

Crows and Ravens: A Multicultural Mythological Perspective

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FSEM Fall 2007: Bird Obsessions

Mythological Raven: Common Themes of Raven In Myths from Around the World

- In many cultures, such as the Native American tribes of the Pacific Northwest, Raven is viewed as a trickster, a villain and a hero simultaneously.
- Raven is also masters of deceit. In many Native American legends, the raven is also cruel and has no regard for anyone but himself.
- Raven is driven by greed. He commonly steals from others, usually using deception to get what he wants. Most often, it is food that he seeks.
- Raven often appears in multiple disguises, and has the ability to change his form at will. This capacity for dissimulation allows Raven to carry out his mischief.
- Raven can also play a positive role. In many myths, he is either the actual creator of the world or plays an important role in its creation. In some cultures, he is credited with bringing about the end of the age of animals and the beginning of the age of man.
- Another common theme involves Raven's theft of the sun, moon, stars, or fire.



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European Culture and Myths

Greek

In almost all of the cultures the raven or crow were originally white. In one of the Greek tales, Coronis, the daughter of Phlegyes was pregnant by Apollo. Apollo left a white crow (or raven) to watch over her, but, just before the birth, Coronis married Ischys. The crow informed Apollo of this, and Apollo was not impressed. He killed Coronis and Ischys, and turned the crow black for being the bearer of bad news. Luckily, Apollo retrieved the unborn child at the funeral, for the child became Aesclepius, the father of medicine.



A real-life albino raven from North Island Wildlife Recovery Center

Scandinavian

In Scandinavian myths, ravens are usually messengers. The Norse God Odin, had two raven companions, Huginn and Muninn. These two birds represent thought and memory, respectively. He sends them off at daybreak every day to fly around the world and bring him news. Odin also has two wolf companions, Geri and Freki. The wolves are similar in character to the ravens. This echoes the real world relationship between ravens and wolves. (See Biology and Behavior)

Biology and Behavior: The relation of Mythological Raven to Biological Raven

- The raven is often portrayed as a trickster. In reality, crows and ravens can sometimes get a free meal by yanking the tail of a wolf or eagle and stealing the distracted predator's kill. This is an important behavioral adaptation that contributes to the survival of crows and ravens, although humans may have interpreted it as mischievous trickery.
- Ravens and crows are sometimes depicted as being cruel. This portrayal may stem from observations of the birds selectively attacking young or wounded animals. Again, this is simply a survival tactic, although human storytellers could interpret it as cruelty.



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Native American Culture and Myths



A Tlingit storyteller says that, "raven never got full because he had eaten the black spots off his own toes. He learned about this after having inquired everywhere for some way of bringing a state about. Then he wandered through all of the world in search of things to eat. The journeys of Raven form the basis of most of the myths in the region, and he travels around meeting animals of all descriptions and usually succeeds in contests of wit and them, either destroying and eating them or driving them off and securing their food." One of the most common myths is about the raven and how he stole the stars, sun, moon and fire. This would reflect how in real life they are curious and take new things and examine them. Talks about the end of the age of animals and the beginning of the age of man.

Inuit Culture and Myths



A long time ago when the world was first born, it was always dark in the north where the Inuit people lived. They thought it was dark all over the world until a crow told them about daylight and how he had seen it on his journeys. The more they heard about daylight the more the people wanted it. People begged the crow to go and bring them daylight. He flapped his wings and launched into the dark sky towards the east. He flew until he saw the dim glow of daylight in the distance. He flew towards the dim light until the whole sky was bright. He landed in a tree near a village wanting to rest. A daughter of the chief came to the nearby river. Crow turned himself into a speck of dust and drifted on to her fur clock. When she walked back to her fathers lodge she carried him with her. The girl took off her clock and the speck of dust drifted towards the chiefs grandson. It floated into the child's eye and he began to cry. "What's wrong, why are you crying" asked the Chief. "Tell him you want to play with a ball of daylight." said the speck of dust. The chief took out a small ball of daylight and gave it to his grandson. "tell him you want to play outside," whispered crow. The child did so, and the chief took him outside. As soon as they left the lodge the speck of dust turned into crow. He grabbed the ball of daylight and flew into the west. Finally he reached the land of the Inuit again, and dropped the ball to the ground where it shattered into tiny pieces. Light went into every home and the darkness left the sky. The people thanked crow for bringing daylight into their land.

- Another real characteristic of ravens is their tendency to consume huge amounts of food when it is available. They will also cache additional food for later use. This behavior helps corvids to survive long winters, and probably led humans to consider them gluttons.
- In many stories, Raven steal items such as daylight. This reflects their tendency to pick up and examine objects that are unfamiliar to them. Most often, these objects are bright, shiny, or otherwise visually appealing. This curiosity allows ravens to find possible food items.

Works Consulted

- <http://www.ravenfamily.org>
- Heinrich, Bernd. *Mind of the Raven*. Harper Collins. New York: 1999.