Monsters From Native Canadian Mythologies

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Since earliest times, literature, art and religion have used monster images to express man's fears and man's concept of evil. Monsters have no existence in the real world; they are creatures of the imagination. Yet they are not so far removed from human experiences as to be incomprehensible. In fact, most monsters have a human component – a human head on an animal body, an animal head on a human body, an upright posture, or a power of shape-shifting from animal to human and vice versa. Deformity, cannibalism, destructiveness and an ability to inflict suffering are common elements in the conception of monsters. Visualisations emphasize teeth, claws, horns, tusks, fiery breaths and eyes, serpentine locks, and other pain-producing features. Paradoxically, while monsters are an expression of human fears, they are also a product of human hope. In mythology and folklore they exist to be defeated by the hero. The Minotaur, Medusa, Grendel, and the dragon Fafnir derive their significance from the fact that they are killed by Theseus, Perseus, Beowulf and Siegfried who prove their ability to rescue mankind from evil.

Evidence that the creative power of the imagination is stimulated by fear has been collected in Canada by students of Inuit and Indian cultures. When the great Danish ethnologist, Knud Rasmussen, visited the Canadian Arctic in 1922, he was told by an Inuit leader that myth and ritual were the people's defence against fear:

> We fear the weather spirit of earth, that we must fight against to wrest our food from land and sea . . . . We fear death and hunger in the cold snow huts. We fear Takánakapsâluk, the great woman down at the bottom of the sea, that rules all the beasts of the sea . . . . We fear the evil spirits of life, those of the air, of the sea, and the earth, that can help wicked shamans to harm their fellow men . . . .
>
> Therefore it is that our fathers have inherited from their fathers all the old rules of life which are based on the experience and wisdom of generations. We do not know how, we cannot say why, but we keep those rules in order that we may live untroubled.[1]

Inuit mythology centred on three monstrous creatures that expressed the human fear of starvation, cold and darkness. The most important was the sea-goddess Sedna (Takánakapsâluk, Kauna, Arnakapshaaluk – "the

terrible woman down there").[2] She had control of the seals, whales, and walruses that were the chief source of food. Originally a human girl who rejected ordinary suitors, she was carried to a distant shore by a shape-shifting Petrel. When her father and brothers tried to rescue her, she became a victim of their fears, for to pacify the stormraising Petrel they threw her into the sea. In *Shadows from the Singing House* (Edmonton, 1968), Helen Caswell, whose account is closely based on Rasmussen's, does not spare the grisly details of mutilation:

> Sedna, blue with cold, came up to the surface and grabbed at the side of the boat with fingers that were turning to ice. Her brothers, out of their minds with fear, hit at her hands with a paddle, and her fingertips broke off like icicles and fell back into the sea, where they turned into seals and swam away.[3]

Her second joints became ground seals, her third joints walruses, and her dismembered thumbs whales. Sedna's desire for revenge on the race that treated her so cruelly might lead her to withhold the animals necessary to Inuit survival but she might be propitiated by exact observance of rituals and taboos. Inuit artists depict her as having the body of a fish in a seal skin, a neck circled by the loon's necklace, and the head of a woman whose hair is braided by favour-seeking shamans (fig. 1).

A second monstrous deity was Naarssuk or Sila, the giant infant who became the weather spirit to revenge himself on those who had murdered his parents. Storms, snow drifts and severe cold were the penances he imposed. The third member of the trinity was originally a mistreated blind boy who, because he had committed incest with his sister, became the "unnatural" moon, subdued by the female sun. A desire for vengeance was the chief characteristic of the Inuit monsters, whether they were the three generally recognised deities or the evil spirits that took such forms as the giants, sea serpents, owl men, hell dogs, and gigantic spirit bears represented in prints and sculptures (fig. 2). It was man himself who caused the monsters' vengeful attitude – initially by mistreating fellow beings and recurrently by failing to observe rituals and taboos.

When Inuit mythology takes literary form, certain adaptations are required, aside from those related to problems of translation.[4] For non-Inuit readers, the mythic characters must be set in a realisable physical and social world, a sequence of cause and effect must be established, and, if the retellings are intended for children, the nightmare elements and sexual allusions must be softened. Techniques of adaptation in re-tellings now available for young readers include a reduction of violence, a comic treatment of the monsters, and the provision of a dragon-slayer who succeeds through intelligence as much as through courage and strength.

Among the few contemporary writers who have used Inuit materials in books for children, the best known is James Houston. Most of his stories present a realistic struggle for survival with the hostile environment as the

fig. 1 Sea Goddess feeding her young, print by Saggiassie.

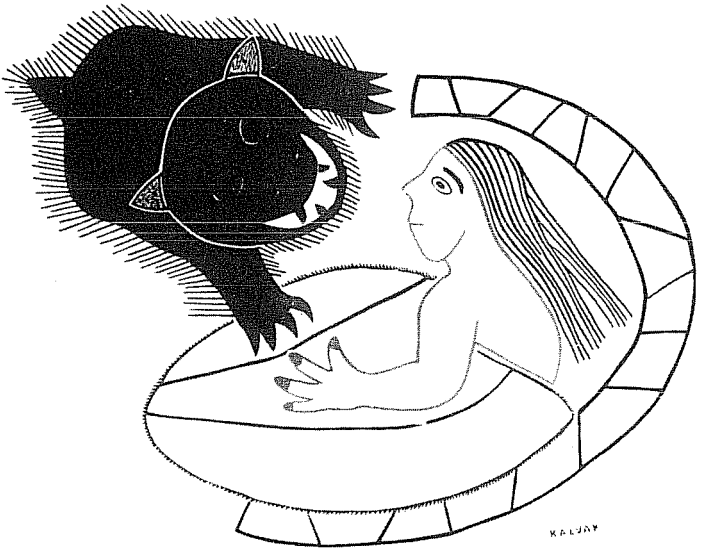

fig. 2 "Nightmare", Eskimo print by Kalvak.

chief enemy. *Kiviok's Magic Journey* (New York, 1973) is an Inuit version of the European swan-maiden folktale with the Raven playing the part of villain and the giant Inukpek acting as a helpful agent.

In Caswell's *Shadows from the Singing House*, the child heroes and heroines have no difficulty outwitting the terrible monster Qualutalugssuaq who makes a noise "like two ladles being banged together," or the worm dragon lovingly raised by the chief's daughter. Robert Mayokok's illustrations show rather comic monsters, not unlike Sendak's "wild things", with their "gently smiling jaws." In another collection of Inuit tales, *Raven, Creator of the World* (Toronto, 1970), Ronald Melzack provides unity by using a single hero who is both creator and culture hero – the shape-shifting Raven. But the climactic confrontations with the witch's son Axsuq, in the form of a giant polar bear, and with the witch's serpent are told in such pallid prose that excitement and suspense are almost completely eliminated.

While the Inuit spawned monsters from wronged humanity, the Ojibway and Cree of Central Canada saw vitiated humanity as the source of monstrosity. Nothing was more fearful than the Windigo (Witigo), a once-normal human being that had been possessed by a cannibal spirit. He has been described as

> wild and haggard, barefoot, tall and thin, ragged, sometimes completely naked. Usually the face is mutilated, and the most frequent mutilation is of the lips; these have been gnawed by mice or other parasites, so that the teeth show menacingly . . . . A constant thirst torments him and only human blood can quench it and warm his heart, for his heart is a block of ice contained within a frozen thoracic cage.[5]

In *Legends of my People: the Great Ojibway* (Toronto, 1965) Norval Morriseau describes in words and art (fig. 3) the "evil spirit who grows to a great height and eats human flesh." Accompanied by a blizzard it swoops down on the helpless villagers until the hero Big Goose changes his human form for that of a giant in order to battle and overcome Windigo:

> Trees were used as clubs, mountains were levelled, the ice on the Great Lakes was broken.

In Morriseau's stories and in Herbert I. Schwarz's *Windigo and Other Tales of the Ojibway* (Toronto, 1969), Windigo must share the prairies and forests with the water demigod Misshipeshu who appears in the form of a huge cat; with the evil Thunderbird that transforms disrespectful youths into his own likeness; and with Paakuk, half-human, half-skeleton with long flowing hair, coal black eyes, and sunken cheeks, eternally wandering the skies because he committed the first murder by sorcery. No Cree legend is more horrendous than the story of the monstrous head; the tale is part of the cycle associated with the mythological trickster Wesakitchak.[6] The first man (so the story goes) lived with his beautiful wife and his two sons in a tipi. But his wife secretly took as her lover an enormous snake that would

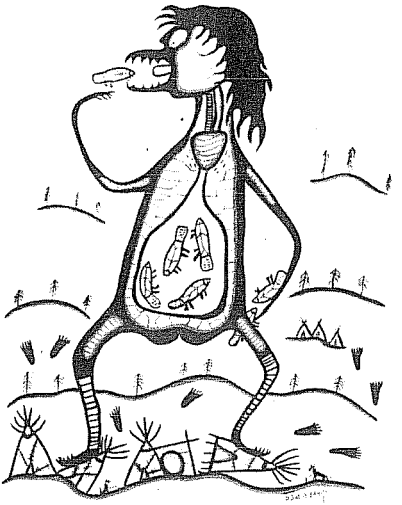

fig. 3 Norval Morriseau's "Windigo", from *Windigo and Other Tales of the Ojibway*, ed. Herbert F. Schwarz.

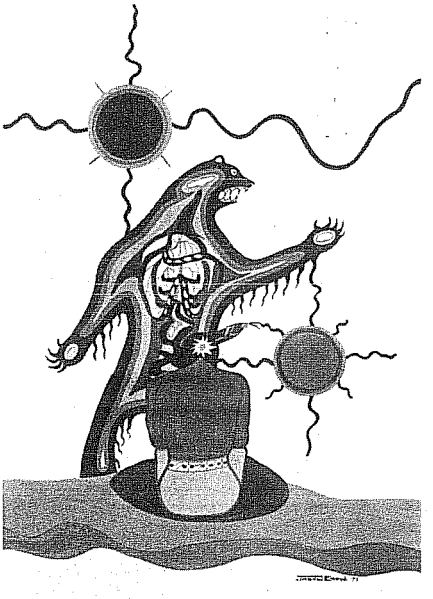

fig. 4 Jackson Beardy's Monster Grizzly Bear (bear walker) in *When the Morning Stars Sang Together,* ed. John Morgan (Agincourt, Ontario, 1974).

wrap itself lasciviously about her body. On discovering the affair, the husband killed the snake, provided his sons with four protective spells decapitated his wife, then escaped into the heavens where he became a star The dismembered head of the mother embarked on a nightmarish pursuit o her children, a pursuit that ended only when the curse of the elder son Wesakitchak transformed her into a monstrous sturgeon.[7] The story reflects the Cree belief that evil was present in the world from the beginning of time. The monsters are man's darker side.

Monsters in the form of giant man-animals have an important place in the mythological traditions of West Coast Indians. By cleverly converting some of the most horrendous into totemic figures, the clans used the monsters' power to protect themselves. Marius Barbeau tells the story of a young man whose hand was caught inextricably between the teeth of a devil fish, so that he drowned:

> The men and women now sat in canoes over the rock to which he was fastened and sang dirge songs (lemih'oi). When the monster felt that his victim was drowned, it opened its jaws and released him. He floated up, and his body was pulled into a canoe.
>
> This happened at Larksai'l, Alaska, before the people had taken flight southwards (gwenhoot). That is why the families of Guhlraerh and Sqagwait of the Gitandaw tribe among the Tsinsyan used the kakl'on (Devil-Fish) as a crest on their poles and head-dresses and robes.[8]

Spirit Grizzly Bears that could assume human form would allow themselves to be slaughtered by the Tsimsyan if they were treated respectfully Similarly, the Thunderbird, a monster predator possibly derived from the Russian imperial crest, became a favourite totem of the Kwakiutl.

Less easily assimilated as a tutelary deity was Tsonokwa or D'Sononaqua, the cannibalistic Wild Woman of the Woods in Kwakiutl mythology. She was said to gather up children in her basket and take them off to her forest home where she cooked and ate them. Emily Carr has vividly recreated the demonic setting in which she had her first view of the Wild Woman:

> Water was in the air, half mist, half rain. The stinging nettles, higher than my head, left their nervy smart on my ears and forehead, as I beat my way through them . . . . Big yellow slugs crawled on the walk and slimed it . . . . The nettle-bed ended a few yards beyond her, and then a rocky bluff jutted out, with waves battering it below. I scrambled up and went out on the bluff, so that I could see the creature above the nettles. The forest was behind her, the sea in front . . . . Her breasts were two eagle heads, fiercely carved . . . . The eyes were two rounds of black, set in wider rounds of white, and placed in deep sockets under wide, black eyebrows. Their fixed stare bored into me as if the very life of the old cedar looked out, and it seemed that the voice of the tree itself might have burst from that great round cavity, with projecting lips, that was her mouth.[9]

Totems of the terrible woman scattered through the dense Pacific rain forest must have provided a potent warning against wandering away from home.

A good example of West Coast mythology adapted for children is Robert Ayre's *Sketco the Raven*. Sketco combines the role of a culture hero, who gives the human people the sun, moon, stars, fire, and knowledge about hunting and fishing, with that of a trickster hero, who outwits his rivals and makes them the butt of his jokes. His adventures reflect dominant archetypes of world mythology – the otherworld journey, the rebirth in the belly of a whale, the wrestling of "good things" from a tyrant, and the climactic slaying of an evil monster. Most of the monsters Ayre has defanged with a vengeance by making them play comic parts. Curiosity, wonder, and laughter rather than fear and revulsion are the responses to the Fog Man, Kanugu, who produces mist by jamming his hat down over his ears. The hero's conflict with the Man Who Sits on the Tide is a slapstick routine made familiar by animated cartoons. The only thoroughly evil character is the Grizzly-Bear uncle,[10], a Grendel-like villain whose pursuit allows the introduction of the macabre:

> The trail of blood became a trail of bones and at length Stetco stood peering into a dark cavern which was half hidden by two huge boulders and which stank evilly.
>
> "Are you at home, Grizzly Man?" he asked softly. He could hear the monster breathing heavily and snuffling and cracking bones in his teeth. Stetco's heart beat in his throat. He heard the Grizzly snort. The monster stopped eating and sniffed loudly.
>
> The Grizzly waddled out of his lair, an enormous shaggy bear whose fur was tipped with silver, and he had blood on his muzzle and on his long claws.[11]

Here the reader may experience a pleasurable shudder before the monster is outwitted and destroyed by the hero.

By using one central character, Sketco, and the structural device of the quest in which the hero is aided by helpful agents and obstructed by opponents, Ayre has created a work not far from genuine fantasy. Like Tolkien and Lewis, he has presented a world where much evil exists but where evil is ultimately overcome by good:

> Sketco stood looking at the Grizzly and thinking of the little boys murdered, so long ago, and of the village, laid waste by the monster's greed and wickedness. He thought of Nass-shig-ee-yalth, who tried to keep the sun, the moon and the stars to himself, and of Qak, the Snowy Owl, who hoarded the fire, of Atsentma, the Game Mother, and of the "Man Who Sat on the Tide". Then he changed into his Raven shape and soared above the tree-tops. As he sailed over the village, he could see that it was beginning to stir. Freed of the Grizzly's tyranny, the people who were left were beginning to make a new life for themselves.[12]

In *Secret in the Stlalakum Wild* (Toronto, 1972), Christie Harris sho herself to be a conscious fantasist who combines Indian beliefs in "t unnatural beings who still live in the natural world" with an ecologic concern to preserve the West Coast wilderness from destructive mini developments. In using fantasy for didactic purposes she follows in t footsteps of such moralizing Victorians as Charles Kingsley, Geor MacDonald and John Ruskin. The story is told from the viewpoint Morann Finn, a heroine who fits the "unpromising and rejected" catego but whose tenacious quest for the treasure of Devil Mountain brings abou satisfactory ecological conclusion.

Where Christie Harris fails is in her treatment of the "unnatural beings The effectiveness of the monsters is reduced by the lack of dir confrontation between them and the main characters. Sarah, a univers student doing research on Indian beliefs, merely hears about the Ogress Wild Woman of the Woods. Sixteen-inch humanoid Sasquatch footpri are reported to have been seen but the creature soon loses his fear-maki potential by being described as "a pitiful buffoon – big as a grizzly b timid as a rabbit." Seexqui, the two-headed lake serpent, is a seemin respectable monster even though as an allegorical image he deno pollution. But when Morann sees him at close quarters on Stlalakum Lal the possibility for heroic action is aborted because she shuts her eyes a presses the sleeping bag against them. Her only thought is to escape.

A more successful use of native mythology and folklore occurs Catharine Anthony Clark's *The Silver Man* (Toronto, 1958). Gilbert Stey is transferred from a museum to the Otherworld by gazing at a crystal ir bird's claw, part of a medicine bundle that had belonged to the Shaman the Interior Salish Indian tribe. Gil has not been long in Crown Valley wh he encounters a spectacular Wild Woman.

> Out of the lake with a hiss rose a gush of fog. Gil's heart began to pound. The vapour parted and something stood there on the lonely water. It was a woman and she glimmered like a fish.[13]

Steam rises from the lake whenever her feet touch it. With a magic r woven from her hair she catches her prey. She lives in a tree that has be struck by lightning since ordinary trees would be set on fire by her he With her magic powers she has bespelled the orphan girl, Fringa, a twisted her into a mischief-making acolyte.

The story is developed according to the archetypal quest pattern with t young people, Gil and the Indian princess Kawitha, seeking first the Cl which the Wild Woman has stolen, and eventually the Young Ch Kunshat whose defection has been caused by the Wild Woman. Kawit explains why the Young Chief is not with his tribe:

> Because that Woman touched him and put fire in his blood. To cool the fever he went up to Crown Mountain where the Mountain King dwells

and then ghost-ice got into him and he has silver in his blood.[14]

The questors are assisted by such helpful agents as the Shaman Eagle-Bone, Uncle Barker, an Arctic Fox and a Mammoth who have the gift of speech, and a friendly witch Makuma, brown, small and wizened like a bat. The story ends in a way reminiscent of C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and Vera Chapman's *The Green Knight*, with Gil's sacrifice of his own blood to replace the ice blood in Kunshat's veins.

While the Wild Woman is the chief source of evil, it is another monster, Glee-san, the Terror of the Forest, who has been responsible for the Wild Woman's creation. Like the Inuit deities and the totemic animals, he can be either a protector or an opponent. Half man, half eagle, it is his claw, torn off by the chief that is the source of the Shaman's power and the cause of Glee-san's hostility. Appearance, threats, a savage attack on Eagle-bone, and an ability to disintegrate into a wreath of fog make him a memorable and convincing monster.

Heroes and heroines tend to be much of a muchness. It is the monsters that provide the excitement and the imaginative appeal in any fantasy. The Minotaur, Medusa, and Smaug are much more interesting than Theseus, Perseus, and Bard. Canadian mythology provides a fine cast of monsters – Sedna, Naarssuk, Windigo, Paakuk, The Wild Woman of the Woods and Grizzly Bear. What we need now are some new Tolkiens to take them in hand and put them to work.

NOTES

[1]Knud Rasmussen. *Intellectual Culture of the Iglulik Eskimos.* Report of the Fifth Ihule Expedition 1921-24, vol. VII, No. 1 (Copenhagen, 1929), p. 56.

[2]See Erik Holtved. "The Eskimo Myth about the Sea-Woman," *Folk*, 8-9, (1966-67), pp. 145-153 and *Eskimo Stories, Unikkaatuat*, ed. Zebeder Nungak and Eugene Arima, (Ottawa, 1969), pp. 111-137. National Museums of Canada Bulletin No. 235, Anthropological Series No. 90.

[3]Helen Caswell, *Shadows from the Singing House* (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1968), pp. 30-31.

[4]See my article "Canadian Indian and Eskimo legends as children's books" in *Children's Books in Translation*, ed. Göte Klingberg, Mary Orvig and Stuart Amor,(Stockholm, 1978), pp. 159-167.

[5]Father Roger Vandersteen, *Wabasca* (Gemmenich, Belgium, 1960), republished in *The Western Canadian Journal of Anthropology*, Vol. 1, no. 1, 1969, pp. 40-64.

[6]See Paul Radin, *The Trickster, a Study in American Indian Mythology*, (New York: Greenwood, 1956).

[7]Retellings of the story may be found in Vandersteene *op cit.*, and in Franci Fraser's collection of Blackfoot tales *The Wind Along the River* (Toronto, 1968).

[8]Marius Barbeau, " 'Totemic Atmosphere' on the North Pacific Coast," *Journa of American Folklore*, vol. 67 (1965), p. 113.

[9]*Klee Wyck* (Toronto and London: Oxford,1941), pp. 48-49.

[10]Many Indian tribes had a traditional belief in the bear-walker, a person wh used evil medicine to change himself into a bear for purposes of destruction an revenge (fig. 4).

[11]Robert Ayre, *Sketco the Raven* (Richmond Hill: Scholastic-TAB, 1961), p. 152

[12]Ayre, *Sketco the Raven*, pp. 182-3.

[13]Catharine Anthony Clark, *The Silver Man* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1958), p. 30

[14]Clarke, *The Silver Man*, pp. 36-7.

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