The Legacy of Lycanthropes

An overview of the Werewolf in Culture
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The world is filled with some rather interesting mythologies, but the ones that have always fascinated me most involve man, our own nature, and how we perceive it. And of these, my favourite is the werewolf.

The werewolf is, most basically, a man able to take on aspects of the wolf. This is usually inclusive of physical aspects – such as growth of fur and fang – and mental aspects, such as a more bestially motivated mind. They are often portrayed as savage creatures of the night, vilified by society, and in some interpretations, the state may be passed to others through bite.

Most prevalent throughout Europe, the werewolf myth is thought to have originated in Ancient Greece, but some scholars think they borrowed the idea from Phoenician culture mythos. The Greeks called the werewolf ‘Lukanthrōpos’ – literally ‘wolf man’ when translated, and where we get the alternative term for a werewolf, lycanthrope, from. Werewolf itself as a term comes from the Old English combination of the terms ‘wer’, meaning ‘man or husband’, and ‘wulf’, meaning ‘wolf’.

In Greek mythology, the first werewolf was King Lycaon. He was king of Arcadia, and in the most popular version of the myth, he became a werewolf when Zeus cursed him for testing the god’s omnipotence. The tale of Lycaon was also covered in the Roman poet Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, written around 1 AD. In his telling, Lycaon was instead cursed by Jupiter.
One of the most striking aspects of the werewolf is its appearance, so we will start with describing the most common three variations.

The most prevalent and traditional interpretation considers the werewolf to be a mix of both man and wolf, with the wolf side slightly more dominant, as seen in variant one. This is the creature we most often see in medieval depictions. Variant two shows the ‘wolf man’ version that was popularised by Universal Pictures 1931 film, *The Wolf Man*. This interpretation has the man side slightly more dominant. This type may have been inspired by Hypertrichosis, also known as Ambras or Werewolf Syndrome, which is a condition that causes an excessive amount of hair growth.

The final physical variant, variant three, appears simply as a wolf, which may or may not be larger than a common wolf. The Swedes were fond of this particular variant, and asserted that one could tell a werewolf apart from a regular wolf as the former had an extra leg and a lack of tail.

Depending on the mythology, a werewolf may even be able to change between these various forms, and their human one.

European folklore also describes the tell-tale physical appearances of a werewolf in human form – they may be possessing of a unibrow, excess hair, have curved fingernails, low-set ears, or a swing to their stride. Russians believed one could also be determined if the person had bristles under their tongue.

Europe owes its common interpretations both to the Mediterranean myths, and to their portrayal in Germanic paganism. In Germanic paganism, the werewolf is associated with the initiation of warriors (who would wear a wolf pelt on their backs), Harald I of Norway is said to have a ‘wolf coated body’, also known as a ‘Úlfhednar’ (also a type of berserker who would wear wolf skin and adopt lupin traits), and of course, there were many wolfish divine beings such as the fearsome Fenrir of Norse mythology. The werewolf myth has particular strength in that culture as a result.

*Illustration 2: A German text, depicting the transformation of a lycanthrope.*
But these are not the only origins of the werewolf.

We also need to keep in mind that the werewolf is intricately related to cultural interpretations of the wolf itself. Pre-agrarian Europeans viewed the wolves as mighty hunters, wise, and even nurturing beings that embodied nature. The ancient Celts, for example, considered wolves divine companions of the gods. But as society shifted from hunting, conflict between wolves and man arose due to the poaching of livestock, and attitudes changed; wolves became known as greedy, ravenous, murderous things – beasts wishing nothing but to wreck havoc and kill. This interpretation heavily eroded the previously established identity of the wolf, but as seen through depictions like the She-Wolf who raised Romulus and Remus in Roman myth, did not entirely erase it.

Had the myth of the werewolf arisen in pre-agrarian Europe, interpretations of it may have been more diverse in nature. We can similar trends in other regions that underwent the farming revolution (eg. The Werehyena of Africa and the Weretiger of India). But negative interpretations of the werewolf prevailed, with the others becoming demonised by a burgeoning Christianity, which sought to portray heathen beliefs as backwards and evil in nature in an effort to convert populations.

In newly Christian Europe, the werewolf was the result of a person who has been involved with the Devil or black magic. As such, they were often depicted killing livestock, attacking people, and generally trying to turn people towards the Devil.

This lead to numerous persecutions for lycanthropy, most notably from the 15th through to even the 18th centuries. The trials, like those for witches, originated in Switzerland. One of the most famous of these trials was the 1589 trial of Rhenish farmer Peter Stube, which ended in his execution.

Yet despite Christianity’s persecution and accusations of the demonic, some of the more older, neutral interpretations of the wolf (and thus werewolf) survived. Thiess of Kaltenbrun, for example, claimed to be a werewolf, but one in the service of God, and he asserted that werewolves were in fact heavenly soldiers. There is also Saint Christopher, the Patron Saint of Travellers, who is possessing of a dog’s head in a great deal of his depictions; additionally, Saints Patrick and Natalis are fabled to have turned people into wolves.

Illustration 3: A relief of St. Christopher, located in Greece.
Again, whilst the typical Christian interpretation permeated throughout most of post-Christian Europe, that was not the only interpretation the world had.

In Portugal, aside from the previously mentioned Devil-induced version, there also exists the Lobis-Homems. The Lobis-Homems is actually a gentle being, whose interest is only in howling at crossroads. It is considered to be a shy creature possessing a great deal of sorrow, and could be identified from regular wolves by its short, yellow tail. \textsuperscript{xx}

The Finnish werewolf usually finds themselves permanently transformed into a wolf due to a mistake, or an offence against a witch. They wander around their native hometowns, hoping for someone to recognise them, and call them by their name, which will break the curse. These werewolves, even when freed, will often possess a wolf tail for the rest of their lives. \textsuperscript{xxi}

Across the ocean in Mexico, the werewolf is known as a Nahual, originating from the old Nahuatl word \textit{Nuahualli}, meaning ‘warlock’. This interpretation has no ties to the European ones, but most cultures have similar views on them; the exception being some Mesoamerican Native American tribes consider the nahual to be a guardian spirit that lived in other animals. \textsuperscript{xxii}

Some Native American tribes do not think poorly of the werewolf or wolf man, likely due to traditional interpretations of the wolf itself as a being representing courage, strength, loyalty, and good hunting; indeed, some tribes consider the wolf to be close to humanity, with the Quileute and Kwakiutl believing they descended from wolves transformed into man \textsuperscript{xxiii}. But not all Native American tales are positive – the Skin-Walkers of Navajo legend are men cursed for an unforgivable crime, such as patricide, who take on animal form to prey upon humans. \textsuperscript{xxiv}

\textbf{Illustration 4: To hear Quileute legends, visit https://bit.ly/2ACBI8G}
There are, indeed, a great many ways to become a werewolf.

In addition to those cultural origins already touched upon, and others such as divine curse, demonic consultation and dark magics, and being turned by a werewolf through bite, Carol Rose, in her 2000 book, *Giants, Monsters & Dragons: An Encyclopaedia of Folklore, Legend and Myth*, asserts that the Ancient Greeks believed, when not a curse, one could become a werewolf by consuming wolf meat that had been mixed with that of a human.\textsuperscript{xxv} Other methods to become a werewolf have included being conceived under a full moon, eating certain herbs\textsuperscript{xxvi}, drinking water that a wolf had touched\textsuperscript{xxvii}, and the Livonian lycanthropes supposedly initiated other werewolves through the imbibment of a specially brewed ale.\textsuperscript{xxviii} In South American culture – heavily inspired by the traditions of conquistador Spain and Portugal – one need merely be the 7\textsuperscript{th} son of a family to be at risk.\textsuperscript{xxix}

Lycanthropy could also be gained by wearing a girdle made of human skin, that was sometimes a dark gift from the Devil to strengthen his worshippers. Benjamin Thorpe’s 1851 book, *Northern Mythology*, covers a few such tales,\textsuperscript{xxx} and Peter Stube confessed to owning a skin, although it was never found.\textsuperscript{xxxi}

Another way to become a werewolf was to simply wear the skin of a wolf; this may have been inspired by the previously mentioned pagan Germanic practice of warriors – most notably Úlfhednar berserkers – wearing wolf pelts.\textsuperscript{xxi}

We do, of course, have to address the more grounded reasons for being considered a werewolf. As previously mentioned, there exists Hypertrichosis, whose sufferers were no doubt persecuted. But employment of the werewolf myth can also be interpreted as an older society’s attempt to understand and explain situations it had difficulty grasping.
Rabies is considered by Ian Woodward in his 1978 book, *The Werewolf Delusion*, to be the most likely originator the basis the werewolf myth grew on; rabies possesses similar symptoms to how a typical werewolf behaves, and Woodward also says this may explain the virulent qualities of some interpretations, with the condition able to pass through a bite.\textsuperscript{xxiii}

The serial killer phenomenon and particularly violent murders, for example, were sometimes explained as the perpetrator being a werewolf. Former FBI profiler, Gregg McCrary, asserts that medieval societies may have been ready to blame the werewolf because “There’s a reluctance to admit that someone in our community would be capable of the kind of evil we see in brutal murders…Evil is so overpowering that we want to attribute it to some ‘monster’.”\textsuperscript{xxxiv}

Modern physicians also think lycanthropy has associations with various mental conditions that a medieval society may not have understood. Dr Lee Illis claims in his 1963 paper, *On Porphyria and the Aetiology of Werewolves*, that people suffering congenital porphyria – which includes a sensitivity to sunlight, reddish teeth, and psychosis – may have been called werewolves.\textsuperscript{xxv} There have been similar claims for people suffering Down Syndrome\textsuperscript{xxvi}, and modern Clinical Lycanthropy – wherein one genuinely believes to be a werewolf – is often associated with bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and severe depression.\textsuperscript{xxvii}

Illustration 6: Lycanthropy has connections with various mental conditions.

It is perhaps from these mental origins the idea of the ‘unwilling werewolf’ – whom did not want or seek the affliction – arose. And along with it, the desire for cures from the curse.

Aside from the usually undesired lethal options, various cultures had various cures. Returning to Ancient Greece once more, it was believed that exhaustion could assist in removing the state, as the person would simply be too tired to transform. Sicilians believed that striking a werewolf on the forehead with a knife would purge the beast within, and Serbians believed that finding and burning the magical skin the werewolf usually wore would destroy that part of them. In many Germanic traditions, simply telling the werewolf off or addressing it by its Christian name three times would suffice as a cure.\textsuperscript{xxviii,xxix}
In most of Europe, a herbal concoction – such as a tea made of wolfsbane, a plant said to be antithesis to the wolf – could be drunk to cure the condition. In post-Christian Europe, exorcism of the dark energies within the afflicted, as well as conversion to Christianity, were also suitable cures.\textsuperscript{xi}

In some depictions, small amounts of silver are able to subdue the beast. But although the use of silver to adversely affect a werewolf, along with the tradition of the creature being forced to change every full moon are widely known, these are actually more modern inventions.

The myth about silver being harmful doesn’t appear until 18\textsuperscript{th} century literature on werewolves, and likely came about due to some incidental stories where silver happened to be used in slaying (such as the killing of the Beast of Gévaudan, and the supposed driving out of werewolves from Greifswald, Germany, around 1640).\textsuperscript{xlii} Traditionally, silver also has strong connections with the moon, and associations as a ward against evil spirits, so it’s connection to werewolves – although late – makes sense.\textsuperscript{xliii}

The connection of shape changing and the full moon is harder to pin – whilst werewolves certainly do have some connection to the moon, mostly in regards to old stories about becoming one when born under a full moon or sleeping out under a full moon’s light\textsuperscript{xliii}, the forceful shifting aspect only became part of the general mythology in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, where it was popularised by its depiction in the 1941 movie, \textit{The Wolf Man}\textsuperscript{xliv}

It quite likely emerged as an extension of the typical imagery of wolves in general being associated with the moon, which has permeated a lot of art forms since the ancient Neolithic Age,\textsuperscript{xlv} as well as the notion of lunacy. Lunacy is the astrological theory that one’s mental state is adversely affected by the full moon as it creates undue light when it should otherwise be dark, promoting anything from mentally ill and dangerous behaviour to heightened aggression or irritability.\textsuperscript{xlvi}

\textit{Illustration 7: The moon has links to mental conditions, as well.}
We can consider these changes as being part of the larger growth of interest in the werewolf mythos. The popularity of the werewolf grew with the fascination of Gothic horror in the 19th century. The werewolf was depicted in fictional novels like Leitch Ritchie’s 1831 book, The Man-Wolf; Sutherland Menzies’ 1838 book, Hugues, The Wer-Wolf; and Catherine Crowe’s 1846 short story, A Story of a Weir-Wolf. These interpretations, up to and including those stories from the early 20th century (such as those appearing in pulp magazine of the 20’s to 50’s, and notably Guy Endore’s 1933 book, The Werewolf of Paris) helped solidify what we perceive as typical werewolf lore. The blood-thirsty, bestial nature; the curse; the form.

These stories depicted the werewolf as a monster, a human falling to either vice or sin, whom when a beast, often acted out of hunger, aggression, and sometimes even sexual desire (as in Clemence Housman’s 1896 book, The Were-wolf, which followed a femme fatal who would lure and eat unwary men). They would often die by the tale’s end, or at best, be saved and learning their lesson, irrecoverably changed.

It was with Universal Studio’s The Wolf Man that pop culture was exposed to the other side of the myth more readily; that the werewolf was not a choice or a state that was tolerated, but one undesired, and actively fought against. It was with this move wider society was introduced to the pitiable lycanthrope, who sought to free himself of his curse.

To build pity, the transformation was depicted as painful, and the character of the wolf often in conflict of the character of the afflicted, leading them at times to awaken from a transformation period, mortified at being covered in human blood.

Perhaps the emerging popularity of this interpretation correlated with humanity’s growth as a society – we now knew things like werewolves and the like surely did not exist, and allowed ourselves to be more curious than afraid, leading us to wonder what it would really be like to be a werewolf.

That idea, especially in modern culture, has expanded into interpreting the werewolf less as a curse, and more as a power fantasy; we see in modern interpretations of the werewolf myth, such as The Twilight Saga by Stephanie Meyer, the Teen Wolf TV series, the Werewolf By Night comic series, and numerous other media properties, some – if not all – of the negative aspects of lycanthropy being dismissed. A lot of these properties reason that the human mind is the only mind, and is thus in control of the bestial form and able to act in accordance to the lycanthrope’s human character.

Illustration 8: Teen Wolf is a popular contemporary depiction of werewolves in the media.
If I had to theorise, I would say this interpretation has come about due to a mixture of accessible knowledge and understanding (particularly of the mythology and perhaps a sense of injustice felt towards it, and a better understanding of wolves in general), and a sense of powerlessness in contemporary society/disenfranchisement. Indeed, a lot of these interpretations feature young or minority characters who feel the most powerless in society.

The old interpretations have, by no means, disappeared – the werewolf is not always something akin to a naturally-attuned superhero. In the film series, *The Howling*, we see the willingly sinful and violent lycanthropes of old, and in the film series, *Ginger Snaps*, we witness a young woman struggle with becoming a werewolf and how it leads her down a dark path.

Instead, we are simply now free to interpret the werewolf in a greater number of ways, including employing it as an allegory – the aforementioned *Ginger Snaps*, and the *Teen Wolf* movie series of the 80’s, use lycanthropy as a metaphor for puberty; J.K. Rowling uses the werewolf character, Remus Lupin, of her *Harry Potter* book series, as an allegory for someone living with AIDS.

In conclusion, the werewolf is a mythological being with an incredibly diverse range of interpretations and origins. Although the creature most popularly began as a Christian demonisation against paganism and farm-poaching wolves, the creature, much like us as a society, has grown to be much more than that. But no matter the interpretation, the werewolf is undeniably a being important to numerous cultures, both past and present, and its presence enriches our creative endeavours immeasurably.

It will be interesting to see the myth, like so many others, transforms alongside us.

*Illustration 9: Who knows what lays ahead?*


xxxi“Peter Stumpp”, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Stumpp, owned by the Wikimedia Group, as accessed September 2016


xxxiiiThe Werewolf Delusion (1979), by Ian Woodward, published by Paddington Press, as referenced September 2016


xxxv“Werewolf – Lycanthropy as a Medical Condition section”, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Werewolf#Lycanthropy_as_a_medical_condition, owned by the Wikimedia Foundation, as accessed September 2016

xxxvi“Werewolf – Lycanthropy as a Medical Condition section”, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Werewolf#Lycanthropy_as_a_medical_condition, owned by the Wikimedia Foundation, as accessed September 2016


lFor two specific examples: George Sands of the TV show, Being Human, was a mid-20’s with Bipolar Disorder; Jack and Lyn of the webcomic, Zombie Roomie, are brother and sister in their late 20’s – Jack is a gay man, and Lyn struggles with her decisions and whether she’s doing what she wants or what she feels ‘is best’.

liInterpretation backed by “Puberty, the Horror Movie”, by Alice Bolan, http://www.salon.com/2013/08/10/horrifying_female_puberty_makes_a_b_movie_brilliant_partner/, owned by SALON, as accessed September 2016
