



Gypsies: Fateful Fortune Tellers or Free Spirits?

The Gypsy archetype has been used in literature and theatre to connote mysterious exotic and somewhat devious characters time and time again. It is not chance that the title character in Merimée's and Bizet's work is a gypsy, as it allows her to be a free spirit and live life as she pleases.

The word Gypsy is a derogatory term for the Roma – a culture that can be traced to a group that lived in Northwest India in the 10th century. The name Gypsy originated because Europeans believed that the Roma culture originated in Egypt, leading to the name "Gyptians," which then became "Gypsy."

The Roma traveled throughout Europe, often moving out of necessity rather than choice. While the Roma have a place of origin, they do not currently have a state. This has forced them to travel continuously, and this struggle has often led to battles with the governments of countries where the Roma live.

There are four main tenets in the belief system of the Roma. They are: loyalty to family, which includes the extended family and larger clan; belief in god (*De!*) and the devil (*Beng*); belief in pre-destiny; and adaptability to changing conditions. They also maintain rich customs and traditions around birth, death, marriage, and cleanliness. These beliefs and customs have led to many assumptions being made about the group as a whole, and have no doubt contributed to the notion that Gypsies are mysterious and strange.

The Roma have faced persecution for centuries, and still do today. Traditionally, Roma have held very distinct positions of employment. Often, Roma find work as musicians, fortune tellers, metal workers and dancers. These occupations suit the life of a traveller, and allow for little interaction with people who are not Roma.

The Roma have suffered direct persecution well into the 20th century. The Nazi regime put 500,000 gypsies to death, as they were considered dangerously non-Aryan.

Closer to home, Roma people have emigrated to Canada and the U.S. since the 1870s. By the 1990s there were at least 80,000 Roma integrated into Canadian society. Canadian media and the public most recently became aware of the Roma when Czech-Romani refugees began to arrive in Canada in 1997. Unlike previous refugees, the Czech-Roma came fleeing persecution for being Roma in the Czech Republic.

The public has long been fascinated with the mythological, racial and stereotypical image of the Romani people created by Victorian writers and perpetuated by writers such as the noted Canadian author Robertson Davies; his novel *The Rebel Angels* depict Roma as magical, surrealistic, phantasmagorical, light-fingered characters likely to pick pockets of Canadians in general. Fortunately, perceptions have improved but the Roma, even in Canada, are sometimes viewed with suspicion and fear.