

Tanja Kovačič

How to Know whether a Dog is Dangerous: Myth, Superstition and its Influence on the Human-dog Relationship

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The dog has always been important for human beings. This fact can be observed from archaeological remains and also from various roles the dog has had in different human cultures and mythological traditions. Dogs have been extremely useful for the *Homo sapiens* species and its survival. But this should not lead to the conclusion that the dog was highly respected and valued in all historical periods. On the contrary, the negative connotations of the dog are reflected in the Slovenian language, its proverbs and also its folklore tradition. Through the analysis of the stories in the *Glasovi* (Voices) (1988-) collection I will present how the dog is depicted in Slovenian folk traditions and how the colour of its coat affected people. Black is the colour that is most often mentioned in the narratives. These are mainly stories about dogs as demonic creatures or about dogs with supernatural powers. The motifs that associate a black dog with the underworld are derived from symbolic and mythological images and superstitions about dogs. People feared such dogs because they believed they only bring misfortune.

Today we assess whether a dog is dangerous or not through its breed, history and physical appearance. Nevertheless, mythological and symbolic ideas about black dogs still influence people and their relationships toward dogs. The figure of a black dog still appears to be connected to the field of psychotherapy and mood disorders. Prejudice about black dogs also negatively affects animals' shelters and their attempts to find new homes for as many animals as possible.

1 The dog as a man's companion and enemy

Archaeological excavations show that the dog was the first domesticated animal. This happened towards the end of the last ice age, at a time when man still depended entirely on hunting and gathering for his survival. Only in the last stage

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of domestication, about 4,000 years ago, did the first dog breeds emerge through artificial selection, particularly with respect to the colour of the coat, hair type, length of legs, shape of ears and tail and also on the basis of dogs' temperament and behaviour (Clutton-Brock, 1999, 10-18). The dogs we know today are not only physically but also psychologically different from their wild ancestors. Ethologists and geneticists have concluded that our ancient ancestors were already breeding dogs systematically. They were selecting properties that were characteristic of young animals. This influenced the development of neoteny, in which the juvenile characteristics, both physical and psychological, are retained into adult life (Leach, 2003, 354-355; Coren, 2010, 56-58). In her examination of the history of the dog Helen M. Leach (2007, 89) emphasizes the concept of synanthropic selection¹ when she interprets the shared history of the dog and man as a form of ecological interconnection. Stanley Coren (2001, 16-17) goes even further when he presents the speculative theory which claims that *Homo sapiens* improved his capacity of symbolic thinking and consequently his language abilities only after he began actively cooperating with dogs.

Coren (2010, 145-146) continues to compare different roles the dog has had in different cultures. He states that the alliance between man and dog can simply be explained by the fact that dogs do things that benefit humans. Guard dogs protect humans and their property, hunting dogs help humans in different stages of hunting, and shepherds and herding dogs can be involved in various livestock activities. Dogs can serve as sledge dogs and can assist in the transfer of cargo. They participate in the search for different objects, people or materials, work as rescuers and assist persons with disabilities in living more independent lives. Therapy dogs help the elderly, socially isolated and people with developmental disorders. Dogs help humans in battles and wars. For human amusement, dogs can fight with other dogs or with other animal species (Coren, 2010, 168-173), can run after bait or can perform in circuses. Dogs can cleanse human settlements by eating human waste or by exterminating pests. Although in the modern Western societies consumption of dog meat is perceived as taboo (Serpell, 2009, 640-641), in some human communities it was or still is an important source of meat (Coren, 2010, 159-160; Podberscek, 2009).

An overview of the world's mythologies confirms that the relationship between humans and dogs must have been very important in the past. The dog as a mythical figure is known in all continents that were inhabited by man and dogs. It was known

1 Synanthropic selection occurs when a species is attracted to the environment that surrounds humans. This environment is highly modified and may take many different forms. It must provide shelter, protection and food for the species. The environment affects behavioural modifications, which eventually lead to genetic modifications. This can only happen if humans occupy the location long enough for breeding to occur or if the species is capable of travelling with humans. This was probably one of the reasons why the dog and not some other animal became the first domesticated animal of hunter and gatherer in human societies (Leach, 2007, 89).

to Asian Kyrgyz, Kazakhs and the Huns (Šmitek, 2004, 271) and also to the ancient Greeks (Šmitek, 2004, 37). Carl Gustav Jung (see Whitmont, 2003, 193) wrote about the dog as being akin to the dark side of the Moon. According to him the dog was the animal of Hecate and Persephone, the daughter of Zeus and the goddess Demeter, and also the queen of the underworld. The dog is known in the mythological traditions of Iranian Zoroastrianism (Šmitek, 2004, 39, 159-160), the Egyptians (Šmitek, 2004, 128), Celts (Sax, 2001, 87), Germans (Šmitek, 2004, 128) and Slavs (Šmitek, 2004, 159-160). It is also known in Norse (Sax, 2001, 87), Indian Vedic, Babylonian, Arab (Šmitek, 2004, 159-160), Chinese (Yang et al., 2008, 52-54, 100, 180), African (Allan et al., 2012; Parrinder, 1984, 45, 77, 134), Mayan (Bošković, 1988, 76, 122), Aztec (Sax, 2001, 87-88), the North American indigenous (Virk, 1990, 10, 24, 39) and Aboriginal (Smith, 2003) mythology.

Despite numerous facts indicating that the dog has always been important to humans – it is extremely useful, it appears in numerous world mythologies and is understood in the modern Western societies as man's best friend – we can not conclude that it only has positive connotations. On the contrary, as I will show below in the detailed description of folk and mythological traditions, a dog is often associated with death, danger and the world beyond. I must point out that this is a modern interpretation in which I am assessing the past with my own modern values and concepts. Our belief that death is something dangerous and unwanted is primarily a result of Christian traditions. But it is not necessarily so, that death was also feared in periods when the described mythological motifs were being created. The fact that dogs in the myths perform very important functions such as escorting gods and deities and protecting the passage between this and the other world, shows that dogs were given extremely important tasks. We will never know what exactly our ancient ancestors and various extinct world civilizations thought about the dog in general. I must conclude that at least some must have noticed the extraordinary usefulness and importance of dogs and therefore they must have also appreciated them.

Nevertheless, in mythologies the dog is reflected as a complex and extremely ambivalent symbol. Tine Germ states that in ancient times the dog was a symbol of a clever, reasonable and loyal subject. At the same time it was also a symbol of infernal forces. Christian iconography, which uses the black dog as a substitute for Satan, derived meanings from the old mythological ideas. In the set of Christian sins the dog represented laziness, quick anger and sexual impurity. Later in the medieval moralistic iconography the dog became a symbol of envy and greediness. But at the same time its positive meanings were also extremely popular. Through the centuries they gradually started to dominate the negative ones. The dog gradually became a symbol of loyalty and devotion to the master (Germ, 2006, 174-178).

In the modern era dog symbolism did not change much. Now the dog has become a powerful symbol of marital fidelity. It has also begun to represent its negative side – excessive obedience and humility (Germ, 2006, 176). In the 19th and 20th centuries traditional motifs of loyalty strongly trumped the negative meanings of the dog. It started to be defined as man's best friend. In spite of all this the historically ambivalent attitudes towards the dog are also evident in the present time and expressed in the Slovenian language. The Slovenian word “psovka”, which means “a swearword”, derives from the word “pes”, which means “dog”. In the Dictionary of the Slovenian Language a “psovka” is defined as a rough, very offensive word or phrase which is usually expressed in a moment full of strong emotions (Slovar 1985, 281). Also, the Slovenian oral tradition is full of proverbs that talk about dogs in an extremely negative way and which express man's brutal attitude towards dogs (Bojc, 1974).

To understand the specifics of the Slovenian territory I have analysed the *Glasovi* collection, a collection of folk and memory tales composed from narrations gathered through field research methodology in areas that are inhabited by speakers of the Slovenian language in the Republic of Slovenia and in minority communities living in neighbouring countries. In these stories the dog is represented in different ways. In this paper I am particularly interested in the category of a dog as a mythological creature. In it the dog can take the shape of a demonic dog, wild hunt or cynopheli (explained below). It can also announce death, protect treasure or be associated with divine powers. In the first three subcategories the dog itself is a mythological creature. Further motifs depict the dog as an animal of supernatural qualities that are closely linked to mythological and folkloristic ideas about dogs.

The dog as a mythological creature is most often depicted as demonic. It can threaten men, or humans can just be afraid of it. A demonic dog is most commonly described as black or large. In the form of a dog the Devil, a werewolf or *mrak*² can appear. It can appear due to violations of social prohibitions. Furthermore, it can be driven away through the practice of Christian rituals or by black magic. This knowledge was of utmost importance since facing such a demonic dog could have serious undesirable consequences. A man, his relatives or his neighbours could have an accident or could even die. Those who met an unknown dog could lose their voice or could become deaf.³

2 *Mrak* (dusk) is a mythological creature which appears at dusk.

3 The origin of the last two motives was described by Bernadette Bricout in her lecture “Les pouvoirs du regard dans les contes merveilleux” at the Ljubljana International Symposium Myth and Gaze on 22 May, 2014. She presented the power of a wolf's gaze that could take away man's ability to speak. This happened only if the wolf looked at the man first. In order to avoid this terrible sentence the man had to be quick enough to look at the animal first.

In these stories, the dog was also a part of wild hunt which appears in the evening and at night. A wild hunt is a set of demonic events in which you can hear rifles sounding, dogs barking and all sorts of other animal voices. Hunters who have sinned in this world must participate in the wild hunt after death. They may also be accompanied by their wife or even children. Stories summarize different rules on how to handle an encounter with a wild hunt. If you do not get out of its way fast enough you may get hit in the back with an axe. The narratives note many instructions for recovering from wild hunt spells.

Cynopheli are another common motif in the analysed stories. They were believed to have human bodies and an ugly misshaped face, similar to a canine. They had a single eye in the middle of their forehead. People were generally afraid of them.

The *Glasovi* collection also contains stories in which humans ascribe supernatural abilities to dogs they lived with or knew personally. In particular, they believed that the dog is able to detect and respond to a demonic event. People believed that the dog may feel or announce death. A man who met an unknown dog could interpret this encounter as a sign of an accident or even death. A less frequent motif in the stories depicts the dog as a guard of underground treasure. This guard dog can glow, can spit out fire and brimstone, or can just be black. It can also wear keys to the treasury around its neck. Very rarely a dog is described as a benign or divine creature which can help humans. In this last case the dog is often described as white.

2 Theory and methodology

In my initial analyses of in the *Glasovi* collection I have included its first 40 books that were published between 1988 and 2012. During this period a total of 13,543 stories were published. The dog is mentioned in 506 stories. When analysing the material I was mainly interested in the qualitative data. I did not distinguish the stories according to their genre, nor according to whether the event really did happen. While reading the stories I developed a list of recurring motifs: 1. The dog as *Canis lupus familiaris*, 2. The dog as a mythical creature, 3. The dog as a basis for the geographical name, and 4. The dog as a basis for comparison. For this article I have once again reviewed the collected material and have therein searched for stories that give visual description of a dog. I wanted to know how this description was associated with the emotions and reactions of literary characters and how they affected the storyline. To answer this question, I have produced an Excel table and for each story separately entered data on the basic motif of the story, visual description of the dog (especially its colour and size; other descriptive adjectives were used much less frequently), context of meeting and emotional reactions of the human and of

the dog. I have found 42 stories with dogs' visual description. Of these, two-thirds belong to the motif of the dog as a mythological creature. Although the dog in the stories was described in various ways – such as black, white, spotted, multi-coloured, brown or grey, as well as large or small – the dominant adjectives that described it were “black” and “large”.

Below I will present the related folkloristic and superstitious traditions about the black dog, which have been preserved in many parts of the world. I will show that a black dog was not an indicator of danger only to our ancestors, but that it symbolizes negative forces even today. Next, I shall indicate that black is no longer the basic visual category which helps people to assess how dangerous a dog is. It has been replaced by category of breed – a category that is in principle not mentioned in myths, superstitions and other folklore material.

I estimate that my research has two main limitations. Firstly, by limiting my research to the *Glasovi* collection I have probably overlooked a number of other stories and folklore motifs containing dogs. Also, by focusing on dog's black coat as a visual characteristic, which enables individuals to immediately evaluate whether a dog is (or is not) dangerous, I have neglected many other tools used by humans to assess the world around them. This is the second important limitation of this work.

3 The colour of the dog and its impact on humans

How does the dog's colour affect the content of the stories? Out of total 13,543 stories, only 42 mention dog's physical characteristics. Out of those, 29 present the dog as a mythical creature.⁴ Hereinafter I will present findings regarding stories about the mythological dog. In those stories the dog's coat is black in 23 cases. In several stories there is more than one black dog character. The black dog in the stories can be the Devil, Satan's watchdog, a guardian of treasure, harbinger of death, a ghost, werewolf or witch or wizard.

A white dog is mentioned in five stories. Only one dog is black and white, one is spotted and one is multi-coloured. When comparing a white dog with a black one it becomes obvious that they have opposite roles in the development of the story. A white dog can help a man or defend him against bad people or an aggressive black dog. A white dog can also represent the soul of a deceased child.

4 In the stories about a dog as *Canis lupus familiaris* or the domestic dog the dog is described as black only in four stories. More frequently other colours of the canine coat are mentioned: in three cases it is brown, twice it is white, once grey and again once it is spotted. In these stories the dog is described three times as large, and only in one of these cases is the dog black and large. In five stories the dog is described as small. Man is afraid of the dog in only one of those stories.

The adjective “small” is mentioned once while “large” is used in 8 cases in 29 stories that deal with the dog as a mythical creature. Analysing the size-colour description combination, most often – namely, in 7 stories – the combination “black and large” is used. In contrast, “black and small” is used only in one narrative to describe a dog.

Black and white often appear together in a pair, explains Damjan J. Ovsec. When these two colours are present together, they often express the conflict of forces. Black represents the night and negative powers, while white stands for daylight and a positive force. White symbolizes peace, tranquillity, peacefulness and also neutrality. It is a symbol of beginning and of purity, and is therefore good, especially in contrast with black, which symbolizes evil, devil and dark forces or purposes. That is why white animals were often seen as sacred, concludes Ovsec (2001, 204-206). My research shows that black, or even more often “black and large” animals were in the past understood as associated with risks, with the Devil and demons from the beyond. This black and white colour symbolism, where those two colours are seen as oppositions, is culturally specific. It is characteristic of the Christian societies and started to emerge only after the year 1000 AD (Pastoureau, 2009, 51-52).

Until here two elements seemed to be important in the stories: the dog's coat colour and its body size. Another important feature is the context in which the dog is mentioned. As my analysis indicates a man feared the dog only when he was not familiar with it. Furthermore, there is one more characteristic which has proved to be even more significant. It is the emotional response that indicates the psychological impact of the colour of the dog on a human being. When a man or a woman meets an unknown dog, he or she experiences fear. Human emotion is mentioned in eleven stories about a mythical black dog and in all those stories man is afraid of the dog. Fear is the only emotion that man experiences in the analysed 42 narratives that mention dogs' colour and size. According to Zoran Milivojević, an expert on transactional analysis, fears are a group of emotions which are experienced by a person on assessing that his/her values are threatened. At the same time a person feels that he or she cannot adequately tackle the threatening object or situation (Milivojević, 2008, 490). As stories demonstrate, people believed that dogs, especially “black and large” ones, represented supernatural beings. They also believed that meeting such dogs could have extremely negative consequences that could lead to accidents and even death. When they encountered an unknown large black dog, they feared for their health and the lives of themselves and also of their loved ones. Individuals often did not know how to fight this kind of demonic creature and its powers. All they could do was escape from the dog; they could try to drive it away or they could also avoid areas where such creatures were seen most

often. Only some knew the recipes which were believed to repel demons and which had been transmitted by oral tradition.

4 How to know whether a dog is dangerous

Marija Stanonik (2009, 188, 287) notes that in horror legends fear is most often a response to scary objects. But ignorance and superstitions also lead people to experience fear. There are different interpretations and classifications of superstitions (see Ovsec, 2001, 23-35; Mullen, 1997, 89-98), all following one common element – belief in the irrational. In the Slovenian folk traditions superstitions about dogs are quite common. Dogs are believed to be able to see ghosts and smell death. In different areas of Europe there is a superstition about a dog that howls. It is believed to predict the death of a patient that lies in a house. Ovsec (2001, 160-162) summarizes that when a dog howls three times in a row it communicates that someone will die.

This negative dog symbolism is particularly highlighted in the figure of the black dog, which is known in many traditions. The Roman poet Horace (see Brewer, 2001, 348), who lived in the 1st century BC, reported that it is a bad sign to see a black dog with puppies. In addition to Slovenian folklore, stories about a black dog were recorded also in England (Sax, 2001, 87), Germany, Latin America (Burchell, 2007), among the North American natives and also later immigrants to the United States of America (Varner, 2007, 153-154). That is why Gary R. Varner (2007, 153) defines the stories about a black dog as almost universal narratives. Carl Gustav Jung (1997, 1059) also noted that the black dog or the black hen appear in magical rituals. Black animals that are buried to be fed to the gods, he added, characterize the chaotic properties of the ritual process.

The black dog also appears as a symbol in modern culture. In the English-speaking world the term “the black dog” is used as a synonym for depression. The authorship of this symbolism is attributed to Sir Winston Churchill (1874-1965), British politician and two-time Prime Minister of the United Kingdom (Johnson, 2009, 7). But according to *The Penguin Dictionary of Historical Slang* (Partridge, 1972, 77) the history of the phrase is much older. It had already appeared in English texts in the 19th century. This symbolism is used also in the name of the Australian The Black Dog Institute (2014), which is focused on researching, therapeutic counselling, and improving lives of people living with mood disorders and depression. In the Republic of Slovenia this kind of dog symbolism is not in use.

Let me now return to the fear that humans experience when they meet a black dog in the stories in *Glasovi*. As I have shown, in the past people mostly feared black

dogs, especially large black dogs. Today the terms by which people judge whether a dog is dangerous or not, have changed. The black coat of a dog is no longer the most important sign that testifies about dog's personality. On the contrary, today we judge dogs primarily on their breed. We believe that particularly dangerous dogs are Pit Bulls: the Bull Terrier, American Staffordshire Terrier, Staffordshire Bull Terrier; and also the Doberman Pinscher, Dogo Argentino and Rottweiler.⁵ In Slovenia, based on the Baričević⁶ affair, we also believe that the Bullmastiff is a dangerous dog. What most of these dogs have in common is their medium or large body size, strong muscular body, strong flat snout, raised pointy and often cropped ears, as well as legs that are proportionally short compared to its body.⁷ Only the Doberman Pinscher strongly deviates from this description.⁸ The listed dog breeds appear in different colour combinations. Four of these breeds – the American Staffordshire Terrier and all three breeds whose name contains the word “Bull” – were used in dog fights against bulls, bears, roosters or other dogs for human amusement in 19th and 20th centuries. The Doberman Pinscher was a police dog, the Bullmastiff was a hunting dog, the Dogo Argentino was a hunting as well as a defence dog, and Rottweilers were used for herding cattle and for towing vehicles. Today in the Western world most of these dogs are pets. But there are still individual dogs that are being systematically trained to be fighting dogs. As concluded by Evans, Kalicha and Forsyth (2007, 209-218), who studied dog fights in the south of the United States of America, especially white men from the working class participate in this sport today. Through the dog and its achievements they struggle to gain honour and reputation in their community.

Bites and other injuries that are caused by those breeds are often serious due to the physical structure of the dog. But they are also quite rare compared to other dog

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- 5 Dog expert Stanley Coren (2010, 173) adds to this list also some other dog breeds: Fila Brasileiro, Cane Corso, Ca de Bou, Perro de Presa Canario, Alano Español, Japanese Tosa and the Neapolitan Mastiff. I do not mention them in the main text because these dogs are extremely rare in Slovenia.
- 6 Sašo Baričević was a medical practitioner whose patients were politicians, ministers, lawyers, managers and other members of the Slovenian elite. He owned three Bullmastiff dogs. In March 2006 the dogs attacked and severely injured a man. The dogs were taken from the owner and then returned to him. In February 2010 the dogs attacked again. But this time the victim was their owner Sašo Baričević. When the police arrived, Baričević was already dead. At the crime scene a sex toy was found, which indicated that dogs were probably sexually abused. At the time of his death Sašo Baričević was identified as a transsexual man. This made the case even more interesting for the media, which led to the production of moral panic.
- 7 The shapes and sizes of the ears and tails of individual dog from the listed dog breeds vary depending on the laws and practices of the individual nation-states. In Slovenia, Article 20 of the Animal Protection Act from 2013 prohibits ear and tail docking (Uradni list RS, 2013, 4459). Despite this legislative ban some individuals who find the aesthetics of the dog's body important still decide to intervene in this way. They can buy a docked puppy in a country where docking is permitted. Or they can take their own dog to some of these countries, and let a foreign practitioner do the job. Slovenians often take their dogs to Croatia or Serbia, where such practices are also illegal.
- 8 It has a slender body, pointed muzzle, long legs and often a shortened tail.

breeds. As reported by Veterinary Administration of the Republic of Slovenia in the period from the beginning of 2008 to June 2009, there were 274 dog bites recorded in Slovenia. In most of the cases (131), the dog in question was of mixed breed. Further 50 bites were from German Shepherds. Here are the totals for other breeds: Golden Retrievers – 7; Rottweilers – also 7; Karst Shepherds, Bernese Mountain Dogs, Illyrian Sheepdog⁹ – 6 each. Even fewer bites have been reported by other dog breeds (Z., 2009). As of September 11, 2014, there was a total of 1624 bites reported to the Slovenian Central register of dogs. Most of these “dangerous dogs” – dogs which have bitten a human or an animal – are of mixed breed. They have bitten in 855 (45.9%) cases. Second on the list were German Shepherds which have bitten 292 (15.7%) individuals, and only in third place was the American Staffordshire Terrier (which is believed to be dangerous); they bit in 51 cases (2.7%) (Cesar, 2014). There have also been proposals for laws that would prohibit “dangerous dog breeds” in Slovenia (Ministry, 2010). None of them have been successful. Objections to them have relied mainly on three points: 1. Many countries that have adopted such legislation have already revoked it or are noting that it does not work. 2. The proportion of dangerous dogs within any breed ranges from 0 to 1.7 percent. Where within this continuum should the lawmakers draw the line between dangerous and non-dangerous dogs? 3. The Slovenian autochthonous Karst Shepherd is one of the Molossus breeds.¹⁰ Legislation that would prohibit dogs with this type of origin could have a very negative affect on the future of Slovenia's only autochthonous dog breed.

Today's prejudice about dangerous dogs is based primarily on dog breed. But the experiences of those who work in European and American shelters show that bias towards black dogs is not just a historical fact. Many observe that large black dogs usually have to wait much longer than dogs of lighter colours to get adopted. This phenomenon is known as “black dog syndrome” and was highlighted mainly by the activist Tamara Delany (2004). Also Stanley Coren (2011), a psychologist and

9 It is also known as Šarplaninac.

10 There are several interpretations of the words Molossus and Mastiff. In the Veterinary terminology dictionary (Veterinarski, 2013, 388) molos is described as the dog of the Illyrians and an ancestor of some shepherds dog breeds. The Mastiff, meanwhile, is the oldest English breed dog and originates from the time of the Celts. It has a broad, squarish head and a short snout, long legs and strong bones (Veterinarski, 2013, 357-358). Ulrich Klever (1995, 198) defines Molossus dogs as a breed with a history of fighting. In Slovenia, they are known under the names “mastif” and “doga”. Klever believes that the origin of the breed is not clear. He explains that they might derive from the British islands or were brought there by Phoenicians. It seems that the Romans only discovered these dogs in England. The author highly simplifies when he says that the Mastiff is derived from the Tibetan Mastiff; it evolved from Greek Molosser dogs to Roman fighting dogs. Its successor is the Rottweiler, its brother in law is the German Boxer, and its successors, British fight dogs. Due to the intertwined history of the terms Molossus and Mastiff, these dogs are often presented together. This group of dogs also includes: the German Boxer, English Bulldog, Bullmastiff, Cane Corso, Dogo Argentino, Dogue de Bordeaux, Great Dane, Fila Brasileiro, Shar Pei, Newfoundland, Rottweiler, St. Bernard, Pug, Mastiff, Spanish Mastiff, Tibetan Mastiff and Neapolitan Mastiff (Falappi, 2002, 86-107).

dog expert, did research on people's perceptions on dogs based on their appearance, especially the colour of coat. His work revealed that people deem black dogs to be less likeable, less friendly, and therefore less appropriate pets. Respondents also defined black dogs as being more prone to aggressive behaviour. The author interpreted the research findings as based on superstitions and prejudices against black dogs.

To determine whether black dog syndrome was noticed also in Slovenia I contacted eleven Slovenian animal shelters on 10 May, 2013. I sent them an e-mail asking whether they were facing problems in finding people to adopt black dogs. I wanted to know whether there is any difference if the dog is small or large and also if they are facing problems with black cat adoption. In the next few days I received three responses. All three shelter workers replied they had not noticed problems with black dog adoption. Only one of the respondents (Turk, 2013) explained his experience in more detail. He stated that it is true that in the last few years it has been easier to give away smaller dogs. Large dogs have to wait longer to be adopted. It is also true that sometimes one colour of dogs prevails in the shelter: once they had only black and on other occasion they only had brown dogs. During the adoption process the dog's character is perceived as more important than its colour. But it has happened that someone said that they will not take a particular dog because it was black. The respondents did not give me any information regarding adoption of black cats.

I have not received enough responses to be able to make generalizations. I can only conclude that when it comes to animal adoption, a black coat is not a hindering factor. In the context of animal shelter adoption people prioritise a dog's personality and body size, preferring smaller dogs. In spite of this, bias against black dogs remains alive at least in the heads of certain individuals.

However, there are also those who do not believe in the existence of black dog syndrome. They are convinced that black dogs are facing problems when it comes to animal shelter adoptions mainly due to the medium through which they are promoted. This is photography – a medium with which it is extremely difficult to photographically transmit a black object. It is even more difficult to photograph a moving black animal (McConnell, 2013). Since black dogs on photographs are usually quite difficult to see clearly, they consequently also have less chance of finding a new home. There are different solutions to this problem. Photographer Fred Levy (2014) has decided to raise awareness about practical problems that are caused by black dog superstitions. He conducted “Black Dogs Project” – a set of photographs of black dogs and their owners. Others (Coren, 2011) advise that, during photographing for the adoption

program black dogs should be decorated with colourful objects. This will make the dog in the photograph more interesting. The photographer should also use proper background and adequate lighting. The dog's name is also important. Especially large black dogs must be given appropriate names such as Lucky, Cookie, Darling or Happy – names which associate positive thoughts and indicate that the dog is friendly.

5 Conclusion

Dog symbolism is complex and extremely ambivalent. For thousands of years the dog has been very important for humans as a work associate and a companion. In the mythological traditions it is associated with death and the underworld. Many stories about dogs in *Glasovi* are narrations about superstitions which are known in Slovenia and also in many other parts of the world. They testify to the fact that, for our ancestors, the dog was often a supernatural being which implied bad luck or even death. Especially large black dogs were associated with demons and that is why many feared them. Occasionally people also attributed supernatural powers to white dogs but they were, in contrast, associated with good or at least non-hazardous forces. The motif of a black dog with negative connotations is also known in modern cultures. In the English-speaking world it is associated with depression. Current observations of the problems which black dogs are facing in animal shelter adoption programs have led to the formation of the phrase "black dog syndrome". Although today we usually instantly decide whether a dog is dangerous or not primarily on its breed and physical characteristics, the negative mythological, symbolic and superstitious ideas about black dogs remain a factor in our perceptions of dogs and in the relationships we form with them.

All things considered, the outlined symbolism of the black dog should not surprise us. In our culture many objects and creatures, which appear in both black and white version, often carry stereotypical conflicting meanings. When we talk about flags, a black one symbolizes mourning, while a white flag is associated with surrender and safety. Also a white swan, which typically symbolizes chastity, strength and fragility at the same time, in a black version represents its opposition and ruthlessness (Chevalier et al., 1993, 301). Moreover, the immaculate white lamb and the sinful black sheep bear similar contrasting meanings. This opposite symbolism of colours is reflected also in the racist theories which described white men as superior, more fully developed and more capable than black men. Additionally, when it comes to health, we tend to believe that white poultry meat is healthier opposed to dark or red meat of other animals, which is associated with body acidification. As shown in the above cases, colour is a clearly visible signifier which allows immediate evaluation of the object or subject. Saying this, we must not forget that these value judgments are culturally conditioned

and are the result of different influences and traditions. As such they essentially affect our physical, cultural, social and psychological world and our perception of reality.

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Tanja Kovačič

Kako vedeti, ali je pes nevaren: miti in vraže ter njihov vpliv na odnos med človekom in psom

Ključne besede: pes, črna barva, strah, mitologija, folklor, vraže

Odnos med človekom in psom je zapleten in ambivalenten. Pes je bil prva udomačena žival, zato njegov tesen odnos s človekom traja najdlje med vsemi živalskimi vrstami. Kljub temu pes v mitoloških, simbolnih in folklornih tradicijah najpogosteje reprezentira negativne, nevarne in grozeče sile iz onstranstva. Te ljudske predstave so bile nekoč razširjene tudi na območju slovensko govorečega prebivalstva. Zaradi prepričanja, da soočenje z neznanim psom za posameznika ali njegove bližnje pomeni nesrečo in celo smrt, so se ljudje psov pogosto bali.

Specifična znanja, prek katerih so lahko posamezniki psa ocenili kot bolj ali manj nevarnega, so se med generacijami med drugim prenašala prek ljudskih tradicij, folklornih pripovedi in vraževerij. Kot na podlagi analize folklornih zgodb iz zbirke *Glasovi* ugotavlja avtorica, so se pretekli prebivalci območja današnje Republike Slovenije bali predvsem črnih psov. Danes, nasprotno, o tem, ali je določen pes nevaren ali ne, sodimo predvsem na podlagi njegove pasme in telesne strukture. Kljub temu se naše vražne predstave in predsodki do črnih psov zrcalijo tudi v sodobni družbi. V angleškem jeziku črni pes simbolizira depresijo. Nekatera zavetišča za živali pa opažajo, da se ljudje manj pogosto odločajo za posvojitev velikih črnih psov.

Tanja Kovačič

How to Know whether a Dog is Dangerous: Myth, Superstition and its Influence on the Human-dog Relationship

Keywords: dog, black, fear, mythology, folklore, superstition

The relationship between humans and dogs is complex and ambivalent. The dog was the first animal that *Homo sapiens* domesticated. This means that the human-dog relationship has lasted longer than any other human-animal relationships. Despite all this, mythological, symbolic and folkloristic traditions often depict dogs in a negative light and as a dangerous and threatening force from the underworld. Due to the belief that seeing an unknown dog can lead to misfortune, accident or even death, people were often afraid of dogs.

People had to invent certain rules that could help them determine which dog was dangerous and which was not. Those rules had to change over time based on the fact that human-dog relationship is culturally and historically defined. The author analyses stories from in the *Glasovi* (Voices) collection to show that, in the last few centuries in the territory of modern Slovenia, black dogs were most feared by humans. In contrast, nowadays the most feared dogs are those of the Pit Bull and some other breeds. Nevertheless, the folk superstitions and prejudice toward black dogs is still present in modern Western societies. In the English language “black dog” symbolizes depression. And some are still reluctant to adopt large black dogs from the animal shelters.