their dark coloring and tendency to keep company with dead things.

## *Evil and Death Symbolism Of the Wolf*

The wolf is one of the most villainized and misunderstood animals on the planet today. Despite the complex social structure of wolf packs, the nurturing care they give their young, and the intelligence they display while tracking and killing their prey, many cultures continue to demonize these animals instead of honoring them for their elaborate understanding and strangely human social grouping. The proliferation of scientific studies on the wolf before their reintroduction in the western United States has done little to displace the suspicion and fear that has been rooted in our culture for decades.

A long history of misconception and myth has helped to portray the nature of the wolf as evil and sinister. Many cultures have feared the gaze of a wolf for centuries, and the fear that the stare of a wolf could strike one speechless pervaded Greek and Roman societies.<sup>1</sup> People who lived in the Middle Ages steered their horses clear of wolf prints, as it was believed that any horse whose hoof landed in a print would be crippled. Since that time, humans have shot wolves and displayed or buried them at the edges of their property and at the entrance to town gates in the hope that these totems would keep other wolves away. And one may also notice that wolf meat is not considered a delicacy in any part of Europe or the Americas, as it was thought to be poisonous.<sup>2</sup>

Stories such as “The Little Red Riding Hood” and “The Three Little Pigs” have circulated for centuries in different cultures and forms. They have been told to children from their earliest days for hundreds of years, indoctrinating them in the tradition of wolf hatred. How can one expect anything but fear of the wolf if children’s first association

with the animal is as a rapacious killer who stalks grandmothers and children and as a sneaky villain who will stop at nothing until his enemy is destroyed?

In today's culture, movies have served to carry on this torch, and no other single movie maker is more to blame than every child's favorite, Walt Disney. In *Beauty and the Beast*, wolves drive Belle to the enchanted castle when she trots down the wrong path on her horse, and it is the same pack that nearly ends her life and the life of the Beast later in the film. *The Sword in the Stone* portrays a hapless, salivating wolf that follows Arthur through the woods, always just missing his chance at a meal, and while he is not successful he certainly does nothing good for the name of the wolf. The list is endless.

Today's expressions are full of slurs on the wolf. "The wolf is at the door." "Who's afraid of the big, bad wolf?" "Don't wolf down your food!" "He is such a wolf!" Our culture has taken the mythology behind the wolf to heart and regularly uses it to describe dangerous situations, disgusting eating habits, and womanizing men. But wolf symbolism has penetrated even more deeply into our psyches and is evident in more telling and damning analogies as well: during World War II, groups of German submarines that hunted down British and American ships in the North Atlantic were called wolf packs by Allied troops.<sup>3</sup>

Because of the massive amounts of cultural myths and symbols that have found their way into civilizations, it is not surprising that the written tradition is also rife with slurs on the wolf, and every literary culture from Homer onwards adds some new twist on the already familiar theme. The Greeks and Romans had quite a few references to wolves in their mythology. The wolf was associated closely with the god of war, Ares to the Greeks and Mars to the Romans. While in a certain light this could be considered a

position of honor, the god of war's special pet took on many of its master's traits, which were often less than heroic. Edith Hamilton says this of the god of war: "Homer calls him murderous, bloodstained, the incarnate curse of mortals; and strangely, a coward, too, who bellows with pain and runs away when he is wounded."<sup>4</sup> According to this description, Ares, and his wolf by extension, loved to create chaos and bloodshed, and joyed in the pain and suffering of others. Many cultures exhibit the wolf as a bloodthirsty savage, but the image of the bloodthirsty coward adds another, even less respectable layer on top of this.

The wolf is also closely connected to Hecate, who was said to be able to turn into a wolf. Hecate is the goddess of the darkness of the moon and is associated with all that darkness implies. The ultimate witch, she is a symbol of evil, a harbinger of death and destruction.<sup>5</sup> Because of this, it is surprising that she is not more closely associated with the crow as well. The wolf, instead, receives the dubious honor of representing her and her connection to evil and hell. Hecate herself is a complex character in that she is closely tied to Artemis, the goddess of the hunt. These two characters represent the two sides of life and human nature: virginal purity and healthy competition versus dark, primal urges and wicked deeds. It is especially interesting then, that the deer, noted prey of wolves, is the animal most closely connected to Artemis. The wolf and the deer come to symbolize these two halves as well – predator and prey, innocence pitted against sinful knowledge, and in the end, good against evil.

In one of the only Greek myths that directly involve the wolf, Lycaon, king of Arcadia, is turned into a wolf by Zeus after having fed the god raw human meat for dinner. While many would say the king deserved this punishment for his cruel actions

and disregard for well-founded cultural laws against cannibalism, the fact that Zeus chose the wolf as punishment adds interesting commentary to the Greek's perceptions of the wolf.<sup>6</sup> The transformation into a wolf suggests that the Greeks believed the wolves were similarly cannibalistic, although this is far from the case. This perception may come from the impression that the wolf is a rapacious killer and will eat just about anything in order to get his next meal, combined with his reputation for viciousness and individuality.

This image of the ravenous, depraved wolf may have been made most famous by Dante, who includes a haunting description of the animal in the first canto of *The Inferno*.

Then suddenly a she-wolf showed herself,  
Bedeviled in her craving, rabid, gaunt  
The source of misery to many souls.  
The sight of her so paralyzed my will,  
I lost all hope of making the ascent . . .  
For on she came at me, relentlessly,  
And down she drove me, down into the dark,  
And down I fled to where the sun is silent.<sup>7</sup>

At this early point in his voyage, Dante has wandered off the path of righteousness and into the forest of sin. It is fitting, then, that the wolf is one of the three animals who block his path, the last, and the most formidable. Here, the wolf actively drives Dante further and further away from his goal of goodness, until he runs towards evil of his own free will. *The Inferno* is one of the most popular and well-read pieces of literature ever written; millions of people have been affected by Dante's decision to use the wolf as a metaphor for dishonorable actions and broken allegiance with light and goodness.

While the Greeks and Romans may have been one of the earliest purveyors of negative wolf symbolism and Dante continued the construction of evil imagery after their fall, Shakespeare had no trouble picking up where these masters left off centuries later. Some of his particularly well known characters helped to further along the wolf's infamy.

In one of their most famous speeches, the three witches in *Macbeth* illustrate succinctly the common perceptions of the wolf as an evildoer:

Witchcraft celebrates  
pale Hecate's offerings, and withered Murder,  
Alarumed by his sentinel, the wolf  
Who howl's his watch, thus with his stealthy pace,  
With Tarquin's ravishing strides, towards his design  
Moves like a ghost.<sup>8</sup>

Not only is the wolf once again connected to Hecate, but they are both inextricably linked to murder – Shakespeare has brought evil and death together, and once again, the wolf is used as the figurehead of this combination. As the wolf stands as the right hand attendant of “withered” murder, his howl symbolizes violent death. The use of this adjective implies that the wolf is far more than a sidekick; his presence is absolutely necessary to getting the job done. Murder relies on the wolf to carry out what it cannot accomplish alone. The wolf effectively becomes murder incarnate.

Shakespeare also alludes to the silent speed of the wolf, one of the most damning characteristics the animal possesses. The image of the swift, vengeful killer stalking its prey like a ghost, always just out of sight, has been used over and over again in movies and books to build tension for the audience. The wolf is unswerving, intelligent, and intent on his goal, and there will be no distracting him from his mission. The wolf has no one to blame but himself for this impression, however, because it mirrors quite closely how a wolf stalks its prey. Wolves hunt both in packs and alone, depending on whether they are part of a family group or are younger and more transient, as well as the type of prey they are stalking. Because the transient wolf is often alone on his quest for food, he must rely on the element of surprise more than those in a group, and quiet stalking of the

chosen victim is the most effective way to do this, whether large or small.<sup>9</sup> His success in the hunt, unfortunately, signals his castigation in the public eye.

Shakespeare was far from alone in this portrayal of the wolf. Aesop approaches the death symbolism of the wolf in the same vein – the wolf is the harbinger of death – but in the following fable, the author’s meaning is even more clear than the poetic vision drawn by Shakespeare:

The sheep in a particular flock were having a great deal of trouble with the local wolves and eventually asked a group of dogs to help protect them. The dogs were so effective that they made the wolves fear for their lives, and so the wolves send an ambassador to make peace with the sheep. “If you give us the dogs who are making our lives so difficult, we swear not to eat you or any of your children,” the ambassador proclaimed to the sheep. The leader of the sheep replied, “If you give us your faith on this matter, we will be content.” The deal made, the wolves killed the dogs and left the sheep alone. A few years later, the wolves which had been mere cubs at the time the accord was struck were grown, and they questioned their fathers about the deal. They insisted on eating the sheep, but their fathers tried to dissuade them, saying that they had already made peace and it wasn’t right to go back on their word. One night, under the cover of darkness, the young wolves slipped off to the sheep herd, and because the sheep had no protectors, every one was killed.<sup>10</sup>

This particular fable is first interesting because it is one of few allusions to wolves, in Aesop as well as most other traditions examined, that shows them in a pack, despite the fact that this is how most wolves live. The pack very closely resembles the nuclear family structure of humans, with the breeder pair and their children living together and the occasional older sibling staying on as a helper if there is no possibility for it to breed that year.<sup>11</sup> The omission of pack living in most references to wolves is curious – why would writers prefer to focus on the lone wolf and not the more common family living arrangement? Despite the capability of a wolf pack to take down larger prey more often, it is the lone wolf that is feared, because he lives in contrast to the way the vast majority of human society is run. Men and women who remain unmarried and



childless are often looked on with suspicion because they have strayed from society's expected norm. In this way, their fate is similar to that of the lone wolf – both are viewed with raised eyebrows. Group living is something humans are very familiar with, and if an image of a mother and her wolf pups at play was common in the tradition, the contradicting example of the vengeful killer would seem absurd. It is difficult to fear something so closely aligned with human society.

The brutality of the young wolves in Aesop's fable is severe in light of the deal struck by their fathers and brings up several interesting points. First of all, this fable portrays a lack of structure and discipline within wolf society. The younger males disobey their fathers with little difficulty, going against authority to get a meal. While the idea of anarchy certainly adds a layer of contempt for authority to the ideology of the wolf, it is far from the truth. In every pack, a very structured hierarchy is developed with the breeding male and female reigning as the alpha and beta members. Every other member of the pack falls into line after this, down to the lowest ranking wolf: the omega or scapegoat, which has the least respect and hardest life. Certainly, power shifts do occur as lower ranking wolves challenge those at the top of the hierarchy, but they are rarely successful and the challenger stands a good chance of being evicted from the group after a failed attempt.<sup>12</sup> In short, however, the head wolves do not tolerate insubordination, and the example given in this story would be very unlikely to happen in real wolf packs and the young wolves would either be put back in their place or run out of the pack. Any imagery that implies otherwise merely serves to undermine the truth and villanize the wolf even further.

The uprising of the younger wolves also shows a kind of mob mentality, that enough creatures together will do things that they never would alone. The sheep are defenseless due to their fathers' promise, and the younger wolves take advantage of this situation, destroying the trust created between opposing species and the hierarchy of the wolf pack in one swift move. Above all other negative messages that can be gleaned from this story, the most potent is that the wolf is not to be trusted. Sooner or later, despite any promises he may make, his hunger will get the best of him and leave a path of carnage in its wake. To a logical extent, this does make sense: wolves are predators and need to kill other animals in order to survive. However, they are more often unlucky in their efforts than successful, and even when they do capture and kill another animal, none goes to waste. Wolves are also very predictable in what they will kill, and humans are not on their list of favored fare. The fact that humans twist this logic to show only the negative side of the story shows the lengths to which people will go to undermine the wolf.

Despite the large variety of sleights and insults given to the wolf by Western tradition, the most common image of all is that of the rapacious, ravenous killer lusting after blood and death. This imagery is without question the most frequently used of all wolf symbolism. Allusions to this blood-thirsty version of the wolf can be found as far back as Homer and continue to thrive in today's culture. Unfortunately, this negative imagery is also often the only vehicle for any positive traits portrayed in stories: the intelligence, tenacity, and prowess of the wolf are most often only treated as the means to a gory end for some defenseless creature. The writers of the Bible, of course, could not help but implement such rich symbolism perfectly designed for their tales focused upon the fight between good and evil. Although the examples are numerous, one of the most

descriptive illustrations can be found in the book of Zephaniah in criticism of the city of Jerusalem: “Her judges are wolves of the night / that have had no bones to gnaw / by morning.”<sup>13</sup> Here, wolves are once again aligned with the evil forces of the night, placing them in the correct context for their gruesome deeds. They are voracious, hungry from the lack of success in hunting, and ready for blood. Although the author does not explicitly describe the destruction that judges in this frame of mind are capable of, it is very clear from this description. They are tired, hungry, and mean. They will destroy immediately any victim that crosses their path, without remorse or regret. This is the most typical portrayal of the wolf.

The repeated effect of this imagery, combined with the stories hunters and herdsman loved to tell, has had a profound effect on human society since well before the very earliest written record. Wolves are brutal and bad, killing innocent animals that cannot protect themselves. It is indisputable that wolves prey on the sick and weak, as does every predator. They do kill brutally, but they do so in order to survive. None of the remains goes to waste, for if the wolves do not eat it, there are plenty of scavengers lined up behind them to finish it off—most notably the crow. They take no more than they need. Predators such as the wolf are vital to maintaining the populations of their prey in check. They weed out the sick and infirm, strengthening the gene pool, and prevent population explosions that cause starvation and overcrowding. And yet humans consider their only means for survival and the only check on prey populations as murder. This hardly seems fair, especially because we humans are guilty of the same or worse in the name of food.

## *Reflections*

Why have the crow and wolf been chosen to receive the frustration and denial of many cultures spanning thousands of years? To begin with, they elect themselves quite stringently. The crow's black feathers associate it strongly with death and evil in people's mind, and its habit of eating the most unpleasant foods furthers the association with rot and decay. This bird is set in juxtaposition with the dove and lamb, two creatures of spotless white with a reputation for purity, peace, and love. The crow's loud, insistent call sends shivers down many people's backs because of its haunting quality. In many movies and television shows, it is the crow's voice one hears at funerals and in cemeteries, as dusk falls, and before something frightening is going to happen. Finally, their very intelligence and the fact that crows can live for over forty years gives them an unnatural air, as if they are just a little too smart to be caught in a winged body. The gift of flight also gives the impression of being able to trespass where they are not wanted, into the mind and soul, and their piercing onyx eyes seem to know what is occurring inside one's head. They are indeed a fine choice for a symbol of evil if one goes no deeper than the surface.

The wolf as well secures his place in people's minds as the perfect ambassador of evil because he is so closely associated with the violent death of innocent animals. His silent stalking and success in bringing down animals many times larger than himself is frightening in the display of power it presents. Although there have been no attacks reported on humans throughout the course of American history, the fact remains that a wolf could kill a person easily, and this fact does not sit well with society. Because of

their legendary insatiable hunger, it is also widely thought that wolves cannot be trusted, that they will go to extraordinary lengths to obtain a meal regardless of the costs. Finally, the lone wolf is seized upon as an entity in contrast to the rules of society, a dangerous outcast with the ability to destroy order and take lives. This combination of factors is persuasive evidence that the wolf should be categorized as an evil animal, and many societies have done so regardless of facts.

The long length of time that negative wolf and crow mythology has been in existence gives even more weight to the tales and provides the impetus to propel these perceptions upon generation after generation. Religion, fairy tales, and grandmothers have passed on their superstitions for centuries, making the eradication of these beliefs virtually impossible.



# *The Trickster*



In addition to exploring the symbolism of the shadow, Jung continued his explorations into archetypes by delving more thoroughly into the notion of the Trickster. This device complicates the symbolism of both wolves and crows wonderfully, for it takes away the black and white imagery so often applied and throws in some true-to-life gray areas. In explanation of Jung's "On the Psychology of the Trickster-Figure," Robert Hopcke says the following:

Jung notices that the shadow may have much in common with the psychology of the Trickster in the way its existence continually upsets the balance of ego-dominated consciousness, giving the lie to our conscious intentions, playing painful pranks on our lofty self-importance, and thereby providing the impetus for transformation and change. Tarot decks and ordinary playing cards both preserve the figure of the Trickster in the card of the Fool or the Joker, the wild card of human existence, who can play any role, high to low, with the power to reverse and change the direction of our journey. Thus, the figure is greeted with delight and anxiety, powerful when on our side, baffling when not, an untrustworthy but altogether necessary part of our humanity.<sup>1</sup>

In many ways, trickster symbolism is one way the wolf and crow can fight back at societies which have vilified them in other contexts and may be the most honest way of portraying both animals, as well as ourselves. The trickster is neither good nor bad, simply exists as it is and serves as a mirror for questioning who we are and what our true intentions might be. The range of trickster symbolism is great, ranging from the simplest tricks and games to actions that shift the weight of kingdoms and history.

In ancient societies and in today's world, human tricksters are all too common, and the stories of tricksters are one way for the older generation to warn the younger about the multitude of difficult situations they will find themselves in. Many cultures have some symbolic trickster who can be found throughout their mythology, which suggests that the role of the trickster is important in a way that crosses cultural boundaries. In part, this is because of the important lessons that can be taught by the

trickster himself and by the dupes of his clever plots. These include, but certainly are not limited to, not trusting too easily, being watchful and careful at all times, and honing one's own skills when faced with a particularly tough adversary. Additionally, the aftermath of being tricked teaches one resiliency and humility. It is rare that the butt of the trickster's jokes doesn't deserve what is coming to him in some way, still a run in with a trickster will certainly make one more careful next time he comes across a similar situation. The duped character's ability to rise up again after falling victim to a trickster, even if this means simply being laughed at, signifies renewal and hope. It also shows the reader that he is not alone in his occasional innocent mistakes.

Some would argue that the role of trickster extends even farther than all of this. Howard Norman says of the trickster's role in Native life, "His presence demands, cries out for, compassion and generosity toward existence itself. Trickster is a celebrator of life, a celebration of life, because by rallying against him a community discovers its own resilience and protective skills."<sup>2</sup>



## *The Crow as Trickster*

Although the crow's most well defined role in literature is undoubtedly that of a harbinger of death and destruction, other common images persist as well. One of the most notable exceptions to the rule is that of the trickster. The crow is an especially apt candidate for trickster fame because of its uncanny intelligence, which Native Americans in particular recognized and respected. Crows are inherent clowns in nature and this truth has spilled over into Western cultural symbolism, most notably in Aesop's fables. More developed by far, however, is the trickster crow of Native American mythology. Native American stories lack much of the negative associations to the crow that are commonly found in Western culture, but he is far from an unimportant figure. One of his most common and endearing roles throughout Native American mythology is as a trickster. He is often the butt of his own pranks, while laughing at other animals in distress.

Aesop's fables are rich with trickster symbolism, and although the wolf is the most important trickster for Aesop as well as for later European society, some examples of trickster crows are far from uncommon in the Western tradition. One story focuses on the eagle and the raven, two very competitive species in nature as well as in this setting.

An eagle was having trouble opening a nut when a raven came by and saw him struggling. He suggested that the eagle fly as high as he could and then let the nut fall on some nearby stones. The eagle, thankful for the advice, immediately put the plan into action and flew as high as he possibly could before dropping the nut directly over the pile of rocks. Taking full advantage of the trap he had laid, the raven then flew quickly to the rocks and retrieved the meat of the nut from among the shattered shell before the eagle had time to descend from his great height and scoop up the prize himself. The raven then flew off, cackling his success, and the eagle was left to hunt for more food.<sup>1</sup>

The moral that accompanies this fable denotes that even if one is sure of oneself and well prepared for defense against other creatures, it is still possible to be deceived by false council.

As the trickster in this story, the raven works up to his finest potential. Eagles are known to be powerful, majestic birds, capable of defending themselves and easily stealing prey from weaker animals. In this case, the eagle is easily defeated by the slower and weaker, but wittier, raven. The raven knows there is no possibility of taking the nut from the eagle by force; instead he uses his cunning to convince the eagle to follow a course of action that will ultimately guarantee him the nut. The eagle's downfall is his blind trust in a creative idea, especially because it is posed to him by an inherent enemy. While the eagle literally flies above the competition, the raven stays close to the earth, a symbol of lower status but also of being more in tune with nature and the flow of the earth's vibes.

The basis of this story rings true to life. In baiting crows, one of the most important considerations is what to use as bait. True to the story, many accomplished crow baiters recommend shelled peanuts as the best bait source because crows are one of the only bird species intelligent enough to break into the nuts. Although the occasional squirrel can be a problem, it is virtually assured that no other bird species will be successful in obtaining the bait, and thus if peanuts have been removed, chances are good that crows have been there.<sup>2</sup> A crow baiting program has been taking place on the Boston College campus for nearly two years, and in that time the author has never heard of a hawk (very prevalent on campus as well) having any success in breaking into peanuts.

This element of Aesop's tale is true to life – an eagle would likely need the help of a crow to get into a peanut.

Furthermore, the eagle is approaching the right species because ravens have been shown not only to be good problem solvers but also capable of creating tools to reach objects they would not otherwise be able to touch. Ravens are regarded by the most informed sources as the smartest of all birds. In fact, a study undertaken by Groebecke and Pietsch in 1978 cited two crows that had become adept at dropping pine nuts on a highway and waiting for passing cars to crush the shells so they could scoop up the exposed meat and eat it.<sup>3</sup> The ability to use tools is limited to only the most advanced animal species, and the fact that the crow is ranked in this select group is proof of its astonishing and unexpected intelligence.

The culmination of Aesop's tale, in which the raven snatches the nut out from under the very talons of the eagle, is the very essence of trickster behavior – the ability to use one's intelligence to defeat a larger and more powerful adversary. In this particular story, the raven boosts his reputation as a trickster, but this aspect is not limited to just nature alone. When a raven or crow territory is invaded by a hawk, the first bird to sight the intruder begins to give an alarm call until he is joined by all of the members of its group, as well as those crows of adjoining territories if the threat is close to a border. Crows will dive bomb, swarm, and generally make the invader's life so difficult that he will eventually give up and try his luck somewhere else. However, once the crows have an initial handle on the threat, their behavior changes to become more playful. They will cheerfully climb into the sky and cruise downwards, barely missing the intruder, and chase him in circles, appearing to enjoy themselves immensely. The same can be seen in

crow to crow interactions. When the risk of a threat is small, crows on the ground will hop back and forth as if dancing, and occasionally chase each other similar to children playing tag. The prevalence of such light spiritedness throughout the species elects the crows, especially when dealing with other animals, as tricksters in their own right, and observant authors, noticing this behavior before, altered the symbolism to reflect this reality.

The Athapascan Native American tribe tell this story about a trickster crow:

Once there was an old couple who wanted their only daughter to marry a rich man. Many suitors came and went, and they asked their son to count the beads of the visitors to determine who was the richest. One well-dressed stranger in particular had many beads, and the girl's mother thought that he might be a good possibility for a husband. The shore was muddy, so she walked down to the bank and laid out strips of bark for the rich stranger to walk upon. He entered the tipi and sat down next to the girl, but refused to eat while the dog was inside. The mother, thinking that he must be particularly important to be so finicky, took the dog out into the woods and killed him. The next morning, crow tracks were found around the body of the dog, who's eyes had been pecked out. The mother and the rest of the village immediately went on a search for the raven who had made the tracks because he was so well known for tricking people. They insisted that everyone in the village take off their shoes. The important stranger, who was of course the raven, took his shoes off and put them on again so fast that the mother couldn't see his bird feet. Later that day, the girl agreed to marry him. The Raven asked her to leave with him that day, before he could be discovered for what he really was. The pair started down river in his canoe, and a few minutes later it started to rain. As the raindrops began to come down harder, the girl noticed something white washing off of her fiancé's back, and realized the truth about the Raven's identity. She decided to escape before it was too late and asked him to row her to the shore so she could stretch her legs and then discreetly tied the tail of his coat to a part of the canoe before stepping out onto shore. As soon as she was out of sight, the girl ran back upstream to her parents. After a significant amount of time went by, the Raven grew suspicious and tried to follow her, but of course, he was tied to the canoe and couldn't escape. In order to free himself, he had to turn back into his true form. As he flew over the girl, he cawed "Once more, I cheat you!"<sup>4</sup>

In this story, the crow's trickery is discovered just in time to allow the girl to avoid a relatively painful fate. It is not human intelligence alone that allows the girl to

escape, but rather the timely intrusion of nature itself. She shows more insight than anyone else in the village, however, with a little help from the rainstorm. The crow is a known “shape shifter” in Native American mythology, so the mother’s solution of asking everyone to take their shoes off is a good one, although once again she focuses on the material aspects of the raven and overlooks his very nature. To discredit this method even further, she fails utterly in carrying this good plan out. Not only does she not look at his feet carefully, but also is responsible for laying bark over the mud of the bank before he steps out of his canoe – illustrating yet another way she would have been able to discover the crow before allowing her daughter to marry him and just one more example of her disconnection from the natural world.

In some ways this is true in real life as well. Crows have become incredibly prolific because they adapt easily and have fit themselves into human society, benefiting greatly from the human takeover of the globe. The urbanization and growth of crow populations has been occurring right alongside the growth of urban sprawl. They are equally at home in the forest and in New York City, and are increasingly found in urban settings. They feast off of the trash that human societies create, laying claim to landfills and trash cans, scavengers determined to survive. The house crow, an Indian relative of the American crow, has become so comfortable with humans and their environment that they have been seen swooping into houses through open windows to steal the food inside.<sup>5</sup> In this, they have allied themselves more closely with humans and have left the natural world behind in favor of concrete and chrome. It is their striking ability to adapt to the world around them that has allowed such an adaptation to take place, which is in part attributed to their uncanny intelligence. The trickster can only be a successful trickster if he can use the world around him to his advantage, while having the mental capacity to out-think his enemies. The crow is a master in both of these qualifications.

One has to admire the intelligence of the crow’s plans in this fable. He uses his knowledge of the weaknesses of the mother and the villagers to get what he wants and

also manages to have the dog killed before it can betray him. His plan shows forethought and insight, qualities which the crow has in abundance. Crows prepare for the winter months by saving up as many nuts and other food stuffs as possible and redistributing to several different cache sites. They have been shown to remember thousands of different locations for as long as several months, and more often than not will find their cached food immediately, without having to search the area before achieving success.<sup>6</sup> Native Americans who witnessed this activity must have respected and admired the animal's quick mind and uncanny memory; these characteristics helped to establish the crow as a trickster who was able to identify his enemy's weakness and then outthink him.

Of course, the opposite happens in this particular tale. The girl escapes and the crow finds himself trapped in his own canoe. It is only by returning to his true form that he is able to escape the anger the village people would inevitably feel and the hunt that would follow. Because of this, he still counts himself victorious as he has cheated them of their revenge. In light of the volumes of Native American tales that reference successful crow tricksters, this tale serves first and foremost to prove that one must stay true to one's own identity in order to be successful. Because the crow abandoned his true form and relinquished his real skills, he was denied the end result. In terms of the worth of trickster tales this one weighs as doubly significant, for it sends a warning to all would-be tricksters that, regardless of how well prepared one is, it is always fatal to distance oneself too far from one's real worth, and equally as foolish to try to pass oneself off as something other than what one really is. The crow does not belong in human society, despite his efforts and desires. He is caught between the two worlds, with one foot in each, but cannot truly claim either one for his home.

## *The Wolf as Trickster*

Even the youngest of children is familiar with the story of the wolf in sheep's clothing, which first appeared in a collection of Aesop's fables:

The tale tells of an especially tricky wolf who was having trouble taking the amount of sheep he wished from a nearby shepherd and his dog. One day he was particularly lucky and managed to snag a sheep that had strayed too close to the edge of the forest. As he was eating his prey, an idea struck him. He carefully skinned the sheep, threw the pelt over his back, and waited until nightfall. After the sun had gone down, he worked his way back into the flock and waited. The sheep, meanwhile, began to grow suspicious, and their leader began to question the camouflaged wolf about where he had been all day. Sensing that his disguise had been breached, the wolf leapt at the sheep, grabbed him, and ran back to the forest before the shepherd had a chance to intervene.<sup>1</sup>

This fable, one of the most famous from all of Aesop's large collection, has sent important messages to millions of children around the world about wolves and their inherent dangers: wolves are smart and very dangerous, and will do whatever they have to do to capture their prey. The wolf in this story has the capacity to come up with new, inventive solutions to put his prey within reach. He is able to disguise himself well enough to fool even members of the same species and family. The wolf's intelligence also extends to his recognition that the sheep were becoming suspicious of his disguise, and his ability to seize the moment and his prey before making his escape.

The symbolism of the two animals chosen for this story goes a long way in allying them with good and evil. The sheep, of course, is a clear sign of goodness and purity, as evidenced physically by its white, fluffy wool. The wolf, in taking the sheep's skin, literally destroys the sheep's purity and tries to incorporate it into his own symbolism. In the end, this story reaches to the heart of the fight between good and evil,

as the dark wolf pretends to be good in order to lead others into danger. This is a theme commonly seen in the Bible, among other places.

One of the tragedies related to the degradation of the wolf's image is that a completely natural and necessary process of life and death via the food chain has been perverted to reflect society's opinions concerning which animal is good and which is evil. In reality, the wolf is no more evil than the sheep. They both obey their instincts, which are governed by the same laws of nature, and help each other to coexist in a delicate balance. Predators aid in maintaining the health of a species by killing the weakest members of the gene pool at the same time their own family is kept alive by the kill. This has been shown time and again in areas that have exterminated wolf populations. The decimation of top predators leads to an explosion in population of all prey species, especially deer, which means more overcrowding and starvation, more fighting for mates and territories within the species, and a less healthy gene pool which eventually leads to a weaker group on the whole. The diversity of plants and animals also suffers as the overpopulated groups wipe out whole generations of herbage and crowd out other animals competing for similar food sources. Predators are vitally necessary to keeping every ecosystem balanced and running smoothly.<sup>2</sup>

However, the problem that most predators, including the wolf, eventually face is an even more potent killing force – humans. As a generalized statement, humans don't like competition from other species, and in order to avoid this, we have been guilty of destroying populations to the brink of extinction. Why is this? From a biological standpoint, it makes good sense. If the competition is destroyed, all food sources can be used for human consumption. At one point in time, humans and wolves fought for food



sources, and perhaps it is this enmity developed thousands of years ago that still fuels humankind's hatred of the species.

Perhaps the most interesting piece of the "Wolf in Sheep's Clothing" story is its significance on a larger scale for culture, which of course directly affects that of today. The story has had a long history, and was important enough to the people of two thousand years ago to be included in the Bible. Matthew 7:15 says, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but underneath are ravenous wolves. By their fruits you will know them."<sup>3</sup> The parable goes on to describe knowing a good fruit from a bad by judging the trees from which they come, and ends by demanding that every tree which does not bear good fruit be chopped down and thrown into the fire.

By alluding to the wolf in sheep's clothing, Jesus clearly references the tale attributed to Aesop and uses this story to put the fight between sinners and innocents into perspective. While it may not always be possible to judge a person on first impressions, if one waits long enough to see the works of a person (or creature), one will be able to determine more accurately if he is really good or evil.

This parable leaves no room for hope that the wolf could be converted into a creature able to do good works. The wolves are described as "ravenous," a word that denotes a thoughtless, barbaric desire to kill, destroy, and ingest. No reason will stand up against the attacks of ravenous creatures. In this way, the Bible undoes even the few positive connotations that Aesop leaves to the wolf in his version of "The Wolf in Sheep's Clothing." In the Bible, wolves are directly related to evil, and even their clever trickery is not enough to help them escape this iconography.

This may be part of the root in explaining why wolves are so hated in Western society. The Bible has had a larger influence on more people than any other book in the world.<sup>4</sup> When billions of people over thousands of centuries are repeatedly told that wolves are bad from a source they consider infallible, the certain doom of the wolf is sure to be close behind. Tribal societies, closer to nature and its animals, judged the wolf on

what they saw as this animal's virtues and weaknesses, drawing a much more balanced picture in the process. The people shared the land and their food sources directly with the wolf, yet instead of despising him for it, they recognized his unique talents and praised them in hope of gaining his power, even if only for a short time.

Shakespeare comments on the role of the wolf as a powerful trickster in an interesting and unique way. Lines from King Henry VIII give the following description of Cardinal Wolsey: "This holy fox, / or wolf, or both – for he is equal ravenous / as he is subtle, and as prone to mischief / as able to perform't . . ."5

In terms of trickster symbolism, this example from Shakespeare is closely allied with the wolf in Aesop's fable about the lamb and the wolf. The wolf is a dishonest, conniving animal, and will do anything it can to satiate its ravenous nature. It spends a great deal of time developing plans for the next plot to foil an innocent bystander or a deserving traitor and is often very successful in creating havoc for others. However, the wolf's main motivating factor is still survival.

However, the presentation of Cardinal Wolsey is set up in such a way as to allow for some ambiguity. The character contains both positive and negative elements. The wolf's hunger and tendency to get into mischief are as important as the fox's subtlety and ability. A good villain, a good trickster, needs both. These negative versions of wolf tricksters relay an indisputable truth: many people without power envy those with power, and will accuse them of using treachery to rise to where they are, even if they rise by honest means. At the same time, it is also true that many politicians do deceive the voting public through promises they don't intend to keep, magic with polls that show only what they want the voters to see, and a keen ability to cut down opponents to get the upper hand. To maintain power in any species, a certain amount of deception is needed, and in many cases this cunning is combined with brute force. Just as in the case of the wolf, the trickster gets a bad reputation more as a result of the words of his enemies for his actions.

Although these drives influenced Aesop, he was writing at a time when the negative wolf and crow symbolism was not as firmly rooted in culture, leading to an interesting mix between the European and the Native American points of view, perhaps because of their age and appearance in a society closer to the land and its animals. While the wolf is almost always cast in a negative role as a rule in Western culture, his positive attributes are much more likely to be in evidence in Aesop's fables. However, Aesop was far from immune to the legends that cast wolves in an evil light, and his stories also show the wolf as the worst kind of trickster. One in particular tells a story about a wolf and a lamb:

A wolf was running after a lamb when his prey ran into a house full of goats. The wolf immediately saw that he could not take the lamb by force, so he began to advise the lamb, suggesting he leave the house and come with him into the fields because the goats were planning on sacrificing him to the gods. The lamb replied "I would rather shed blood for the gods and be sacrificed than be eaten by a wolf." The moral of the story: between two evils, choose the lesser of two evils if you have a choice.<sup>6</sup>

The iconography of this story is very straightforward. Lambs are symbols associated with purity and innocence, while goats are often connected with the Devil. The fact that the lamb would freely choose to be sacrificed by the goats to the gods rather than be eaten by the wolf illustrates exactly how malevolent the wolf is thought to be. Following this sequence, the wolf is even worse than the evil goats; he is, once again, the devil himself, tempting the innocent to fall into sin and corruption. The moral corroborates the fact that the fate of falling victim to the wolf is indeed worse than taking one's chances with the goats, although neither is desirable. The lamb's preference for dying in a pagan ritual over becoming food for a hungry wolf illustrates once again the undesirable aspects of becoming a wolf's meal.

The theme of trickster is applicable in this story as well. Failing to immediately secure his meal, the wolf resorts to cajoling the lamb into coming out into the open, where he will become the wolf's next meal. His words are chosen wisely, for they play upon not only the lamb's fear of death, but also upon a revulsion for the pagan rights the goats symbolize. By the same token, it would take an unusually blind lamb to believe the wolf's claim enough to follow him into the fields. While Aesop credits the wolf with having the intelligence to play on another animal's fears as a way of getting his next meal, he negates all praise at the same time by allowing the wolf to use a very transparent trick.

These two fables serve to show the intense fear Western society holds about a wolf's potential to destroy herds of livestock. Sheep are the animal most often cited in these stories, but there is also concern for goats, horses, cattle, pigs, and virtually every animal any human has ever raised for food or profit. This truth also continues to play itself out in the real world. In the Western United States, ranchers have repeatedly protested the reintroduction of wolves after an absence of decades. They fear that the wolves will come after their livelihoods and decimate their herds of livestock, regardless of the fact that there is little evidence of wolves having ever had such a significant affect. The truth is that it is not so much facts that fuel the ranchers' fears, but a lifetime full of cultural messages that wolves are rapacious killers who will take the easiest prey for their next meal. While this is not the case, the cultural critique is hard to contradict. Wolves are genetically trained to hunt wild game, and for the most part this is what they do. However, once they kill their first captive animal, they tend to come back for more, bringing the whole family group with them. While this information supports the rancher's

fears, the number of livestock killed every year by wolves is miniscule when compared to the number of livestock lost for other reasons. Even amongst predators, wolves rank surprisingly low. The number of cattle killed due to coyotes ranges in the tens of thousands, up to one thousand for domesticated dogs, and in the dozens for wolves.<sup>7</sup> If a particular wolf pack does become a nuisance to farmers, it is also relatively easy to transport the family away from farms and ranches, solving the problem quickly and efficiently.

## *Reflections*

Partially because they are also so important as symbolism of the shadow but mostly in their own right, crows and wolves are among the pinnacle of trickster animals. Both are intelligent and conniving in nature, and the fact that this truth has appeared in mythology helps to improve the veracity of myths as a medium.

Crows engage in play behavior on a regular basis, teasing other crows, predators, and even humans. Often it seems that crows interact with other animals in this way for the pure joy of it, proving them to be true to life tricksters as well as mythological ones. Within the stories, they are shown to use those around them to get what they want, outthinking their opponents at every turn. But along the way, they provide lessons in trust, relying on oneself to solve problems, and being true to oneself, elements that elevate what would otherwise be merely entertaining stories to a level of importance.

The images of the trickster wolf presented in the above tales is overall much darker than those given of the crow. All show the wolf as a cut-throat villain intent upon the next meal and in some ways seem better suited for discussion in the preceding chapter. However, the fact that the wolf relies on his intelligence to grab the suspicious sheep, attempts to sweet-talk himself into a meal, and relies on tricks to gain power give enough support to include these stories as trickster myths. The wolf is a darker trickster, the opposing half to the crow's more light-hearted fun. However, this trickster is equally as valid and shows the truth of the real world – some tricksters leave one laughing at oneself, while others are capable of creating chaos. Both teach valuable lessons about life and are absolutely necessary for creating an accurate picture of the trickster and of life as a whole.

*The Good Crow and Wolf*



The paradox that allows so much hatred of the crow and wolf and yet still permits a few rays of respect to infiltrate the otherwise dark symbolism is an interesting one. As with so many other aspects of symbolism, certain holdovers from more ancient cultures inevitably filter into the conquering civilization. The wolf and crow are well respected in Celtic lore, in a similar fashion as in Native American cultures. The same is true of many peoples who lived closer to the land and in closer sympathy with animals. The real clash between man and wolf did not really occur until the human race gave up its nomadic, hunter-gatherer style of living and became more sedentary, developing farms and breeding livestock from which wolves could easily steal a stray calf or lamb.<sup>1</sup> This conflict is evident in the many Aesop's fables that center around the strife between shepherds and wolves. Prior to this time, humans and animals lived in a similar fashion, hunting prey using their intelligence and their weapons of choice: claws, fangs, and beaks or spears and arrows. The wolf served as a great example of a hunter, and he was respected and emulated in many societies. Similarly, the crow was honored as one of the smartest birds, capable of surviving under almost any conditions. This respect has survived as a holdover of ideals long gone, when people and animals faced the same obstacles and admired one another's gifts and talents, even in the face of competition. They have withstood the test of time, traveling in myth and in the memories of those whose ancestors admired what the natural world had to offer.

Although a dark period lasting hundreds of years has passed in which very little thought or care was given to the natural world, a time again may be approaching when nature and animals may be given a second chance. Recently, more and more people have become concerned with their environment, taking more care with what they discard and beginning to recognize the strengths as well as the weakness in animals that have been hated for millennia. Positive wolf and crow symbolism has become much more common, giving rise to the hope that these animals will one day be exonerated for the crime of simply following their instincts.



## *The Good Crow*

Despite jerky movements that create a very unique pattern against the sky, the crow is a master of the air, and an unmistakable one at that. No other bird flies like the crow, bobbing up and down as it flies, most likely an adaptation tailored to catching insects on the fly and avoiding predators in close chases. The sky, a symbol of otherworldliness and a hope for better things after death, is the crow's chief domain, and this fact was not lost on early symbolists. Because of this association with the sky, the crow has become a symbol of creativity along with all other birds due to its closer contact with heaven and higher powers.<sup>1</sup> For example, in *Ode to a Nightingale*, Keats uses the nightingale to symbolize freedom, escape from death, and as a muse who guides his meandering thoughts.<sup>2</sup> As a member of the bird family, the crow shares this ability to set the mind free and explore new possibilities from a different angle. The Celtic bards went even further and turned crow symbolism into a yin-yang figure, in which both light and dark were present.<sup>3</sup> This contradiction continues to hold true in today's culture; while most crow symbolism is dark and bleak, there are still some examples of positive imagery even within the very heart of the Western Tradition.

Egyptians used the crow to designate monogamy, a trait that is prized in Western tradition, although it is not necessarily followed as closely as could be hoped.<sup>4</sup> Crows do not necessarily mate for life, but they are commonly seen to nest with the same partner for many years. However, the concept of monogamy has been, as so many other things, misunderstood. While crows will nest and mate with the same partner, if another crow appears, it will most likely mate with the second animal as well in an attempt to secure a more likely chance of producing offspring. Because of this, male crows participate in what is called "mate guarding," in which they try as hard as possible to stay by their female counterpart in order to chase off other interested crows.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, for centuries the crow has stood as a symbol of fulfilled wishes, under certain circumstances. This legend indicates the ambiguity of the crow, for if a crow is flying from the southwest while the sun goes down, it means a lover is on the way, but if one sees a crow flying from the southwest at noon, it means an enemy is coming. The meaning of a sited crow depends entirely on the time of day and from what direction it arrives, which captures its complex personality and symbolism quite nicely.<sup>6</sup>

In this confusion of crow symbolism, one of the most constantly positive themes treat the crow as a messenger. This image can be found throughout nearly all of Western culture. It makes sense that writers have chosen this bird as their messenger: crows are often loud and raucous, and draw attention to themselves as they deliver their vocalizations to whomever may be listening. In reality of course, their calls are meant for other crows and enemies only, used chiefly as a tool for communication within the family group, to frighten off invading crows, and to rally others for an attack on a common enemy.

Their insistent voice, however, has been used as messenger symbolism for many Western writers as well, dating back as far as the Bible.

The Lord then said to Elijah: "Leave here, go east and hide in the Wadi Cherith, east of the Jordan. You shall drink of the stream, and I have commanded ravens to feed you there. So he left and did as the Lord had commanded. He went and remained by the Wadi Cherit, east of the Jordan. Ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the stream."<sup>7</sup>

In this passage, God uses the crow as his special messenger, to keep one of his most beloved sons alive on grain and meat, notably two of the most essential sources of nourishment for the crow. Out of all the animals, God has chosen the crow to carry out this important task because He recognizes the focus with which crows will attack a challenge until they are successful, regardless of how long it takes them. More importantly, however, it is the simple trust God vests in the birds to consistently bring

food to Elijah to sustain in the wilderness that is striking about this passage, so opposed to what is seen in most of Western tradition symbolism. This is shown again and again as anxious crow parents dutifully bring meals back to their offspring in the nest.

Although many negative attributes can be applied to crows, it would be a hard sell to convince any informed audience that they are bad parents. For several months, both the male and female crow devote themselves to the building of a nest, incubating eggs, and raising offspring carefully, even though less than fifty percent of fledgling crows will survive their first forays out of the nest.<sup>8</sup> God has chosen well in this instance, for the crow has already proven itself time and time again to being a caring, devoted parent who will put in a great deal of effort to ensure the survival of its offspring.

In direct contrast to the negative associations with which Western tradition labeled the crow lie an abundance of North American Native American tales. While there are plenty of Native American myths in which the crow appears as a trickster or joker, very few of them are purely negative. None of the death symbolism that is so prevalent throughout European iconography of crows is present in these stories. In fact, many of the stories are very flattering to both crows and ravens. Besides acting as a teacher and leader to the other animals, which evolves from its intelligence, the raven has also been credited with creating the world and the sun. The following is a portion of this tradition as told by the Tsimshian tribe, native to the Northwest region of the United States.

After the Raven had put the fish in the rivers and the fruit on the trees, he looked around and realized that it was still very dark. When it was clear, light from the starts came down to earth, but he was sad that there was no day. At this time, the sky chief had control of the Sun, and kept it in a box where it could not be easily stolen, so Raven hatched a plan. He went through a hole in the sky and came to the place where the sky chief's daughter often collected her water. He changed himself into a seed and floated upon the water until she came to drink, and she didn't notice as she drank the seed. The Raven, as the seed, made the girl pregnant

and was born to her in the shape of a human. As a toddler, he begged his grandfather to play with the yellow ball that was kept in the box. Eventually, the old man gave in and allowed his grandson to play with the Sun, and when he was no longer looking, the Raven stole it and flew back through the hole in the sky.<sup>9</sup>

While this story shows the same trickery that is evident in many Native American myths, an element of great respect for the raven is also present in this society. Different tribes will ascribe the creation of the world to different species, but the raven is one of the most common, which shows how important the raven was to all of Native American culture. Far from being the symbol of death and decay, this bird is charged with creating life for every other animal on the planet and giving them the sun to ensure their survival.

The symbolism in this story is interesting in its similarity to that in Genesis of the Old Testament: the raven spaces out his creations over a period of time and concentrates on one aspect of the world at a time, fish and animals, and then fruit and vegetation. It is interesting to note, however, that these creations took place in exactly the opposite order as in the Bible. This indicates that, while obviously the sun is important to Native Americans and to all life, it is the animals that rule supreme. They are the foundation of Native American life, and for the raven to be put in charge of this group is therefore very telling of the respect he received from so many of the tribes.

Other links exist between this tale and that of Jesus. Just as Mary becomes pregnant through the Immaculate Conception, so too does this girl have a child without any sexual intercourse. The raven is in roughly the same relationship to the chief as Jesus has to God – a servant of the earth, but still part of the divine through his relationship to God. The raven is responsible for bringing light to earth, the same mission Jesus is charged with. In essence, these two mythologies parallel one another in interesting ways, not only commenting on the pervasiveness of the collective unconscious, but also

pointing out the necessity of a figure responsible for light, literal or figurative. The fact that the Native Americans pick the crow as their representative shows the level of respect reserved for this animal in their society.

## *The Good Wolf*

Despite the prevalence of negative wolf imagery throughout Western tradition, certain instances of more positive symbolism occasionally appear as well, as if the “civilized” writers couldn’t quite contain a more ancient, earthy respect for the animals that shared their environment. Although the Greeks and Romans associated the wolf with Ares and Mars and thus war, implicit in this is also a great deal of respect, as the God of War is the man who controls events that change the course of thousands of lives and the map of the world.<sup>1</sup> For centuries in many cultures, a wolf crest is a sign of loyalty in battle and has been given to captains and war heroes in recognition of their bravery and steadfast hearts.<sup>2</sup> Significant as well are the sheer number of names that include wolf references, especially in Eastern European tradition. Wolfgang, Wolfram, and many others have been passed down through generations of families -- and it is far from likely that such names would have held continuing popularity in a culture that simply abhorred the wolf.<sup>3</sup>

Wolves have also been credited with raising several strong and valiant leaders throughout the course of literature. Historically, the great city of Rome was founded by two brothers, Romulus and Remus, who were nursed by a wolf as babies.<sup>4</sup> While their wild upbringing denotes a certain untamable aspect to their personalities and to the city of Rome as a whole, it also is a sign of strength, cunning, and endurance, proven in the fact that both the city and the legend have endured for so many centuries. In Rudyard Kipling’s *Jungle Book*, Mowgli is similarly raised by wolves and goes on to prove himself a strong, independent hero. These examples indicate that the wolf is recognized as a capable leader, unafraid of risking himself for higher causes and capable of raising wildly successful offspring.

However, the moment humans began to raise livestock and sheep for a living, the wolf became the enemy. Instead of having a large, diffuse population of communal game animals to share, hunters laid claim to a certain number of sheep or steer which became unequivocally theirs. The wolf was a threat not only to their well-being and their financial success, but also a transgressor to the rancher's "rights" as owner. Studies have been done in recent years that show there have been many fewer wolf attacks on livestock populations than might be expected, and that wolves which do pick off the stray calf or lamb are usually injured as a result of trapping attempts by humans or have been given limited options for food by habitat destruction. Most healthy wolves, given a choice, will hunt for their food, instead of stealing from ranchers. Furthermore, wolf predation actually serves to strengthen a herd, as only the weakest animals will fall victim, leaving the rancher with a healthier gene pool for breeding in following years.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the relatively recent competition that has developed between humans and wolves, the roots of respect for these remarkable animals are present in ancient human culture. In addition to this, the wolf possesses traits which we must admire, because we prize them in our society as well and search for them in ourselves. Once people realize how similar wolf and human cultures really are, it becomes much harder to hate them. Whether we choose to admit such an understanding when faced with the animal is another matter entirely.

An admission of the respect Aesop held for the wolf is related in the story below:

A fox approached a wolf and asked if he would be willing to teach him good doctrine, and the wolf agreed, asking the fox to come to him when he called. When the wolf came across a herd of swine, he called for the fox and asked if they should try to capture them, to which the fox replied, "Of course!" The wolf disagreed, pointing out that the swine were with a dog that would likely kill them. The two animals went on their way, and it wasn't long before the fox saw a mare with her colt close to the edge of the forest. The wolf promptly killed both and dragged them off into the woods to feast on. After they had eaten their fill, the fox thanked the wolf for teaching him and told him that he now planned to return to his mother and teach her what he had learned. The wolf cautioned him against

this, saying, “You have not yet learned all that you need to know, my son.” But the fox left anyway, blown up by his newfound intelligence.

Upon returning to his mother, the fox was eager to show her what he had learned, and so they ventured out on the hunt together. When his mother pointed out a herd of swine, the fox advised her to let them go because they had dogs watching over them. A few minutes later, she spotted a mare and colt near the edge of the woods and pointed them out to her son, who immediately trotted over and attacked the mare. The horse whinnied in protest and grabbed the unfortunate fox between her teeth to bring him over to the shepherd, who immediately killed him. His mother cried in distress, lamenting that her son had not learned enough before trying to hunt on his own.<sup>6</sup>

In this story, the fox makes the fatal mistake of hubris in thinking that he has learned all there is to know and is now capable of hunting on his own despite the caution of the wolf. The wolf is in a powerful position as a teacher, a learned animal to whom others look up and whose example they will follow almost unthinkingly. He appears in this story as a Jesus-like figure, leading by example and imparting his wisdom through teaching. As a good teacher, however, the wolf is quick to warn his student that he is not ready – unlike the hard example seen in most literature, this wolf is protective of his protégé and wishes him only the best. Again in similarity to the Jesus story, the wolf is betrayed by his student, with disastrous results.

While in reality the relationship between foxes and wolves is probably too competitive for any “friendships” to emerge, the point made about the thoughtful, intelligent wolf holds true in nature. They are careful teachers and spend much time learning as youngsters and teaching their own offspring lessons about hunting and wolf society once full grown. For several weeks pups will follow their parents on hunts without participating in order to learn the methods of stalking and attack. In addition, wolves are innately wired to interpret a fast moving animal as prey, and based on this learn through trial and error what can be caught and what should be left alone. Zimen tells a story of four young wolves trotting through a herd of cattle, virtually oblivious to their presence until the cattle noticed them and bolted. After this incident, the young



wolves tried to attack cows at any given opportunity, although they were never successful.<sup>7</sup>

Just as important as the teaching that occurs between the old and new generations is the fact that wolves have the intelligence to learn to adapt to the situations around them. A wolf's skull and brain is larger than that of any other canid, and their ability to remember details and think through problems verges on the uncanny. In fact, researchers have a difficult time trapping wolves and their close relatives because once captured in a trap of any kind, these animals will remember the event for the rest of their lives and are highly unlikely to enter another trap ever again. This is a problem that the Boston College study on coyotes is currently experiencing in the Boston area as well as on the Cape. Once a coyote is caught, it is almost always necessary to use a sedative dart, shot out of a gun, to recapture the animal.

The twin aspects of learning and remembering show the wolf to be a much more intelligent animal than many humans would care to admit. As a general rule, most people are opposed to intelligent animals because it threatens our rank as the smartest animal on the planet. The fact that the wolf has the ability to problem solve, learn and remember, and display emotions that verge on human frightens people simply because the idea of another intelligent species causes discomfort. In general, the human race has an abhorrence towards most animals that have the ability to understand and manipulate their surroundings. The initial competition for food between humans and wolves made them serious competitors, and any kind of competition is a bad sort when linked to the survival of a species. It is our brain size that has allowed us to rise to dominion over all the other animals on the earth, a right that we hold sacred and dear, something that we wish to be a unique human characteristic unshared by any other species on the planet. Furthermore, animals are much easier to torture and kill when they are simple, dumb beasts. As soon as it is admitted that they are aware of their surroundings and not immune to pain or fear, they become, simply put, more human and therefore command more respect. If one

admits that the wolf has a relatively deep understanding, the fate of the lab rat or guinea pig must also be called into question.

However, anyone open to the idea of animal consciousness will soon realize that the wolf ranks very high on this list and deserves significant respect. The fact that wolves can solve problems and teach their young what they have learned makes them more akin to the human species, demanding a grudging amount of respect from even the most cynical mind.

Once one is open to the idea that wolves can represent more than just bloodthirsty killers, their appealing qualities are much more easily seen. Listed among the positive symbolism of wolves can also be found a great deal of freedom imagery. Wolves are brought into the spotlight because they are closely related to dogs and have familiar faces and in many cases similar behavior. The distinct difference, of course, lies in the fact that wolves cannot easily be tamed, despite the prevalence of books like *Call of the Wild*. Wolves are inherently afraid of people, and while repeated exposure will make them more tame, like all wild animals, they can never fully be trusted to take on the role of a “civilized animal.” This fact draws some people to them just as it repels most of the population. A lone wolf standing on a hill top basking in the light from a full moon symbolizes nothing so much as the chance to be free. Humans envy this stereotypically easy lifestyle, with no ties to home, job, or, in the lone wolf’s case, family. The howl of a wolf symbolizes a force that cannot be tamed or made to obey laws and conventions handed down from a higher power, which is something that even the most urbane can appreciate from time to time. Aesop, once again, offers a window from which to view the wolf in this perspective:

A wolf and dog met as they were walking in opposite directions along a forest path, and the wolf asked the dog why he looked so fat and pleasant. The dog replied “Because I keep my lord’s house well and bark at those who enter. For this, he gives me as much meat as I can eat.” The wolf then noticed an iron collar around the dog’s neck that had worn away his hair. He asked about it and the dog

told him that his master fastened him up by it daily to make sure he didn't escape. The wolf replied, "You don't need a master! I'm not under anyone's subjection and I won't let anyone put a collar around my neck to get food!"<sup>8</sup>

In this fable, the wolf so eloquently relates what many humans feel: freedom is far less important than security. The fact that the wolf receives this independence as a birthright makes him a symbol of wild freedom, which people both revere and detest out of jealousy more than for any other reason. Again, one of the positive characteristics of the wolf is often subverted by humanity into a debate about what we don't have and reasons to envy the wolf, leading to mass killings and the near extermination of the entire species.

This jealousy of the wolf's freedom also rises from a misunderstanding of wolf culture. While it is true that young males often roam by themselves, apart from family groups and with no offspring to protect, at the first opportunity they will take a mate and begin raising young. This drive towards family and progeny makes genetic sense, as the real drive for procreation is to ensure that one's genes make it into the next generation.<sup>9</sup> Although the picture of the free, lone wolf is one that has struck the hearts of many people and one of the only popular, positive images of wolves in Western society, it is still largely a misunderstanding. Wolves are as bound to their instincts and genetic responsibilities as every other creature, including ourselves, and their family groups and larger societies are governed almost as closely as our own. In this instance, it is difficult to envy the wolf for his freedom, because he will give it up under his own volition given the chance.

The Western tradition of the wolf is most often far from flattering, instead focusing on every negative nuance and expanding its implications until the wolf is the veritable poster-animal of evil, untimely death. North American Native Americans, however, were able to appreciate the positive aspects of the wolf, noting his skill as a hunter and praying for his bravery to descend upon them before heading off to battle.

They respected the close family ties between a wolf and its pack, and many tribes believed that wolf fur brought good luck to those who wore it or rubbed it on arrows before the hunt. The Native American respect for the wolf is most obvious, however, in some tribes' attribution of the creation of the world to a wolf. The Cree tell the story in this way:

A long time ago, all the world was covered in water, and the trickster Wisagatcak created a raft out of trees to save the animals that were swimming in the water. The raven left the raft first to search for land, but after flying for an entire day he returned defeated. Wisagatcak then turned to the wolf to help the animals. The wolf ran in circles around the raft with a ball of moss in his mouth until the ball began to grow and form earth. It continued to spread across the raft and kept growing until it created the world.<sup>10</sup>

This tale is eerily similar to the Bible story of Noah and the flood. In both, it is the raven who is first sent out to look for land on which the animals can settle, and in both he fails. While Noah next sends out the dove, which thus replaces the raven as the savior and begins its run of fame, in the Cree story the trickster turns to the wolf to save the day. The fact that the wolf is granted the ability to create land shows that the Native Americans respected his canny intellect. Wolves are very keen at solving problems to get what they want, another trait respected by the Native American tribes. The mouth of the wolf in this story, instead of simply being a vehicle for teeth and swift death, is the direct cause of the creation of land. The wolf is honored with the credit for having given birth to the land, thereby saving the other creatures as well as himself. This may be the Native Americans way of commenting on their recognition of the role that the wolf plays in protecting the health of other species at the same time that he keeps himself and his family strong and healthy.

# *Reflections*

The wolf and crow offer up strong reasons for society to consider them more kindly, despite the features that lead many to condemn them and associate them only with death and evil. Crows serve as wonderful mythological messengers, with their raucous caw and ability to convey ideas with over fifty distinct vocalizations. Crows are also good parents, spending weeks incubating eggs, teaching fledglings how to fly and locate food, and then in later years showing them how to build nests and take care of young. These qualities show them as nurturers, an idea Western society respects.

The wolf has also been shown to be strong and valiant, a desirable spirit in the midst of battle or adversity. They are intelligent learners and good teachers, willing to teach their young how to survive in the world. Finally, they embody a spirit of freedom, something that many humans can relate to on a number of levels.

Crows and wolves are not evil. They are simply themselves, and as do humans, they have flaws as well as virtues. While many myths disparage them, giving extremely negative connotations where none are truly due, these stories as well as others help in setting the record straight. Taken together, the stories of evil, good, and the wild card of the trickster balance each other, approaching something resembling an accurate picture of the mixed bag of characteristics one attains with any living creature.



## *In Conclusion . . .*

Symbolism of the wolf and crow has been in development for thousands of years, beginning in the shrouded time before written language and stretching through mythological tradition to this day. After reviewing various forms of purveying myths in the Western tradition, it is clear that crow and wolf symbolism isn't simply black or white. No one tradition shows only positive images of these animals while others concentrate on solely negative. An overview of Western mythology fits the pattern of the yin-yang image in which the Celtic people viewed the crow.

Greek and Roman myths give examples of both great strength and goodness as well as pure evil in regards to these animals. While the wolf is closely associated with Ares, it has been discussed that this is both a negative and a positive association. The link to Hecate makes the animal appear darker, but the crow's position as the sacred bird of Apollo once again confuses the ideology.

Aesop's fables are, if anything, even more representative of the spectrum. He details the wolf as a good teacher and symbol of freedom and yet still vilifies him for ravenously chasing after innocent victims and disobeying the order of the family group. Aesop looks with more favor on the crow, who is given a more consistent role of trickster throughout these fables.

The same is true with imagery used in the Bible. The Old Testament portrays the crow as a faithful messenger, but also as an evil creature banned to condemned Edom. The wolf fares even less well: no positive imagery emerges in either the Old or New Testaments, which instead focuses on his predator/prey relationship with sheep.

Shakespeare is more consistent than these three guides. He offers no positive imagery of the wolf and very few examples for the crow. Instead, both are witnessed at the height of their castigation here, in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. Only one example exists that can be interpreted as trickster wolf symbolism – the vast majority of other examples are purely negative.

In contrast, Native American symbolism is the most consistently positive, with no examples of entirely negative crow or wolf symbolism, several very positive, and the majority landing in the trickster category.

What differences lie in these five separate mythologies that cause this breakdown to emerge? They span a large gap of recorded history, and one might assume that the transition in imagery would occur chronologically throughout time as one coherent symbol morphs throughout time. However, this does not appear to be the case. Instead, the difference lies in the relationship of the people to the land. The Native Americans are significantly closer to the land on which they live and the animals that inhabit their planet than virtually any other culture within the last several hundred years. Because “civilization” arrived in the Americas relatively late, they were able to keep this connection unbroken for a longer period of time. When Europeans did arrive, the breakdown of the Native American lifestyle happened relatively quickly, which led to a more positive written version of the stories that remained close to the storytellers’ original intentions.

Aesop, the Greek and Roman mythologists, and the writers of the Bible all lived during a period of great transition from societies of hunter-gatherers to settled farms surrounding cultural centers and government. While this changeover began several centuries earlier, people were still utilizing symbols that were developed during the reign

of hunters and gatherers. As Freud says, symbols can tell us where we have been and point the direction in which we are moving as a culture. The fact that these three forms of myth, developed at different times and with different purposes in mind, are so ambiguous points to a shift in ideals and values that these cultures were still trying to work out.

Shakespeare, of course, wrote much later, and not surprisingly shows much less ambiguity in his use of crow and wolf symbolism. He is almost uniformly negative in regards to these animals. This shows an even further move away from the land and an increased focus on human culture and activity, not surprising after the Renaissance had swept through Europe a relatively short time earlier. Cities became ever more popular as people moved further and further away from living as one with the other animals with which they shared the earth.

### *The Effect of Sedentary Societies On the Relationship Between Humans and Animals*

The picture clouds, of course, when one considers the adversarial relationship between the wolf and crow and humans before farming really caught on. It is likely that there was also a great deal of animosity over the difficulties crows and wolves must have caused hunting and gathering societies by taking prime resources that humans needed and killing the most prized animals, removing them from human mouths. Also, both these animals are renowned scavengers and would have snapped up any relatively fresh carrion available, as would have early man. This race to obtain the best food sources must have caused quite a bit of friction.

Although these two ideas seem to be completely contradictory, the gap is solved fairly easily: we respect people who are good at what they do. We revere sports heroes



and movie stars, praise the successful and award them ridiculous sums of money for their time and immense effort. It follows that we would then also respect animals who meet and exceed the standards society sets for success. Before societies settle into a more sedentary and reliable way of life, the bar for success is set according to who can obtain the most food for their family, sire the largest amount of healthy offspring, and protect their family against attack. The wolf and crow are both masters in each of these three categories, something less technology-oriented cultures appreciate, revere, and work into their mythology in positive ways.

One may argue that, while very few hunter/gatherer societies continued to exist in Europe, the people continued to exist in an agrarian society, still a common occupation for the majority of the population. However, it was this very transition to a sedentary lifestyle dependant on what the land and animals belonging to the farmer produced that widened the gap between crows, wolves, and humans. People no longer had to think in the same manner as animals to obtain their food, and they began to lose an important connection with them. Also, it was taken as a personal offense when crows pecked at a farmer's corn or a wolf made off with a lamb or two, when before both the hunter and the animals were in the same plight. An example of this is the proliferation of scarecrows in farms, an effort to drive crows away from farmer's crops, from what belongs to them specifically. It is true that competition between humans and animals must have existed, but this served only to strengthen people's appreciation of the natural gifts of these animals even more, as evidenced by the respect Native Americans had for the wolf's speed and the crow's intelligence.

## *The Effect of Uncertainty*

The shift of society to a settled way of life serves as the underpinning and stage for the creation of crow and wolf symbolism, but there is more to the picture than simply this. One of the main purposes of myth is to explain what cannot otherwise be explained. Scientific mysteries including the change of seasons and the creation of the world are discussed in virtually every myth culture, and in some cases the wolf and crow even figured in to these events. More importantly, though, even more than most animals, these two species live most of their lives in secret.

As a general rule, all animals benefit from being as unobtrusive as possible for most of the year to avoid predators, and wolves and crows have both perfected this art and have it on hand whenever it is needed. Wolves give birth to and take care of their young inside of dens underground for weeks, making human observation very difficult. One might think that crows should be one of the easiest animals to find because of their distinctive color and loud vocalizations and this is true if one knows where to look, yet the most interesting parts of crow life still take place within trees and even under the cover of nightfall. During the winter months, crows often fly dozens of miles to roost in another location just before nightfall and it is not unusual for the number of crows in these roosts to count into the hundreds or even thousands. Before arriving at the roost location, crows get together in smaller groups called pre-roosts. This entire behavior pattern seems extremely bizarre – suddenly there will be hundreds of birds flying through the air in a great cloud as do the flying monkeys that the Wicked Witch of the West sends after Dorothy.

Even today, this behavior is still largely a mystery. No one can say for certain why it occurs and what benefits the crow receives from grouping together with so many

others. Roosting is merely one example of a litany of complicated animal behaviors that scientists still don't comprehend fully. Behavior such as this must have seemed strange to people in less advanced cultures, and they worked the crow and its odd behavior into their mythology to try to grasp what was occurring in their natural world.

### *Additional Reasons for Wolf and Crow Symbolism*

Other more obvious reasons exist to explain why the crow and wolf were chosen out of the millions of different species for censure and evil symbolism. The crow, an obviously black, fairly ugly bird, seems made to consort with black cats and witches, and one can picture the crow above all other birds as a messenger from the devil. They have no fear around dead animals and will cheerfully pick apart road kill in order to get the next meal. Even more repulsive to humans, crows are frequenters of battle fields, growing fat on the deaths of men and women, and have also been known to take advantage of public executions. Their caw is harsh and grating, but also has a mysterious, haunting quality that has been noted and used in myths from Greek culture to Poe: the Greeks believed that the crow's cry, "Cras, cras", meant "Tomorrow, tomorrow,"<sup>1</sup> while Poe's famous poem "The Raven" revolves around the repetition of the raven's phrase, "Nevermore." This call has had a lasting impact on humans and is likely part of what has associated the crow with evil.

The most obvious reason that the wolf was chosen for public castigation is because of its violent nature. Wolves have powerful jaws and sharp claws for a reason, and to watch a pack of wolves pull down a buck deer is truly an amazing sight. However, it's also one that will cause a chill to run down a person's spine: "Could a wolf do that to me?" Despite the well documented fact that wolves do not attack people, the fear of death

in the jaws of a wolf is one that has been burned into society. Even though more domesticated dog attacks end in human death than from wolves, still the wolf's clear power over the weaker human has entered the human unconscious and will be a very hard fear to remove.

### *Crow and Wolf Symbolism Today*

The ambiguity and then more decided negativity of wolf and crow symbolism has held sway for literally thousands of years. In many ways, people are further away from the land than they have ever been; many go their entire lives without ever seeing a wolf, while crows might be one of a handful of bird species that they do see. Many signs, however, point a new direction for the relationship between humans and the animals that inhabit the earth. Since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, few people have reflected on nature or its intrinsic value, perhaps assuming that these are things that cannot be destroyed. However, during the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the symbolism began to change. People began to look around them and realize what they had lost amidst the boom of industry and manufacturing. The skies were smudged with smog, lakes and rivers flowed orange in some places and even caught on fire. With her book *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson summed up the damage that society had caused to the environment as well as to human health, and suddenly the picture looked far different. People began to realize that nature would not be around forever, and while the crow might make itself at home in cities and manufactured parks, many species, including the remnants of the wolf population, would be lost.

Since that time, a tremendous effort has been made to halt the progression of the damage we have done and restore natural areas to the extent possible. Obviously, human

interference has changed the face of the globe in a short span of time as nothing else in the history of the planet and it will be virtually impossible to return to a world free of pollution, but in the last few decades, an awareness of the environment has pervaded society as never before. Endangered species are now protected, toxic waste dumps cleaned up, and pollution limited as much as possible. The effects of human industry are still deadly to many animals, but the acknowledgment of the human impact has pervaded society, and people as a whole are much more conscientious.

In the midst of this, animal symbolism has been greatly affected. Here, the twin stories of the wolf and crow split, for while the crow has thrived under the rule of skyscraper and chrome, the wolf is still battling its way back from near extirpation. The wolf has become a champion for wildlife, standing as a symbol for what has almost been lost and the effort to regain it once again. The reintroduction of wolves into the Western United States has been met with a mixture of joy, fear, and animosity, but the projects on the whole are going quite well. As more and more wolves are being reintroduced to areas over which they once reigned supreme, they have taken a new role in the public spotlight. Because of massive efforts to win the public approval that is so necessary to the success of wolf introduction, people have come into contact with and learned more about the wolf, more scientifically proven facts about their lives, than at any other time in history. From all signs, the more a person learns about wolves, the more inspired they are to foster their comeback<sup>2</sup>

Because of this, the “Big Bad Wolf” phenomenon has been dulled. More and more imagery of positive wolves has been revealed within the last twenty years. It seems that this change is occurring much more quickly than the one from positive to negative as human society first shifted. The wolf has come to stand as a symbol of wildlife and a

precious resource that cannot be replaced after it has been lost. Additionally, none of the more recent Disney movies uses wolves as the villain, and in 1993 a children's book written by Eugene Trivizas and entitled *The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig* gave a new twist on the original tale in favor of the wolf.

People have begun to realize that they have given the wolf an undeservedly bad name and are slowly making amends. While it is unlikely that the image of ravenous wolves on a hunt for innocent blood will ever completely leave our culture, the trend towards portraying a more accurate version of the wolf is gaining strength and will hopefully carry through the next century and into the future.

The crow is not likely to be as fortunate as the wolf. Because crows are at home in cities and suburbs, they can seem to be ever present, loud, obnoxious, and dirty. None of these characteristics is particularly appealing to the large majority of people. Additionally, they remain less understood by both people in general and the scientific community as there has been very little research on either the crow or raven to date. Movies such as *The Crow*, which features a crow as a guide for a vengeful dead man, do not help the animal's reputation. The lack of understanding, continued negative public press, and the fact that crows can simply seem to be everywhere will continue to plague its reputation in society.

Furthermore, it makes biological sense that humans as a species want to be the most successful, and the fact that the crow is proliferating in a society of our making undermines a part of the human unconscious. We don't like species that become successful by existing on our own refuse. The cockroach is another example of a species whose survival we have strengthened and yet is abhorred by the majority of people.

Perhaps this rests on the fact that cockroaches will outlive us even in a nuclear holocaust, proving their superiority.

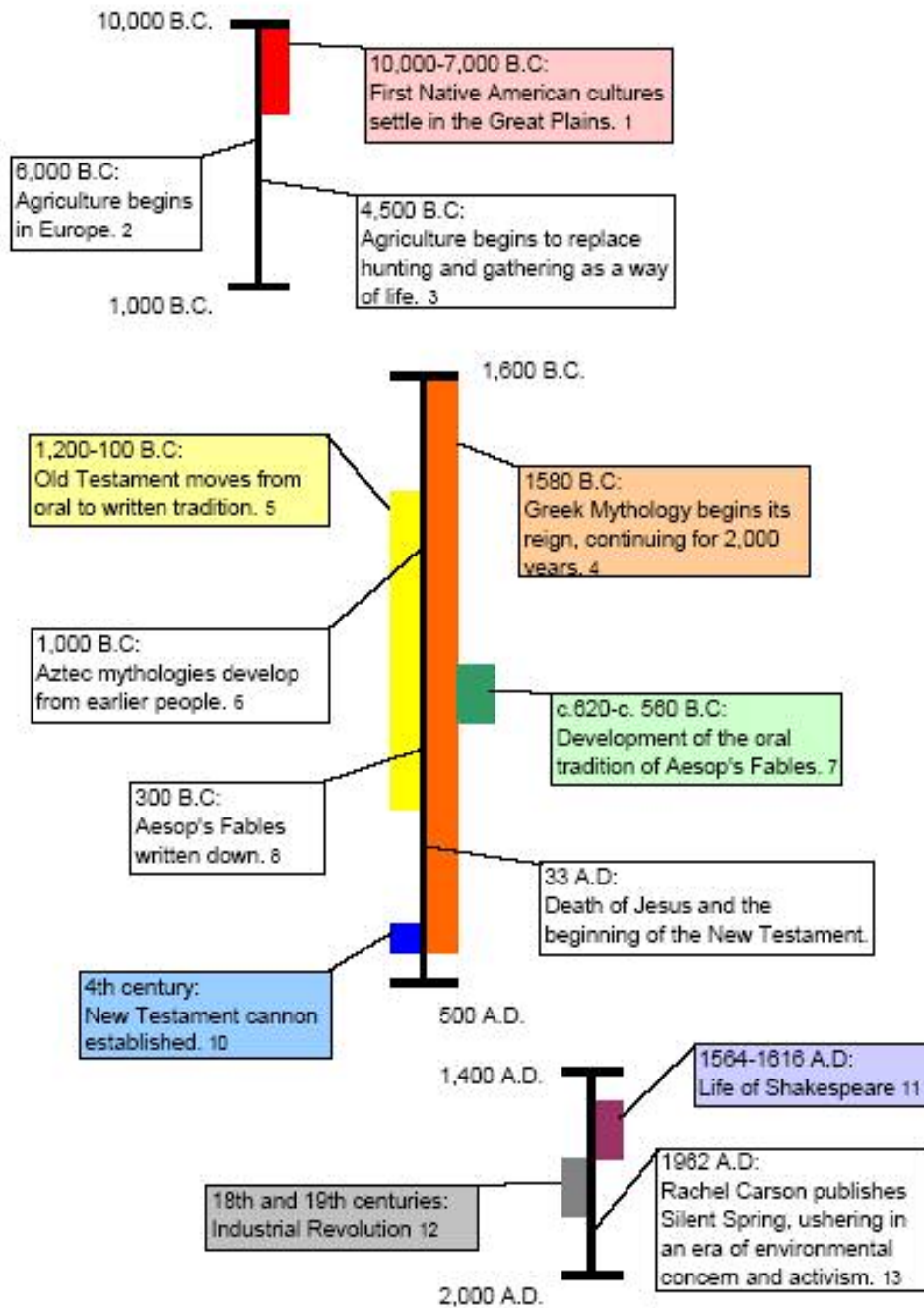
The one positive element that may help to turn crow symbolism around is the fact that, now more than ever, human society prizes intelligence. As previously discussed, what a society values will be reflected in the symbolism of the culture, and animal symbolism will shift depending on which stereotypes each individual animal fits. It cannot be argued by any who watch crows for even a short period of time that they are unintelligent. The fact that this animal may be the smartest of all birds could help to raise its reputation out of the basement of death and deceit into a more positive light. The wolf will benefit from this shift as well, as he has proven himself to be one of the smartest animals in the dog family. Aside from intelligence, both animals have family structures very similar to ours, and as this fact continues to filter through society, as it already has to some extent with the wolf, the animals will most likely reach a greater level of acceptance than their public images are presently reflecting.

Nothing, of course, is certain. We are once again in a period of transition, from a spirit of apathy towards nature and a lack of understanding towards a more active, interested, and informed response. The future of these animals is still uncertain, and yet with increased understanding and participation in the lives of these animals, humans shall formulate symbolism that can reveal the truth of the lives of wolves and crows.





## Timeline of Important Dates in Literary Sources and Human History



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