



Wolf Folklore

By Connor Hager

Folklore, Folk Tales, Legends and Myths

Folklore is the word for the traditions, customs and beliefs found within a culture. Folklore is passed on by telling stories, sharing superstitions, creating music and art, and teaching by word-of-mouth. A folk tale, or story, may contain important lessons, tell a joke or reveal the moral values of the culture it came from. Cultures may also have mythology—a whole collection of stories passed on through generations, as if they were true, that are used to explain mysteries like the origin of the world, or the behavior of humans and animals. In myths and folklore, wolves have been used as characters to discuss social issues—human issues—when in fact, real wolves are focused only on their own survival.

“Romulus and Remus” is a Roman myth in which two baby brothers are raised by a mother wolf until they are adopted by a peasant family, and Romulus grows up to become the founder of Rome. In that myth, the mother wolf is described as kind and nurturing, though many modern myths and folk tales depict wolves in negative ways. Giving human characteristics (such a “kind” and “nurturing”) to non-human creatures is called anthropomorphism.

Cartoon animals are a good example of anthropomorphism; they look like animals, but they act like people.

Over time, most people and cultures have changed their attitudes toward wolves because of human activities like agriculture (farming), wildlife management and environmental studies. Changing attitudes can alter the way wolves are depicted by humans—and that can affect human tolerance for wolves, depending on whether the depictions are positive or negative.

Aesop’s Fables: The Wolf and the Crane

One ancient example of a myth, or fable, comes from a Greek slave named Aesop. Many of his fables used human-like animals to explain human morals and life lessons. One of his fables, *The Wolf and the Crane*, goes like this: A wolf got a bone stuck in his throat, so he went to a crane and begged her to put her long bill down his throat and pull it out. “I’ll make it worth your while,” he added. The crane did as she was asked and got the bone out quite easily.

The wolf thanked her warmly and was turning away when she cried, “What about that fee of mine?”

“Well, what about it?” snapped the wolf, baring his teeth as he spoke. “You can go about boasting that you once put your head into a wolf’s mouth and didn’t get it bitten off. What more do you want?”

European Fairy Tales and the Brothers Grimm

Popular European folk tales were written down during the 19th century. In 1812, a number of them were published by two brothers with the last name of Grimm, under a title still familiar to many young readers: *Grimm’s Fairy Tales*.

The brothers Grimm were lawyers who became interested in folklore as a way to study the German culture and system of laws. They collected these stories from people they knew, friends of



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friends, and peasants and farmers, revising them to be appropriate for an upper-class audience. In many of the stories, the wolf character symbolizes a villain or an enemy, rather than representing a real wolf. One famous fairy tale from the brothers Grimm is *Little Red Cap*, now more commonly called *Little Red Riding Hood*. The story's villain is the Big Bad Wolf, an evil character that shows up in storytelling even today.

Most of these fairy tales were created during a time when people were afraid that wolves would eat them or their livestock. They remembered old, false ideas about wolves' magical powers and human characteristics—storytellers made the wolf characters clever, devious and dangerous. These stories continue to provide material for books, movies and television—and even today, many people use “wolf-like” to mean hungry, deceitful, vicious and dangerous. ■

Start Your Own Story

Every myth, every story, starts with an author's idea. Try your hand at telling your own story by continuing the sentence below.

Once upon a time, there was a wolf that lived in a mysterious forest. The wolf was walking through the trees, searching for...

Word Jumble

Unscramble the letters to form the correct words. Use the highlighted words above to help you out!

1 WVLEOS

2 GMRIM

3 FLRKOOLE

4 FLOK TLEAS

5 IGB ADB WLOF

6 MTOYLG OHY

7 ACUGRITRULE



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Answers: 1- WOLVES 2- GRIMM 3- FOLKLORE 4- FOLK TALES 5- BIG BAD WOLF 6- MYTHOLOGY 7- AGRICULTURE