

TOTEMISM

“natural species are chosen not because they are ‘good to eat’ but because they are ‘good to think’”

--Claude Lévi-Strauss

- Western naturalist, post-Darwinian evolutionary theory expresses our connection to animals in a metonymic world (things next to one another in physical space).

- The notion of *talking animals*, as widespread as culture itself, seems to express our connection to animals in a *metaphoric* world (things from different realms occupying the same space).

- metonymy [lit. “change of name”]-- *Rhetoric*.
(A figure of speech characterized by) the action of substituting for a word or phrase denoting an object, action, institution, etc., a word or phrase denoting a property or something associated with it.

- metaphor [‘carrying across’ —to transfer] –
- A figure of speech in which a name or descriptive word or phrase is transferred to an object or action different from, but analogous to, that to which it is literally applicable; an instance of this, a metaphorical expression.

- Lévi-Strauss: “metonymy corresponds to the order of events, metaphor to the order of structure”

- Here we seem to step clearly from the realm of nature to the realm of culture--projecting, comparing, resembling, pursuing metaphors and analogies:
- Children's Stories
- Fairy Tales / Folk Tales / Cartoons
- Indigenous Traditions

- Are animals just screens (metaphors, figures) for human cultural needs, or are we entertaining real relationships with them in these stories?
- Shepard (p. 89): is “a rich, literal knowledge of animal life . . . fundamental to this process” of acculturation?

- Are animals in animal stories just humans with animal masks, animal heads, or animal bodies?
- Or are they animals with human clothes?
- What role does animality play in these stories?
- And what do we mean by *animality*?

- The tension between:

humanizing the animal, and

animalizing the human.

- Psychology

takes such cultural manifestations as children's stories, fairy and folk tales, seriously, relating them to the dreamwork of Freudian analysis

- where images are treated as screens for basic (and often culturally unacceptable) sexual drives
- images (people, places, things) condense and displace the wishes that would fulfill sexual drives

- Freud's classic Oedipal scenario: child's sexual attraction to mother, aggressive feelings towards father

- In childhood, animal images can mediate mysteries of sexuality, reproduction, social difficulties
- Shepard (p. 75): animals in children's dreams mediate "problems that children have with other people."

- Still a kind of naturalism or attempt to bring all explanation to the plane of metonymy--to trace everything to the management of basic sexual (animal) drives.
- Little Red Riding Hood confronts rather directly the fearsome nature of sex (and of men) from the perspective of pre-pubescent children. It literalizes (and perhaps demonizes) the predatory, animalistic nature of male human sexuality.

- The Wind in the Willows, by contrast, socializes children--who have all sorts of lessons to learn in the realm of “etiquette”-- via tales of “animal etiquette.” The book offers an extended lesson in the challenges of friendship--including the importance of forgiveness, etc.--and in “tough love” (viz. Toad).

- This psychological processing continues throughout life: “Throughout our lives animals in dreams may continue to signify unresolved concerns, intolerable truth, or interpersonal uncertainty.”

- “animals are an eclipsed content having to do with something other than themselves--for instance, problems that children have with other people”
- “the animals are a cast of surrogates and vehicles for riding out a problem. They substitute for actual humans in dreams, especially parents or other relatives, who are too necessary to the dreamer's well-being to accept as ambivalent or threatening.”

- “That the animal disguise should screen the true situation in a friendly way” contrasts with the “mythology of dangerous beasts” evident in a tale like Little Red Riding Hood.

- “the child’s ‘work’ does not require knowledge of the behavior of wild animals, only the comforting sense of order in categories themselves, already experienced in the naming of the animals in the development of speech”

- That the very names of the animals should provide us with a comforting sense of order brings us to the second way of thinking about talking animals: *totemism*.

- In anthropology, totemism was a way of thinking about the plethora of animal images in indigenous cultures, often used to organize group identity, as in the Ojibwa “clan” system, with its catfish, crane, loon, bear, marten clans, etc.

- confusion between clan names and beliefs concerning guardian spirits
- (the popular “totem animal”)

- “totem animal” idea based on some kind of similarity between human(s) and animal with which the human(s) identify
- the clan name does not immediately and normally arouse a zoological or botanical association in the native mind

- the “totem animal” is personal, involving direct contact crowning a “vision quest”
- the totemic clan relation is collective, a relation between two systems, one based on distinction between groups, the other on distinction between species – placed in correlation and opposition

- the only possible relationship must be “masked,” and thus metaphorical

- Tikopian totemism
- The animal is conceived neither as an emblem, nor as an ancestor, nor as a relative
- (the group is descended from an ancestor, the god is incarnated in an animal, in mythical times there existed a relation of alliance between ancestor and god)

- The perceptible reality of animals in totemism permits the embodiment of ideas and relations conceived by speculative thought on the basis of empirical observations.
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