

Wendigo: cannibalism in native american folklore

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Wendigo Cannibalism in Native American Folklore

Lurking in the deep woods of the Northern United States and Southern Canada lies a mysterious and fearsome Native American monster, the Wendigo. The Wendigo is by far one of the most mysterious and feared monsters in not only in the Algonquian folklore which it is attributed to, but also other indigenous populations all over the world.

Although this creature goes by many names in the Native American Tribes, including Wechuge (Athapaskan Beaver), Windigo (Algonkian), Witiko (Sekani), Wittikow (Cree), Wintuc (Lenape), Wintiko (Ojibwa), and others, it is represented in the folklore of many cultures. For the sake of simplicity, the term Wendigo (Woodland Cree) will be used throughout this paper. Native Americans lived in harmony with the land around them, and their legends and stories showed the necessity to preserve that harmony, and the consequences of failing to do such.

The story and idea behind the Wendigo is no exception to this; being an “unnatural” and dysfunctional part of life. This paper will observe and analyze the role of the Wendigo in Native American legend as well as the effect that it had on, not only the Natives Americans, but those who came into contact and studied the tribes. The Wendigo According to legend, a Wendigo is neither a man nor non-human, but rather something in between.

A fully transformed Wendigo is most often described as a giant creature standing between eight and thirty feet tall, possessing incredible strength and speed, large claws and a body that looks like a skeleton with ash-toned skin. However, in any stage of transformation, it is most easily identified by

its ravenous and continuous hunger for human flesh (Atwood 84). A Wendigo's hunger is believed to be so insatiable that one of first things it consumes is its own lips (Carlson 359). For Native Americans, encountering a Wendigo, whether by accident or on purpose, could be the last mistake you ever make. You cannot outrun or outwit a Wendigo; and according to most stories, you are unable to talk or plead with the creature due to the fact it has lost the capacity for human speech after a long period of isolation (Atwood 84). However, that does not mean they are intelligent. The amount of time they have spent alone in forced isolation has made them the perfect hunter. They do not pursue their victims with inchoate frenzy but rather use superior cunning and an advanced knowledge of their game's desires and weaknesses.

They hunt people with the cultural strategy and intelligence that people use to hunt animals (Ridington 110). Their hunting skills are only amplified by their extreme elusiveness and ability to survive in the harshest of climates. They are the epitome of everything to be afraid of in the woods. The original Wendigos can be found in the Pawnee creation myth, as the creatures that came before the Pawnee and were destroyed by the Creator Tirdwa. "The men of the present era were not the original inhabitants of the earth.

They were preceded by another race - people of great size and strength. These were so swift of foot, and so powerful, that they could easily run down and kill the buffalo... The race of giants had no respect for the Ruler. On the contrary, they derided and insulted him in every way possible. When the sun rose, or when it thundered and rained, they would defy him. They had great confidence in their own powers, and believed that they were able to cope

with the Creator. As they increased in numbers they grew more defiant, and at length became so bad that Tirdwa determined to destroy them.

This he attempted to do at first by shooting the lightning at them; but the bolts glanced aside from their bodies without injuring them. When he found that they could not be killed by that means, he sent a great rain, which destroyed them by drowning (Grinnell 122). According to legend, a few of these giants managed to escape the flood and the Wendigos managed to survive. As the Creator made the new species of man, the original Pawnee, these giants shrunk back into the wilderness, emerging only occasionally to feed on the unsuspecting human.

There are two kinds of Wendigos, Non-Human and Human. The first human Wendigo is sometimes said to have been a man who, driven mad by hunger and snowblindness, mistook his family for a group of beavers, killed and ate them (Smith 68). Human Wendigos do not always take on the traditional described appearance unless they are exposed to the severe isolation required to drive the person mad. Most human Wendigos mostly retain their human features, and instead only experience the desire for loneliness and a craving for human flesh.

Also common to stories, both in legend and those recorded by persons studying native tribes, was the belief that a person transforming into a Wendigo had lost permanent control over their own actions and that the only possible solution is death (Ridington 108). Many people, fearing that they would bring harm to their family, begged for death rather than face a full transformation. Human Wendigos, although powerful, can be killed by

dismemberment and the burning the remains to prevent the evil spirit from ever returning to the earth (Atwood 85).

In the majority of stories that result in the death of a Wendigo, that Wendigo was at one time a human. Other traditional cures involved the consumption of copious amounts of hot grease from sources such as bear fat, melted deer tallow, and sturgeon oil (Atwood 85). Non-Human Wendigos are seen as the original Wendigos that were around before the first humans. These creatures are considered to be much more powerful than their human counterparts, and were able to inhabit and attack the dreams of their victims. These creatures rarely appear in legends, but rather are blamed for the actions of a possessed person.

Killing a non-human Wendigo was not easy and stories celebrated the bravery of those who acted as bait in Wendigo traps. Algonquians often had great battles and had to employ the help of shamans (Podruchny 690). It is important to note that non-human Wendigos are considered by Native Americans to be Otherworldly, and on the same degree as the spirits that inhabit the spirit world alongside the Creator. Origins and Folklore The earliest reference to Wendigo occurs as an entry in the Powhatan dictionary appended to Strachey's *Historie of Travell into Virginia Britania*.

The original word was *wintekowa*, meaning "owl" in Algonquian. For many natives, especially member of the Cree Nation, Owl calls were precursors of the deaths of individuals, and thus owls were seen as the sign of a coming Wendigo. Owls, like Wendigos, are formidable predators and possess large glistening eyes, and therefore became synonymous with the same (Brightman 341). The word Wendigo itself is derived from the Cree word

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wihtikowiw, meaning “ he eats greedily”, which may explain the reason why most believed to be Wendigos were isolated from the community before they consumed everything the community had. Native American Tribes lived in harmony with the land and the creatures around them. All tribes believed that upsetting the natural order of the world would cause severe disarray and eventually would lead to the destruction of the world. To counter this, hunters and gatherers would take only what they needed, waste nothing, and praise the creator for allowing them to be worthy to take such.

Animals were held in high regard, not only for their gifts of food, clothing, and other materials, but also for the powers endowed upon them by the creator. Eating the flesh of an animal was said to transmit to persons, under appropriate circumstances, desired attributes of the species. For example, raw moose blood is said to impart onto the hunter a kind of invisibility relative to the perceptions of game animals, thus allowing the hunter greater luck in the successful hunting of animals due to his increased stealthy abilities (Brightman 364).

Like the flesh of any other animal, human flesh was believed to possess a Great Spirit power that is acquired through consumption of the tissue or organs. Eating human flesh would exacerbate the powers already present in the human consumer; endowing the Wendigo physical and spiritual abilities to overcome and eat human prey. In essence, a human's abilities were multiplied and would eventually cause them to expand out of control and transform the person into a Wendigo (Brightman 364).

The Wendigo often appears in stories in legends, but unlike most other mythical creatures, its purpose was less to teach moral values, and more to

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impart upon members of a community the consequences from straying from the natural order of life and defiance of the rules of the community. There are three kinds of stories in which a Wendigo is a part of. The first kind of story, involves a Wendigo which may be presented as a manifestation of the environment; the spirit is a spirit of place. In these stories, meeting up with a Wendigo carries no more moral weight than meeting up with a bear.

If you get eaten, about all that can be said of you is that you ought to have been less unlucky (Atwood 86). In the second kind of story, a Wendigo appears as a warning or as a message to the protagonist. In these stories, if you get eaten by a Wendigo, the audience doesn't feel sorry for you, because it was your own fault for getting eaten. These stories served to send the message that if you behaved and followed the rules like you were supposed to, such a thing would never happen to you (Atwood 86).

The third kind of story the Wendigo is a fragment of the protagonist's psyche, and represents part of their subconscious that is made public to teach a lesson. In these stories, human beings who have " become a Wendigo " have not actually transformed, but in fact worried so much that the creature they have feared or dreamed about splits off from the rest of their personality, destroys it, and becomes manifested through the person's body (Atwood 86). These were used to teach lessons in regards to gluttony, loneliness, and other behaviors seen by natives to be unnatural and destructive.

Wendigo stories express the danger and isolation of living in the subarctic wilderness as well as taboos against cannibalism (Ferrara 77). The Wendigo was seen as the personification of winter, hunger, spiritual selfishness, and <https://assignbuster.com/wendigo-cannibalism-in-native-american-folklore/>

isolation (Atwood 85). Winter is a time of scarcity in both food and warmth, and was considered by the natives to be one of the most necessary times for a community to band together to survive the harshness. A scarcity of materials would give rise to hunger; forcing people to either share what they had with each other for the good of the group, or hoard what they had for their own sakes.

The choice to hoard, and act of selfishness, was seen as an act of defiance not only against a group, but the Creator himself. The penalty for such a choice was being ostracized and isolated from the remainder of the community, and in some cases, death. Transformation According to lore, there are four recorded ways to be transformed into a Wendigo, either human or non-human. Most methods of transformation include large amounts of stressor pain, both mental and physical, and a long transformation period that may not occur all at once.

In order to become a non-human Wendigo, one must either be born a Wendigo, or be eaten by a Wendigo. Although an individual Wendigo may once have been a man or a woman, once fully transformed they no longer have any evidence of gender (Atwood 84). Because of this, there is no recorded lore of Wendigos ever giving birth to new Wendigos, other than the Pawnee origins legend in regards to Wendigos inhabiting the world before man. Because of this, most non-human Wendigos are said to be the originals that have survived for hundreds of years. The other method is to be eaten by a Wendigo and have our now "evil spirit" enter the otherworld. A person suffering this fate becomes the Native equivalent of a Demon and possesses humans through dreams and thoughts. Thoughts of the Wendigo are said to

drive a person mad with anxiety about becoming a Wendigo, to the point that they give in to the desires to consume other people (Ferrara 79). Native Shamans were notorious in legends for using their ability to communicate with the spirits in order to send one of these creatures into the dreams of another, thus tormenting them with the thought of being transformed.

To become a human Wendigo is much worse a fate than a non-human Wendigo. To become such, a human must either consume human flesh, or be bitten by a Wendigo. The reason for the consumption of human flesh is irrelevant, as soon as it passes your lips, your fate is essentially sealed. Legends of this kind of transformation speak of people starving from a lack of food, who eventually give in to the desire for food and eat their companions or family members. Like the stories of the Loup Garou or French word for werewolf, a Wendigo bite served as another way for one to be transformed into one of these creatures.

However, unlike werewolves, a human was unable to transform back into a human once the transformation had begun (Podruchny 681). Both being bitten and the consumption of human flesh was said to not be instantaneous but rather a lengthy process, signaled by a period of strange emotions and behaviors by the possessed person that served as a series of warnings to others (Ferrara 79). The Wendigo in Reality In 1767, Alexander Henry observed an Ojibwa man who had killed and eaten four relatives during a food crisis. Henry recorded the actions of the tribe in his journal. The Indians entertain an opinion that the man who has once made human flesh his food will never afterwards be satisfied with any other... He ate with relish nothing that was given to him but, indifferent to the food prepared, fixed his eyes

continually on the children which were in the Indian lodge, and frequently exclaimed, ' How fat they are! '... Be this as it may, his behavior was considered, and not less naturally, as marked with the most alarming symptoms; and the Indians, apprehensive that he would prey on these children, resolved on putting him to death (Brightman 348). The tribe was so scared of the unnaturalness of the man's actions that they had him killed. Not unlike the Salem Witch Trials, those suspected of being a Wendigo were given little or no chance to defend themselves. They were immediately outcast from the group and treated like they were infected with some sort of disease. In many cases, acts of cannibalism were not actually witnessed, but rather reported by the suspected individual or other persons, or didn't even occur at all. In seventy cases reported, 44 involved an actual act of cannibalism.

In 26 cases, or 37 percent the potential Wendigo either recovered or was killed to prevent cannibalism (Rohrl 98). Around the time of Freud, psychologists began to analyze the stories and multiple cases regarding the Wendigo. Many noted that the common link between most cases was a psychological weakness and breakdown of the normally functioning personality (Ridington 107). From these psychologists, emerged the term "Wendigo Psychosis" which was used to describe the mental state of persons suspected or convicted of being a Wendigo.

People suspected of suffering from this were often described as being "Bushed" or suffering from "Cabin Fever" (Atwood 87). For most, in order to reach such a breakdown of mind required large amounts of time spent apart from others, usually in harsh or near fatal conditions. The compulsive desire

and craving for human flesh that appears in many of the Wendigo cases may point to a psychotic breakdown of normal emotions, motivations, and satisfactions in people who kill or are killed as cannibal monsters.

However, unlike many other psychotic breakdowns, Wendigo behavior it is believed to be genuine and real by the members of society as well as by the afflicted individual (Ridington 128). More recently however, another possible reason for the actions of those believed to be Wendigos was uncovered, a lack of proper diet. Meat, and especially fatty meat, is essential to the diet of the Eskimo and of Northern Athapaskan Indians. Researchers claimed that a fat deficiency could lead to headache, and, in four to eight weeks, ultimately death (Rohrl 100).

Was the reason for the actions of some not necessarily motivated by extreme hunger, but rather a lack of proper nutrition? It has been demonstrated that a drop in the blood sugar level can lead to many psychic phenomena, including depressive states, anxiety, and " other symptoms that have been lumped together as 'neuroses (Rohrl 100). The accepted conclusion is that although persons suffering from Wendigo Psychosis have experienced a large amount of mental stress, the fearsome creature itself does not in fact exist.

Like many other mythological creatures, the Wendigo was placed in Native American legend to explain things that the natives could not understand at the time, and to enforce the rules of the community. Psychologist Lou Marano ultimately went further in a 1982 article stating that Wendigos had never existed, at least as people overcome by cannibal desires. Instead, he adopted a functionalist interpretation (influenced by scholarship on the Salem <https://assignbuster.com/wendigo-cannibalism-in-native-american-folklore/>

Witch trials), arguing that the Wendigo was a phenomenon that allowed Algonquians to kill the marginal, the mentally ill, and the unpopular (Smallman 575).

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