

Zoology and Mythology

by

Jens Bjerneboe

translated by Ted Warren

Zoology is actually an aspect of mythology. Many of the most well known animal species appeal to such powerful feelings that they provoke the same, deep layer of our underconscious that can only be touched with the most simple and true myths. The word tiger contains just as mystical and secret a sound as the word Cain. Eagle, lamb, lion and hare are all words that can penetrate right through us, and sink into deep layers of our soul, like a stone that falls far into the earth through a deep mineshaft.

Elephant—what an endless, soul-like firmness lies in that word! And what a remarkable group of sounds, vowels and consonants meet each other here! Nightingale, swan, and shark! Butterfly and rhinoceros! Yes, there may be no doubt that we belong to their family, together with lonesome wolves, mother hens and rooster chicks. We are created in their picture also. In our distant past we must have had a lot in common.

The great English mystic and author William Blake wrote the beautiful poem on the tiger and it begins with two lines that are already powerful:

Tiger, tiger, burning bright,
In the forest of the night.....

He describes the tiger as a mystical, supernatural being, the true tiger of fairy tale-like dimensions, liberated from nature's most awesome secrets.

Lessons in zoology can build upon the dream-like dimensions of the animal, on the soul of the animal and the most complete equivalent, its ideal physical expression. Every animal is a human characteristic, a soul condition held in ideal form.

The shark is made of teeth. It is mouth and tail. It roams through miles of ocean with open mouth, eating everything from anchor-chains to octopus. Its teeth grow so quickly that they spew out of the mouth, so that shark-filled waters have seafloors filled with shark teeth and sand. On the other hand, the shark has almost no digestion; everything it swallows, it emits half-digested. Its intestines are almost non-existent, just a short stump that sucks in the required

nutrition; then it empties its stomach and continues its eternal hunt, because the stomach does not hold on to any food. This is how the shark plows through the ocean, crazed for hunger, ready to swallow anything. With practically no brain, it is almost insensitive to pain than hunger; it can ignore wounds and knife lacerations. In reality the shark is an unchanged species; ages ago it achieved its form and its unbeatable specialty, the naked combination of movement and appetite, teeth and muscle. It is the most primitive fisherman we know, specialized at an early point in time. The shark is the embodiment of the fall of man, solidified and unchanged. It fell out of evolution, a pair of lonely jaws eternally moving through the oceans with no other goal than reducing its nagging, never-ending hunger, the soul of the shark.

What a difference compared with the little, soft silk-ape with large, lively eyes, and the quick little heart that hammers away under his fur coat, warm and silent.

When the peregrine falcon attacks, it nosedives towards the bird it will take, usually one of the good fliers, at the speed of three hundred kilometers per hour. With one claw it hits the bird, not over the back or in the neck, but with surgical accuracy it inserts a claw through the cranium of the bird, in the middle of the crown of the head in a lightning fast trepanning. In the hands of a talented falk-tamer, an enlightened falconer, the peregrine falcon becomes identical with its archetype, with the human thought. Man and bird become one being, they live together day and night, until the man becomes the bird and the bird becomes the man. In other words it becomes a part of him that it has always symbolized—the thought, free as a bird—and the bird, free as the thought. He who has observed hens and roosters without discovering that the hen is created in the image of a woman and the rooster in the man's, must have not paid attention. Nature points its finger: pay attention! The rooster's empty, bulky strides and the hen's foolish loquacity are serious warnings. A normal man should blush when he sees a rooster. The hen, at least, can lay an egg.

In relation to its weight the lion has the mammal's largest heart. Otherwise it would not have room for its royal disposition. Richard the Lion-hearted! A mystical spell vibrates down the spine of children, here are history and zoology in an artistic union—both share the mythological rank and reality. The leopard is smooth as a cat in your bed, playful and cuddly, smart and tame, content with a piece of paper on a string, but also the only beast of prey that can walk into a village and carry off an Englishman in the light of day. It is the most beautiful of all beasts of prey.

The great Norwegian animal of the night, the lynx, is also an animal that can be as tame as a pussy cat, but patient and loyal, more loving than a house cat because of its intelligence. It likes to play with dogs and lets chickens alone. Only the sight of a housecat can it not abide; if these two enemies should meet, one plus one becomes one before you know it.



A Norwegian Lynx

Then come snakes
and hummingbirds,
rhinoceroses, crocodiles
and polar bears. There are
brown bear and flounders,
starfish and mussels—
every animal is a word
from nature.

Animals play a curious
role in fairy tales. Either
they are charms cast upon
the prince or they are
personal characteristics, not
necessarily “animalistic”
sides of them, but magical,
secret powers that turn
to the human heroes or
who unexpectedly appear

as helpers. In any case, the relationship between animal and human being is extremely intimate.

In legends animals appear with distinct intention; it is the “animalistic” as mirrored in more or less moral qualities. Snakes and doves, wolves and lambs are synonymous with evil and good. The lion who is befriended by the hermit in the desert and later refuses to attack him in the arena is nothing more than a clear illustration of the ideal that the hermit overcame his inner animal of prey, not killed it but tamed it, during his asceticism. The lion’s wildness has become something that will help him at a later time when he is in danger. Along the way from fairy tales to legends the animals have become less important; they have lost some of their supernatural dimension.

It is very different in the nature sagas and myths. Here animals have retained their power and their perplexing riddles. They have nothing to do with moralistic symbolism or instructive allegory. They appear in full size, fantastic and supernatural, no longer simply animals, but more like gods that man should kneel before and pray to. Is it so strange to pray to animals? Who knows who/what they really are? The more one thinks about it, the more natural it can seem that man prayed to animal gods, as in Egypt.

The ideal animal is the unicorn, an animal that does not exist, never has and never shall—the true animal. The unicorn is the animal that has never eaten or slept beyond the limits of mythical gardens. For just a short moment it stands and stares at us through the branches of the fairy tale forest with huge, all-knowing animals eyes—then it is gone. The unicorn is so much more animal-like than

other animals because it has never been corrupted by physical existence. The unicorn is itself, it is original and unique. The poet Rilke saw a unicorn in the forest one night. He wrote that from its forehead stood the single horn like a tower in the moonlight. Its coat was white.

In good zoology lessons no scientific observations should be omitted if it is important for providing a strong picture of the animal; but the other, scientific side of all animals, the unicorn, should also not be omitted. Sometimes I think zoology is a symbolic park. Who are our brothers of the night?

In our soul live unicorns, falcons, deer, polar bear, lions, rhinoceroses, tigers and cows, but also Askaladen, Aase the Goose Girl, and Lille-Kort. In animals we meet our own past. Animals are world history.

The same is true of mythology and sagas. Behind world history lie two additional world histories: zoology and mythology. They are cast forms, preserved conditions from the past. Every mythology and every animal species have that in common.

According to mythologies human beings belong under the gods and the angels. According to zoology human beings belong under the animals. Somehow we synthesize the lower angels with the higher mammals. That is not a bad combination. But as angels and as animals we are problematic examples. In mythology and zoology live our secret memories.

Jens Bjorneboe (1920–1976) was one of Norway's most cosmopolitan and controversial writers: a novelist, poet, playwright, and essayist. His works have been translated into many languages. He was a class teacher at the RudolofSteinerskole in Oslo.