

The Modern Literary Werewolf: A Critical Study of a Mutable Motif

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Whilst for decades vampires, ghosts and zombies have enjoyed prominence with regard to the academic study of supernatural creatures, it seems attention is finally starting to shift to the werewolf. In the last decade alone there have been several critical texts published on the subject: *The Essential Guide to Werewolf Literature* (2003), *Renaissance Beasts: Of Animals, Humans, and Other Wonderful Creatures* (2004), *Metamorphoses of the Werewolf: A Literary Study from Antiquity Through the Renaissance* (2009), *Werewolves and Other Shapeshifters in Popular Culture: A Thematic Analysis of Recent Depictions* (2012) and now *The Modern Literary Werewolf: A Critical Study of a Mutable Motif* (2013). Amongst supernatural creatures, werewolves are arguably more adaptable than zombies, ghosts and even some vampires; instead of being permanently changed in to a fearful form, they shapeshift continually, adapting and reacting to their environment, providing multiple, rich avenues for academic study. To explore this fascinating and worthwhile topic Brent A. Stypczynski addresses a range of modern literary sources, as well as the werewolf's literary history from the medieval and Early Modern period, thus providing an effective overview of how the werewolf has transformed over time.

Just as the werewolf is a figure that continually shifts, so too does the academic definition of what constitutes a werewolf. To this end, Stypczynski's introduction describes his own system and criteria for inclusion – his text examines werewolves as figures who can shape shift into humans and wolves, but are never truly one or the other, and he separates this form from the hybrid man-wolf (which is ironically represented on the front cover). Within this definition, he also takes into account whether or not the wolf retains the mind of the human or if the animal takes over completely; whether the werewolf is sympathetic or violent; and the roles werewolves adopt (teacher, policing society, civilizing others). *The Modern Literary Werewolf's* target audience is not directly stated, but Stypczynski's study benefits literary studies in general, but particularly scholars of Gothic and contemporary

popular literature, as well as those generally interested in physical and mental transformations.

To organise his text, Stypczynski writes six chapters that each consider a particular author, which allows him to trace how each author has adapted the werewolf archetype from its origins in medieval literature. However, each chapter title should have directly referenced the author to be discussed – this would have made the contents much clearer and demonstrated the variety of the texts covered. For example, ‘It’s Only in Your Head’ analyses Jack Williamson, ‘The Disc’s K-9 Unit’ covers Terry Pratchett, ‘Wolf in Professor’s Clothing’ examines J. K. Rowling, ‘Southern Wolves’ discusses Charlaine Harris, ‘Secondary Worlds and Wolf Cousins’ considers Charles de Lint, and ‘Variety’ engages with a selection of short story writers – Philip José Farmer, Robert Randisi, Barbara Paul, Brad Strickland, Robert Weinberg, Jane Yolen, A. C. Crispin, Larry Niven and Kathleen O’Malley – which is a commendable expansion of the usual literary canon. There is a lot of new material here, with regard to fresh texts covered and new approaches to established authors, and this should have been emphasised more clearly on the contents page and on the book’s blurb.

One prominent omission is Stephanie Meyer’s *Twilight* series, which would have completed the analysis of mainstream popular series, although her problematic use of Native Americans as werewolves is examined by Kimberley McMahon-Coleman and Roslyn Weaver in *Werewolves and Other Shapeshifters in Popular Culture* (2012), which came out a year before Stypczynski’s text. Another omission is any acknowledgment of the thriving, much less mainstream, modern development of fan fiction writers who frequently grapple with the subject of werewolves wholly unfettered by the restrictions of classic literary practices.

Nevertheless, Stypczynski’s main aim was to establish how modern authors adapt the medieval and Early Modern sources’ depictions of werewolves and this is the book’s greatest strength. He provides clear and frequent references to a variety of early texts – such as fiction, trial records, treatises and medical texts – which produces an authoritative discussion on the medieval and Early Modern period. He then adeptly examines the contemporary sources – which cover a good mixture of young adult material and adult novels – for their similarities, differences and progression of the archetype. For example, Jack Williamson utilizes medieval concepts of metamorphosis as demonic trickery alongside Darwin’s theory of evolution, Heisenburg’s uncertainty principle and Freudian psychoanalysis; Terry Pratchett uses medieval traditions in relation to his fascination with fairy tales; J. K. Rowling presents

a neomedieval werewolf who is sympathetic because he self-regulates; Charlaine Harris modifies lycanthropy as a disease through germ theory; Charles de Lint pits a medieval sympathetic werewolf against a Renaissance Church-based huntsman; while the short story writers translate the werewolf into Science Fiction and other genres.

By the last chapters these comparisons begin to read a little simplistically though, almost like a check list of which authors do what changes, and there are some repeated points and quotations that could have been streamlined to make space for a more in depth analysis of the archetype with regard to wider variations, such as the werewolf-vampire or werewolf-witch crossovers that he briefly mentions. Nevertheless, Stypczynski does look beyond these comparisons of old to new depictions of werewolves to the wider social, political and psychological implications of this shifter. He considers not just what it means to be ‘human’ or ‘beast’ and the traditional nature versus nurture debate, but he engages with environmental messages, political commentary, moral debates, religious fundamentalism, racism, disease, biological evolution, technological advancement and psychological change, which all demonstrate the versatility and continuing relevance of werewolves to society’s collective consciousness.

This consciousness is a key aspect of Stypczynski’s analysis because his intervention into the literature is through his examination of the werewolf archetype from a Jungian perspective, which provides the overarching narrative frame of the text. Stypczynski uses Jungian theory to argue that the werewolf is an example of the ‘collective psyche perspective’ because of its frequent appearance in literature across the ages and diverse cultures, and that ‘the shape shifter is a Jungian archetype unto itself’ (1), although it does play a more independent role than Carl Jung expected. Stypczynski continues to elucidate Jung’s theory and how it relates to the shadow as either controlled, thus the animal urges are inhibited, or given into, with relation to violence and sexual desires. This theory was kept simple and jargon free making it reader friendly, yet it still contributes a significant theoretical element that advances werewolf studies.

Overall, *The Modern Literary Werewolf* usefully highlights the burgeoning field of werewolf literature, expanding the supernatural canon to include lesser considered creatures. The significance of Stypczynski’s research is his contribution through Jungian theory of the werewolf as archetype of the shapeshifter community. Stypczynski wisely assembled a group of specifically werewolf texts, narrowing his focus to what he considers the archetype of the were form, avoiding the pitfall of only briefly mentioning other shapeshifters and not exploring them in detail. The text therefore indicates these other were forms, such as

weredingos, werebears or werelions, alongside human-to-human shapeshifters, as an area in which more work should be done – as are werewolves depicted in different media – to see how the archetype progresses. *The Modern Literary Werewolf* is thus a welcome addition to studies of transformation, as although a substantial amount has been written on other supernatural entities, such as vampires, ghosts and zombies, there is a dearth of scholarly criticism on werewolf literature that Stypczynski helps to rectify.