

The Black Dog Mystery

By

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The black dog – faithful friend or wild flesh eater of the dead and dying? He pads through history as he pads through his keeper's mind – constant, panting lightly, and alert to possibility. Obviously an opportunist, his wolfish ancestor colonised the human campfire some 15,000 years ago, but not before the fear of his carnivorous predations had been deeply instilled into the human meme. Comfortable now with the warmth of his furry smell and his seeming constancy, we can relax in the company of the familiar black dog, a loyal friend who lavishes his attention on us and guards us, even in his sleep, and ours. For the black dog's wolfish genes are much more alert to danger than ours, much more finely attuned to environmental clues and premonitions of dark, unknown spectres of the night. Even in his sleep, the black dog twitches, growls and postures at danger. Awake, he can be menacing, with the power to savage, rip and vanquish. He gnaws at the bones of dead creatures. Just as depression gnaws.

The black dog – a term for depression which has very old origins, but which has been made famous in more recent times by Britain's World War II leader, Sir Winston Churchill, referring to his own periods of gloom. Sir Winston was a great rhetorician, but he did not invent the term. Schooled in the classics as he and his contemporaries were, he would have brushed with the *black dog's* syntactic antecedents in the works of great Greek and Roman writers of antiquity. The younger Sir Winston at the turn of the 20th century would have shared the West's enduring fascination with the myths, relics, and icons of Egypt's ancient history. He would have read the chronicles of Europe and Britain's journey from the dark ages to modernity over the past half millenium. But it is doubtful that Sir Winston could have said at what precise point in this history a the semantic turn occurred. When did the black dog assume his distinctive place in the colloquialisms of contemporary psychology?

There is a vast planetary oral and written history populated with supernatural wolves, demons, hell hounds and human/canine hybrids, mostly associated with suffering, failure, obstacles, defeat or death. From this, there emerged somewhere, some time, the term *black dog* as a vivid metaphor for the misery of depression. It does not leap out of a linguist's history pages fully formed, snarling, teeth bared, ears back, fur

upright – he simply fades in, as one might expect from a ghostly apparition which has hung around for a long time, avoiding the exorcist's best efforts.

Tracing the Black Dog's genealogy is as tricky as his shape-shifting mythology foreshadows. The first clues to his personal metamorphosis lie in the universe itself. Bright and gleaming, Sirius the dog-star pre-dates knowledge itself. Its portent in the ancient world was of hot summer months, a time of sickness and death in area of the Nile River and the Mediterranean, the cradle of our own civilisation. The waxing and waning of the pale moon tracked the mysterious bloody cycles of woman's body, and at its fullest, the round pock-marked Wolf Moon, gave humanity a word for madness - lunacy. The Earth itself was deep and dark, descending endlessly and welcome only to those night creatures yellow-eyed or sightless who could endure the unrelenting blackness which absorbed the bodies of the dead. These were riddles which helped form early attitudes to wolf and dog.

Already under suspicion as other-worldly creatures, wolves compounded their potential status as symbols of dark powers by being cunning, indiscriminate and skilful hunters and scavengers. They travelled in packs and co-operated in bringing down their prey. They and their cousins, the jackal and the dingo, were not too fussy about the nature of their kill so long as they could fill their bellies with protein-rich flesh. Little wonder that ancient humans both feared and revered the wolf. They co-opted the wolf, first into their story telling and then their myths, their poetry and their art. Eventually, it is thought some 400,000 years ago¹, those wolves which found human detritus a food source started to co-habit. Firstly, perhaps among the victors on the battlefields of human conflict and the grave yards of the dead, where a protein source was assured. These creatures ate the dead in a time when eating the dead provided not just energy, but spirit as well.

So the wolf decisively became both fearsome legend of the wild but only after thousands of years of steady but minute genetic divergence did he become loyal companion of the hearth and field that we know today.

Legends abound in all cultures which encountered the wolf. As we are on the track of the *black dog*, we will follow the scent of western culture and those legends which converged with science, art and culture to give substance to our spectral target. The

¹ www.wikipedia.com

amount of detail is potentially immense, so we need to stay where the scent is stronger.

Sirius dog-star was the larger of Orion's two hunting dogs. Hunting dogs became associated with the ancient gods of Greek and Roman mythology, as did the guard dog of hell, Cerberus. Cerberus was a particularly blood-thirsty character. He lays down early mythic canine connections with death and sorrow². It is said he tormented the souls that entered hell, and devoured those who tried to escape. His three slaving heads (or more in some accounts), a lion's in the centre, and a dog's and wolf's on either side were a formidable image to contemplate as an introduction to hell. His tail was serpent-like, with poisonous barbs. These are the two main roles, hunter and hell hound, which lead to our current understanding of the Black Dog.

We can take heart in our own task by the fact that Cerberus was not invincible. Sheer brute strength and lion-skin protection enabled Hercules to subdue Cerberus and drag him back to Earth. according to Horace. Trojan hero Aeneas teamed up with Bybil of Cumae, who tempted Cerberus with a cake of honey and poppy seeds which drugged him to sleep. Most famously, Orpheus soothed Cerberus with his beautiful music when he attempted unsuccessfully to rescue Eurydice from the underworld. Perhaps the early seeds of domesticity had been planted in Cerberus's doggy head. Certainly, there is an early ambiguity about the inevitability of his vigil, and the hope that deliverance with jaws of hell becomes a possibility. In Egyptian mythology, the jackal-headed god Anubis was a more benign guardian and escort to the world of after-life. One's soul need only be as light as a feather to escape the eternal darkness of the underworld.

To locate ourselves now firmly in Britain, our own *black dog's* birthplace, we should first remember that it was a place where there once were many more wolves than people³. Those were pagan times, when the wolf was sacred to Mars, the Roman God of War, and to Morrigan, the Celtic goddess of War. Semi-tame wolves were used by the Celts in battle, and wolves became known as the 'dogs of war'⁴. Merlin, the most powerful of magicians, kept a wolf as his 'familiar'. As a night hunter, and

² Hyatt, Victoria, and Charles, Joseph in The Book of Demons at www.greekmyth.com

³ Bruce, Marie. 2004. Magical Beasts. Quatum, Berkshire. p 51-68.

⁴ Bruce, *ibid*.

often one seen only at when driven by hunger out of the forests in winter months, the wolf's association with the moon was very strong.

The advent of Christianity changed, but did not eradicate, the old celtic beliefs. Wolves more than ever were associated with evil, and were themselves relentlessly hunted, almost to extinction. In 1127, when Henry of Poitou was appointed Abbot of Peterborough, it was reported that ... many people saw and heard many hunters hunting. The hunters were black and big and loathsome, and their hounds all black and wide-eyed and loathsome, and they rode on black horses and black goats⁵. The hunted were also the hunters. Wolves even gained an additional symbolism during the middle ages – that of exile. An outlaw became known as a 'wolfshead', the most famous being Robin Hood⁶. By this time, however, the dog had also become a symbol of loyalty and fidelity, and was adopted among the emblems of the English crusaders.

Christianity had become the main instrument of social belief and power was invested in the clergy. Life was hard, but if endured well, heaven awaited the good soul. However, a fiery hell presided over by Satan himself awaited those who fell from grace. This was now became a period on the threshold of change, and England was jolted out of the dark ages, where literacy levels were low and superstitions prevalent.

The black plague of the 1300's devastated England, including many of the clergy. Famine, civil war and economic restructuring were forcing major upheavals, including the Reformation, when Catholicism lost its religious monopoly in England. Labor was in short supply and people started to organise themselves into guilds to protect and maintain their livelihoods. The guilds, however, did not just fulfil an economic function. They were deeply involved in preserving the prevailing Christian ethos, and took a strong role in organising the production of the Corpus Christi or Mystery Cycle plays, which became quite elaborate during the late stages of the Middle Ages in England. This was a period also marked by a widespread and socially sanctioned 'literate disbelief' in much of the imagery of the demonic.⁷

⁵ ibid.

⁶ Bruce, ibid.

⁷ Paxon, James, J. 1997. Theorising the Mysteries' end in England, the Artificial Demonic, and the Sixteenth-Century Witch-Craze. *Journal Title: Criticism*. Volume 39, Issue4. Wayne State University Press. pp481+

The Mystery plays became increasingly more concerned with daily life as experienced by guild members, often manifesting in more farce and 'filth' than religious piety. Further, their very elaborateness gave substance to the demons and devils of hell who were represented by actors in costumes and props of increasing sophistication. They became, literally, fantastic, making even the demons they represented susceptible to skepticism and even ridicule. For a variety of reasons, ecclesiastic and government officialdom found the need to reassert their authority. The sixteenth century witch craze may have met this requirement, with the period between 1567 and 1640 representing the height of witchcraft cases brought before courts⁸. However, the extent of witch hunting which occurred in England during this time is academically contested terrain^{9/10}. Although witch hangings certainly occurred there, England did not pursue witches with the same vigour as occurred in parts of Europe. Nonetheless, with the superstitions of the time, we are closing in on our own *black dog*.

Still the black dog held steady his sorcerous mystique as the devil's own embodiment. Cerberus's repute as hell hound held fast to the black dog and he was given the status of a witch's familiar, although his long term rival for human affection, the cat, took the prize in these magical stakes. By the 16th century, the black dog remained the harbinger of disaster or approaching death, even though his reputation had been mollified by domesticity.

It was not yet over for the Black Dog. One of the most famous of his appearances in the Middle Ages was as the Black Dog of Bungay, which was visited upon the good people of Suffolk's St Mary's Church in 1577¹¹. It happened during a wild thunderstorm with such 'darkness, rain, hail, thunder and lightning as was never seen the like'.

As the people knelt in fear, praying for mercy, suddenly there appeared in their midst a great black Hell Hound. It began tearing around the Church, attacking many of the congregation with its cruel teeth and claws. An old verse records:

⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Witch_hunts

⁹ Gibbons, Jenny. Recent Developments in the Study of the Great European Witch Hunt. www.cog.org/witch_hunt.html.

¹⁰ Pavlack, Brian A. Ten General Historical Theories about the Origins and Causes of the Witch Hunts. www.kings.edu/womens_history/witch/worigin.html

¹¹ www.bungay-suffolk.co.uk/history/black-dog.htm

‘All down the church in midst of fire, the hellish
monster flew
and, passing onward to the quire, he many
people slew’

Such well known black dog apparitions occurred in many parts of Britain, and were called by different names¹², for example:

In the north of England – Guytrash, Shriker or Barguest (Barguest from the German ‘Bargeist’ meaning spirit of the (funeral bier).

In East Anglia and Norfolk

Black Shuck (from Old English Scuccca – meaning Demon – other accounts refer to the Padfoot¹³), Skeff or Moddey Dhoo

South England

Yeth, or Wish Hounds

These black dogs were thought to haunt roads or other places where people move from one place to another. They were usually portended death, either of the person who sighted them or an acquaintance of that person. Sometimes, these spectral hounds were actually helpful, especially in more recent history. Other black dog paths were found around old churches or graveyards.

But our own mystery is not yet solved. Frightening as many of these depictions may have been, nowhere in these mythologies is there yet found the black dog’s direct ownership by nomenclature of madness, melancholia or depression. He is certainly guilty by association, but this does not come close enough to solving the puzzle.

The myth of the werewolf is similarly tantalising. Legend as related by Ovid has it that Lykæon, king of Arkadia, served up to Zeus a dish of human flesh. Zeus was

¹² Black Dog – Canine Apparitions Revisited and Beyond.
www.jb004a9668.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/features/f_16_black_dog.htm

¹³ Paw of the Padfoot: A History of the Fire-Eyed Dog. www.geocities.com/ravenwinggryphon/Paw/

not deceived and punished Lykaon by transforming him into a wolf¹⁴. This myth spurred the medieval imagination into the superstition that a person could have the power of transforming himself into a wolf, while maintaining his human intelligence. According to one medieval notion, the soul of the werewolf quit its human body, which remained in a trance until its return. The werewolf/soul then wreaked its violence. This was a state taken seriously as lycanthropy. Robert Burton, in his *Anatomy of Melancholy*¹⁵, in 1621 described 'lycanthopia' as 'wolf-madness, when men run howling about graves and fields in the night, and will not be persuaded but that they are wolves.' Again, the werewolf/lycanthropic is in the right place, but not as a term for what we now call depression. The publication of the *Anatomy of Melancholy* coincided with another publication which brings us much closer to our own Black Dog's emergence as modern-day metaphor.

Contemporaneously, in 1621, a play was written called "*The Witch of Edmonton: a known true story. Composed into a Tragi-comedy by divers well-esteemed Poets; William Rowley, Thomas Dekker, John Ford, etc. Acted by the Prince's Servants, often at the Cockpit in Drury Lane, once at Court, with singular applause. Never printed till now. 1658.*"¹⁶ It is based on the trial, imprisonment and execution of a Witch, Mother Sawyer as recorded by 'Henry Goodcole, Minister of the Word of God, and her Continual Visitor in the Gaol of Newgate'¹⁷. Mother Sawyer stood accused of having a compact with the Devil in the guise of a Black Dog. She was a deformed, ignorant and superstitious old woman who had been persecuted and beaten by her neighbours, and in her rage gave 'herself up to evil passions.'¹⁸ She swore and cursed.

The theme of the play is one of murder and redemption. Mother Sawyer's Black Dog (the devil) appears to her because she cursed aloud, albeit in anger. He claims her, and she agrees to his pact. The devil incarnate as the Black Dog weaves great mischief and harm, inciting the young male protagonist to the murder of an innocent maiden whom he has bigamously married for money. Frank goes to the gallows, repentant and forgiven. Mother Sawyer, too, goes to the gallows, repentant but without the redemption afforded Frank.

¹⁴ Fis-ke, John. 1901. *Myths and Myth Makers: Old Tales and Superstiitions*. Houghton, Bostong. pp69

¹⁶ Hunt, Mary Leleand. 1911. *thomas Dekker: A Study*. The Columbia University Press, New York. p178.

¹⁷ Leland, *ibid*, p179.

Mother Sawyer is both victim and perpetrator in this play. Unlike Faust's pact with Mephistopheles, for example, her anger and discontent occur under provocation. Faust has much to lose, Mother Sawyer has little. In the play, her first entrance shows her gathering sticks and quietly muttering:

*And why on me? why should the envious world
Throw all the scandalous malice upon me?
'Cause I am poor, deformed, and ignorant,
and like a bow buckled and bent together,
By some more strong in mischiefs than myself,
Must I for that be made a common sink
for all the filth and rubbish of men's tongues
To fall and run into? Some call me witch,
And being ignorant of myself, the go
About to teach me how to be one; urging
that my bad tongue—by their bad usage made so—
Forspeaks their cattle, doth bewitch their corn,
Themselves, their servants, and their babes at nurse.
This they enforce upon me, and in part
Make me to credit it.*

There is no sense that the Devil inveigled his way into Mother Sawyer's life; nor that she was a virtuous woman who was to be tested. He set upon her and she capitulated. Once in his thrall, Mother Sawyer attempted to use the Black Dog/devil to revenge herself on one of her particularly troublesome neighbours, but he refused.

The Black Dog plays the connecting character in this three act play, linking it together. It is he who besets the characters and inflicts grief upon them. Frank is so distraught by his actions wrought under the influence of the Black Dog, he lies sick with both his self inflicted wounds and remorse, and he momentarily contemplates suicide as the Black Dog dances around him¹⁹.

This is moralistic play, in which virtue is extolled and sin is punished. The Black Dog is a speaking character, and while the religious principles are serious indeed,

¹⁸ Leland, *ibid*, p179

¹⁹ Leech, Clifford. 1957. *John Ford and the Drama of His Time*. Chatto and Windus. Londong. P27.

perhaps the Devil's incarnation as a black dog is one aspect of the play which we are meant to treat fancifully. During the play, the Black Dog amuses himself with a clown, Cuddy Banks²⁰. After all, the play is intended as both tragedy and comedy. This is where our own Black Dog is emerging.

Demonic possession was a commonplace explanation for mental illness in the middle ages²¹. But it was not the only one. Physiological causes were also proposed. In the fifth and fourth centuries BC, Hippocratic writings were describing melancholia as a distinct disease characterised by 'aversion to food, despondency, sleeplessness, irritability, restless' or lingering 'grief and fear'²². The four humours or temperaments described people of as sanguine, choleric, phlegmatic or melancholic. The melancholic was thought to suffer from too much black bile.

As already noted, Robert Burton published his great classic of the mind, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*²³ in 1621. Burton was a learned scholar, philosopher and clergyman who practised medicine only in the field of mental illness. He himself suffered from Melancholia – or depression - and he truly wrote as a form of personal therapy. It was a work deeply indebted for its science to Hippocrates and Galen, and to other writers on the soul. The book, which was both satirical and serious, was a greater early success than the works of Shakespeare. However, Burton struggled with the concept of 'melancholia', which he distinguished from that 'strange state of lycanthropy, in which one believed oneself a wolf'. In trying to grapple with the many symptoms and manifestations of melancholia, Burton compared his task to that of capturing a 'man-headed beast'. The echo of Cerberus resonates, but Burton himself appears not to have referred specifically to the 'Black Dog' in his work.²⁴

By the end of the 16th Century, melancholy had become fashionable. After all, it was Aristotle who had proposed long ago that melancholy and great philosophy and creativity were linked.

We have a coincidence between Mother Sawyer's leaping Black Dog, and Burton's melancholy. The evidence is not entirely conclusive, but both pieces of literature

²⁰ Leech, Clifford. 1957. *John Ford and the Drama of His Time*. Chatto and Windus. London. P27.

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²² www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four_humours

²³ www.abc.net.au/rn/science/mind/stories/s1090845.htm.

reached a wide audience in their shared day. I am satisfied that 1621 is the year on which to settle for own Black Dog.

Dr Samuel Johnson reportedly said that the 'Anatomy of Melancholy' was the only book that every took him out of bed two hours sooner than he wished to rise. In 1778, the term Black Dog for depression/melancholia was clearly in use by him and his circle of friends.. Mrs Thrale's diaries records a letter she wrote to Doctor Johnson about her husband's financial troubles and describes a trip to Brighton 'where he warded off the *black dog* of depression' by hunting and chatting with friends²⁵. Later (August 12, 1778), of herself she wrote²⁶:

"A day I couldn't rise above. I remember the old saw of my childhood about a black dog sitting on your back. I was annoyed as I rarely am by my nurse"

and again on August 29²⁷:

"Third day of this apathy, and the black dog on my back and today there is no consolation outside. Chill and damp with, now pouring rain and a feeling that the future will be like this, that nothing can get through to me."

In Boswell's letters:

The black dog that worries me at home I cannot but dread; yet, as I have been for some time past in a military train, I trust I shall repulse ...

And in Johnson's (gloomily writing to Mrs Thrale)

The black dog I hope always to resist and it time drive, though I am deprived on almost all those that used to help me ...

The Term was used by Sir Walter Scott's 1816 'Antiquary'²⁸

I think Sir Arthur has got the black dog on his back again,' said Miss Oldbuck.

Finally, was perhaps from Robert Louis Stevenson's 1882 story, *A Lodging for the Nigh,t* that Sir Winston borrowed his own Black Dog in more recent times:

All three peered covertly at the gamester. He did not seem to be enjoying his luck. His mouth was a little to a side; one nostril nearly shut, and the other much inflated.

²⁴ Radden, Jennifer. 2000. *The Nature of Melanchol: From Aristotle to Kristeva*. Oxford US. Oxford. P12.

²⁵ Clifford, James L. 1941. *Hister Lynch Piozzi (Mrs Thrale)*. Clarendon Press, Coxford. P72-76.

²⁶ *ibid*

²⁷ *ibid*

²⁸ *The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs: To have the black dong on one's back.*

*The black dog was on his back, as people say, in terrifying nursery metaphor, and he breathed hard under the gruesome burden.*²⁹

Or was it from Rudyard Kipling?:

*I'm an ould fool," said Mulvaney, reflectively, "dhraggin' you two out here bekaze I was undher the Black Dog – sulking like a child"*³⁰

And lastly, and most curiously from Walter Alexander Raleigh in 1906 to a Miss Ker ,

*I'm not fit for human company, -- just a weary man in a room the size of a meatsafe, pumping up splenetic utterances on a dead author, and getting angrier every day. It's no sort of life. Now and All because I don't want to say anything, and I've got to. It's a comfort to hear that Mr. Ker shares my outlook. I belong to the **Guild of the Black Dog**. Members of that guild are either blissfully happy or don't believe in the possibility of happiness, -- turn about. I have noticed that when they are really hit hard, they often take it serenely. Quite peaceful on a sinking ship...*³¹

The former Oxford English Literature Professor was also a member of the Guild of the Man of Sin!

There are many references in to the “Black Dog” of Depression occurring after the performances of the ‘Witch of Edmonton’ and the publication of ‘Anatomy of Melancholy’. Those quoted above are but a few. Many of the wolvine characters this amateur sleuthing has revealed are still with us today in the works of a Freud and Jung, slipping in and out of the subconscious and the shadows.

It has been a struggle to find the real Black Dog. If only he did look like Cerberus, his eyes, in all three heads, flashing like large red circles of fire, his jaws snapping ravenously, vile slather sprouting wolf's bane as it splashes about, his tail whipping menacingly with its serpents writhing and striking. We might all find the strength of Hercules, the guile of Bybil or the musicality of Orpheus if he were to be so substantiated. But our own Black Dog yet remains a mystery - true to the metaphor he is. Still a hunter of the sad, the grief stricken, and the fragile. Still a hell hound – a devil to shake off. Yet, remarkably faithful, loyal and persistent. Tame and beastly all at once. The , wolvine-canine shape shifter. Depression.

²⁹ Robert Louis Stevenson. 1910. *The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson*, V2. PF Collier & Son. New York. P227.

³⁰ Kipling, Rudyard. 1920. *The Writings in Prose and Verse of Rudyard Kipling*. Volume 2. Charles Scriber's Sons. New York. P178.

³¹ Walter Raleigh (1879-1922). *The Letters of Walter Raleigh (1879-1922)*. Contributors: Lady Raleigh - editor, Walter Alexander Raleigh - author. Publisher: The Macmillan Company. Place of Publication: New York. Publication Year: 1926. Page Number: 303., Walter Alexander Raleigh. Publisher: The Macmillan Company. Place of Publication: New York. Publication Year: 1926. Page Number: 303.

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