



The Skeptics SA guide to Tarot

There are disparate opinions as to the origin of Tarot cards, their invention having been variously attributed to the Chinese, Egyptians, Indians and Hebrews.

Writers, scholars, philosophers and poets —among them TS Eliot, Ouspensky and WB Yeates — have dealt with them in various ways, and the symbols, pictures and images printed on the cards have been interpreted at times as being authentic lore, messages, prophecies and inspirations, having spiritual significance and occult wisdom. According to a French writer, Court de Geblin, the Tarot trumps were originally religious murals copied by ancient Egyptian priests who, realising that their civilisation was on the decline reasoned that their mysteries would survive if disguised as a gambling game. The claim that the guardians of the cards were the gypsies is based on the false notion that gypsies originated in Egypt.

To the devotees, divination, or the reading of the cards for their revelations and disclosure of the future is the most important feature. To undertake a reading it is necessary to know the meanings attributed to the cards.

The pack consists of 78 cards divided into four suits: 56 making up the Minor Arcana, and 22 picture cards known as the Major Arcana

(from the Latin *arcanus*, meaning inner secrets or mystery). To each card is attributed one or more meanings, and if a card falls in an upside-down position when dealt it can have additional meanings, a total of between four and five hundred different interpretations. Using the basic interpretations, intuition, and allowing the mind to drift, a reading can proceed using one of the several standard spreads or card layouts. Of these, The Ancient Celtic Method and The Tree of Life are the most popular. Another use for the Tarot is meditation. Eliphas Levi (1856), in his book, *Transcendental Magic*, says:

“The practical value of the Tarot is truly marvelous. A person devoid of books, had he only a Tarot of which he knew how to make use, could in a few years acquire a universal science, and converse with an unequalled doctrine and inexhaustible eloquence.”

It is claimed that in studying the Tarot, one can exercise the mind, meditate in a world of higher dimensions, and understand the meaning of the symbols that are universal in meaning and found everywhere.

Sorting the wheat from the chaff one can concede that Tarot cards today are among the

most popular forms of character reading and divination. The truth is, however, that they were developed from playing cards introduced into Europe in the latter part of the 14th century. Towards the end of the 18th century, a French writer, Court de Geblin, in his work, *Le Monde Primitif* (1773 – 1782), concocted a fantastic tale linking the Tarot trumps with the religious murals of some ancient Egyptian temple. It was from this basis that most occult claims about the Tarot have arisen. Over the next two hundred years they were modified and popularised, and today it is common to see Tarot readers advertising in newspapers and magazines offering to read your future in their cards.

Like so many other divination systems, Tarot relies on the cold reading technique which employs ambiguous and general statements, and solicits information from the victim to be fed back at a later time during the reading. Known as the PT Barnum effect, (after PT Barnum’s supposed famous quip which was incorrectly attributed to him: ‘there’s a sucker born every minute’) this convinces the subject to believe that a vague stock spiel, with few if any specifics, is an accurate description of their own individual personality. This can be

amply demonstrated by using the following stock spiel on your friends:

You appear to be a cheerful, well balanced person. You may have some alternation of happy and unhappy moods, but they are not extreme now. You have few or no problems with your health. You are sociable and mix well with others. You are adaptable to social situations. You tend to be adventurous. Your interests are wide. You are fairly self-confident, and usually think clearly.

Using the standard Tarot card interpretations supplied with the pack, imagination, and (with slight variations) the spiel above, no matter to whom this spiel is applied, it will invariably be seen as an 'accurate' portrayal of the individual's personality. Given that most seeking the services of a Tarot reader would be a believer to a certain extent, even this vague description would, to them, seem specific.

Having convinced the client that you know all about them the next step is to 'read' the cards making up a story as you go hazarding a guess as to what the client's problem may be. By fishing for clues, getting the client to open-up, and watching reactions, it soon becomes apparent that tarot reading is simply the application of elementary psychology using arbitrary interpretations of meaningless symbols.

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