Monsters. They're Us, Man: Crash Course World Mythology #36

Crash Course: World Mythology
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Hey there, I'm Mike Rugnetta. This is Crash Course Mythology and today is the first of a few episodes focused on one of the greatest aspects of myths in general: mythical creatures. More specifically: monsters! And today, one terrible, international monster in particular.

Don't worry, Thoth, I'll protect you! As long as you promise to protect me... Hey! Hey, where are you going?! No, I definitely don't think we should split up to "cover more ground"!

===== Intro (0:26-0:35) =====

What do we mean by the word "monster"? Well, quite a lot. In English, we use monster to describe something or someone outside the bounds of acceptable form or behavior.

Monster comes from the Latin word that means "to show" and we see its root in words like demonstrate. But monsters don't just act monstrously, they're monstrosity is usually pretty visible without much action.

Almost any mythical creature could technically qualify as a monster. But from our studies, you'd probably get a sense that it's trickier than that. Unicorns, for instance, are way outside normal appearance and behavior, but no one calls them monsters.

The Sphinx provides another way to think through this. There are actually a number of sphinxes, but most applicable are the Egyptian androsphinxes, with a male head like the Great Sphynx at Giza and the Greek sphinx with a female head.

The Egyptian sphinx was mighty and powerful, but mostly considered benevolent, guarding entrances to temples, to pyramids, while the Greek sphinx was considered ferocious and would mercilessly eat those who were not able to answer her riddle.

So we might ask, in that duo, which is the creature and which is the monster? Beyond some naturalistic boundary, to get labeled a monster, a mythical creature usually has to transgress some kind of social boundary as well. If you consider it from a psychological perspective, particular brands of monstrosity often embody particular human fears.

Shapeshifters aren't automatically monstrous simply because they change forms. Think of Professor McGonagall or even the Doctor. But because often that ability can be used to deceive (think: Mystique), or lead to uncontrollable urges like with werewolves.

Vampires are another example. They may be a human-bat combo, but that's not really why they're monstrous. Vampires are bad because of their thirst for human blood, which is a pretty serious transgression of social norms.

Often, some naturalistic transgression is simply an outward sign of what makes monsters truly evil. What anthropology professor David Gilmore calls "an unmotivated wickedness toward humans".

This can take many different forms. The most common version is "monsters eat people". But sometimes that wickedness is more complicated and has more to do with the person who is afraid than the things doing the scaring.

But why do monsters even exist? Well, lots of reasons. Monsters are often sent by gods to punish humans for some transgression. One of teh most common images of a monster in Western art, for example, is the sea monster sent by Poseidon to devour Andromeda. Why? Because her mother Cassiopeia had bragged that she was more beautiful than the Nereids.

Humans, just don't brag when gods are around! It never goes well.

Luckily, Andromeda was saved by Perseus. And hey, that's another reason to have some monsters around, you gotta give heroes something to fight.

Our friend Joseph Campbell, among others has identified the basic pattern of Hero vs Monster stories. It's a three-part, repetitive story where a monster mysteriously appears from a dark shadow world to menace some previously peaceful local.

After the monster brings death and destruction, the besieged community calls upon a hero who saves them. The community rejoices only to have the monster or one of the monster's kin return and restart the cycle.

Classic example of this is Beowulf. Grendel shows up, Beowulf defeats him, and just when he thinks it's all done, Grendel's mom shows up and Beowulf has to get all heroic all over again.

Today, however, we have a monster even more terrifying than Grendel's superman momma. This incredibly frightening monster comes from Canada. Sorry, Thought Bubble, this ones for you, eh.

===== Thought Bubble (4:20) =====

Once upon a time, in the late 19th century, a First Nation's group is living in a camp on the Barrens River. One day, a hunter is driven by hunger and leaves the camp to go trapping. A few days later, people in the camp hear the trapper screaming and howling in the woods.

Everyone knows what's happening. The trapper has become a wendigo. A terrifying, man-eating ogre. A brave group goes to look for the trapper and finds his family all dead. And hey, worse still, half-eaten.

They return and tell their story and panic runs through the camp. The people know that soon the wendigo will come for them and they don't feel like being eaten. So they call a council. At the council, an intrepid young warrior named Rotten Log stands up and volunteers to fight the wendigo.

That night, they go into the forest and build a fire. Sure enough, a huge monster arrives. This is almost certainly the wendigo. The wendigo attacks Rotten Log, trying to slash his throat and eat him, but Rotten log has a guardian spirit he calls on to save him.

The spirit gives Rotten Log supernatural strength and, after a long battle, he finally defeats the wendigo. The hunters bring the creature back to the camp and teh people rejoice. But the wendigo isn't dead. Not yet. The only way to kill a wendigo is to melt its icy heart.

So the people throw him on a raging fire. The flames heat the beast, his heart defrosts, and the wendigo finally dies.

Thank you Thought Bubble.

===== End Thought Bubble (6:02) =====

Yeah, I mean as far as ogres go, I think I prefer Shrek? As I mentioned, this story is from Canada, but there are countless others.

According to Gilmore, "The wendigo has the distinction of the being the monster whose mythology has the greatest geographical reach in teh world. Wendigo stories, and the hysteria that accompanies them, have been reported all across Canada and as far south as North Dakota."

They are common among most of the Algonquian-speaking native tribes, but especially the Ojibwe and the Saulteaux-Manitoba.

The wendigo is, in many ways, the quintessential monster. It's big, it has super-human strength, and it's really really mean to people. Wendigos are humanoid in appearance with two legs, but almost everything else about them is misshapen or grotesque.

They hands are paws with twelve-inch long claws. And their feet, each a yard long, have a single toe with one long, long sharp nail. Wendigos have huge yellow eyes like an owl and a giant mouth with no lips because their cannibalistic hunger causes them to devour their own flesh.

Their breath is so powerful and loud that it seems like a windstorm and their howling sends those who hear it into a panic. Think you can hide from a wendigo? Maybe in the river? Nope! They can walk on water or swim beneath it like a seal.

They can subsist on mushrooms, rotting wood, moss, basically anything you can find on the forest floor, but their favorite food is people. And that really is what makes them monsters.

There are both male and female wendigos. And when a male and female meet, they fight until one of them dies. But if male and female wendigos would rather fight than breed, then where do new wendigos come from? A monster stork, maybe?

As the story makes clear, they come from us; the ranks of the desperate and hungry. Ordinary humans, often driven by hunger, can become possessed by the spirit of the wendigo and turn to cannibalism.

Metamophases are often brought on by the starvation that can occur in the cold winter months. In many of these stories, the wendigo possession is accompanied by incredible physical changes.

A person who has "gone wendigo" will grow in size and their appearance will become coarse and wild. As the wendigo's heart freezes, the urge to eat human flesh grows, eventually becoming irresistible.

The idea that anyone can transform into a wendigo is found in the most typical wendigo origin story. That very first, ancient wendigo, was a native North American who was transformed into a monster by overpowering hunger.

This story is so real to many who hear it that it has caused actual wendigo panics in Canada up through the 20th century.

So how do we understand the endurance of the wendigo legend? Well, I think just about all of us can agree that cannibalism is a pretty terrifying and taboo thing. The wendigo represents a fear of cannibalism and a fear that we might lose control of ourselves and violate, perhaps violently, some set of social norms.

People don't usually grow three-foot monster toes, but they do sometimes lose their grip. Which is to say, the monster legend is alive and well, although maybe more as a metaphor than as a real, yellow-eyed creature.

All humans have the capacity to become monstrous. Even me. And maybe even Thoth...

Thanks for watching. And we'll see you next week. Unless this guy sees you first.

===== Credits (9:41) =====

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Thanks for watching! And can you believe a guy named Rotten Log is the one who can stand up to the wendigo? What's the opposite of an aptonym?