

Windigo

The figure of the Windigo is familiar to Native and First Nations Algonquin peoples and predominant in Anishinaabe (Ojibwe) and Cree literature. It goes by various names with variant spellings (see Colombo 2) but is most commonly rendered as Windigo, Wendigo, or Witiko.

Windigo is a malevolent **manitou** or spirit whose insatiable appetite for human flesh can never be satisfied. The Windigo also has the power to turn humans into cannibals who suffer the same voracity.

Ojibwe storyteller Basil Johnston explains that Windigos “came into being in winter and stopped villagers and beset wanderers. Ever hungry, they craved human flesh, which is the only substance that could sustain them. The irony is that having eaten human flesh, the Weendigos grew in size, so their hunger and craving remained in proportion to their size; thus they were eternally starving” (*The Manitous* 247). The Windigo’s appearance reflects the bitter winters of the remote North, and its presence often is signaled by sudden cold and wind. Although it can take many forms, the Windigo often is depicted as “a giant spirit-creature with a heart and sometimes a body of ice” endowed with “prodigious strength” and able to travel “as fast as the wind” (Atwood, *Strange Things* 66-67). However, the assumption that the Windigo is exclusively malevolent is challenged by assertions that “though Weendigo was fearsome and visited punishment upon those committing excesses, he nevertheless conferred rewards upon the moderate. He was excess who encouraged moderation” (Johnston, *Ojibwe Heritage* 167).

Colombo’s research identifies the first recorded instance of the Windigo in Bacqueville de la Potherie’s 1722 travel narrative (2). The journals and memoirs of Hudson Bay Company employees document cases beginning in the 1770s (Smallman 572). For four centuries, the legends grew, culled from Algonquian stories. Windigo entered the mainstream through

compilations, translations, and borrowings, including Mary Hartwell Catherwood, “The Windigo,” from her 1894 book *The Chase of Saint-Castin, and Other Stories of the French in the New World*. Catherwood was among the first who purported to retell original Native tales. Other anthologies of “true Windigo stories” include Herbert T. Schwartz, *Windigo and Other Tales of the Ojibways* (1969) and Howard Norman, *Where the Chill Came From: Cree Windigo Tales and Journeys* (1982). Richard Erdoes and Alfonso Ortiz retell the Cree and Métis story, “Wesakaychak, the Windigo, and the Ermine” in *American Indian Trickster Tales* (1999). Anne M. Dunn’s Ojibwe stories collected in *Winter Thunder: Retold Tales* (2000) include “Snowbird and the Windigo.”

Jacques L. Condor’s *Windigo: An Anthology of Fact and Fantastic Fiction* (1982) provides a good example of how Indigenous stories and commercial fiction combine in the development of the Windigo as a literary motif. Condor’s anthology has it all: weird tales of the supernatural by authors like Algernon Blackwood, poetic parody by Ogden Nash, “scientific” analysis from anthropologists and sociologists Ruth Landes and Morton I. Teicher, and Native stories from Ojibwe artists like Basil Johnston and Norval Morrisseau. In “The Voice of the Wendigo” from *Condor Tales of the Supernatural in Alaska and Canada* (2000), Condor himself offers a “true story of a man who spoke [the name Windigo] and did not live to speak any other” (257) that appeals like the best of pulp horror fiction.

Stephen King’s *Pet Sematary* (1984), adapted to cinema by Director Mary Lambert in 1989, mixes the Windigo with another familiar exploitation of Native elements, the idea of the “Indian burial ground” that acts as a conduit between realms of existence. Other important literary works include Eden Robinson’s “Dogs in Winter” from her collection *Traplines* (1999); Stephen Graham Jones’ *The Fast Red Road: A Plainsong* (2000) and *All the Beautiful Sinners*

(2003); Michael Jensen's *Fireland* (2004); Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2005); and Edmund Metatawabin's *Hanaway* (2006). Louise Erdrich's poem "Windigo" is often anthologized. Young adult offerings that popularize the Windigo include Kathrene Pinkerton, *Windigo* (1945), Jane and Paul Annixter, *Windigo: A Wilderness Story of Fear and Courage* (1963), and *Bone Chiller* (2008) by award-winning young adult mystery writer Graham McNamee.

Allegorical adaptations exploit the sociopolitical tensions of contact between Euro-western imperialism and Indigenous culture, as the Windigo has become synonymous with Western capitalistic expansion and cultural appropriation (see Forbes; Johnston, *The Manitous* 235-237; C. Richard King; Root). Forbes, who compares the Windigo to "a cannibal or, more specifically, to an evil person or spirit who terrorizes other creatures by means of terrible evil acts, including cannibalism," draws on the etymology of the Algonquian word "wétikowatisewin," an abstract noun referring to "diabolical wickedness or cannibalism," and concludes that "imperialism and exploitation are forms of cannibalism and, in fact, are precisely those forms of cannibalism which are most diabolical or evil" (24). Historical evidence establishes the connection between the proliferation of Windigo and colonization, as Indigenous peoples were stressed by dwindling resources and deadly diseases introduced by European settlers. Goldman contends that "as a result of these illnesses, kinship groups faced huge losses; hunters died, and without them, starvation was inevitable" (171). Following this chain of reasoning, starvation spawned the Windigo, and colonization caused starvation; therefore, colonization brought the Windigo into being. Ethnohistorians make this case emphatically. Smallman examines the historical reports of Windigo in the context of commerce, emphasizing that "explorers, fur traders, missionaries, the police, psychologists, and social scientists sought to

understand, define, and use this ‘disorder,’ as companies and the state sought to assert their authority in Cree and Ojibwa communities. Accordingly, an imperial context shaped both the discursive and practical responses of non-Algonquians to the windigo” (571-72).

A metaphor of “colonialism as cannibalism,” the Windigo trope can alternatively represent Euro-Western consumption of Indigenous peoples, lands, and resources or judgment and justice, or revenge, upon colonizers for their greed and brutality. Characters suffering possession by the Windigo might represent either the colonizer or the colonized, as both the role of imperialist conqueror and of victim reflect states of excess and imbalance. This metaphor is consistent with the Algonquian identification of the Windigo as the personification of excess, greed, and gluttony (Johnston, *Ojibway Heritage* 66).

Director Antonia Bird’s film *Ravenous* (1999), for example, is a cautionary tale of Manifest Destiny where white men become Windigos, and the metaphor of colonialism as cannibalism is literalized: America is eating its way west in the guise of cannibal Army officers. The Menominee character George (played by Joseph Runningfox) warns an incredulous Colonel (played by Jeffrey Jones) that a Windigo is threatening their company. George produces an image of the Windigo painted on leather but must resort to the Native language of the Ojibwe to describe its meaning. The Captain translates, “A man who eats another’s flesh, usually an enemy, and he takes—steals—his strength, essence, spirit, and his hunger becomes craven, insatiable. And the more he eats, the more he wants, and the more he eats, the stronger he becomes.” The Captain pauses and asks, “George? People don’t still do that, do they?” George answers, “Like the white man eats the body of Jesus Christ every Sunday.” In the end, the only survivor is another Menominee, George’s sister Martha (played by Sheila Tousey).

Director Larry Fessenden's *The Last Winter* (2006) returns the role of Windigo to a Native character, Dawn (played by Joanne Shenandoah, Grammy award winning singer and a Wolf Clan member of the Iroquois Confederacy). The story depicts nature's revenge on an American oil company that is exploring the Alaska wilderness for its next fix, manifesting a mixture of spirit ghosts that protect Mother Earth from the invader; this time, it is the Native who goes Windigo, displaying the maniacal behavior of someone who has lost sovereignty over her own mental and spiritual being. In both of these adaptations, the characters who go Windigo adhere to historical accounts, remaining "generally rational except at short intervals when the paroxysms seize them: their motions then are various and diametrically contrary at one time to what they are the next moment—sullen, thoughtful, wild look and perfectly mute: [then] staring, in sudden convulsions, wild, incoherent and extravagant language" (Brown and Brightman 91).

Among more nuanced uses, Fessenden's earlier film *Windigo* (2001) provides a psychological take, as the Windigo spirit who takes revenge on a murderous woodsman seems to manifest in response to a young boy's depression and melancholia. Director Norma Bailey's film adaptation of the 2000 book by Gordon Sinclair, *Cowboys and Indians: The J. J. Harper Story* (2003) introduces Windigo vengeance to the original story, the true account of Winnipeg Police Constable Robert Cross's murder of First Nations Chief J. J. Harper in 1988. Although the crime and Cross's secret are covered up, he is overcome with guilt and commits suicide. In the film adaptation, Harper's father James recognizes that Cross is being punished by a Windigo and recommends pity and compassion. Grant Harvey's *Ginger Snaps Back: The Beginning* (2004), the third installment and prequel in the *Ginger Snaps* (2000) and *Ginger Snaps: Unleashed* (2004) trilogy, traces the origins of **werewolf** sisters Ginger and Brigitte to the Windigo of the

nineteenth-century Canadian frontier, casting the Windigo as defender of Indigenous territories against encroachment by European traders and settlers.

Indigenous artists who utilize the Windigo trope to explore longstanding issues of injustice include Armand Ruffo (Ojibwe) and Tomson Highway (Cree). Ruffo's film *A Windigo Tale* (2010) studies the damaging effects of the residential boarding school system on generations of Canadian First Nations peoples. Highway's autobiographically based tour de force novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen* (2008) also uses Windigo imagery to contextualize the experience of residential boarding school, where he and his brother were sexually assaulted as boys.

Windigo's cannibalistic behavior recalls the **vampire**, the **zombie**, and the **werewolf**. "Like the vampire, it feasts on flesh and blood," writes Columbo. "Like the werewolf, it shape-changes at will. Like the **Medusa**, it may scare its victim to death" (2). Nelson even offers the intriguing intertextual assertion that J. R. R. Tolkien based the **Nazgûl** who terrify Sauron's enemies in *The Return of the King* on the Windigo. The belief that a person under the Windigo's influence undergoes a metamorphosis from human to creature/monster and back again foregrounds the werewolf tradition; in fact, Métis and French Canadian voyageurs called the Windigo the **Loup-Garou**, French for "werewolf" (Podruchny 685-93). Despite resemblances to other members of the monster pantheon, however, the Windigo should be distinguished as a cultural icon unique to the Indigenous peoples of North America.

Indigenous scholars emphasize that Western perspectives are incapable of accounting for the Windigo phenomenon, which can only be "analyzed from within northern Algonquian cosmologies rather than Western perspectives if it is to be adequately accounted for" (Carlson 355). In hegemonic Western discourse, Windigo is dismissed as a form of insanity, and Windigo stories are relegated to the status of myth or legends born of the harsh winters across North

America, where food became scarce, and people sometimes resorted to cannibalism to stay alive. The reality of the Windigo for Indigenous peoples is much more complex. Waldram decries the longstanding western tradition of attributing Windigo possession to a psychological disorder: “Early historic and ethnographic reports of wendigo lead to ...the transformation of this folk belief into a bona fide mental disorder, windigo psychosis, considered by many to be a culture-bound syndrome. But no actual cases of windigo psychosis have ever been studied” (17). Resorting to a fitting monster analogy, Waldram cautions against the misunderstanding and appropriation that has troubled the exchange between Indigenous and Western thinking from those by-gone days when missionaries first recorded their versions of Native presence: “Windigo psychosis may well be the most perfect example of the construction of an Aboriginal mental disorder by the scholarly professions, and its persistence dramatically underscores how constructions by these professions have, like **Frankenstein’s monster**, taken on a life of their own” (17-18). **Grace L. Dillon**

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