

‘Know yourself: the fear of the uncivilised in *Balto*’

[Remember to say ‘Good morning / good afternoon’ and to introduce yourself before you start giving your presentation]

‘Balto’ is a 1995 live-action/animated movie directed by Simon Wells that is loosely based on the true story of a team of sled dogs who carried desperately needed medicine to a little town in Alaska where an epidemic of diphtheria had broken out.

In the movie, Balto, who led the team on the final leg of the run, is the main character and is portrayed as a wolf-dog hybrid struggling to be accepted by the people in the town and their dogs, who are all pedigree sled dogs.

While the humans keep their distance because Balto is a stray and as such he is seen as dangerous, their dogs look down on him because of his wolf heritage. Indeed, Balto is constantly being bullied, sneered at and excluded by the dogs and especially by the villain of the story, a Siberian Husky named Steel.

When I was a kid, I didn’t find this strange: every community has its outcasts after all. However, as I grew up I started wondering. What’s wrong with being a wolf cross? All dogs are descended from wolves. Many of them look very similar to wolves, Siberian Huskies among them. So why do the dogs in the movie take issue with Balto because of his mixed heritage?

I am drawn to stories about identity and this one stayed with me for a long time. As is often the case in movies for children, the animals in ‘Balto’ are humanised – they are gifted with speech, reason, and even specifically human traits like vanity. The disdain the dogs show for Balto is more akin to the kind of discrimination that some groups of people practise against other groups or individuals on the grounds of age, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity and so on. A very human behaviour that is projected onto the dog characters in the story for the purpose of teaching kids to be inclusive and cherish diversity.

So... what is so interesting about this movie?

Well, the more I thought about it, the more I realized that there were deeper layers to explore.

I don’t think it was a coincidence that Balto was portrayed as being half wolf – which the original Balto was not, by the way. He was a Siberian Husky. So the identity he is given in the film was a deliberate choice. And it comes as no surprise to anyone that a wolf should be shunned, because, well... wolves are bad, aren’t they? Even from a dog’s perspective, it would appear.

For centuries, wolves have been depicted by Western cultures as blood-thirsty, evil creatures lurking in the dark, ready to creep up on helpless lambs and children and feast on their tender flesh. Think about it: how many fairy tales do you know in which the villain is a wolf?

In the past, farmers relying on their cattle for survival fought against wolves on a daily basis to keep them away from their flocks and so this bad reputation has become established in Europe. In addition to this,

wolves hunt mainly at night and, consequently, they have also been associated with monsters and demons of all kinds, who are also said to come out at night.

As an example, let's have a look at the very famous novel 'Dracula', by Bram Stoker. At the beginning of the novel, when British lawyer Jonathan Harker is being held captive in Dracula's castle, as the two of them are having a conversation they are interrupted by some howling that they can hear from the distant woods. While Harker startles and shakes in his boots at the thought of wolves, the vampire rejoices and says: "Listen to them, the children of the night. What music they make!", thus establishing a clear connection between wolves and the evil that he represents. Later in the novel, Dracula himself takes the shape not only of bats and rats, but also of a huge, intimidating wolf.

In other movies starring animal characters, wolves also take the side of the bad guys. In 'The Chronicles of Narnia', the evil queen's police is made up of a pack of wolves led by the vicious Maugrim. In 'The Golden Compass', where humans are accompanied by daimons – a part of their soul that is visible in the form of an animal – wolves appear by the side of the Samo wardens that keep a bunch of kids prisoners in the Arctic region.

I made a reference to these movies not only as examples, but also as an introduction to my next point, which is also the most important. In both 'Narnia' and 'Compass', animals and daimons can speak and think just like humans. That is to say: most of them can. Even in movies where the majority of the cast is composed by animals, not all of them are portrayed in the same way. In 'Narnia', very few of the queen's supporters actually say something: most of them growl. In 'Compass', the daimons of bad people are mostly silent.

I would go as far as to say that they are real animals among humanised animals, but at the same time it is not that simple.

Let's go back to 'Balto'. As we said, most of the cast is made up of animals in this movie as well. We have not only Balto and the dogs, but also Balto's friends – a goose that speaks with a heavy Russian accent and two polar bears who can't swim. One of these two can't actually speak – he is portrayed as a sort of mentally handicapped cute chap – but he can understand everything his friends say and he manages to interact perfectly with them in his own particular way.

But there are other animals in 'Balto' which are treated very differently. The first one is an enormous grizzly bear that attacks Balto's clique trying to catch up with the team of sled dogs led by Steel. The grizzly attacks them for no apparent reason: he doesn't go up to them and say 'hey, this is my territory, get lost!'. Balto and the others cannot talk to him and make him understand that they pose no threat to him. The bear is determined to kill them all and we know nothing about his motives because he only growls a lot and gives no explanations.

The second speechless animal is even more crucial to my argument. At one point in the movie Balto is thrown by Steel down a steep mountain and is nearly killed. Weak and frozen to death, he is about to give up when suddenly... a white wolf appears in front of him. Now, Balto being half wolf himself, you might think the white wolf will come up with some Yoda-like mantra to restore his self-confidence and put him back on trail, but it doesn't. It howls.

Speech is not for animals. Speech is for humans – that is, civilised humans. The word 'barbarian' comes from ancient Greece, where it was coined to refer to all those who could not speak Greek. Whoever and whatever cannot speak is not treated with the respect and decency that is – usually – granted human

beings. After all, you cannot reason with an animal. Based on this premise, until recently, all sorts of violence and abuse used to be justified.

What the main characters in 'Balto' – and by extension the people producing and receiving the movie – are afraid of is not simply wolves. It is the irrational, uncivilised side of our souls, which is only hidden, but always present in our hearts, ready to resurface when we least expect it. And when it does, history has shown on countless occasions that the human animal is the only one who is capable of actual evil.

References

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