

The Black Dog
By Harriet Sawyer

I am the black dog of depression. Beware the fierce grip of my sharp claws and my yellow fangs. Beware the shadow I cast when I come. Beware the haunted dreams and sleepless nights I bring. Treat me with respect, for if you disdain my presence I have the power to paralyze you. I am a hound of fierce reputation, and my coat is black.

How many famous faithful hounds there are in history! Argos, Odysseus's dog in Homer's Odyssey, recognizes his master on his return after twenty years absence, and is so pleased to see him that he dies of joy. From the middle ages my more diminutive relatives are placed at the foot of ladies' tombs to denote faithfulness and affection, and placed at the foot of crusaders' tombs to represent their faithful following of the armies of Lord. These dogs are examples of beneficent companions and I am a far more malevolent force. Yet I too am the unerring companion that these other dogs so often represent.

I am the black dog. Ancient civilizations, including Babylonians and Ancient Egyptians, attributed me to demonic possession. I will show you later my links with the devil. Hippocrates (fl.c.460 BC) thought that my dark presence – called melancholia in his times – was caused by black bile, while Cicero (106–43 BC) attributed me to psychological difficulties. I remain amused at the debates over my causes that continue to rage. People say I am a chemical imbalance, a product of circumstances, or “all in the head”. It doesn't matter to me what your take on me is. I am the black dog, and in the impersonal and competitive age of technology the reach of my shadow is extending. But historical evidence will demonstrate that being plagued by “the black dog” is nothing new.

In Roman times Horace writes of me in his satires. In book 2, satire VII, Davus says:

*Then too you cannot spend an hour alone;
No company's more hateful than your own;
You dodge and give yourself the slip; you seek
In bed or in your cups from care to sneak;
In vain: the black dog follows you and hangs
Close on your flying skirts with hungry fangs.*

This was found on the net but no original source was given. Compare this to Rudd's translation (Horace & Perseus 1997:121) where I am thoughtlessly omitted and replaced with the modern term “Angst”.

*Moreover, you can't stand so much as an hour of your own company
Or spend your leisure properly; you avoid yourself like a truant
Or fugitive, hoping by drink or sleep to elude Angst.
But it's no good, for that dark companion stays on your heels.*

I hope that it is not egotistical of me to say that without me the verse loses much of its descriptive power. When I am present I bring rich associations from history, and a tangible depth of presence. Can you feel me pestering your very feet?

My name has been used very directly to refer to depression in literature since the time of Horace. The Oxford English Dictionary quotes Stevenson (1882): *The black dog was on his back, as people say in terrifying nursery metaphor.* Samuel Johnson, the famous lexicographer, wrote of me in his letter to Mrs. Thrale dated the 28th of June 1783. He described me as:

The black dog I hope always to resist, and in time drive, though I am deprived of all that used to help me. When I rise my breakfast is solitary, the black dog waits to share it, from breakfast to dinner he continues barking, Dr Brockelsby for a little keeps him at a distance. Night comes at last, and some hours of restlessness and confusion bring me again to a day of solitude. What shall exclude the black dog from a habitation like this?

R.W. Chapman (ed) (1952) *The Letters of Samuel Johnson*, Vol.3

Who better than me to mark a dark state of melancholia that is so domestic, familiar, and persistent?

I am the black dog. While in literature I may be a direct reference to depression, I am more frequently used as a symbol for much more than just this. Symbols draw their power from the fact that they imply more than what is directly represented. As Jung (1990:20) points out; *(w)hat we call a symbol is a term, a name, or even a picture that may be familiar in daily life, yet that possesses specific connotations in addition to its conventional and obvious meaning. It implies something vague, unknown, or hidden from us.* I am the wicked, lumbering dog in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Hound of the Baskervilles. I am the stealthy black dog of the night waiting to sap your life force in Bram Stoker's masterpiece of gothic imagination, Dracula. I am an ominous presence in the gloom.

I grip writers, statesmen, artists, and religious leaders alike. Johnson, Goethe, Martin Luther, Abraham Lincoln, Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Dickens, John Keats, Vincent Van Gough, Sylvia Plath, Edward Munch, and Marilyn Monroe all lived in my terrible shadow. It pleases me greatly that Storr (1988) argues that many have achieved greatness because of their very struggle with me. I lurk, terrible and feared, but not always with the worst of intentions for humanity. As people struggle with the pain and anguish I bring they may be forced to find creative and humanitarian outlets for their suffering. I may become the catalyst for new masterpieces, great visions, and heroic actions. But this is not the story of famous people affected by depression or their accomplishments. It is my story, and it is older than the celebrities who have made me famous.

In the beginning, black was all there was. *The earth was without form, and void: and darkness was upon the face of the deep* (Genesis 1; 2). Eons passed. Suddenly there was

an explosion of light. Sun-dazzle, moon-glow, star-beams, phosphorescent glimmerings, came upon the world. New hearts began to beat and fresh eyes began to blink. There was a great swimming, slithering, hopping, creeping, crawling, and flying forth. Out of the great swamp I come, black catching on the steely hairs of my coat. My four paws sink into the loam and I pause to survey the landscape of shadows with its enticing smell of fermentation. There will be time enough for me to cross the far deserts, mountains and oceans in my travels. For now, I turn my nose to the sky, and howl with the pure pleasure of existence.

To ancient Egypt I come, travelling with the body of a man and the face of a jackal. Here they call me Anubis. When Osiris is chopped into fourteen parts I gently prepare the parts with herbs and oils, lovingly bandaged the pieces, and then finally bring them into a whole. Osiris ascends to heaven, while mummification became my domain. Now it is your parts I take and carefully tend to, although your heart still beats and your lungs still expand and contract. I wrap you to preserve you for the journey. If you have been careful all will be well. Fear the weight of your heart as I lead you down to the chamber of reckoning, where Thoth waits with scales in hand and the feather of Truth. Down the ages I will become known as "psychopomp", or keeper of souls. Anubis or Hermes, I am the black dog leading you down.

I am the black dog Cerberus, chained at the gates of the underworld. See my forked tongue and forked tail flicking while galaxies of snakes dart from my back. My brother was Geryon, dog of many heads with the body of a snake, and father of the sphinx. I am Cerberus and with three heads dutifully alert I stand guard to prevent the dead walking from Hades back to the world of form. The Hindu god of death, Yama, also employs two black dogs to bring back wandering souls. As Cerberus, only one ever overcomes me. To accomplish his eleventh task, Heracles, that hero of heroes, comes dressed in his lion skin with only his bare hands as weapons. I sting him, but still he overcomes me. On returning to land with me as his captive, his examiner hides in a jar in his terror at the very sight of me. What else to do but to send me back to Pluto's depths to snarl and flare at ghostly sojourners to my hearts content?

Garm am I, chained in a cave at the entrance to Niflheim. Ik Drasil is the tree of life at the very heart of Nordic mythology, and Niflheim is seated at the root of the tree. It is a world of fog and mist that I watch over. In the middle of Niflheim is a bubbling cauldron, the font of all water beginnings, and cradle to gather all water endings. On Ragnarok, the end of ends, destiny calls me to break free of my chains. I will kill Tyr, who disperses valour in war and is the most intrepid of gods. In turn he will kill me. My relative the wolf Fenir also lives in the centre of Niflheim. He has a mouth like a whale, with the bottom jaw clanging against the ground, and the top jaw stretched beyond the stars. On the day of doom this beast will swallow Odin, the god of wisdom.

I am the black dog who marks the end of hope. Something is dying. But in the mists and the gloom, the waters are silently bubbling. These springs will slowly creep back up to the land, and some day something fresh and sweet will burst into the bright light of day.

I am Laelaps, dog of Procris. I am Laelaps, the tenacious. Procris was a cunning woman who really knew how to trade, giving the lustful Minos the antidote to all the scorpions and serpents that befell his mistresses in return for a javelin that never misses its target – and me, Laelaps, who never lets go of his prey. I come as the storm wind, driving brooding clouds with their leaden sheets of rain, forming towering waves and canyons that plunge into the ocean's depths. I hunt with seafarers, fish, and birds as my quarry. Many have found watery graves or been found washed up on stony beaches in my wake.

So famed am I for my tenacity that the carping critic of ancient Greece, Zoilus (Brewer 1989), compares me to the critic.

*Like airs, our critics haunt the poet's feast
And feed on scraps refused by every guest;
From the old Thracian dog they learned the way
To snarl in want and grumble o'er their prey.*

When I come to haunt you I am relentless in my criticisms, berating you with your faults and failures, wasted opportunities and wasted talents. The more you struggle to escape, the more I hold you captive. There is an art to taming me. I cannot always be overcome by mere force of will.

I am the black dog Hecate. Once I bestowed my favours on men – prosperity, eloquence, victory in battle and the like. Fish swam to the net blessed in my name. The cattle grew fat when the offering was made, lean when my name was forgotten. Yet like so many great and powerful goddesses, my name became linked to the dark powers. Sometimes I come to sorcerers and magicians in my former glory, with a torch held in each hand. Sometimes it is a jet-black mare or wolf that comes. And at other times it is the lean silhouette of a black dog slinking towards the crossroads.

Now I have come to the alley of the dogs. Escaping from the midday sun, which beats down on the Roman plaza like a migraine, mongrels are scattered amongst the rubbish. Pups suck at my exhausted teats and my tongue is long. A slave girl passes nearby. She catches sight of my dark form with its trailing appendages, and turns quickly. To see a black dog with pups is considered unlucky in these parts. My head drops back down to the ground, with my whiskers trailing in the dust. Almost delirious from the heat, earlier days of glory come to me in visions.

I am Moera the glistener, dog of Icarius. Icarius was taught cultivation of the wine, and it was wine that was his undoing in the end. He gives his wine to some local peasants and, intoxicated, they believe themselves to be poisoned. To make things worse, in their befuddled state swords are drawn and Icarius is slaughtered. The body is buried under a tree while I stand howling in grief over my master. Eventually Icarius's daughter comes, and she too is demented in her grief. It all ends in tragedy, with Erigone hanging herself. I become the star, Procyon, which rises in July before the Dog Star, Sirius. But more about astrology later...

Meanwhile the murderers flee from Cos to Rome, and drought descends on the land. It is the time of the rising of Cirrus. Crops wither on the bush, the ribs of sheep and cattle rattle, and pestilence falls upon the land. In desperation, the local people make sacrifices to Zeus and beg him to send down the east winds. But murder must be avenged, and it is the hot wind from the west that comes. The Etesiae blows for forty days, turning the land to dust and bones. Now each year the rising of the Dog Star in July heralds the coming of what are known as the “caniculares”, or dog days. The name for this hot and unwholesome period comes from the pernicious qualities attributed to Cirius. More than this, this is the time when us canines are prone to madness. See us running down the street with our eyes rolling and our mouth frothing and our tongues flapping. Take great care not to be bitten.

Now the Christians have come to the land, spreading the Hebrew attitude of contempt for me. *Thou shalt not bring the hire of a whore, or the price of a dog, into the house of the lord thy God for any vow; for even both are an abomination to the Lord thy God* (Deuteronomy, 23:18). This denigration will continue for centuries to come, right up to the present day. In the twentieth century Elvis puts it succinctly; *you ain't nothing but a hound dog*. But while the new religion spreads I am not just seen as a lower form of life. I become charged with power, and start to be associated with the devil himself. Stories of fiendish black dogs, often associated with the devil, abound in folklore. On the Yorkshire Moors I have fiery eyes, the power to blast, and claws like embers, and when sighted on me on dark roads I can spell disaster. My howl announces death, and can provoke all other hounds to wail around the country. I am the Barguest. In medieval Europe there is the legend of Dr John Faustus, a professional magician who sold his soul to the devil. In his version of Faust, Goethe describes the devil's apparition. It is I, the black dog, who has come to bargain. In far off lands you will find me too, inflicting my terrible punishments in the Buddhist hell.

I am also Cuchulainn, the greatest hero in Ireland, and defender of Ulster, slayer of giants, victorious in single-handed combat. As a boy, I smashed my lord's huge ferocious guard-dog against a doorpost, killing it instantly. When the king returned to the palace he was greatly displeased. To make amends, I vow to raise another whelp and serve as his hound in the meantime. I take the name of Cuchulainn, or hound of Cullain. Mackillop (1988:116) describes the riasrad (battle fury, frenzy, contortion, or war spasm) that overtakes me before going into battle:

When this overtakes him he becomes a fearsome figure such as has never been seen before. Every particle of him quivers like a bulrush in a running stream. His calves, hams and heels shift to the front, and his feet and knees to the back, while the muscles on his neck stand out like the head of a baby. One eye is engulfed deep in his head, the other protrudes, his mouth meets his ears, foam pours from his jaws like the fleece from a three-year old whether. The beats of his heart sound like the roar of a lion as he rushes his prey. A column of dark blood spurts from his scalp and scatters in the four directions, forming a mist of gloom...

While I am a hero who harnesses his forces for the good, I want you to have a sense of the incredible magnitude of my power. Such are the powers of the black dog.

I am the black dog without shadow or reflection. I have the power to summons the “children of the night”. Wolves gather in the moonlight when I call them, and are silenced and scattered with a gesture of my hand. I disappear from the mysterious Russian vessel that enters the harbour at Whitby with a corpse at the helm. I run and leap to my freedom on dry land. I can afford to be swift, for I know my destination. I head straight to the steps at the steep cliff where the graveyard is precariously perched. Beware the night. Beware my sharp incisors. Recoil at my fetid breath. It is the nectar of blood that I crave. My name is Dracula.

I come to the stony crags and tors of Dartmoor, wreaking death and havoc. A killer paints my muzzle with phosphorus to imbue me with terrifying mythic status (thereby drawing suspicion away from him-self), before setting me upon the horrified victims. It is that most rational of all men, Sherlock Holmes, who, with the power of his deductive logic, finally solves the crime. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy is one tool in the struggle against me that is here to stay. But while you can rob my most grotesque stature, I still often remain a formidable beast at the end of the day.

I am the black dog. I am critic, tormentor, inflictor of punishment, taker of life, guardian of the dead, and the devil incarnate. I wield immense power, and am tenacious in the extreme. All over the modern world people battle me with drugs, medications, and therapies. Do not feel alone if I come to visit you, or that you are somehow to blame for the intrusion. I do respond to treatment. Be gentle with me. I am the black dog, keeper of your soul, and I respond well to kindness.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Aesop (1889) *Aesop's Fables*, London: Cassel & Company Ltd.

Brewer (1989) *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, London: Cassell Publishers Ltd.

Chevalier, C. & Gheerbrant, A.(1994) *A Dictionary of Symbols*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.

Doyle, Sir A.C. (2001) *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, London : Dorling Kindersley.

Grimal, P. (1996) *The Dictionary of Classical Mythology*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.

Horace & Persius (1997) *HORACE: Satires and Epistles, PERSIUS: Satires*, transl. N. Rudd, London: Penguin Books Ltd.

Jung, C.G. (1990) *Man and His Symbols*, London: Penguin Books Ltd.

Mackillop, J. (1998) *Oxford Dictionary of World Mythology and Legend*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mercantile, A. (1988) *Encyclopedia of World Mythology and Legend*, French's Forest: Child and Associates Publishing Pty Ltd.

Stoker, B. (1995) *Dracula*, Philadelphia: Running Press.

Storr, A. (1988) *Churchill's Black Dog, Mice, and Other Phenomonology of the Human Mind*. New York: Groves Press.