

Movie: Wolf (1994)

Synopsis

Wolf (1994) is a film adaptation of *Otia imperialia*, a form of speculum literature written by Gervase of Tilbury in the 13th century. In his book, Gervase describes a folkloric human with the ability to shapeshift into a wolf upon the appearance of the full moon.

The word “werewolf” is derived from Old English *wer*, which translates as “man.” The man-wolf is perhaps best portrayed in the 1941 film *The Wolfman* starring Lon Chaney Jr. In the 1994 re-make, Will Randall is bitten by a wolf while driving through Vermont after it was seemingly hit by his car. The accident is the beginning of a series of “cursed” events for the editor-in-chief; being stabbed in the ~~heart~~ back by his ambitious protégé, Stewart Swinton; learning that his wife is having an affair; and meeting the enigmatic Laura Alden, daughter of the ruthless tycoon behind the takeover of Will’s publishing house. The psychological toll of Will’s current events is paralleled by physiological changes ranging from increased libido to onset of primal sensory perceptions.

How it relates to the field of psychiatry

The essential feature of the Disruptive, Impulse-Control, and Conduct Disorders is the problem of self-control of emotions and behaviors that violate the rights of others. The curse of the werewolf symbolizes the affliction of Intermittent Explosive Disorder (IED). The common attribute of “turning into an animal” is metaphoric of IED. However, for IED to be diagnosed, the recurrent aggressive outbursts cannot be better explained by another mental disorder, the physiologic effects of a substance or another medical condition. The idea that a brain tumor may be causing Will’s symptoms is suggested by Laura, “I say we get you examined for physical causes before we take for granted that you’re becoming [mentally ill].”

The shaman's rules discussed in *Wolf* represent a psychological formulation of IED. It is said that like our base, biological drives, “the wolf” is always present. It grows inside a man until the first full moon...and then it consumes him, killing all but his nature and his heart. This description parallels the development of the Freudian id. The analogue of the wolf is the superego, a culture’s prohibitions governed by the reality principle. The superego is externally represented by Will’s amulet that “holds the wolf at bay.”

The original term *lycanthropy* was applied to a supernatural condition in which men assumed the physical form of werewolves. This term has evolved into the classification “clinical lycanthropy” which is a syndrome whereby the individual demonstrates the delusion that he/she can transform into a wolf (or other animal). The various descriptions of lycanthropy across cultures serve to reinforce salient teaching points pertaining to the Disruptive, Impulse-Control, and Conduct Disorders. For example, in Russian folklore, a werewolf can be recognized by bristles under the tongue, which symbolizes the vulgar and abusive speech individuals with IED may describe as being beyond their control. Two additional examples follow.

Pyromania. In the Serbian culture, werewolves traditionally congregated annually in the winter months. The festival includes stripping off their wolf skins and hanging them from trees. They would then burn the skins, releasing the werewolf from its curse.

Kleptomania. In Haitian folklore, werewolves would typically try to steal children by waking mothers during the night and asking their permission to take their child.

Key Words: Otia imperialia, Gervase of Tilbury, werewolf, The Wolfman, Lon Chaney Jr., Disruptive, Impulse-Control and Conduct Disorders, Intermittent Explosive Disorder, Freud, id, superego, reality principle, lycanthropy, Pyromania, Kleptomania

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