

Things That Go Bump In a Canadian Night

The Wendigo

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You probably won't find a more savage or terrifying creature as the Wendigo. Americans and Canadians share this legend which is very similar to a werewolf.

The Wendigo (also known as Windigo, Weendigo, Windago, Windiga, Witiko, Wihtikow, is a mythical creature appearing in the mythology of the Algonquian people.

It is a malevolent cannibalistic spirit which humans could transform, or which could possess humans. Those who indulged in cannibalism were at particular risk, and the legend appears to have reinforced this practice as taboo.

Wendigo psychosis is a culture-bound disorder which involves an intense craving for human flesh and the fear that one will turn into a cannibal. This once occurred frequently among Algonquian Native cultures, though has declined with the Native American urbanization.

Recently, the Wendigo has also become a horror entity of contemporary literature and film, much like the vampire,

werewolf, or zombie, although these fictional depictions often bear little resemblance to the original entity.

The Wendigo is part of the traditional belief systems of various Algonquian-speaking tribes in the northern United States and Canada, most notably the Ojibwa/Saulteaux, the Cree, and the Innu/Naskapi/Montagnais.

Though descriptions varied somewhat, common to all these cultures was the conception of Wendigos as malevolent, cannibalistic, supernatural beings (manitous) of great spiritual power.

They were strongly associated with the winter, the North, and coldness, as well as with famine and starvation. At the same time, Wendigos were embodiments of gluttony, greed, and excess; never satisfied after killing and consuming one person, they were constantly searching for new victims.

In some traditions, humans who became overpowered by greed could turn into Wendigos; the Wendigo myth thus served as a method of encouraging cooperation and moderation. Among the Ojibwa, Eastern Cree, Westmain Swampy Cree, and Innu/Naskapi/Montagnais, Wendigos were said to be giants, many times larger than human beings (a characteristic absent from the Wendigo myth in the other Algonquian cultures).

Whenever a Wendigo ate another person, it would grow larger, in proportion to the meal it had just eaten, so that it

could never be full. Wendigos were therefore simultaneously constantly gorging themselves and emaciated from starvation.

All cultures in which the Wendigo myth appeared shared the belief that human beings could turn into Wendigos if they ever resorted to cannibalism or, alternately, become possessed by the demonic spirit of a Wendigo, often in a dream.

Once transformed, a person would become violent and obsessed with eating human flesh. The most frequent cause of transformation into a Wendigo was if a person had resorted to cannibalism, consuming the body of another human in order to keep from starving to death during a time of extreme hardship or famine.

Among northern Algonquian cultures, cannibalism, even to save one's own life, was viewed as a serious taboo; the proper response to famine was suicide or resignation to death. On one level, the Wendigo myth thus worked as a deterrent and a warning against resorting to cannibalism; those who did would become Wendigo monsters themselves.

Among the Assiniboine, the Cree and the Ojibwa, a satirical ceremonial dance was originally performed during times of famine to reinforce the seriousness of the Wendigo taboo.

The ceremonial dance, known as a wiindigookaanzhimowin in Ojibwe and today performed as part of the last day activities of the Sun dance, involves wearing a mask and dancing about the drum back-