Werewolves of the swamp: The Loup-garou has terrorized South Louisiana for decades

Melissa Watson
melissa.watson@thevermillion.com

After a long night at work, you walk home on your usual route with only the cloud-covered moonlight to light your path. You see the bushes rustle violently before a demonic dog emerges from the darkness and lunges at you, but before it reaches your pocket knife, the dog transforms into your neighbor who disappeared days ago. He thanks you for lifting his terrible curse and returns to his home, leaving you stunned on the ground.

The next day, you see your neighbor at the bait store with the same cut on his nose, confirming the encounter was more than just a nightmare. He smiles knowingly at you, oblivious to the stares of the other patrons. You look away, as you would never want to be associated with a man who was cursed by God for blasphemy.

This tale has echoed across South Louisiana folklore for centuries according to University of Louisiana at Lafayette doctorate student Rachel Doherty, who is doing her dissertation on the reappropriation of this legend into modern Louisiana francophone writing.

“It will attack them in a way that’s scary but not lethal,” Doherty said. “And then, someone will cut it. A lot of times you will hear that they cut it on the hand, on the paw or on the nose.”

She added that this usually breaks the curse and transforms the beast back into a human, but the victim of the attack must never reveal the identity of the beast in a “secret pact.”

The reason for the secret pact, according to Doherty, is the person is cursed as punishment for doing something shameful, usually something that goes against religion. If someone behaves lowly, one will be knocked down to a lower state—that of a beast.

Doherty isn’t the only person fascinated by this monster on campus.

“In the Creole Twilight,” a book of South Louisiana folklore-based poetry written by Director of the Center for Louisiana Studies Joshua Caffery, Ph.D., has a poem with this monster as its focal point.

“In a guttural howl, in a horrible crown, it wailed out its name to the curd-colored moon. Loup-ga, Loup-ga, Loup-garou. Loup-ga, Loup-ga, Loup-garou,” the poem reads.

The term “Loup-garou” literally means “wolf-man” or “werewolf,” according to Doherty.

“Loup” means “wolf” in French and “garou” is an old Frankish word that means “man,” Doherty said.

In South Louisiana, many may recognize this monster by a different title—the more rhythmic “Rougarou.”

Doherty said the “Rougarou” spelling and pronunciation evolved in South Louisiana as a part of the Louisiana-French dialect. The same version of the word is used in francophone communities in maritime Canada that are a mixture of different cultures, like Creoles.

“There are cultures like (Creoles) in Canada that also use French as their primary language and they’re mixed French colonists and Native Americans. They also use the spelling and the pronunciation ‘Rougarou,’” Doherty said.

According to Doherty, the Loup-garou originated in France when it was primarily an agrarian society, as wolves ate livestock and sometimes children during the harsh winters.

This made the wolf a symbol of fear and savagery that was appropriate for a creature like the Loup-garou. In South Louisiana, where there are no wolves, the Loup-garou became a supernatural dog-creature.

“In France, it’s almost always a wolf because France had a huge wolf population. For centuries, it was a man versus wolf sort of thing,” Doherty said, adding that while European werewolves are often violent and bloodthirsty, the curse of the Loup-garou in South Louisiana is more of a cautionary tale.

Doherty said Loup-garous sometimes appear as different animals or creatures rather than a wolf or a dog.

Caffery described the monster as a hedgepodge of different creatures in his poem, as it reads, “Head of a wolf, arms of a man, teeth of a bat, it started to stand.”

The Loup-garou has made headlines in recent history. A news article from the Shreveport Times in 1983 (retrieved from newspapers.com) featured the mysterious Loup-garou’s claims to fame is the George Rodrigue “Blue Dog” painting series. According to Doherty, some of the original “Blue Dog” paintings are meant to depict Loup-garous, like on the cover of “The Loup-garou of Côte Gélée” by Morris Raphael.

Doherty also said Loup-garous enjoy a party just like any good Acadiana resident, as there is one legend of a “Loup-garou Ball” which takes place in Bayou Goula.

“In almost every collection of Louisiana folklore that I’ve come across, they say that Bayou Goula is the hub of werewolves where they have big party on the banks of the bayou,” Doherty said. “In some versions, kind of like vampires, they’ll fly there on the backs of giant bats.”

As for local French literature on the Loup-garou, Doherty mentioned “À cette heure, la louve” by Deborah Clifton, Ph.D., and “Suite du loup” by Director of the Center for Acadian and Creole Folklore Barry Ancelot, Ph.D., under his pseudonym “Jean Arceneaux,” as novels written by UL Lafayette professors.

October 31 2018
Serving news over rice since 1904

The Vermilion

Loup-garou's claims to fame is the George Rodrigue “Blue Dog” painting series. According to Doherty, some of the original “Blue Dog” paintings are meant to depict Loup-garous, like on the cover of “The Loup-garou of Côte Gélée” by Morris Raphael.

Doherty also said Loup-garous enjoy a party just like any good Acadiana resident, as there is one legend of a “Loup-garou Ball” which takes place in Bayou Goula.

“In almost every collection of Louisiana folklore that I’ve come across, they say that Bayou Goula is the hub of werewolves where they have a big party on the banks of the bayou,” Doherty said. “In some versions, kind of like vampires, they’ll fly there on the backs of giant bats.”

As for local French literature on the Loup-garou, Doherty mentioned “À cette heure, la louve” by Deborah Clifton, Ph.D., and “Suite du loup” by Director of the Center for Acadian and Creole Folklore Barry Ancelot, Ph.D., under his pseudonym “Jean Arceneaux,” as novels written by UL Lafayette professors.