

Animals in the Tarot

By Miranda Gray

Talk given at the first British Tarot Conference 9/10th October 2004

Very often as we first learn to read the tarot we are given specific meanings to the animals in the pictures, and are told to notice how they look and the behaviour they are enacting. The most obvious examples are the knights, and we are told to notice if the horses they ride are moving, fluid, flexible, or static and heavy, and to use these qualities to help interpret the card. We are also told that the dog and wolf in the moon card represent wildness and civilisation, instinct and rational thought, intuition and reasoning. However, there are other animals within the tarot deck which are less often read, and understanding the symbolism behind these animal archetypes can bring a greater depth to our understanding of the energies the cards represent.

Queen of Wands: Cat

Illustrations: The Ryder Waite Tarot and The Beasts of Albion.

The Ryder Waite illustration feels quite heavy and static, and yet the Queen of Wands is a dynamic, sensual and exciting woman. She is much more the enchantress, seductress and witch than is pictured here. However, we do find her nature expressed fully in the archetype of the cat sitting at her feet.

Cats are renowned as witches' familiars. They are psychic animals, happy to walk between the material and spiritual worlds. Cats have a strong dynamic nature; they are risk-takers and impulsive, often jumping without thinking of the consequences of where they will land. Cats are opportunists – open a front door and they will sneak in and curl up on your sofa! They are sensual animals - they love luxury, enjoy the material world, and need physical touch and adoration. To relax, a cat needs somewhere that is sensually pleasing.

Cats are also intelligent, aware, observant and curious. They have a lively interest in the world around them when it suits them. They are alert to power struggles and hierarchy. Cats are also extremely sensitive to energies, with a sharp intuition but a tendency towards anxiety. They will stand and fight, but would rather avoid it.

When we read the cat in the Queen of Wands card as a reflection of her energies, it offers a new depth of information. In this queen, we have a cat-woman who is sensual, sexy, loves material things, is self-confident, dynamic and yet is also spiritual, magical and intuitive. She has a keen mind, is observant and when motivated will happily take risks and jump on opportunities. She has the ability to relax through her senses and the material world (including shopping!) and this is very important for her well-being. There is also a spiritual side to the Queen which, when balanced with her dynamic nature, guides her towards the right risks. She is also easily able to make herself at home, and can sometimes seem lazy when she is in fact conserving energy and observing.

The cat-woman will have a great wardrobe. She'll love fashion, and will be immaculate in her appearance. She will enjoy being wined and dined, and will love being the centre of attention. She is often very beautiful, or she will make the very best of what she has. Self-confident and independent, relationships have to be on her terms. She does need people, but she also needs to have times alone. Often she will come across as aloof and untrusting, but with the right approach she is fun-loving and passionate.

In the picture, the cat is alert, upright and observant - but the question is, does it watch the mundane world or the spiritual realms?

The King of Pentacles: Robin

Illustrations: The Sacred Circle Tarot and The Beasts of Albion.

Many modern decks add additional animal images to the standard tarot card design. In the King of Discs or pentacles card in The Sacred Circle Tarot, there is an image of a robin in the bottom left-hand corner. This robin, through its symbolism, gives a wonderful depth to the understanding of the King of Pentacles card.

The robin has a long history as a companion of humanity. It is the robin who stays with us through the harsh conditions of winter whilst the other birds fly off to warmer climates. The robin shows commitment, courage, endurance, faithfulness, strength of character, tenacity and compassion for humankind.

We find many stories of the robin which reflect this great compassion.

In the dawn of the world, the robin saw the early humans cold and featherless and furless, huddled together in caves for warmth. Taking great pity on them, the robin organised all the birds to relay a brand of fire from the sun down to earth. The robin, being the bravest and driven by compassion, was the final bird in the chain, and it was he who flew into the sun to get the brand. The robin was willing to sacrifice himself for others, and the reason why the robin has a red breast is that its feathers were scorched by the sun during this feat.

Another story tells of the robin's overwhelming compassion for the torment of souls in hell, so he flew down into the flames to try and beat them out with his wings, burning his breast.

And lastly, a robin flew to Christ on the cross, and in compassion for his great suffering the robin tried to pull the thorny crown away. As he did this, thorns pierced his breast, marking it red with blood.

The robin shows the ability to be a companion through the winters and traumas of life. It will see things through to the end, no matter how tough life gets. As a bird of light, it can bring warmth, empathy and compassion into people's lives, as well as being dynamically motivated to take action on behalf of those who are suffering. The

robin is a bold and fearless champion, bringing the divine fire of compassion and warmth into the winter earth.

The robin in the King of Discs card reflects a person who is deeply compassionate, who is confident in himself and his abilities to champion and support others. This is a person who has a deep spiritual awareness and is motivated by compassion. He will take paths which others would not commit to, and has the ability to see them through to the end. The King is able to sacrifice his needs and wants for others, and to bring light and motivation into lives which are trapped in winter.

Strength: Lion

Illustrations: The Ryder Waite Tarot, Tarot of the Old Path, The Greenwood Tarot, The Beasts of Albion.

The strength card is usually depicted as a woman placing her hand in a lion's mouth or appearing in partnership with it, and this card is often interpreted as mastery over our base instincts, and co-operation.

However, if we look at the archetypal energy of the lion, this same symbolism is inherent in the actual lion image. The Greenwood Tarot image reflects this in an image of a woman with the head of a lioness.

The lion is a symbol of leadership, measured strength, guardianship, companionship, sovereignty, life and death. The lion depicts measured strength. A true leader is someone who is able to put a team of people together, to encourage and motivate them to use their individual strengths, who is attentive of their individual needs as well as the needs of the team, and who can provide direction, motivation and mediation for the team.

The lion has the self-confidence, the presence of inner strength, to be able to set aside his own ego needs and become a facilitator for others rather than a strong dictator who bullies and overpowers others to get their own way and to stand in the limelight.

In the lion image from the Beasts of Albion, the lion's claws are sheathed, and the sword is in the scabbard. This doesn't mean that the lion doesn't fight; it means that he can, but chooses to do so only when necessary and when it is part of his role as a guardian. We see similar imagery in the spear in The Greenwood Tarot image, where the spear is pictured as a passive staff and not as an aggressive weapon.

The lion embodies the solar dynamic energy which brings us enthusiasm and life. Lion cubs were thought to be born dead, and after 3 days their sire would breathe life into them, a resurrection myth that was used by the medieval church and of which we find an echo in 'The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe' by C.S.Lewis.

When we place the lion at our heart we experience the strength to be giving, to be confident in our abilities to give to others, and to bring compassion and mediation into

the world. It is not that the ego is set aside, but rather that the light in the heart shines stronger.

The Blasted Tower: Toad

Illustrations: Tarot of the Old path.

Toads and frogs tend to be associated with ugliness and sliminess, and certainly don't give the impression that their energies are linked to the Blasted Tower card. The toad is a creature of the Underworld; aware of the currents of earth energies, aware of the flow of emotions, the true nature and true needs. The toad is comfortable on land as well as in water; it is balanced between the inner and outer worlds, the realms of the conscious, rational self and the deep subconscious, intuitive, magical self.

What meaning has the toad in the Blasted Tower card, what does it symbolise? Like the Tower, the toad also represents dramatic change. In faery stories, when the toad or frog is kissed by the beautiful princess, it dramatically transforms into a handsome young prince. In medieval folklore, toads were believed to have a magical stone - the borax stone - embedded in their heads, which could change, clear and transmute poisons. In both these ideas the toad is a symbol of change, transmutation and enlightenment. The toad changes from a lowly, ugly, amphibian into an upright, intelligent, handsome physical being. This change is not gradual or progressive, but instantaneous and devastating. In spiritual terms, it is initiation or enlightenment. But how does this change come about? The change is totally out of the hands of the toad - he cannot force it. It has to come from an outside source – the kiss of a beautiful princess.

Both the Tower card and the toad represent sudden and dynamic change instigated by an outside source. The toad is a creature which is balanced in the subconscious and conscious, and this suggests the key to this dramatic event. This dynamic change arises out of an imbalance between our inner self and our external projection of our self and the environment we are in. The needs of our soul and inner mythology are not being met. The magic stone within the toad clears out, removes and transmutes the energies, behaviour patterns and walls we have built around our true nature and purpose in life. When the Universe steps in, when the princess kisses someone, when the magic borax stone in the toad's head touches them, within an instant their world collapses and the mental structures they have developed, the limitations they have been happily living with, are destroyed, leaving them beautiful, naked and vulnerable, but true to themselves.

The Close card (Death): Heron, Owl and Moth

Illustrations: Tarot of the Old Path

This card contains beautiful images full of rich animal symbolism.

The heron is a bird often seen at the edge of ponds and rivers, standing in perfect stillness in the first light and silver mist of the dawn. In Celtic times areas of water

were seen as the gateway to the Otherworld, and the heron was the sentinel who stood between the worlds guarding the gateway.

Hérons are associated with stillness, patience and vigilance, and represent the natural process, the still before the storm, the rest before activity, and the winter before the spring. They are also associated with solar energies, standing to meet the sunrise every morning and arranging their catch in a solar wheel at their feet.

In the heron we see the entry of the soul into a time of stillness and peace, of a gentle letting go and leaving behind, of patience and allowing the natural process to flow. As a solar sentinel it represents the rising of the sun, new life, new beginnings and new growth as part of an ongoing, natural, cyclical process. This growth is part of the natural cycle of things, giving the soul confidence and trust to move forward.

Everyone goes through times when they need to withdraw; this is not depression, but a desire for the soul. We need times to turn our consciousness inwards towards the realms of the soul. This is not a time of emptiness, but a time of fullness. A still lake seen at dawn is not empty, it appears brimming. For women in particular, this time may be during menstruation when they need to touch base before going back out in to the frantic world. For some people this time of withdrawal can seem frightening, as they are not able to function in their usual manner, but it is a natural requirement of our souls. Out of the period of withdrawal, of reduced dynamic energy, of a journey through our soul's inner world, we re-emerge blinking into the new light of dawn, a new beginning and a new view of life.

Inherent in the image of the dawn and the heron is the period of darkness or inner-worldliness through which we first have to travel. To accept the Heron is to accept the stages of life, to withdraw and seek our inner soul, to allow the natural process of life to take us there and to patiently wait for the rise of the new dawn.

Within the card we also see the owl, which gives us a greater insight into the process of the darkness through which we travel. The owl as a creature of the night has long had associations with prophecy and death, but it is also associated with change, sexuality, the seasons and cycles. In the Welsh story of Bloddeuwedd, the flower bride is turned into an owl by magic; the bright goddess is transformed into the dark winter goddess. As the owl, her energies rest in the depths of the Otherworld where illusion is stripped away and the soul seed waits for the increasing warmth of spring. In this period of darkness there is access to the greater wisdom and inner depth and understanding that lie in the soul. There is loss, grief at letting go, but there is also insight into the self and life. There is an opportunity to see clearly through the confusion and fog of thought, bringing clarity and purpose. When the soul emerges from the winter it is with new dynamic energy and enthusiasm that it leaps into the outer world.

In the bottom left of the card is a moth. Both the moth and the butterfly have long associations with the soul, often thought to be actual souls, and with fire. The moth reflects our hidden aspect, our true self, our hidden nature, our soul. In the journey through the Otherworld, in our inner darkness, the moth-soul is in its home element. Able to see clearly and navigate the inner realms, we too are in our natural element during this time of withdrawal. Like the moth we too will eventually be called by the

enticing dance of the fire flames out of the darkness in to the light. It is in human nature to move from light to darkness and back again.

All these animals reflect the natural growth, cycling, and inner and outer world journeying the soul makes. They bring the comfort and security that this is a beautiful and natural process.

Ace of Cups: Dove

Illustrations: The Ryder Waite Tarot and The Beasts of Albion.

The imagery of the Ace of Cups in the Ryder Waite deck is very Christian, and many people simply interpret the dove as a symbol of peace. But there is a stronger association with the dove beyond this obvious representation. The dove has long been a feminine symbol sacred to the divine feminine Aphrodite, Venus and the Great Goddess. Together with swans, doves drew the chariot of Venus. It represented purity, divine female energy, harmony and faithfulness. In both the Roman and Celtic world it was related to oracle and healing, and was also seen as the messenger or channel of the divine.

In the Ace of Cups, the dove can be seen to represent many aspects of this card. In the Christian imagery the dove represents the Holy Spirit, the channel and messenger of God. This female imagery of the divine spirit is able to bring healing to emotional blocks, allowing the emotional body to flow freely and harmoniously. Many people repress emotions because they are uncomfortable, but all emotions are meant to be experienced to enrich our soul. Often it is only by stepping back from the turmoil and looking toward a higher power to intervene that the divine is able to work Her healing in us.

The dove also offers a faithful relationship between the divine and the everyday world through feelings. It is said that the divine first speaks in feelings, then in images, and when all else fails in words. As feelings, the divine presence is not restricted to the limited images and definitions of our mind. When we listen to our feelings we feel the presence of the dove guiding our lives.

In this card the dove offers spiritual love and devotion as the source of emotional well-being and freedom. Through emotional devotion to the divine comes strength in compassion and love, and a purity of integrity and soul. It also offers transformation through love.

Animal archetypes can bring an extra dimension to reading the tarot cards. As well as information relating to everyday practicality they bring a depth of spiritual wisdom which can help and guide seekers on their paths of self-development.

*Miranda Gray is the artist of both **The Merlin Tarot** deck and **The Arthurian Tarot** deck. She is the author/artist of **The Beasts of Albion** self-development deck which*



| [homepage](#) | [books & publications](#) | [articles & resources](#) | [about Miranda Gray](#) |

can be bought from her at www.mirandagrays.co.uk. There are limited numbers available.

Find more articles and resources from Miranda Gray including:

See her website:

<http://www.MirandaGray.co.uk>