

The Evil in this World: A Native American Perspective of Evil

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Editor's Note: FāVS has launched a new series on [The Evil in this World](#). We see it every day in the murder and mayhem that trouble our lives. The world's great religions have an explanation for this and different ways to describe the battle between good and evil. Those who do not subscribe to a religious tradition have their own perceptions of evil and good. How does your belief system describe both forces and how does it help you cope with the notion that evil exists in this world? Has your faith ever been shaken by the evil around you?

Commentary by [Becky Tallent](#)



Most Native Americans will say both good and evil exist, but Indigenous concepts differ from Eurocentric ideas when it comes to evil.

As I have said before, there are hundreds of Indigenous tribes, and each has their own cultures and religions. As a rule, however, most seem to believe in evil – not as a concept or an entity separate from humans, but as an action made by humans.

For example, murder and torturing others are often thought of as evil acts in Native America. Most other cultures would agree, but most other cultures seem to have a set idea of evil as an entity rather than an action. For most Indigenous people, all humans are capable of being good and evil, it is within us not outside us.

There are some tribes who have legends of evil beings such as Wendigo in the Great Lakes region or Skinwalkers, also known as shapeshifters, in the Southwest that are both cautionary tales for their people against cannibalism and abandoning cultural norms. There are also cautionary legends among the Yakama, Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) and some plains tribes, but these are not universal among all Native American nations.

As a child, I would hear a neighbor talk about Irish tales of evil beings, especially banshees, fairies and witches. I was fascinated, mostly because Indigenous stories about spirits and witches were far different from the ones I heard my neighbor tell. To us, witches are powerful beings who possess a form of magic that can be used for good or evil (their choice). Spirits, to us, can be our ancestors, a god or an animal (or an element, such as a river) that brings us guidance or healing.

Here it needs to be noted some tribes do have trickster spirits, not necessarily evil, but legends about confusing people or creating chaos. The most famous trickster is the Hopi legend of Kokopelli, although many tribes also have a legend that a coyote is a trickster spirit.

As a child, it was easy for me to understand the idea of fairies and witches thanks to Halloween and pop culture, but banshees and devils? Individual spirits or entities that could create havoc or were pure evil were beyond my comprehension. In my family's world, such creatures do not exist.

An excellent example of combining both the Native and Irish perspectives come from the 2022 movie "[The Banshees of Inisherin](#)." It is the story of two old friends, where one man wants to end the friendship while the other man resists. Both men eventually commit evil acts, and the story seems to ask: Which one is worse – the good man who tells a deliberate lie or the one who maims himself to make a point?

The film's writer/director Martin McDonagh uses black humor to make his points about people talking to one another, but neither one really listening. What he also, perhaps unknowingly, does is show how sometimes people will react to a situation using an evil action to prove or gain their point. It begs the Indigenous question of balance in people's lives.

As I said, in many Indigenous cultures, it is the people who make the decisions to do good or evil, not an outside source.

Case in point is the story told in several Indigenous cultures of two animals (usually wolves) battling inside each person. One animal is evil – anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority and ego. The other animal is good – joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, truth, compassion and faith.

The story says a child asks which animal wins, and a grandparent replies: The one you feed.

Some tribes have creation stories where their ancestral worlds were destroyed (especially the Dine [Navajo], Hopi and Pawnee), but most of these stories do not blame independent "evil" characters, rather humans who succumbed to any number of vices (killing, fighting, wrongfully accusing another and forgetting to respect the Great Creator).

It is balance in life that is the key to many of our Indigenous belief systems. We understand every human can commit great good or great evil. It is the choice we make as individuals – not outside interference – that is the difference.