

# PLAYING WITH CULTURES

The Role of Coyote in Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook*  
and Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water*

by

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## Abstract

In Canadian literature, the character of Coyote, with its origins in the oral traditions of Native culture, has been able to cross cultural boundaries between Native and Euro-American writers and act at a cultural intersection where relations between the two traditions meet at the level of myth and story. The complex characteristics of Coyote allow authors like Sheila Watson and Thomas King to incorporate Coyote into their fictions and meet their narrative purposes without violating Coyote's Native origins. In *The Double Hook*, Watson problematizes the character of Coyote through the use of parody in order to invest an element of moral ambiguity in the narrative. The morally ambiguous nature of Watson's Coyote protects the figure from reductive allegorization as a pseudo-Christian symbol and opens the novel to a more complex reading. In King's *Green Grass, Running Water*, Coyote plays an unpredictable, peripheral role in the satiric purpose of the novel, but Coyote's character and the way Coyote approaches experience function as models for the pattern of imagination that informs King's use of parody. King's parody not only serves the satiric aspect of the fiction. It creates an opportunity for King to extend the imaginative effects of his fiction by setting images and story patterns from two different cultural traditions in ironic conjunction to present a narrative that is unpredictable, incongruous, and often humorous. In both novels, the role of Coyote is to open up the narrative and to solicit a careful re-evaluation of the issues in question. In doing so, Coyote demonstrates the value of cross-cultural encounter where differing traditions meet, not in conflict and competition, but in a spirit of mutual discovery.

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## Chapter I

The literary environment of contemporary Canada has become increasingly multi-cultural, and one of the most important results of that development lies in the meeting of differing cultural traditions and the sharing of narrative materials. The area of cultural exchange that has the longest history, and one that in recent years has become particularly productive, is that which brings the values and oral traditions of Natives into contact with the perceptions and literary traditions of Europe. In this context, the Native Trickster, and Coyote in particular, has emerged as a distinctive literary figure, capable of crossing the cultural boundaries between Native and non-Native North American writers and occupying an increasingly significant place in the imaginative worlds of both. In Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook* and Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water*, Coyote operates at a cultural intersection where Native and non-Native relations are negotiated at the level of myth and story. The creative use of Coyote's traditional role as Trickster enables both the Native and the non-Native writer to explore ways of balancing contradictory cultural perceptions without having one culture completely overwhelm the other. By ignoring cultural boundaries, Watson's and King's Coyotes subvert the confrontational "either/or" logic that sometimes shapes cultural encounters.

While Watson and King use Coyote to similar ends, their representations of Coyote's character are shaped by the contexts through which they approach the figure. The general context that they share is rooted in Native oral myth. Coyote appears in a variety of interpretations and depictions, beginning with Native oral traditions themselves. Coyote appears in the mythology of numerous tribes over a wide

geographical area, from British Columbia to Guatemala, from the Pacific Ocean to the Great Plains (Bright 19). Within that range, the role and importance of Coyote varies. For example, the Oglala regard Coyote as an evil being whom the shaman-priests must combat (Ricketts 328). The Pueblos have low esteem for Coyote, while the Apache see Coyote as an important trickster-culture hero (Cooper 187). In Navajo culture, Coyote stories are extremely powerful; Karl Kroeber argues that they function to project fundamental perceptions of reality and order (225). This variety of views suggests that there may be as many characterizations of Coyote as there are Native cultures in Western North America.

While Native perceptions of Coyote are diverse, commentators like Paul Radin, William Bright, Guy H. Cooper, and Kroeber approach Coyote in comparative terms, arguing that Coyote's Trickster nature provides a common link between the various representations. In general, these commentators see Coyote as a particular manifestation of the Trickster-figure common to most Native cultures across North America. For example, Kroeber's study examines Coyote myths from the Winnebago, Navajo, Nez Percé, and various other tribes under the common heading "Trickster-Transformer" (224). Barre Toelken, in his study of the Navajo Coyote, reminds us that "the Navajos did not invent Coyote, as we all know; he is a common character in the tales of many American Indian tribes" (108). Following the lead of early anthropologists and ethnologists (such as Radin, who saw Trickster as an archetypal myth figure), Cooper notes that "Trickster tales across the continent have much in common, whether attached to Coyote or to Raven, Blue Jay, Hare or Spider" (182). Anthropologists of Native mythology tend to make the same kind of trans-cultural claim by grouping "Trickster"

tales together. In *American Indian Trickster Tales*, Richard Erdoes and Alfonso Ortiz group tales of Iktomi, the Sioux Spider-Man, Raven, Mink, Rabbit, Blue Jay, and Coyote. Some Native writers have accepted these links. Tomson Highway, for example, sees the Trickster at the centre of a shared spirituality among the Native tribes of North America. In a note about Nanabush, the Ojibway Trickster portrayed in *The Rez Sisters*, Highway states:

The dream world of North American Indian mythology is inhabited by the most fantastic creatures, beings, and events. Foremost among these beings is the "Trickster," as pivotal and important a figure in the Native world as Christ is in the realm of Christian mythology. "Weesageechak" in Cree, "Nanabush" in Ojibway, "Raven" in others, "Coyote" in still others, this Trickster goes by many names and many guises. In fact, he can assume any guise he chooses.... Without him – and without the spiritual health of this figure – the core of Indian culture would be gone forever. (xii)

All these contemporary interpretations of Coyote share the view that Coyote is an essential figure in Native mythology in general, despite different representations in various Native cultures. This discussion of Coyote in oral myth will follow that view, treating various Trickster myths comparatively.

The characterization of Coyote in Native mythologies is generally paradoxical, and as such can appear elusive. Oral stories sometimes depict Coyote as a deceitful trickster and sometimes as a culture hero<sup>1</sup>. Often both aspects of Coyote's nature are present in the same myth. In some stories, Coyote's actions benefit humans. Coyote forms the world-as-it-is (Bright 35), brings sustenance in the form of salmon (Clark 31-33) and fire (Bright 3) to the people, forms taboos, and teaches humans how to survive (Bright xi). In others, Coyote is less heroic. Coyote commits incest with his daughter in a Karuk myth (Bright 146-149) and invents death in another (Bright 105-117). Through the range of stories, Coyote appears variously as courageous or cowardly, wise or foolish.



Bright notes that “Coyote is, then, many things.... he is a mythic trickster, responsible for the world as we know it, yet a persistent bungler and dupe” (18). As a result, commentators often describe Coyote in terms of contradictions or sets of opposites. For example, in describing the Winnebago Trickster, Radin notes that “Trickster is at one and the same time creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others and who is always duped himself” (xxiii). Coyote’s actions are not only contradictory but also morally ambivalent. Bright observes that “even when [Coyote] brings fire for the benefit of humankind, [Coyote] is far from being a Promethean hero: he is an insatiable glutton, a gross lecher, an inveterate thief, liar, and outlaw, a prankster whose schemes regularly backfire” (3). Attempts to define Coyote are always ambiguous. One cannot assert that Coyote is wise without recognizing Coyote’s foolishness at the same time.

Fixing Coyote’s physical identity is just as difficult because Coyote is a shapeshifter, able to assume any earthly appearance animate or inanimate. For example, at one point in the Thompson Indian myth of Coyote bringing salmon to the people, Coyote changes into a board and floats to the mouth of the Fraser River at the Pacific Ocean (Hanna 31; see also Clark 31-33). Coyote makes an even more striking transformation in the Chemehuevi story “How Wolf and Coyote Went Away” when Coyote becomes a coyote track at one point and a coyote rolling-place at another (Kroeber 220-221). Coyote’s identity is fluid, open to any possible form.

In addition, Coyote’s gender is usually ambiguous. While Kroeber observes that Coyote is normally male in oral traditions (233), Coyote’s shapeshifting sometimes involves crossing sex and gender boundaries. For example, in Episode 20 of the Winnebago Trickster cycle that Radin recorded, Trickster forms a vulva from an elk’s

liver, breasts from an elk's kidneys, and puts on a woman's dress. Trickster then marries a chief's son and gives birth to three boys (22-23). In Thompson Indian Coyote myths, storytellers employ a male or female Coyote depending on the story (Hanna 66). In his fiction, Thomas King draws on this sexual ambiguity and uses it counter-ideologically. In an interview, King explains why he makes Coyote female in his story "A Coyote Columbus Story":

Coyote within oral literature doesn't particularly have a determined sex. It is true that many of the oral stories list Coyote as "he," but those are translations, and translations by non-Natives, so who knows? But Coyote changes – the tricksters change sex, for instance – they often get pregnant and have kids. There's no rhyme or reason to that. The trickster is kind of a ubiquitous character and in a real sense I suppose the trickster is, philosophically at least, genderless.

So, for me it just made sense that since everything else in this world was sort of white male patriarchy, that a female Coyote wouldn't be a bad idea. ("Parable" 52)

In *Green Grass, Running Water*, King does not reveal Coyote's sex. However, Coyote's trickster friends, the four old Indians, appear as men and women, using their transformer abilities to play with gender boundaries. According to Linda Lamont-Stewart, King uses ambiguously gendered figures "to destabilize the system of binary logic upon which a variety of patriarchal and imperialist structures are founded" (116). In order to foreground Coyote's sexual ambiguity, I will avoid using gender pronouns when referring to Coyote whenever Coyote's sexual identity is in question, even though repetition of the term "Coyote" may at times seem awkward.

In general, the Coyote of oral tradition occupies a cosmological position set before the creation of the present world of appearances. Coyote is one of a race of beings Bright calls the First People, whose existence precedes that of human beings and who create the world as it is now: "in the Native American context, Frog, Bluejay, Bear, and

Coyote are not animals: They are First People, members of a race of mythic prototypes who lived before humans existed” (Bright xi)<sup>2</sup>. In this state, Coyote is not unambiguously animal or human (Bright 20). As one of the First People, Coyote possesses great power. Coyote meddles with the myth world and makes it habitable for humans (Bright 35). But Coyote meddles without a plan and forms an imperfect world. When humans appear in this newly formed world, the First People become the species of animals and plants their names represent (Bright 20). However, the First People occupy a special position between the world as it is and the mythical spirit world. In fact, no differentiation can be made between the First People of the mythic world and their appearances in our world. Barre Toelken makes this point with reference to the Navajo perception of Coyote, as quoted in Bright:

There is no possible distinction [for the Navajo] between Ma’i, the *animal* we recognize as a coyote in the fields, and Ma’i, the *personification* of Coyote power in all coyotes, and Ma’i, the *character* (trickster, creator, and buffoon) in legends and tales, and Ma’i, the symbolic character of *disorder* in the myths. Ma’i is not a composite but a complex; a Navajo would see no reason to distinguish separate aspects. (Bright 20-21)

Coyote is a complex of several beings in one. Understanding Coyote requires a mode of perception that does not separate Coyote’s various, sometimes contradictory, potentials.

Radin argues that ambivalence is the essence of the Trickster. According to Radin, the Trickster exists in an undifferentiated state and so encompasses all possible states of being. For Radin,

The symbol which Trickster embodies is not a static one. It contains within itself the promise of differentiation, the promise of god and man.... he represents not only the undifferentiated and distant past, but likewise the undifferentiated present within every individual.... And so he became everything to every man – god, animal, human being, hero, buffoon, he who was before good and evil, denier, affirmer, destroyer and creator. (168-169)

Stanley Diamond sums up Radin's ideas about the Trickster by calling the Trickster the "personification of ambivalence" (xi). The Trickster's identity is fluid. Since Coyote can assume any shape, one cannot define Coyote in terms of form. One might best understand Coyote as an ever-shifting life-force.

Coyote's fluidity makes moral judgments about Coyote's motivations problematic. According to Radin, the Trickster exists "before good and evil" (169) and is "not guided by normal conceptions of good or evil" (155). The Trickster acts "from impulses over which he has no control" (Radin xxiii). As a Trickster, Coyote is amoral, and one cannot understand Coyote's actions unambiguously in the context of human moral standards. The key to understanding Coyote's actions and motivations is to remember that conventional rules of behaviour do not guide Coyote. For example, Coyote's theft of fire benefits humans, but Coyote's intentions are not benevolent. Bright comments, "To be sure, [Coyote] is no altruist; he acts out of impulse, or appetite, or for the pure joy of trickery" (21). Thomas King too recognizes Coyote's uncontrolled nature: "If you think of Coyote as being made up [of] a series of overweening appetites that's probably as close to Coyote as you get. I would never define Coyote. It's hard enough working with the critter" ("Parable" 53). Driven by appetites, Coyote never stops moving. Cooper observes that in Navajo mythology, "[Coyote] represents a vital force of restlessness and energy, which moves between the categories of human-gods-animals, good and evil, testing the forms and realities of the world. It is not surprising, then, that he displays contradictions and ambivalence" (191). As a result, amoral energy and gross appetite lead Coyote into every situation imaginable. Barre Toelken notes that, for the Navajo, Coyote's actions, good and bad, are important because they bring a wide range

of ideas and actions into the “field of possibility” (102): “[Coyote], unlike all others, experiences everything; he is, in brief, the exponent of all possibilities” (109). No social rule or cosmological boundary can keep Coyote’s vitality in check.

To explain Coyote’s range of bewildering behaviour, Gary Snyder argues that Coyote is without ego and so acts spontaneously. According to Snyder, Coyote’s actions possess the same playful, dynamic freedom as those of a Zen master. Bright quotes a passage where Snyder elaborates the connection between the shapeshifting Coyote and Buddha-nature as the Zen tradition understands it:

The Buddha can be called a Trickster because he causes us to study, practice, anguish over a truth which is as plain as the nose on your face. That truth is realized by an act of letting go: of the self-image, preconceptions, opinions, concepts & theories that one is always nourishing.... That’s all Coyote ever did.

So it is not the case of having consciousness and choice that sets Buddha/Coyote apart; quite a many miles beyond that: having no special consciousness; no need to choose; the condition of resting in the fluid totality of things....

The shapeshifter can keep shifting because he has no fixed ego-notion. I see a bulldozer, “RRRRRR!”; a chicken, “Cluck!”; a cloud... float by.... (Bright 142-143)

While Snyder’s connection between Coyote’s shapeshifting and the freedom of action Zen Buddhism describes is compelling, Peter Blue Cloud reminds us of the dangers of picturing Coyote as an anti-social Zen eccentric: “[Coyote’s] once extensive range of possibilities and adaptation is being reduced to the narrow spectrum of anti-sociability and personal excess” (quoted in Bright 102). Blue Cloud reminds us that Coyote encompasses all possibilities and that stories sometimes portray Coyote “as householder and community man” (*Ibid.*). Blue Cloud does not deny that Coyote is a creature of appetites; he just points out that Coyote’s freedom allows Coyote to play any role.

One aspect of Coyote stories that should be particularly noted is their humour. It is in the vitality of uninhibited action that Coyote stories achieve their characteristic humour. Coyote's inability to control his appetites often makes him look like a buffoon. The following Laguna story of Coyote (*Toe'osh*) as thief, recounted by Leslie Silko, is a good example:

They were after the picnic food  
that the special dancer left  
down below the cliff.  
And *Toe'osh* and his cousins hung themselves  
down over the cliff  
holding each other's tail in their mouth making a coyote chain  
until someone in the middle farted  
and the guy behind him opened his  
mouth to say "What stinks?" and they  
all went tumbling down, like that. (Silko 239)

While Coyote is breaking a taboo by stealing food from a ritual, there is no malicious intent; rather, there is playfulness in Coyote's actions driven by appetite. Coyote will go to any length to satisfy his urges. But Coyote's inability to control those urges often undermines Coyote's clever tricks. In Silko's story, the one Coyote cannot help farting, and the other cannot help making a comment and ruining the trick.

However, Coyote's humorous exploits are more than simple entertainment for many Native cultures; the telling of Coyote stories serves to establish social and moral order. For example, according to Barre Toelken, in Navajo culture, Coyote stories convey a moral and demonstrate possibilities and limitations. To explain this point, Toelken records a conversation he and Yellowman, his Navajo informant, had after he asked Yellowman why there are funny stories about such an important myth character as Coyote (*Ma'i*). Yellowman replied,

**“They are not funny stories.” Why does everyone laugh, then? “They are laughing at the way Ma’i does things, and at the way the story is told. Many things about the story are funny, but the story is not funny.” Why tell the stories? “If my children hear the stories, they will grow up to be good people; if they don’t hear them, they will turn out bad.” Why tell them to adults? “Through the stories everything is made possible.”**

**Why does Coyote do all those things, foolish on one occasion, good on another; terrible on another? “If he did not do all those things, then those things would not be possible in the world” (101-102)**

Navajo Coyote stories explore a wide range of incidents and emotions. Cooper notes that they cover **“a spectrum from hunting, killing and death to transformation and healing”** (184). Telling a Coyote story is a method for introducing topics for consideration. For example, Toelken notes that the story of how Ma’i got his yellow eyes, where Coyote loses his eyes in a gambling match and replaces them with amber pitch balls, is not etiological. Rather, Toelken explains, **“the tale allows us to envision the possibility of such things as eye disease, injury, or blindness... Ma’i himself may or may not have amber eyes, but since he can do anything he wants to, the question is irrelevant”** (102). Through the stories, Coyote introduces actions and ideas (good and bad) into the Navajo conceptual world. Coyote demonstrates abstractions in terms of real entities (Toelken 102).

In Navajo myths, Coyote’s exploration of all possibilities serves to test and reaffirm Navajo concepts of order. According to Cooper, this function is common to the Trickster figure in general: **“In common with Tricksters generally, [the Navajo Coyote] serves to test the bounds of possibilities and order”** (185). Toelken argues that Coyote **“acts as a test, a challenge to order, a living representative of that full world of good *and* evil which exists around us”** (109). Felix White Sr., a Winnebago storyteller, sees Trickster’s function in a similar way: **“Where they say, ‘No, you can’t do that. You**

shouldn't do that' – well, that's where [Trickster] travels. And he shows what the consequences are" (Danker 523). The testing of boundaries in Coyote myths demonstrates the unhealthy consequences of crossing some boundaries and the need to establish social and moral orders in an unpredictable world. According to Cooper, "Coyote challenges and thereby authenticates and legitimizes the order established in the Navajo universe" (185). Bright notes that Coyote stories in general often have the "power to stabilize the world" (xii).

While Coyote stories demonstrate the need for order, they also dramatize the power of disorder. The disordered nature of the world continually challenges human concepts of order. Coyote stories must be told repeatedly to maintain balance. Coyote stories show that establishing order does not depend on destroying the forces of disorder. One maintains order by acknowledging contradiction and guarding against excess, not by fighting disorder. In discussing the woodland Trickster, Gerald Vizenor remarks that "the trickster is comic in the sense that he does not reclaim idealistic ethics, but survives as a part of the natural world; he represents a spiritual balance in a comic drama rather than the romantic elimination of human contradiction and evil" (4). Social and moral orders can never completely impose themselves on a disordered world. Coyote stories function to restore or maintain that "spiritual balance" by recognizing human failings, appetites, and excesses as inevitable aspects of life at the same time that they dramatize the need to avoid excess.

Another aspect of Coyote stories that bears mentioning is their satiric function. According to Mac Ricketts, Coyote represents a less reverent attitude toward sacred priestly rites than that typified by shamans. Coyote stories often reflect this difference in



attitude through satiric parody: "Very often some deed of the trickster is a parody and caricature of some shamanistic experience or sacred priestly rite" (336). For example, Coyote stories ridicule the shaman's dependence on guardian spirits as when Coyote consults his talking excrement when in danger (Ricketts 336-337). Ricketts comments on this as satiric parody: "Like the warrior who is counseled by his familiar spirits, and like the shaman who calls up a 'pain' (sacred object) from within his body to enable him to perform his healing acts, Coyote has 'counselors' who come forth from his bowels when he is in danger" (337). Ricketts argues that Coyote stories parodying shamans "are found in every region and nearly every tribe" (337). Radin also notes that the Winnebago Trickster cycle contains satires on Winnebago society (151). The Trickster cycle includes satiric parodies of Winnebago feasts (152), of puberty fasting (153), war customs (154), and even of other Winnebago myths (154). According to Radin, these satiric parodies are outlets "for voicing a protest against the many, often onerous, obligations connected with the Winnebago social order and their religion and ritual" (152). Coyote's excesses sometimes reveal excess or potential excess in society. Coyote's satires work to maintain a balance within the social order.

This brief discussion of Coyote's character and function in oral mythology and Native culture offers a general context for Watson's and King's representations of Coyote, but the imaginations of both authors are affected by specific aspects of the body of myth and interpretation available to them. Watson's influences are relatively specific. In an interview, she cites James Teit and Franz Boas' study of the Thompson River Indians as her major source of information on West Coast myth, including those relating to Coyote (Watson, "Sheila" 161). The Thompson Indians, a branch of the Salishan

tribes, live in the interior of British Columbia, including the Cariboo region, where it is generally acknowledged that *The Double Hook* is set. In Boas' introduction to his and Teit's study, Boas highlights the moral contradiction inherent in Coyote's character as revealed by the Thompson myths. Boas notes that Coyote figures prominently in the mythology as a culture hero who gives the world its present shape, kills monsters, gives humans the arts for living, and teaches them to clothe themselves, kill animals for food, and make fire (Boas 4). But Boas observes a contradiction within the mythology:

the same great culture hero appears in other groups of tales as a sly trickster, who vaingloriously thinks himself superior to all other beings, whom he tries to deceive in all sorts of ways, and who is often punished for his presumption by the superior powers of his proposed victims. (4)

Boas notes that previous critics (he cites D.G. Brinton and Walter Hoffman) explain the contradiction by arguing that the heroic side of Coyote is the older, purer aspect and that the negative trickster is a recent degradation of the myths. However, Boas explains the moral contradiction between culture hero and trickster by arguing that neither benevolence nor malevolence guides Coyote; pure selfishness alone propels Coyote:

I find that in most tales of the transformer, or of the culture hero, the prime motive is... a purely egotistical one, and that the changes which actually benefit mankind are only incidentally beneficial. They are primarily designed by the transformer to reach his own selfish ends. (6)

For Boas, the results of Coyote's actions do not reveal Coyote's motivations. Coyote's actions appear morally ambiguous because Coyote acts without moral intention. Chapter Two of this thesis will show that Watson's characterization of Coyote embraces Coyote's moral ambiguity by making it unclear what Coyote's motivations are. Her Coyote is not unambiguously benevolent, malevolent, or selfish. Watson conveys Coyote's contradictory nature by shrouding her Coyote in uncertainty.

Unlike Watson, King does not cite any specific influences for his representation of Coyote. Both his Native background and his education point to a wider set of sources<sup>3</sup>. Even though *Green Grass, Running Water* deals extensively with a Blackfoot community, King does not identify his characterization of Coyote as specifically Blackfoot. In fact, as Bright notes, “Among the Blackfeet of Montana and Alberta, the transformer figure is not called Coyote, but *Na’pi*, ‘Old Man’” (117). King’s approach is eclectic. His Coyote embodies many attributes of the Trickster of oral literature.

King discussed his interpretation of Coyote in an interview after being asked if he uses Coyote as a god figure:

No, I never use Coyote as a god figure. That would be eviscerating Coyote. Coyote isn’t a god-like figure at all. Coyote is a trickster.... Coyote really is one of the creative forces in the world and one of the destructive forces in the world. There is imbalance – or a balance – and it goes on with Coyote all the time. The ground is always shifting out from underneath you with the trickster, whereas with anything that resembles God you have this sense that it’s benevolent – one – and everything it does is right – number two – and it can create anything or think anything or be anywhere with impunity. And that’s not Coyote. Coyote is a creature of appetites, of gross appetites. (“Parable” 53)

Like the oral Trickster, it is appetite that drives King’s Coyote in *Green Grass, Running Water*. For example, Coyote’s sexual appetite leads Coyote to impregnate Alberta. But Coyote’s creativity is matched by an equally destructive role: an appetite for mischief causes an earthquake that destroys the Grande Baleine dam and kills Eli. This contradiction in the effects of appetite reflects a character for whom all possibilities are open. As King writes, “When that Coyote dreams, anything can happen” (1). Also at the beginning, King identifies Coyote as an agent of disorder, but it is a disorder that also works constructively. Like the unpredictability of Coyote’s character, the disorder that Coyote creates requires the reader to reexamine assumptions about the nature of order

and to consider possibilities based on other sets of values and perceptions of reality. Coyote's destruction of the dam has apocalyptic overtones, but it is also a restitution of an earlier form of natural order. Ambiguity, contradiction, and paradox raise questions and demand innovative response to new insights. Finally, King's Coyote, like that of the oral tradition, operates in an atmosphere of humour. In part, the humour is an aspect of the uninhibited energy of Coyote's character; in part, it is a way of coping with a world in which unpredictability, paradox, and contradiction lie at the heart of reality.

While King's information was likely broader than Watson's, this difference has a greater impact on Coyote's characterization than it does on Coyote's thematic function in the two novels. King's Coyote emerges as having more dimensions of personality, but thematically both authors exploit the central features of the traditional Coyote figure – paradox and ambiguity – in order to create in Coyote a character who challenges the reader's basic assumptions about how the world is ordered and who ultimately functions to help change the reader's perception of the interrelationship between the differing sets of values that meet in the fiction. Through Coyote's unpredictability and elusive cast of mind, the established order of perception is questioned and broken down, making way for new insights.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The relationships between the terms “Coyote,” “the Trickster,” and “trickster” need clarification here. “Coyote” is the name of a Native myth figure while “the Trickster” is a category anthropologists have developed to describe a set of character traits that a number of Native myth figures share. “Coyote,” then, is an example of “the Trickster” and has traits common to Tricksters throughout North America. However, commentators sometimes use “trickster” (which I represent with a lower-case “t”) to describe the negative aspects of “the Trickster” as in the culture hero-trickster dichotomy. “The Trickster” embodies that dichotomy in one being. Ricketts explains the nature of the Trickster in some detail:

This “trickster-transformer-culture hero” (or “trickster-fixer,” for short) is a problem because he combines in one personage no less than two and sometimes three or more seemingly different and contrary roles. Oftentimes he is the maker of the earth and/or he is the one who changes the chaotic myth-world into the ordered creation of today; he is the slayer of monsters, the thief of daylight, fire, water, and the like for the benefit of man; he is the teacher of cultural skills and customs; but he is also a prankster who is grossly erotic, insatiably hungry, inordinately vain, deceitful, and cunning toward friends as well as foes; a restless wanderer upon the face of the earth; and a blunderer who is often the victim of his own tricks and follies. What kind of logic combines all these disparate elements into one mythical personality?

The figure who embraces all these traits of character is known throughout Indian North America by various names. Over much of the Great Plains, the Great Basin, the Plateau, the Southwest, and California he is “Coyote”; on the Northwest Coast he is “Raven” or “Mink”; in a small area of Washington State he is called “Bluejay”; in the Southeast and probably among the ancient Algonkians, Siouans, and others he usually appears as an anthropomorphic being with a proper name, such as Gluskabe, Iktomi, Wisaka, Wakdajunkaga, Old Man, and Widower-from-across-the Ocean. (327-328)

The Trickster is a ubiquitous presence in Native mythology. Kroeber’s term “Trickster-Transformer” refers to the same character, with an emphasis on the Trickster’s transformative abilities.

<sup>2</sup> In *Our Tellings*, Darwin Hanna notes that in Thompson River Indian mythology, Coyote exists during the period of creation (*sptákwelh*): “In the *sptákwelh* period, the world was inhabited by animals in vaguely human form. Central figures were Coyote, Bear, Grizzly, Chipmunk, Owl, and Crow” (21). Coyote generally occupies this ambivalent animal-human state.

<sup>3</sup> King studied oral literature extensively and completed a Ph.D. at the University of Utah entitled *Inventing the Indian: White Images, Native Oral Literature and Contemporary Native Writers*.

## Chapter II

In the criticism relating to Shelia Watson's *The Double Hook*, the figure of Coyote has frequently been the focus of attention<sup>1</sup>. These interpretations explore in detail the identity and function of this aspect of the narrative, but often struggle in offering a clear understanding of Coyote's role and meaning. In the context of the narrative, Coyote remains mysterious, inhabiting a world stripped of definitive cultural, historical, and moral identifiers, and in which the authorial voice is muted. Without the guidance of an authoritative narrator, Coyote's identity becomes elusive and opens itself to a range of conflicting definitions. The problem lies in how Watson presents Coyote. On the one hand, she wishes to maintain basic elements of Coyote's character and significance as shaped by the figure's Native origins, but at the same time, she works to bring that figure into the dynamic of her non-Native narrative. Thus, in *The Double Hook*, she offers only a fragment of the traditional Native Trickster separated from the cultural matrix that provides the figure with a stable meaning. Outside that cultural context, Coyote's role becomes ambiguous, inviting a variety of attempts at allegorical assimilation. But the persistence of Coyote's Native origins subverts those attempts, creating an elusive, paradoxical figure, occupying a shadowy terrain between two differing perceptions of reality. In effect, Watson places her readers in the position of outsiders with only fragmentary knowledge, trying to make sense of an indefinable myth-like presence in a landscape that is not fully familiar.

Watson's approach to presenting Coyote exploits the possibilities and subtleties of cross-cultural exchange and understanding, an area occupied by both the familiar and

unfamiliar. The lack of precision and clarity in defining Coyote draws us into the complexities of meaning and experience that occur where differing cultural perceptions meet. Such meetings are generally depicted in terms of contradiction, conflict, and efforts at assimilation, and at first glance, Watson appears to be pursuing such a process. Watson creates this impression because she casts Coyote's language in Biblical terms, which is consistent with the way contemporary anthropologists tended to translate Native myth. The effect is to obscure Coyote's traditional Native significance and open the door to imposing Christianized interpretations. But, in Coyote's mouth, Biblical language sounds unnatural<sup>2</sup> because, by making Coyote's moral status uncertain (Coyote's influence is never simply good or evil), Watson makes the connection between Coyote and Christian cosmology uncertain. Because Watson's approach is non-committal, critical opinion has tended to misinterpret her characterization of Coyote and see her depiction as Jehovah-like or Satan-like. Such interpretations explicitly moralize the significance of Coyote while Watson's depiction of Coyote is consistently tentative, even evasive. Watson appears much more concerned with exploiting the ambiguity and the potential for paradox in Coyote's character as a means of exploring and revealing the narrative complexities and moral opportunities of cultural interaction. In pursuing that end, the tension between allusions to Coyote's amoral Native identity and Christian moral dualism creates a context for employing parody.

Here, Bakhtin's observations on parody are instructive. He distinguishes "rhetorical parody," which functions as "a gross and superficial destruction of the other's language," from "parodic stylization," which works to "recreate the parodied language as an authentic whole, giving it its due as a language possessing its own internal logic and

capable of revealing its own world inextricably bound up with the parodied language” (364). Parody in *The Double Hook* functions to present simultaneously two differing moral value-systems without compromising the integrity of either. The conjunction of the character of Coyote (with its Native amorality) and Biblical language (with its implicit moral dualism) works to create a perception of paradox, in which the reader tolerates, even accepts the potential for contradiction. While such an anomaly may be puzzling (even potentially amusing), it is not fundamentally threatening or destructive. As such, it allows for a constructive exploration of paradox without resorting to the poisonous effects of malicious ironies.

This kind of parody allows Watson to protect Coyote from being simply subsumed by forms of Christian definition by placing Coyote in a more complex relationship beside (rather than under) Biblical mythology. In her use of parody, Watson does not privilege one tradition over the other. Rather, the relationship becomes one of dialogue, shaping a narrative in which a reader can explore similarities and recognize differences. For Watson, parody becomes a useful strategy for negotiating shared ground between cultures in a fragmented social environment without imposing assimilation on any component.

Watson uses a number of narrative techniques to create a neutral, even-handed approach to the story and to the character of Coyote in particular. The authorial voice narrates in a non-judgmental, impersonal manner, avoiding the kind of tone that implicitly imposes a moralistic interpretation. Nor does the narrative voice provide any specific details concerning Coyote’s cultural identity, and the author appears to have stripped the text of suggestive adjectives and adverbs. For example, when Coyote cries



from the hills, the verb remains unmodified; all the reader gets is Coyote's voice. In Watson's view, "somehow or other I had to get the authorial voice out of the novel for it to say what I wanted it to say. I didn't want a voice talking about something. I wanted voices" (Watson, "Sheila" 158). Her efforts to create authorial neutrality are intentional.

The effect of muting the directive influence of the narrative voice creates (and invites) a greater interpretive role for the reader, even though the text limits the knowledge with which the reader has to work. For example, the text introduces Coyote without authorial comment: "In the folds of the hills / under Coyote's eye" (19). While "under" may suggest a power relationship with the creek residents and may conjure images of sinister surveillance, there is no moral modifier to confirm that interpretation. "Coyote's eye" is not "evil," "tyrannical," "malevolent," or "benevolent"; it is the object without judgment. The text consistently refuses to pass judgment on Coyote. After Greta lights her house on fire, the narrative states:

And Coyote cried in the hills:  
I've taken her where she stood  
my left hand is on her head  
my right hand embraces her. (85)

Critics like Margot Northey and Leslie Monkman interpret this scene as Coyote's seduction of Greta, casting Coyote in the role of devil/tempter. However, Coyote's role is ambiguous. Coyote's cry comes at the end of the scene without any clear causal connections to the suicide. One might interpret the "cry" as an expression of compassion and love, rather than maliciousness<sup>3</sup>. The narrator does not lead our interpretation in a definitive direction.

Stephen Scobie, however, argues that a definitive reading of Watson's Coyote does lie within the text. His reading responds to Beverly Mitchell's idea that the text

resolves Coyote's moral ambiguities when it finally reveals that Coyote, who initially acts like the Old Testament God of vengeance, is really a benevolent deity similar to the New Testament God. Scobie states: "Coyote is indeed a 'God of vengeance'; there is no evidence at all in the text that he is also a 'God of mercy'" (Scobie 291). For Scobie, Coyote's influence is "unambiguously negative" (292), and Coyote's function is to tempt towards fear, despair, divisiveness, and darkness. Coyote is a fear to be faced and, "Coyote, like the Devil, is a master of lies; the truth is all it takes to make him disappear" (293). Like Monkman, Scobie interprets Watson's Coyote as an allegory of the Devil.

The trouble with linking Watson's Coyote to the Devil (or to fear) is that this view does not acknowledge her understanding of Coyote's amoral status in Native traditions. Scobie and Monkman are aware of Coyote as Native Trickster, but they tend to interpret Watson's Trickster as immoral and so see Trickster as tempter. Watson appears to have been more aware of Native traditions than her critics generally have allowed. In Native traditions, Coyote's actions contain possibilities for both evil and good. At the same time that Coyote is a culture hero, Coyote also harms people. In Felix's memory of Angel and the tar-paper bear, Steven Putzel notes Watson's allusion to a Thompson Indian myth in which Coyote is a culture-hero bringing good and evil:

The memory of the time Angel had seen the bear at the fish camp. Seen the bear rising on its haunches. Prostrating itself before the unsacked winds. Rising as if to strike. Bowing to the spirits let out of the sack, Angel thought, by the meddler Coyote. The bear advancing. Mowing. Scraping, Genuflecting. Angel furious with fear beating wildly. Her hunting-knife pounding the old billycan. (39)

Putzel argues that what we have here is a half-remembered reference of a Thompson tale, recorded in Ella Elizabeth Clark's *Indian Legends of Canada*, in which Coyote brings salmon to the people. In that story, Coyote transforms into a child and some women

adopt Coyote. The women deny salmon access to the Thompson River with a fish dam and keep all the fish for themselves. The women have four boxes in their house and they tell Coyote not to open the boxes. But Coyote meddles:

Salmon, the chief food of the women, was a new food to Coyote. There was no salmon in his country, and the Coyote people knew nothing about it. Below the women's dam the river was full of fish, but of course there were none above it. Coyote made up his mind to break the dam and let the salmon go up the rivers to his people.

One day when the women were away, Coyote broke the dam and then went to the house and opened the four wooden boxes.

From one box, smoke came out; from another, wasps; from the third, salmon-flies; from the fourth, beetles.

Then Coyote, running along the bank of the river, was followed by the salmon. The smoke, the wasps, the flies, and the beetles followed the salmon. (Clark 26)

In this tale, Coyote does not act on morally dualistic principles as a stock hero or villain might. The meddling brings both harm and benefit. In her confrontation with the bear, Angel's fears, founded on the half-remembered story of Coyote releasing harmful things into the world, ignore the beneficial aspect of that same story. The fish Coyote releases are the very symbols of life that the creek community seeks and which Ara eventually sees. Angel's failure to grasp the full import of the situation amplifies her fears. However, the potential to remember is there in terms of textual allusion. While Coyote's effect on Angel is negative, as Scobie argues, textual allusion to Coyote's amorality makes Coyote's moral function unclear. It is difficult to view Coyote simply as tempter/Devil because one cannot assign a clear moral intention to Coyote's actions. Like Angel, Scobie judges Coyote from a limited perspective. This is not to say that Mitchell's interpretation is right and Scobie is wrong. Given the limitations of their perspectives, both have the same validity, but because of those limitations, one side or the other of the double hook snags them.

Watson appears to have been aware of the interpretive pitfalls and moral ambiguity presented by her narrative as a result of muting authorial guidance. In an interview, she remarked:

I was concerned, too... with the problem of an indigenous population which had lost or was losing its own mythic structure, which had had its images destroyed, its myths interpreted for it by various missionary societies and later by anthropologists – a group intermarried or intermingled with people of other beliefs – French Catholics who had come into the West with the Hudson Bay Company, Biblical puritanical elements – all now virtually isolated from their source. All these voices echo in *The Double Hook*. (Watson, “Sheila” 159)

The figure of Coyote reflects this confluence of moral voices and cultural mix, what Watson describes as “confusion everywhere” (*Ibid.* 160). The challenge for the reader is to embrace and explore the complexity of the text and avoid the temptation to simplify response. In doing so, we must find ways of negotiating cross-cultural encounters. For example, early in the text, Felix, lost in his meditative self-absorption, hears a coyote:

But the hounds heard Coyote’s song fretting the gap between the red boulders:

In my mouth is the east wind.  
Those who cling to the rocks I will  
bring down  
I will set my paw on the eagle’s nest. (24)

In this passage, there are allusions to *The Waste Land* (“red boulders”), to God as the east wind in Exodus, Job, and Hosea, to God’s judgment of Edom in Jeremiah, and to the Native myth figure Coyote. How is one to make sense of all these allusions? On the one hand, critics like Mitchell, Putzel, and Donna Smyth impose order on the chaos and argue that Coyote becomes Jehovah in taking on His voice. For them, Watson universalizes myth by showing the underlying archetypal relationship between the two deities. For these critics, Coyote’s intentions are benevolent. The harsh language goads Felix out of his proud self-absorption into life-affirming action. On the other hand, critics like

Margaret Moriss, Monkman, Scobie, Northey, John Grube, and Shirley Neuman focus on Coyote's relationship with fear (as in the Eliot reference). For them, Coyote tempts the creek residents towards the death-in-life that results from fear. In Monkman's view, for example, Coyote inverts Biblical language. Coyote does not goad the residents towards redemption; rather, Coyote tempts them away from it into despair and death, functioning in "Satanic opposition to Old Testament Jehovah" (Monkman 71).

What differentiates these critics is the way they define Coyote's moral intentions, and as a result, come down on one side or the other of the double hook of moral dualism. But this approach overlooks the creative tension between Coyote's amoral status in Native culture and the moral dualism implied by Biblical discourse. Watson alludes to these two traditions simultaneously; however, by refusing to define Coyote's moral identity in exclusive terms or to privilege a Christian reading over a Native one (and vice versa), she undermines all attempts to find an allegorical relationship between the two traditions.

Efforts to link the two traditions allegorically face two major problems. First, the process eventually becomes one of assimilating one set of cultural perspectives into another. In the case of Coyote, the figure loses much of its complexity in the service of moral clarity. Second, the paradoxical amorality of Coyote's character in the Native context makes the figure difficult to fit into the range of Christian moral categories without some contradiction emerging. Consequently, narratives that attempt to embody Coyote in a Christian context have problems credibly transforming the figure. In light of Coyote's origins, Coyote can at times appear like the Devil, or like Jehovah, or, as a mediator between the human and the divine – Coyote can even appear like a Biblical

prophet. Coyote's elusive Native character allows the figure to shapeshift into any of these Christian roles in moral narratives, undermining the reader's efforts to be morally exact.

Watson responds to the elusive quality of Coyote's character and sees a creative value in affirming it. Rather than subject Coyote either to Native or Christian interpretations, she allows the figure to participate in both. Her depiction of Coyote highlights the absurdity of Christianized interpretations. In Coyote's mouth, Biblical language is parodied. The image of Coyote's jaw opening and the voice of God coming out creates a puzzling anomaly. But the nature of the parody created here is not that of blasphemous ridicule (as Scobie suggests (291)); Watson is careful not to privilege one tradition over the other. Rather than demean and destroy, Watson's text explores similarities between Coyote and Christian myth figures, but without requiring that Coyote relinquish Coyote's Native identity. Because we cannot fix Coyote's moral status absolutely, we cannot know why Coyote speaks in Biblical terms and who exactly Coyote intends to "mock." Is Coyote's mocking benign or malicious? There appears to be something of both involved, demanding a simultaneous understanding, tolerance, and acceptance of the contradictions implicit in the meeting of differing perceptions of sacred worth and spiritual wisdom. The great temptation here is to declare the one serious and the other silly, or to obliterate enlightening difference through universalizing patterns of myth. Watson appears to have been sensitive to both these dangers, perhaps more so than her critics allow. When asked if all myths are "one story and one story only," she replied, "I'm not sure. I don't like reductive theories" (Watson, "Sheila" 162). Watson defends Coyote from reductive assimilation of Native myth to Christianity through the instrument

of parody. In doing so, she defends herself from the kind of interpretation of Native myth that minimizes its cultural value and denigrates its moral perceptiveness.

While Watson's parody protects Coyote from Christian assimilation, Watson does not presume to replace parodied interpretations with more "authentic" ones. Rather, Watson forces us back into the position of the outsider to Native tradition by veiling Coyote in epistemological shadow. Coyote is immanent in the text, but barely discernible. For example, when Heinrich first sees the ghost of Mrs. Potter, Coyote calls from the shadows:

I knew it was the old lady, the boy said. Shadows don't bend grass. I know  
a shadow from an old woman.

Above on the hills  
Coyote's voice rose among the rocks:  
In my mouth is forgetting  
In my darkness is rest. (29)

In the shadow, knowledge becomes uncertain. The old lady, associated with Coyote throughout the text, is a shadow that Heinrich feels compelled to define. But the reader has more information than Heinrich at this point and knows that the old lady has been pushed "into the shadow of death" (19). Between the reader and Heinrich, the old lady's ontological status is uncertain. Coyote's role in this scene is also uncertain. One can read Coyote as tempting Heinrich towards spiritual stasis or as goading him towards life. At times, Coyote seems to mock Heinrich's impulse to define everything, and his blindness to the insights ambiguity offers. Throughout, Coyote's motives remain hidden; however, in that mystery, Coyote gains the power to excite the imagination.

The influence of Coyote's mythic presence is pervasive, and Coyote's moral ambiguity becomes a major point of reference against which the narrative unfolds. All

figures live in the valley of the shadow of the unknown where things are difficult to see and know. The relationship between Coyote and the land is almost symbiotic: “Coyote made the land his pastime. He stretched out his paw. He breathed on the grass. His spittle eyed it with prickly pear” (22). In order to understand the territory and its inhabitants, one must explore the character of Coyote. It is in this context that the lack of authorial guidance is most keenly felt. On unfamiliar ground, the reader alone must map a territory that is presented more in symbolic than literal terms. To make matters worse, in Coyote’s territory, every symbol has a good and an evil aspect and every figure has good and bad qualities. There are no obvious agents of moral order or a simple system of justice. Readers must draw on their own moral perceptions and test them against the moral ambiguities of the world Coyote occupies.

Perhaps the most effective technique Watson uses to project the complexity of Coyote’s morally ambivalent universe lies in the narrative’s parody of the popular Western novel. Watson states: “I wanted to do something too about the West, which wasn’t a Western” (“What” 182). Critics like Barbara Godard, George Bowering, Arnold Davidson, and Eli Mandel point out that the text, while not a Western in the classic sense, nonetheless implicitly parodies that genre. For Bowering, Coyote is a parody of the kind of hero often found in Westerns: “[Coyote] is a powerful fool, a smart goof who copes, an anti-hero of his own story, and for the writer who did not want to write a western, a nice change from the western’s silent hero and rescuer” (Bowering 104). However, one might also argue that role of parodic cowboy suits James more and that Coyote parodies the kind of authorial voice common to Westerns that manipulates our moral sympathies. Whatever the case, the effect of the parody is to cast into question the neat, simplistic



pattern of a narrative world (the Western) that interprets the experience of the American West strictly on its own terms. The literary parody demands a moral re-evaluation.

As *The Double Hook* unfolds, Coyote's role helps shift the moral context of the Western from a world of easily definable good and evil to a world without a moral map. The moral ambivalence of Coyote's world-view subverts the normally cathartic experience of the Western. Like modern action films, classic Westerns enact a form of morality play where good triumphs over evil and crimes are always punished. The narrator, acting as moral authority, lets us know unequivocally who the good and bad guys are. Readers are expected to comply with the narrator's imposed moral judgments to such an extent that they not only accept but expect the death of the "villain." The hero can kill without remorse or worry of punishment because the hero (by definition) is doing God's work in eradicating evil and protecting good. Essentially, the popular Western is a story of redemption.

In *The Double Hook*, however, the ambivalence of Coyote's moral perspective disrupts the reader's expectations and leaves the reader in an unclear and often contradictory position. For example, James, who is often cast in the role of hero in criticism, commits a number of "crimes." He kills his mother, he seduces, impregnates, and abandons Lenchen, he blinds Kip, he lashes Greta and Lenchen, and there is a possibility that he commits incest with Greta<sup>4</sup>. However, these crimes are neither punished nor endorsed by the narrator. The reader is left wondering how to pass judgment on James and how to accept him without punishment.

With few exceptions (Glen Deer, Davidson, and Oliver Lovesey), critics have been quick to exonerate James. This justification of James' crimes reflects critics' efforts

to establish a clear moral reading by mapping a story of redemption onto the text's symbols. For example, Grube, in his introduction to the 1969 edition, argues that, although *The Double Hook* avoids the clichés of the traditional Western, it still follows an archetypal symbolic pattern:

The novel *appears* to be written in the clichés of the regional idyll, the Western, the ethnic-group novel, just as Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* appears to be a simple story of a disappointed fisherman. Yet they are both symbolic novels; their use of cliché is ironic. What lifts them above the ordinary is that their symbols do not belong to a private world but to the great heritage of symbols in the "collective unconscious" of the race. All significant fiction unfolds with a hero, a romantic interest, a battle, and a resolution. (5)

However, to make Watson's text fit a universal pattern of redemption, Grube must make moral choices. He must cast James in the role of hero: "The hero, James, comes to represent suffering humanity as well as its deliverer" (10). Grube rationalizes James' violence by arguing that those actions are necessary in order to break the spiritual stagnation of the community. James' matricide becomes a necessary rebellion against a tyrannical power: "Mrs. Potter had been a powerful and psychically dominating woman and the action of the novel turns on James' efforts to liberate himself and the entire settlement from his mother and through her from the dead hand of the past" (5-6). This violent act is the first step in the community's redemption. However, James does not complete that redemption until he departs on his quest (goes to town) and returns after facing and understanding fear, thereby freeing the community from the fear of Coyote (10).

For Grube, the story is a familiar one: the hero combats the villains and redeems the community's confidence by restoring order. In the redemption story, Coyote and Mrs. Potter become aligned as the villains:

[Mrs. Potter] becomes a symbol of death, and is always associated with the chilling sound of the coyote which has been a symbol for fear from time immemorial both to the settler and to the native Indian who preceded him. Primitive people who think in myths turn fear and death as well as natural forces into gods. (11)

Grube has no problem defining his villains and even gives Coyote's voice a moral modifier ("chilling"). To become a hero, James kills his mother (faces death), resists Coyote's temptations (faces fear), and returns with a vision of Eden, "the first pasture of things" (*Double Hook* 131).

While most critics do not present James' role in such simple terms, many follow similar patterns of interpretation. For example, Margaret Morris reads James' matricide as a revolt against spiritual stagnation that is justified but lacks understanding. In his journey to town, James finally confronts the meaning of his actions. Coyote tempts him away from understanding: "Coyote would have the pattern [of redemption] suspended at this point [of revelation], offering only the peace and surrender to fear, the abdication of the glory inherent in responsible human existence" (Morris 67). But James resists Coyote and returns to redeem the community. Similarly, Mitchell justifies James' acts, especially his illicit affair with Lenchen, as accidents with fortunate results. The baby turns out to be a *felix culpa* that leads to communal redemption. Monkman, John Watt Lennox, Dawn Rae Downton, Putzel, Scobie, Neuman, Dick Harrison, D. G. Jones, and Northey, all read the text in similar ways<sup>5</sup>.

In general, the redemption readings rely on three major moral judgments: that James is the hero, that Mrs. Potter is a repressive force, and that Coyote is a manifestation of destructive forces (fear, temptation, despair, darkness) even when seen as emerging ultimately as a benevolent deity. Either way, redemption readings define Coyote on only

one side of the moral double hook. Current critics, however, like Deer, Davidson, Constance Rooke, and Lovesey take a different view of James and his mother and raise questions about a possible parodic relationship between Coyote's tale and the traditional story of redemption. As Davidson notes, the "cowboy reading" of James as redemptive hero is tempting, but it may exonerate him at the expense of Mrs. Potter and Coyote, among others.

In the redemption reading, Mrs. Potter's role becomes that of "psychology's Terrible Mother, the constricting death-force that prevents her children from living full lives" (Putzel 8). Some of the creek folks' perceptions of Mrs. Potter support this view. For example, when Felix sees Mrs. Potter fishing his pools, he wants to "chase her out" (23). He is concerned to the point of threatening violence: "Someday I'll put a catcher on the fence and catch her for once and all" (23). The Widow Wagner sees the old lady's fishing as selfish (25), and Greta too thinks her mother is self-centered and life-denying:

I've seen Ma standing with the lamp by the fence, she said. Holding it up in broad daylight. I've seen her standing looking for something even the birds couldn't see. Something hid from every living thing. I've seen her defying. I've seen her take her hat off in the sun at noon, baring her head and asking for the sun to strike her. Holding the lamp and looking where there's nothing to be found. Nothing but dust. No person's got a right to keep looking. To keep looking and blackening lamp globes for others to clean. (31)

These responses appear to justify James' revolt against her, but critics who judge Mrs. Potter on the basis of these responses downplay some textual ambiguities. It is unclear whether these characters hate and fear Mrs. Potter because she represses them or because she tries to see things they would rather leave hidden. Do the uncomfortable feelings she provokes goad them towards self-knowledge? Felix is glad when the old lady does not return to "disturb his peace" (24). But Felix's self-absorbed peace and refusal to deal with

Angel's departure need to be disturbed. Further, Coyote's comments on Felix's reaction to Mrs. Potter amount to a veiled warning against pride (24). Is Coyote implying that Felix is the one lost in pride, not Mrs. Potter? Davidson suggests that she might be a female Diogenes looking for honesty and trying to find moral cohesion in an amoral world ("Double" 35). Perhaps the old lady is looking and fishing for the meaning that is lost when rituals are forgotten. Ara comments that the old lady is "fishing upstream to the source.... to the bones of the hills" (21). Is she fishing to restore spiritual truth or is she an anti-Fisher King, as Scobie suggests (Scobie 294)? There is even some suggestion that Mrs. Potter may be Native: "James wanted to go down to the river. To throw himself into its long arms. But along the shore like a night watch drifted the brown figure he sought to escape" (98)<sup>6</sup>. Does her brown skin mark her Native heritage? Does her ghost protect James from suicide? Does she goad James towards positive or negative action like the ghost in *Hamlet*? Does she suggest that some crime needs to be avenged? Mrs. Potter's presence raises questions that must be asked. Greta says: "Ask anybody what she did with her fish. Ask them. Not me. I don't know anything" (31). The problem is that no one knows, and no one wants to ask the questions.

Instead of asking questions, redemption readings of *The Double Hook* argue that Mrs. Potter is one of Coyote's agents and that the community eventually conquers the fear she represents. Redemption requires the matricide. However, Coyote makes the community's redemptive vision ambiguous and calls into question the moral justifications for the murder. Ara, when she sees Mrs. Potter, has a vision of death:

The water was running low in the creek. Except in the pools, it would be hardly up to the ankle. Yet as she watched the old lady, Ara felt death leaking through from the centre of the earth. Death rising to the knee. Death rising to the loin. (21)

Infertile herself, Ara has a vision of infertility. Mrs. Potter, Ara's tyrannical mother-in-law, inspires a life-denying fear. Under the old lady's power, Ara sees water as a death symbol. However, once the community faces its fears, water becomes a symbol of life.

After Greta's suicide, Ara has another vision:

[Ara] remembered how she'd thought of water as a death which might seep through the dry shell of the world. Now her tired eyes saw water issuing from under the burned threshold. Welling up and flowing down to fill the dry creek. Until dry lips drank. Until the trees stood knee deep in water.

Everything shall live where the river comes, she said out loud. And she saw a great multitude of fish, each fish springing arched through the slanting light. (114)

Ara's vision is like a sign of the community's spiritual renewal enacted in Christian symbols. However, a refusal to see underlies her vision. In the same scene, Ara refuses a prophetic vision that calls her to find meaning in Greta's suicide:

Ara was sitting on the ground, her arms holding her knees close to her chest, her eyes on the boy's scorched and torn shirt.

The words of the lord came, saying: Say now to the rebellious house, Know you not what these things mean? ...

Prophesy upon these bones, Ara thought. Then she hid her face in her hands. She was afraid she would feel the earth shake and see the bones come together bone to bone. That the wind would blow and she would see Greta fleshed and sinewed standing on the ruin she had made. (113-114)

Ara never explains the meaning of Greta's suicide. Like Ezekiel, she has the opportunity to piece the fragments together, but she refuses, fearing the truths a reincarnated Greta might reveal. The ambiguous personal pronoun "she" in the phrase "standing on the ruin she had made" suggests that Ara refuses to acknowledge her part in the tragedy. The first "she" in that sentence refers to Ara, but the second pronoun's antecedent is uncertain and might refer to Ara. Four paragraphs later, Ara bases her vision of renewal on forgetting the past, not on reconciliation with it.

Coyote's Biblical parody following Ara's vision calls into question our impulse to read her vision as life's triumph over death or good's triumph over evil. As Ara, William, and Heinrich prepare to bury Greta, Coyote interjects:

Above them a coyote barked. This time they could see it on a jut of rock calling down over the ledge so that the walls of the valley magnified its voice and sent it echoing back:

Happy are the dead  
for their eyes see no more. (114-115)

On one level, one can read this passage as the creek residents' discovery that what scared them all along was just a coyote making itself sound big using the valley's echo. The community faces life-denying fear, overturns superstitions by empirical evidence, and achieves a vision of redemption. But Coyote's words are ambiguous and challenge Ara's vision. Who are "the dead" to which Coyote refers? Considering Ara's and the reader's refusal to confront the moral and spiritual consequences of Greta's suicide, the blind dead may include more than just Greta. Coyote's words here, according to Watson, allude to Christ: "Blessed are the pure of heart for they will see God." Watson comments on the connection: "Coyote's song recalls Christ's promise, but it is quite ambiguous" (Watson "Interview" 354). Coyote's song set beside Christ's is a parody that throws Ara's vision of purity into question. Is Ara pure of heart or is her vision of renewal dubious, based on a forgetting of the past? Does her happiness depend on imposing a simplistically favorable interpretation of events on the moral ambiguities of the world? At the end of the story, Ara refuses to look at James and to acknowledge his return (134). One wonders if, in her heart, Ara fully and honestly takes part in the community's renewal. The redemption reading obscures the possibility that the apparent triumph of good over evil

may be deceptive, that the parodic ambiguity of Coyote's words protects Coyote from defeat and subtly maintains Coyote's mythic influence.

Mrs. Potter's role becomes another of Coyote's tricks that parodies the traditional pattern of restoring moral order in Western stories of redemption. Davidson argues that James is like the Western heroes who achieve freedom through the figurative killing of a mother, which is an escape from dependence and domesticity (*Coyote* 59). But in Coyote's morally ambiguous universe, James' escape to freedom and his claim to the title of hero are not so clear. Coyote does not let the community forget the old lady. Coyote shapeshifts into Mrs. Potter (35) and mocks James' bid at hero status, foregrounding the observation that, if we accept James as a hero, we must forget his crimes. It is the suffering of others that allows for James' heroism. Rooke makes a similar point, arguing that Mrs. Potter's resurrection is "a kind of trick, black comedy inspired by Coyote... or by Watson as Coyote" (85). According to Rooke, the trick is on the reader. Annoyed with Mrs. Potter's persistence, the text seduces the reader into taking James' part (*Ibid.*). His departure and return to the community looks like a heroic journey, but his horse carries him the whole way and he never learns a thing. Still, many critics are "happy" to read James as the archetypal hero, accepting James' violence as par for the course.

To read the text as a heroic quest, one must read James' journey as one that leads to understanding and Coyote must play the villain/tempter. However, Coyote resists that role and (even setting aside the question of James' crimes) makes us wonder whether James can be a hero without a villain to fight. If James were fighting Indians or bank robbers, we could forgive his violence, but James does not fight bad guys; rather, he



fights his mother, his sister, his lover, his friends, an amoral supernatural presence, and himself. His violence leads only to ambiguity, not to moral order.

For example, James' interaction with Coyote resembles a scene of heroic resistance to the temptations of darkness, despair, and evil, but Coyote's moral confusion makes the scene a parody:

James wanted to go down to the river. To throw himself into its long arms.  
But along the shore like a night-watch drifted the brown figure he sought to  
escape.

He asked himself now for the first time what he'd really intended to do  
when he'd defied his mother at the head of the stairs.

To gather briars and thorns,  
said Coyote.  
To go down into the holes of the rock  
and into the caves of the earth.  
In my fear is peace.

Yet as James stood looking at the river, his heart cried out against the thought:  
This bed is too short for a man to stretch himself in. The covering's too narrow  
for a man to wrap himself in. (98-99)

James' mind shifts away from thoughts of suicide but does he fully understand the import of his experience? He asks himself about his intentions, but never answers the question: "He could not think of what he'd done. He couldn't think of what he'd do. He would simply come back as he'd gone. He'd stand silent in their cry of hate" (127). His silence signals his refusal to probe the question.

James' role as hero depends on viewing Coyote's role as that of villain: "In my fear is peace." But Coyote's intentions towards James are unclear. Coyote's words (quoted above) allude to a chapter in Isaiah that prophesizes Christ's kingdom, recommending fear of God as an antidote to blind pride:

And the loftiness of man shall be bowed down, and the haughtiness of man shall  
be made low: and the LORD alone shall be exalted in that day.... And they shall

go into the holes of the rocks, and into the caves of the earth, for fear of the LORD, and for the glory of his majesty, when he ariseth to shake terribly the earth.  
(Isaiah 2:17, 19)

What is Coyote's relationship to this passage? Is Coyote warning James against his murderous and suicidal pride? Coyote could be trying to convince James that he is doomed to judgement and might as well kill himself. Or, Coyote could be saying, as Isaiah does, that fear and reverence are necessary to live in peace. Coyote's ambiguous allusions throw open the question of whether James is a hero or a villain and suggest that we would be vain to judge. If we judge James as a hero, we ignore his violence; if we judge him as villain, we deny the community an instrument of redemption. After all, James does return to Lenchen and accept his social responsibilities.

However, it is troubling that James never fully understands the moral implications of his actions. He does not decide to go home; circumstance makes the decision for him. Lacking the imagination to escape, James makes himself the victim of Traff and Lilly: "The flick of a girl's hand had freed James from freedom" (121). James needs someone else to make the decision to return for him. In fact, James does not even direct his horse. Rather, the horse carries James home, while James closes his eyes for most of the trip<sup>7</sup>. The description of the return sounds triumphant, but it is the horse that feels free, not James:

The horse turned of its own accord towards the bridge. James gave it its head.... Freed from the stable, it turned its head towards home.... the horse carried James across the bridge and up a path onto the shoulders of the hills.... The horse raced from the ridge through a meadow of wild hay watered by some hidden spring.... As they climbed again, the horse seemed to draw life with every breath. (121-122)

James emerges as a passive figure; he does not gain any more control over his life than he had the previous morning. Once again, the text places the reader in a quandary.

If one chooses to simplify the text's meaning by reading James as a redemptive hero, one has to accept the moral implications of James' choice to exonerate himself of his past crimes. When he finally returns to find his house burned and Greta dead, James feels more relief than grief:

In the emptiness of the fenced plot the bodies of the man and the boy seemed to occupy space which, too, should have been empty. The lank body of William and the thin body of the boy roped him to the present. He shut his eyes. In his mind now he could see only the seared and smouldering earth, the bare hot cinder of a still unpeopled world. He felt as he stood with his eyes closed on the destruction of what his heart had wished destroyed that by some generous gesture he had been turned once more into the first pasture of things. (131)

James has no intention of facing the moral consequences of his actions and neither do those readers who interpret James' vision as a redemptive one of Eden. The "generous gesture" is the reader's. Like Ara, James imposes a vision on the present, one that is Eden-like but more a horse's paradise than a human's. That vision involves distorting the present and ignoring the moral repercussions of his actions. James wants to forget rather than atone for the suffering he caused: "[James] could, too, he knew, look into his own heart as he could look into the guts of a deer when he slit the white underbelly. He held memory like a knife in his hand. But he clasped it shut and rode on" (126-127). His relation to the land as a "still unpeopled world" erases history and his guilty feelings, and justifies his place. He emerges not just as the apparent hero, but as a hero-conqueror with a sense of empowerment. Oliver Lovesey, in a recent article on *The Double Hook*, argues that James' journey is an allegory enacting a voyage of imperial exploration. From this perspective, one can read James' vision as a throwing off of the colonial burden of guilt (Lovesey 56). James ignores the ambiguities of the territory and maps his own world

overtop: "From the height of the hill the land below seemed ordered and regular" (127).

Accepting James' Eden, then, can be seen as a tacit approval of colonial dispossession.

Reading James as the hero and ignoring the moral complexity implicit in Coyote's role undermines the effectiveness of Watson's parody. Even at the end, there is no comfortable resolution. Watson complicates a happy ending by giving Coyote the last laugh:

I have set his feet on soft ground;  
I have set his feet on the sloping shoulders  
of the world. (134)

Certainly there is hope for the community, and it has undergone a change, but the story of redemption is not adequate to explain what has happened. Coyote's ambiguous parody forces us to make the story mean something without ignoring the moral complexities of experience.

Through the role of Coyote, Watson challenges our impulse to impose simplistic patterns of interpretation and reveals that redemption readings obscure the ambiguous realities of experience and vilify characters unfairly. Watson releases Coyote from dualistic moral interpretation, relinquishes her authorial voice, and creates an ambiguous parodic literary experience. Parody, when employed as a tool of satire, can be used to denigrate and ridicule its subjects, and certainly Coyote does make everyone look absurd (including Coyote) and calls everything into question. But Watson's parody is not so destructive. For her, parody is a useful strategy for negotiating common ground between cultures. Her parody does not privilege one culture over the other and it avoids polemic in favour of dialogue. It helps create conditions for tolerance and understanding. Parody sets two cultures *beside* each other and allows the two to resonate. In doing so, Watson's

parody gives new perspective on the relationship between Native and Christian mythologies and awakens the latent potential for spiritual and emotional meaning inherent in each mythology's symbols by examining them from a fresh perspective.

At the heart of Watson's approach lies a creative use of ambiguity and paradox to broaden and enrich reader response by requiring the reader to consider a range of possible meanings in coming to terms with the text. The role of Coyote and the use of parody are fundamental to this process, and recognizing their importance is key to developing a fuller reading of the work. But the significance of paradox is initially reflected in the image projected by the title. What is the Double Hook? There is no single answer. At times, the Double Hook can symbolize the paradoxes and ironies of moral dualism; at times, it can reflect the contradictory aspects of the cultural dualism that forms the imaginative frame of reference of the work. The meaning of Double Hook is as elusive as the meaning of Coyote.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Most *Double Hook* criticism deals with Coyote to some extent. Leslie Monkman, Beverly Mitchell, George Bowering, Steven Putzel, Stephen Scobie, and Arnold Davidson have done the most extensive work on Coyote's role and function.

<sup>2</sup> Watson's juxtaposition of a Native figure with Biblical language strikes me as an irresolvable dichotomy designed to maintain the co-presence of two value systems that do not naturally harmonize.

<sup>3</sup> Coyote's words align Coyote with the lover in the Song of Solomon:

I am the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valleys. As the lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters. As the apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons. I sat down under his shadow with great delight, and his fruit was sweet to my taste. He brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner over me was love. Stay me with flagons, comfort me with apples: for I am sick of love. His left hand is under my head, and his right hand doth embrace me. (Song 2:1-6)

The images of Greta's suicide, her floral housecoat, her love sickness, and Coyote's possible connection to the beloved all echo ambiguously with this Biblical passage. Because Coyote's moral intentions are unclear, Coyote's relationship with the text is uncertain. Is Coyote, whom the text often associates with shadows, comforting Greta? Or, is the suicide scene an inversion of the Biblical allusion, with Coyote representing the thorns (prickly pear) and not love? Coyote has "taken" her, but Coyote's uncertain motives leave the reader scrambling to make sense of the passage.

<sup>4</sup> Bruce Nesbitt explores in detail the issue of incest in *The Double Hook*.

<sup>5</sup> In "Canadian Letters, Dead Referents: Reconsidering the Critical Construction of *The Double Hook*," Donna Palmateer Pennee argues that *Double Hook* criticism has "functioned to give us a unified view" of the text by locating it within "the modernist tradition" (234). Pennee suggests that locating the text within the modernist tradition leads to a patriarchal reading:

In this case, a mother is murdered (on the first page of the novel) so that her son's narrative can go forward, and a sister is prey (in her suicide) to another discursive murder, aware that she is an (incestuous) obstacle to her brother's entry into a traditional patriarchal structure. (235)

According to Pennee, critics have been complicit with James' act: "Murder is repeated in the criticism of *The Double Hook* insofar as it goes unquestioned" (235). Pennee's article suggests that critics need to explore the textual ambiguities surrounding the matricide. My discussion follows her lead and explores how Coyote problematizes our moral

readings of Mrs. Potter, James, and the murder. Coyote upsets the “unified view” for which critics have striven.

<sup>6</sup> In “‘Between One Cliché and Another’: Language in *The Double Hook*,” Barbara Godard suggests that some of the creek residents have Native origins: “One level of narrative and allusions refers to the mythological trickster god, Coyote, of the Thompson Indian tribe of which Kip is a member and the Potter family are descendants. All the community lives “Under Coyote’s eyes,” but belief in the religion that he represents, like practice in the Indian language, is minimal” (154). Although Godard makes this statement without citing any textual evidence, and is the only critic who suggests a Native heritage for any character, the suggestion is important because it highlights the characters’ racial ambiguities. It is possible that Mrs. Potter’s fishing to the source where Coyote lurks is an effort to reconnect with her heritage, what Godard calls the “religion” that Coyote represents. The symbol of her fishing resonates beyond Christian and medieval symbols. The fish might also refer to the salmon Coyote brings to the Thompson Indians.

<sup>7</sup> In “Miracle, Mystery, and Authority: ReReading *The Double Hook*,” Glen Deer makes the same point that “James is not responsible for his own return – his remarkable horse is” (32). According to Deer, this is evidence that all the figures “are shown as helpless in controlling their own destinies” (33). It is as hard to judge James as it is Coyote because James’ actions are irrational and they produce good and bad consequences. The point is that James is an ambiguous hero.

### Chapter III

In *Green Grass, Running Water*, as in *The Double Hook*, cultural perceptions rooted in Native values meet those of a dominant Euro-American culture in an imaginative world that is often ambiguous and paradoxical, presenting the writer with creative opportunities but also with dangers. As with Watson, the greatest danger lies in allowing one set of cultural perceptions precedence, permitting it to overwhelm the other in a reinterpretation that obscures or distorts the other's integrity. The opportunities lie in creating a dialogue that involves both sets of perspectives without compromising the integrity of either, and drawing the reader into a greater understanding of the value an enriched cultural awareness offers.

Unlike Watson's narrative, King's fiction has an explicitly satiric aspect. It aims to criticize the moral problems present in the way Natives have been and still are treated in encounters with Euro-American society, drawing attention to ignorance, misunderstanding, and injustice. King presents the dominant Euro-American culture (through its agents and myths) as insensitive, a social force with a long history of demeaning and destroying Native life. Dee Home observes that King uses satire as a subversive strategy (258) to attack "the cultural icons of patriarchal settler society... that settler society attempts to impose on First Nations" (259). In this context, King's satire becomes an instrument for articulating wrongs and for displaying justifiable indignation and righteous anger. As "cause-driven" satire, the narrative necessarily depicts cross-cultural encounters in terms of confrontation and conflict, and dramatizes them as forms of dilemma.



Natives and Native values frequently face this situation. For example, when Amos tries to cross the American border with his family, a confrontation occurs over the significance of eagle feathers. The border guards perceive the feathers as commodities protected by U.S. law. One border guard tells Amos: “You aware we got laws that cover certain things ... for instance, parts of animals.’ ...’Certain kinds of feathers. They’re covered, too” (257). However, Amos perceives the feathers as integral parts of his sacred dance outfits and therefore spiritual in nature. The conflict deepens when the border guards assert the supremacy of their cultural perceptions:

The older guy and the skinny kid made Amos take everything out of the truck. They unwrapped the dance outfits and laid them on the asphalt.

“Shouldn’t put the outfits down like that,” said Amos. “It isn’t right.”

“Guess we’re the ones to say what’s right and what’s not right,” said the guard. “Isn’t that right?”

“That’s sacred stuff,” said Amos.

“No,” said the guard. “What we have here are eagle feathers.”

“Sure,” said Amos. “That’s what we use.”

“Know an eagle feather when I see one.” (257)

While one may be tempted to rationalize the guard’s response as rooted in an inherent racist bias, the problem is more far-reaching. The border guard’s value system, institutionalized and validated in government and law, limits his perception to the physical aspect of the feathers and does not admit Amos’ perception of the feathers’ spiritual value. The guard’s blindness and lack of respect stem from his culturally limited interpretation of reality, which functions as a restrictive bias, closing his mind to the possibility of other interpretations of the same phenomena: “No,” said the guard. “What we have here are eagle feathers.” The guard has the power to impose his view, and he enjoys the control it gives him: “The older guard moved in close to Amos, smiling as he came. ‘I can always put you in jail, if that’s what you’d like. Is that what you’d like?’”

(257). Because prevailing institutions do not acknowledge Amos' values, he is powerless to prevent the desecration of his dance outfits.

The scene presents a travesty of justice, but it focuses on how the guard exercises justice. The satire does not in fact attack the idea of justice. Although two sets of values are in conflict here, there is in the background a shared concept, the idea of what is just, around which one might negotiate a mutual understanding. But the maintenance of satiric effect requires that both perspectives remain blind to the valid claims of the other and unprepared to examine the conflict of values between them. Significantly, the rigidity of customs regulations and the inflexibility of the guard serve the satiric purpose of the passage, which is equally fixed. Because King resolves the scene through the simple assertion of power, one side appears to emerge as victor, the other as victim. But King's satiric manipulation obscures the observation that efforts to maintain cultural separation and compound misunderstanding come from both sides.

From Amos' point of view, the border guard's inability to understand and respect the sanctity of the feathers is not simply a matter of racist bigotry or institutional injustice. Amos interprets the guard's cultural limitations and sense of superiority (that blind him to the world as Amos perceives it) as a form of mental deficiency: "So here's this asshole with eyes like an owl. He looks at the outfits like he's checking prime fur and says, 'Oh, yes, these are eagle feathers, all right'" (280). Amos' depiction of the guard as an idiot implicitly discredits and diminishes the guard's humanity, if not his power, and serves to widen the gulf between the cultures.

Amos' main weapon here is defensive sarcasm, one of the basic tools of satire. In King's text, sarcasm becomes a method frequently used to resist thoughtless cultural

ignorance and manipulation. In effect, Amos uses sarcasm to counter the institutional power the border guard asserts over him: "When [Amos] got out of jail, he was still angry. Not the flashing anger Alberta had seen the day the border guards unwrapped the family's dance outfits and spread them out on the ground, but a deeper, quieter rage that Amos buried with smiles and laughter as he recounted the story" (280). Aware that perception was the cause of the conflict, Amos mocks the guard's eyesight: "...this asshole with eyes like an owl" (280). However, Amos' humour is a manifestation of his anger and so provides little relief and no resolution. His satiric parody of the guard's response ("these are eagle feathers, all right") (280) functions as a rhetorical assault on the guard's integrity through (as Bakhtin argues) "a gross and superficial destruction of the other's language" (Bakhtin 364) in the form of ridicule.

In the hands of the disempowered, sarcasm and ridicule are subversive instruments, but they are essentially unproductive. They sharpen the conflict, ensuring that ambiguous confrontation and humiliating defeat can be the only result. In the incident with Milford's truck, for example, Amos resists racism with anger and destroys the truck when he cannot legally reclaim it for Milford. Later, in talking with Milford, Amos denies setting the truck on fire:

"Had nothing to do with it, Milford."  
 "Coyote, right?"  
 "I guess," said Amos.  
 "It won't stop them, you know," said Milford.  
 "I guess," said Amos. (311)

Amos' refusal to acknowledge responsibility does not appear to be an act of humility or even a lie to protect his reputation and his job. It is rooted in his recognition that he acted out of anger, and therefore his action was simply one of vengeful vandalism. He has

stooped to petty mischief and humiliated himself in his own eyes. Despite Milford's warning, anger consumes Amos, and he ends up drunk, with his pants around his ankles, standing in shit, cursing: "They're right behind me, Ada.... I can't stop them" (89).

Anger, conflict, and confrontation have led only to self-humiliation. Anger feeds anger to the point of consuming personal integrity, leaving Amos' sense of dignity compromised by his own actions. Aggressive satire, rooted in anger, creates much the same effect.

The narrations of Amos' humiliating confrontations with cultural insensitivity and implicit racism are not simply satiric attacks on the destructive blindness of the dominant culture, but also function to cast doubt on the tactic of confrontation as an effective means of dealing with the situation. In effect, the narrative thematizes the inherent self-destructiveness of aggressive satiric attack. In a similar manner, Alberta's exchange with the Blossom Lodge desk clerk helps demonstrate the pattern of angry confrontation leading to a sense of self-defeat. Alberta enjoys exercising her superior wit and getting the best of the clerk:

"I'd like a room for the night."

"Mr. and Mrs.?"

"No, a room for one."

The desk clerk looked over his glasses at Alberta.

"As I recall, you have a university discount," she continued.

"And does the lady work at a university?"

Alberta pulled out her university identification card and her driver's license.

The desk clerk smiled and handed her cards back to her. "You can't always tell by looking," he said.

"How true it is," said Alberta. "I could have been a corporate executive."

(174)

Like the border guard, the clerk has a nasty and probably racist streak lurking behind his officiousness. His power flows from his institutional status and not from his moral integrity. His suspicions about Alberta's claim to work at a university arise from racist

expectations about what a Native can and cannot be. His stereotyped assumptions distort his perceptions, and he needs documentation before he will change his perception: “You can’t always tell by looking.” Alberta reacts to the racist and sexist implications of the clerk’s attitude with anger, and resists his assumed superiority with sarcasm, revealing him as the fool he probably is. A few moments later, however, she regrets her actions: “By the time she got to her room, Alberta was sorry she had been so rude” (175). What, under the force of anger, seemed appropriate is now a form of petty rudeness unworthy of her sense of her own dignity. The confrontation has done nothing to resolve the source of the problem (be it racist or sexist) and has served only to alienate her from herself.

A satiric confrontation that points to much broader and more complex issues is the one involving Thought Woman and A.A. Gabriel. In part, its narrative structure imitates the earlier confrontation between Amos and the border guards, satirizing the same bureaucratic officiousness, crude use of power, and insensitivity to differing spiritual values:

Here we are, says A. A. Gabriel, and that one opens that briefcase and takes out a book.

Name?

Thought Woman, says Thought Woman.

Mary, says A. A. Gabriel. And he writes that down. Social Insurance Number? (270)

But the issues here are more complex because of the mythic nature of the characters involved. Particularly telling are Gabriel’s inability to recognize and acknowledge Thought Woman as Thought Woman and his efforts to treat her as an empty signifier that he has the power to define. He simply tries to impose a Christian identity on her in order to draw her into the context of his own understanding and thereby control her meaning. In

the process, he must ignore her actual identity to the point where he treats her as someone else entirely.

Further, the limitations of his perspective distort his perception to such an extent that he cannot communicate directly with her as Thought Woman, although she stands in his presence. He talks *to* her not *with* her. From Thought Woman's perspective, Gabriel, God's great messenger of truth, suffers from profound delusions.<sup>1</sup> He appears to be mad. At one point, Gabriel mistakes Old Coyote for the Devil:

We're going to need a picture, says A. A. Gabriel. Could you stand over there next to that snake?

Snake? says Thought Woman. I don't see a snake.

"Look, look," says Coyote. "It's Old Coyote." (271)

The satiric strategy here demonstrates that Gabriel's limited range of perception prevents him from seeing and hearing anything unless it is in Judeo-Christian terms. Moreover, that limitation is so restrictive that it amounts to a form of delusion when it confronts something it cannot define in its own terms. Because Gabriel's authority as God's mouthpiece comes from God, his apparent madness implicitly condemns the whole Judeo-Christian tradition. Thought Woman, by comparison, emerges as reasonable and sane.

But how does Thought Woman deal with Gabriel? She rejects him and "floats away" (272). In satiric terms, Gabriel is a self-destructing figure, and Thought Woman need not confront him to demonstrate his error. In thematic terms, however, Thought Woman's response (or non-response) does nothing to identify or treat the sources of conflict between the differing culture/value systems. By ignoring Gabriel (and implicitly denigrating what he stands for), she is simply doing to him what he is apparently doing to

her. The satire works to de-signify him. Her disengagement, like his inability to engage, maintains the distance between them.

Thematically, these narratives demonstrate that satiric confrontation is essentially unproductive. Generally, they conclude in some form of self-humiliation or evasion, and never fairly examine the sources of the conflict or offer an effective method of reconciliation. This type of narrative appears to privilege one perception of reality over another, while implicitly damning the other side for doing the same thing. The danger is that the satiric text will simply become a form of repetitive diatribe.

The doubts implied by the narrative about the effectiveness of satiric confrontation raise the possibility that aspects of King's text may venture beyond the perspective of aggressive satire to explore a more constructive form of approach to difference and conflict. In an interview, King stated: "it doesn't help the fiction if all you do is talk about the kinds of oppressions white culture has had on Natives. There are all sorts of other ways to do it which are much more powerful" (King, "Thomas" 112).<sup>2</sup> In the myth episodes, King's complex use of parody offers him an opportunity to moderate the satiric perspective of the text and expand the effect of the narrative. Linda Hutcheon argues that parody, as a conventional instrument of satire, often functions as "ridiculing imitation" (Hutcheon 5), but may also function as a form of "ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text" (Hutcheon 6). For Hutcheon, more complex forms of parody emerge from an "ironic playing with multiple conventions" (Hutcheon 7). King uses parody to set images and story patterns from two different cultural contexts in ironic conjunction, allowing them to work out a narrative in a manner that is unpredictable,

incongruous, and often humorous. His use of parody exploits both its conventional satiric intention and its potential for developing humorous narrative.

To appreciate the humorous effect of King's parodic narrative, it is helpful to recognize that this type of parody signals an important shift in attitude toward cross-cultural encounter. In presenting encounters satirically, King's emphasis falls on confrontation, amplifying difference and separation, as in the episodes previously examined. His use of parodic narrative minimizes conflict by mingling diverse cultural elements in a common fiction in a less confrontational manner. Laura E. Donaldson observes that "King uses the intertextual process in a more gentle and generous way: it neither subjugates nor obliterates but, rather, parodies and resists the way dominant Christian stories have too often been used" (34). In bringing culturally diverse elements together, King's parodic narrative creates the possibility of approaching confrontation as an opportunity for mutual understanding in spite of the danger of conflict. King's use of parody often engages the sensitive materials of symbol and myth (elements charged with cultural values) that are central to the worldviews of the cultures in question. But in drawing Native and Euro-American materials together, King's parody loosens established cultural perceptions, challenging the way Euro-American culture perceives Native culture and vice versa. The episode involving Native and Christian creation myths is a good example.

King sends a troop of trickster-fixers, Coyote, Old Coyote, and the four Indians, into Euro-American narratives to rewrite the drama of encounter and to present more productive approaches to cross-cultural exchanges that generally break down under misunderstanding and confrontation. What these figures share is an eye for the absurd



and the improbable, and the delight that comes from relishing incongruities. Often they are instigators, not just recipients, of the unexpected and function to extricate the imagination (and the narrative) from an exclusively satiric agenda by deflecting attention to possibilities that have not been anticipated. For example, near the beginning of King's text, the narrator starts to tell what appears to be a traditional Native creation story until Old Coyote deflects it. Old Coyote comments on the land First Woman creates:

That is beautiful, says Old Coyote, but what we really need is a garden.

Exactly, says that backward GOD....

A garden is the last thing we need, says grandmother Turtle.

No, no, no, says Old Coyote. A garden is a good thing. Trust me.

Oh, oh, says First Woman. Looks like another adventure. (39-40)

Old Coyote's meddling dissolves the boundaries between Turtle Island and Eden, giving God the opportunity to jump into the story. The hybrid story not only parodies the Eden myth, but parodies the Native myth as well; moreover, it parodies and rewrites popular accounts of the historical encounter between Natives and Euro-Americans, which in effect is the story of the creation of contemporary North America.

Old Coyote has created the opportunity for parody, but what is important is what King does with it. Will it unfold simply as confrontational satire or will the imagination also be fired by the humorous possibilities offered by mingling the two creation stories in a parody that encourages a re-assessment of the implications of both traditions?

The issue is an important one. For King, re-examining creation accounts is crucial because creation stories define cultural values. The Biblical creation story and the historical account of the discovery of North America contain the conceptual antecedents

for the way Euro-Americans define and relate to Natives. In an article, King describes how stories define a culture's world-view:

Within the oral literature of the tribes of the Americas – most clearly seen in oral creation stories – are a set of relationships which define the world Indian people saw and understood (and still see, for that matter): the relationship between humans and the deity, the relationship between humans and the animals, the relationship between humans and the land, and the relationship between good and evil. These same relationships appear within western European cosmology (Genesis) though the ways in which they are defined and understood are substantially different. (*Can. Fiction* 7)

In a storied universe, parodic narrative becomes a powerful tool because it can join differing values in a non-confrontational form, and is capable of transforming cultural perceptions.

The Eden/Turtle Island parody is particularly instructive; it foregrounds the clash of cultural perceptions and highlights those Euro-American perceptions that lead to cross-cultural conflict. Playing with the idea that, in Genesis, God imposes His idea of order on the void, King conjures a God out of Coyote's dream who manifests an exaggerated desire for order and control. This God approaches First Woman's world as a void without form (chaos) that he must order and define with "Christian rules" (69). For God, creation is a singular act ("let there be light") and the only creation allowed is his. Consequently, God reacts with anger to First Woman's creation. At one point, Coyote's God tries to take over the story: "No, no, says that GOD. That's not the way it starts at all. It starts with a void. It starts with a garden" (40). Similar to Watson's Coyote, First Woman feels the pressure of imposed Christian interpretations. However, where Watson's Coyote resists definition with moral ambiguity, First Woman simply refuses to play by Christian rules and withdraws, ending the episode and leaving the issue unresolved.

In addition, the Eden/Turtle Island episode offers a secondary parody in that it echoes the historical encounter between Natives and Euro-Americans, transforming it from a story of Euro-American dominance and Native expulsion/extinction to one of unresolved cultural conflict waiting to be addressed. The garden, like North America, is initially First Woman's, but God enters like an explorer claiming the land for his patron country: "All this stuff is mine" (68). Here, King allegorically presents the early explorers who justified stealing Native land using Biblical precedents. The scene offers an opportunity for confrontational satire but viewed as a humorous parody it also draws attention to the comic absurdity of the blustering God/explorer figure. By extension, King depicts the process by which Europeans claimed North America for God and country as an absurdly comic event as well as a moral outrage.

In both cases, there is a temptation to see these parodies exclusively as satires (on Christian values and Euro-American imperialism), that is, to see the parody as being subsumed and directed by satiric purpose. Horne, for example, argues that King's juxtaposition of "Aboriginal" and "settler" perspectives "serves to depict the struggle between the two cultures and to critique the absurdity and immorality of settler imperialist culture" (260). But viewing the episode as strictly satiric ignores the element of "adventure" (to use First Woman's term) that informs the narrative. Adventure here is imaginative adventure, exploration of the imaginative possibilities that the developing parodic narrative offers to open up perception and enhance sensitivity to combinations of elements that are not usually connected. For example, King's parody of the Tree of Knowledge engages the imagination through an unexpected juxtaposition of Native and non-Native elements. First Woman bumps into the Tree and the results are surprising:

Pardon me, says that Tree, maybe you would like something to eat.  
That would be nice, says First Woman, and all sorts of good things to eat  
fall out of that Tree. Apples fall out. Melons fall out. Bananas fall out. Hot dogs.  
Fry bread, corn, potatoes. Pizza. Extra-crispy fried chicken. (40)

King exploits the imaginative possibilities of cross-cultural parody where diverse elements come together in an incongruity that results more in humour than friction and confrontation. The parodic narrative offers an opportunity for the imagination to be drawn into the delightful incongruities that occur unexpectedly in this garden/island, which seems more like a wonderland than anyone's sacred grove. The way to appreciate this wonderland is to approach it without fixed expectations.

There is a good deal of delight in simply watching the parody unfold as an imaginative fiction without worrying about who is right and who is wrong, that is, without emphasizing a satiric perspective that imposes moral and ideological judgment. But at the same time, the parody initiates a process of re-assessment. In this episode, both main characters reveal problematic aspects of their natures for the reader to ponder. God's character provides food for thought regarding religious, socio-political, and patriarchal authoritarianism. But then First Woman's character is ineffectually passive, emotionally stubborn, and prepared to use male intransigence as a justification for simply abandoning the problem, resorting to disengagement as a form of resolution.

There is evidence that King is aware of the important role confrontational approaches play in Native literature. In "Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial," he identifies one of the major areas of Native literature as "that [which] concerns itself with the clash of Native and non-Native cultures or with the championing of Native values over non-Native values" (13). In King's opinion, this type of Native literature is polemical in that it "chronicles the imposition of non-Native expectations and insinuations... on Native

communities and the methods of resistance employed by Native people in order to maintain both their communities and cultures” (13). The aggressively satiric aspects of King’s fiction ridicule the tendency of some Euro-Americans to assert their cultural values over Native ones. But satire is a double-edged sword. Viewed exclusively as satire, King’s fiction appears to indulge in the same mistake. In ridiculing Christian figures, is King desecrating sacred ground with the same kind of irreverence with which the border guards trample Amos’ dance outfit? Are King’s parodies anger-driven forms of revenge? Much depends on how one reads these episodes.

What saves King from reverse racism is the playfulness of his parodic narrative and the balance in perspective it cultivates. The opportunities for humour in King’s use of parody allow him to moderate the satiric elements. While his parodies function to illuminate error, they are not carried out in the same spirit of anger that drove Amos to burn Milford’s truck. A delight in the parodic process itself nurtures a humour that makes implicit criticism non-threatening and non-confrontational. As the Eden/Turtle Island episode illustrates, the parodic treatment is playful, humourous, and fun. It engages our imagination and puts us in touch with aspects of a Native world beyond our limited knowledge, while still questioning some of our tightly-held assumptions. In King’s view, “the appearance of Native stories in a written form has opened up new worlds of imagination for a non-Native audience” (*Relations* xi). These worlds become accessible when we abandon fixed assumptions and employ the same curiosity and playfulness that informs the imagination of King’s parodic narratives.

The character of Coyote functions in part as a model for the kind of attitude that is most responsive to the possibilities that King’s parody offers. In general, Coyote’s role is

not defined by involvement in the action but by Coyote's constant presence as a curious observer of the unfolding stories. In the opening pages, however, Coyote does play a more active role (1-3). The scene is set before the creation of the world and develops as an ironic presentation of the creation of the Biblical God-the-Creator. Typically, Coyote's connection to the action is accidental and unintentional; one of Coyote's dreams has given rise to this God figure: "When that Coyote dreams, anything can happen" (1). Awakened by the fuss, Coyote makes no effort to control this new "creation." Coyote has no agenda and no expectations. It is the God figure who, under the pressure of some concept of appropriate order, wishes to begin bending reality to his will: "Hooray, says that silly Dream, Coyote dream. I'm in charge of the world" (1). While King directs the focus of the satire toward the God figure, introducing us to the satiric intentions of the novel, the introduction of Coyote is important as well. Coyote has a distinctly different cast of mind. Curiosity, not expectation and a need for order, drives Coyote. Not surprisingly, Coyote at best plays a peripheral role in the satiric agenda of the ensuing narrative. The satiric perspective works to bend the fiction to its will and purpose, and that kind of approach to experience is alien to Coyote's character from the beginning.

Coyote's form of curiosity appears to be linked to King's views on imagination.

Talking about his own writing, King says:

there are a lot of writers who like to touch your mind as a reader – you get into them and you think, "Oh my God, boy that's just wonderful to think about that; the logic is just overwhelming, blah blah blah." But for me, that part of the mind is not what I am really interested in particularly. I am interested in that part of your mind that we call the imagination and in that regard the worst thing that you can do as a storyteller ... is to give the reader too much, to the point where your imagination does not get engaged. My great gripe with television is that it leaves nothing to the imagination... you just know what's going to happen in the end.... It dulls my anticipation and it dulls my appreciation of the piece.... whenever I write I try to get that imagination engaged. I'm not big on plot, particularly, and

I'm not big on time, and what I really am looking at is simply stimulating the imagination and letting the reader sort of take over. (King, "Parable" 50-51)

In his parodic narratives, King plays with diverse materials, Native and non-Native, in unpredictable ways to stimulate curiosity as a form of imaginative response. The result is a response that is much like Coyote's approach to experience. It places its emphasis on exploring experience rather than on seeking to discover or impose forms of order and logic.

The episode where Changing Woman falls out of the sky simultaneously demonstrates King's imaginative technique and Coyote's ability to respond to it:

"If she leans out any farther," says Coyote, "she's going to fall."

"Of course she's going to fall," I tell Coyote. "Sit down. Watch that sky. Watch that water. Pretty soon you can watch her fall."

"Does Changing Woman get hurt?"

"Nope," I tell Coyote. "She lands on something soft."

"Water is soft. Does she land in water like First Woman?"

"No," I tell Coyote. "She lands on a canoe."

"A canoe!" says Coyote. "Where did a canoe come from?"

"Use your imagination," I says.

"Was it a green Royalite Old Town single," says Coyote, "with oak gunnels and woven cane seats?"

"No," I says, "it wasn't one of those."

"Was it a red wood-and-canvas Beaver touring canoe with cedar ribs and built-in portage racks?"

"Not one of those either," I says. "This canoe was big canoe. And it was white. And it was full of animals."

"Wow!" says Coyote. (105)

The narrative goes on to link the mythic canoe with Noah's Ark. In developing the episode, King introduces unexpected shifts (Changing Woman falls into a canoe) and surprising incongruities (modern and mythic canoes, and Noah's Ark). Coyote both assists and responds to the process, concluding with a resounding "Wow!" The reader might well echo Coyote's reaction. In appreciating this kind of imagination, one can be caught up in the humorous incongruities that flow from placing previously unrelated

materials beside one another to see what will come of it. The narrative does not intend to violate the integrity or dignity of anything, but is driven by a form of imaginative playfulness.

In King's novel, as in Native tradition, the master of playfulness is Coyote. In describing King's Coyote, Thomas Matchie and Brett Larson observe: "the trickster operates within the context of play – a light, trusting and open attitude toward ourselves and the world..." (156). Coyote's perspective is an invitation to imaginative worlds where contradictions evoke curiosity, not confrontation. Such an approach to experience resembles the flexible and accepting attitude of childhood play before rules and clear identities demand conformity. Children have no problems forming stories in play that incorporate aspects of wildly different worlds. Children are bricoleurs with their toys, bringing G. I. Joe, He-Man, Star Wars, Lego, Cowboys and Indians, and Fisher Price toys together in one imaginative world. Anything is possible in play.<sup>3</sup>

Significantly, King's text explicitly suggests important parallels between Coyote and children in its portrayal of Latisha's daughter, Elizabeth. Just as Coyote is unconfined, Elizabeth is always denying limitations with the phrase, "Yes, I can." She refuses to remain confined in her crib and learns to escape, despite injury (244). For King, this kind of persistence is a trickster trait:

Like traditional trickster figures, contemporary Native characters are frequently tricked, beaten up, robbed, deserted, wounded, and ridiculed, but, unlike the historical and contemporary Native characters in white fiction, these characters survive and persevere, and in many cases, prosper. (*Can. Fiction* 8)

Elizabeth is a figure of cultural persistence and breaks all the rules and limitations imposed upon her. She even plays with her mother's assumptions about her identity.



Latisha assumes Elizabeth wants to go to school, but Elizabeth reminds Latisha that things are not as predictable as Latisha thinks:

“Come on, honey,” Latisha said. “Time for school.”

“No way,” said Elizabeth.

“You like school,” said Latisha, forcing her daughter’s arms into the jacket. “You want to see Ms. Alice and Sarah and Daniel and Agnes, don’t you?”

“No way.”

Latisha zipped Elizabeth’s jacket and pulled up the hood. “Are you fooling me? Are you just looking to make trouble?”

Under the hood tied tightly under her chin, Elizabeth was smiling. “Yes, I can,” she said. (250)

Like Coyote, Elizabeth acts in the spirit of possibility; nothing is out of the question. That spirit manifests itself as play.

At the same time, Elizabeth’s play (similar to Coyote’s) often disrupts the order people try to impose on reality. Elizabeth makes messes: “Elizabeth was running the spoon through her hair. One hand was leaning on the edge of the bowl. Latisha watched as the milk and the cereal dribbled over the side, like water over a dam” (246). Coyote too makes messes and disrupts patterns of logic and accepted ways of doing things as an act of play. For example, instead of fighting non-Native cultural impositions, Coyote plays with racist stereotypes. In the scene where Old Woman meets Nasty Bumppo, Coyote has fun with Bumppo’s ideas about Indians. Like the border guards, A. A. Gabriel, and the desk clerk Alberta encounters, Nasty Bumppo has stereotyped expectations, which distort his perceptions. He appears delusional when he mistakes Old Woman for Chingachgook: “I can tell an Indian when I see one. Chingachgook is an Indian. You’re an Indian. Case closed” (392). Coyote plays with Bumppo’s logic and his definitions, showing the absurdity of James Fenimore Cooper’s cultural generalizations.

According to Bumppo, "Indians have Indian gifts.... And Whites have white gifts" (392).

Coyote uses a playful approach to undermine Bumppo's racism:

Indians have a keen sense of smell, says Nasty Bumppo. That's an Indian gift.

"I have a keen sense of smell," says Coyote. "I must be an Indian."

"You're a Coyote," I says.

"No, no," says Coyote. "I have an Indian gift."

Whites are compassionate, says Nasty Bumppo. That's a white gift.

"Wait a minute," says Coyote. "I'm compassionate, too. I must be a White."

"You're still a Coyote," I says.

"Boy," says Coyote, "this is confusing." (392-393)

Coyote's playful approach to Bumppo's racism and Eurocentrism is non-confrontational.

Coyote does not self-righteously indict Bumppo on charges of racism and stupidity;

rather, Coyote plays with Bumppo's ideas and deflates them indirectly. In trying to fit

into these racial categories, Coyote suggests that they are useless for describing reality.

This parody of Bumppo's racial signifying system is not a superficial attack on

Bumppo's language; rather, it describes it in such a way that it undermines itself by its

own logic. Coyote disarms racism through play rather than confrontation.

The most important examples of the constructive effects of Coyote's disruptive playfulness occur when King directs Coyote's play at aspects of the story of western expansion. The effect is much the same as when King's Tricksters invade the western movie on Dr. Hovaugh's television screen (222). The unexpected action opens up the movie (and the history it misrepresents) to revision. In Coyote's case, the most important disruptive act comes in the climactic episode of the novel, involving the destruction of the Grande Baleine dam. Coyote does not deliberately set out to break the dam as an act of protest or revenge. Coyote's dancing and singing set off an earthquake that in turn

breaks the dam without Coyote being aware that these actions (play) would cause such a result. Like Old Coyote at the beginning of the Eden/Turtle Island episode, Coyote's actions here are important, not because they are part of a plan, but because they create an opportunity for the author to develop the story more imaginatively.

Again, how King exploits this opportunity is important. Certainly, there is a satiric criticism of insensitive white imperialism and unresolved cultural conflict, ending in disaster. For King, western expansion still influences the way some non-Natives perceive Native culture. From Sifton's point of view, there is no room in the story of progress for Native culture. Sifton has a static set of expectations that limit what he perceives to be "authentic" Native culture. In fact, Sifton has a hard time believing that Native culture exists at all. In a debate with Eli over treaty rights, Sifton remarks:

"Besides, you guys aren't real Indians anyway. I mean, you drive cars, watch television, go to hockey games. Look at you. You're a university professor."

"That's my profession. Being Indian isn't a profession."

"And you speak as good English as me."

"Better," said Eli. "And I speak Blackfoot too. My sisters speak Blackfoot. So do my niece and nephew."

"That's what I mean. Latisha runs a restaurant and Lionel sells televisions. Not exactly traditionalists, are they?"

"It's not exactly the nineteenth century, either." (141)

The myth of western expansion conditions Sifton's ideas about Native culture. His cultural arrogance blinds him to the possibilities of Native cultural definition. For Sifton, Native values are relics that should not interfere with the direction of western progress. George Morningstar approaches Native culture in a similar way when he tries to sneak pictures of the Sun Dance. George does not respect the ceremony as a part of an ongoing cultural definition that links the present with the past. He too sees Indians as doomed. When Eli and Lionel take his film, George reacts with anger:

“You can’t believe in this shit!” George shouted after Eli. “This is ice age crap!”...

“Come on! It’s the twentieth century. Nobody cares about your little powwow. A bunch of old people and drunks sitting around in tents in the middle of nowhere. Nobody cares about any of this.” (386)

As in the story of western expansion, George’s and Clifford Sifton’s versions of the twentieth century see Natives as caught between the past and western progress.

From Eli’s point of view, the dam is the product of a mental attitude that blindly imposes its values and perceptions on top of others. For Eli, “It’s the idea of a dam that’s dangerous” (260). The problem with Sifton’s dam is that Duplessis built it without considering its impact on life around it. Charlie, Duplessis’ token Native lawyer, recounts the dam’s story: “The irony... was that once Duplessis started construction on the dam, nothing stopped it. Environmental concerns were cast aside. Questions about possible fault lines that ran under the dam were dismissed. Native land claims that had been in the courts for over fifty years were shelved” (118). Just as Euro-American stereotyped perceptions ignore Native subjectivity, the dam builders dismiss the possibility that they might not be able to control reality. They also ignore the dam’s potentially damaging affects on Native spirituality. By inhibiting the river’s yearly flooding, the dam denies nutrients to the cottonwoods that live near the river. In talking with Eli, Harley highlights the problem that the death of the cottonwoods would cause: “if the cottonwoods die, where are we going to get the Sun Dance tree? You see what I mean?” (376). King never explicitly states the importance of the Sun Dance tree. However, in a study of Native American religions, Ake Hulkrantz points out that the central pole in the Sun Dance ceremony functions as a cosmic pillar (*axis mundi*), connecting this world and the myth world (25). Through the pole, the myth world rejuvenates this world. The pole is also a

link between past and present, between modern life and traditional life, and gives the Blackfoot culture continuity amid change. The dam threatens to desecrate sacred ground in the name of progress. Sifton ignores the complexity of the situation: "Sifton sat on the railing and squinted at the sun. 'That's the beauty of dams. They don't have personalities, and they don't have politics. They store water, and they create electricity. That's it'" (111). There appears to be no resolution to the impasse.

As a satiric confrontation, the most effective way to end the episode is with a disaster that becomes a moralistic warning. But the episode might also be viewed as a parody of Euro-American apocalyptic vision. The dam is a symbol of order and control, a sign of progress. Its destruction casts doubt on the idea of a fundamental order. In Euro-American eyes, the break-down of order is "the end of the world." Coyote's meddling amounts to a test of the validity of that basic assumption. Coyote's dancing and singing unleash an earthquake that destroys the dam and calls into question the assumptions of those who built it. In King's view, one of the most important functions of the trickster in contemporary Native literature is to demonstrate the dangers of imposing inflexible ideas of order on reality and to suggest an alternative model for approaching the world: "The trickster is an important figure for Native writers for it allows us to create a particular kind of world in which the Judeo-Christian concern with good and evil and order and disorder is replaced with the more Native concern for balance and harmony" (*Relations* xiii). Intentionally or unintentionally, Coyote is prepared to play with even the most revered assumptions and, in doing so, creates opportunity for people to re-assess those assumptions from a more open point of view.

In the case of the Baleine dam, the parodic treatment of the issue undermines the concept that circumstances are fixed, and consequences are predictable and inevitable. It opens up awareness to the possibilities that new beginnings offer, influenced positively (one hopes) by previous experience: "It looks like we got to do this all over again" (429). The dam is broken (Euro-American values humbled), Eli is dead (a sacrifice to principle or stubbornness), but Coyote rides the flood and emerges, shaking off the mud and looking to the next adventure. In terms of satiric allegory, nobody wins much of anything. But as a parody of apocalypse, the episode demonstrates that the claims of doom are exaggerated and that human choices need not be restricted by these fears. It throws the emphasis on new adventure, and the opportunity to look for ways around unresolved confrontation.

What Coyote teaches by flooding our fixed ideas about the world with doubt and unsettling ambiguities is that the world is messy and we must continually revise our ideas and stories to accommodate the flux of life. Carlton Smith notes that this idea is common in contemporary trickster stories: "trickster narratives undermine stable meanings and hold up such positivistic groundings as suspect, untrustworthy, and comically foolish" (519). In breaking the dam, Coyote demonstrates that the story of western expansion needs to be opened to revision to allow for the cultural complexities and contradictions of North America. Histories and other world-defining stories cannot be singular or else they are oppressive. King's native Robinson Crusoe reminds us, "you can't tell [the story] all by yourself" (14). One must be tolerant of multiple perceptions of the world and be aware of all one's relations, from other cultures to the natural world. If we approach the world like the dam builders, Coyote's laugh will eventually defeat us, for as Eli observes of

Sifton's dam: "You can't hold water back forever" (143). It is laughing with Coyote that will restore balance to the North American life-world.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines delusion as “a fixed false opinion or belief with regard to objective things.” Cultural blindness here changes the perception of apparently “objective things.”

<sup>2</sup> King continues the point, talking about Native poets:

I listen to poets. I think, in some ways, poets are the worst offenders! Native poets, especially those who really get involved politically, where the poem itself is simply a recitation about the kinds of oppression. It's not that the oppression does not take place, it's not that it is not true. The point is that, if you are going to enshrine it in the poem, do it in such a way that it has an impact. It has very little impact if you just throw it out there and say: “I am an Indian, I don't like the way you treat me, you brutalize me, etc., etc., etc.” After a while it has no impact at all. People just turn their ears off. For me that's not a poem, that's not creative writing, that is simply preaching. I think you have to get beyond that and figure out clever ways to say that. (King, “Thomas” 112)

<sup>3</sup> In Eli's description of his childhood memories of the Sun Dance, King shows how play can also have a spiritual affect. In one of the Sun Dance ceremonies, play enacts a spiritual death and rebirth:

Each afternoon, toward evening, the men would dance, and just before the sun set, one of the dancers would pick up a rifle and lead the other men to the edge of camp, where the children waited. Eli and the rest of the children would stand in a pack and wave pieces of scrap paper at the dancers as the men attacked and fell back, surged forward and retreated, until finally, after several of these mock forays, the lead dancer would breach the fortress of children and fire the rifle, and all the children would fall down in a heap, laughing, full of fear and pleasure, the pieces of paper scattering across the land. (137)

Through play, confrontation can become spiritually constructive. Eli's mock death symbolically reestablishes him with the rebirth of the land and Blackfoot culture that the Sun Dance enacts. Taken as play, King's parodies contain a similar potential for imaginative rebirth. The parodies scatter cultural narratives and values to the wind, turning cultural confrontation into a cultural hybridization where texts mutually illuminate one another.



## **Conclusion**

**In *The Double Hook* and *Green Grass, Running Water*, the figure of Coyote draws the reader's attention to the complexities of cross-cultural encounters. Coyote emerges as a distinctive literary character with Native roots but capable of crossing the cultural boundaries between Native and Euro-American writers. In doing so, the character of Coyote functions at a cultural intersection where relations between the two traditions are negotiated at the level of myth and story.**

**The origins of Coyote's character lie in the oral traditions of the Natives of western North America where the figure plays a complex role. Both authors draw on the oral Coyote's characteristics to develop their literary Coyotes. For Watson, the aspect of Coyote's traditional character most important to her narrative is Coyote's moral ambiguity. Native oral traditions depict Coyote's actions as amoral in that they appear motivated more by impulse and appetite than by moral intention. Watson exploits Coyote's ambiguities in order to create a more complex presentation of cross-cultural encounter and to resist interpretations that absorb Coyote's character and role into Christian moral categories. King's depiction of Coyote embodies a greater number of the traditional Coyote's attributes, and presents a character with more dimensions of personality. Particularly important to King are the oral Coyote's attributes of spontaneity and unpredictability. King's Coyote is a free spirit who approaches experience openly, in an exploratory manner, responding to discovery with child-like surprise and delight. Coyote is not governed by expectations of logical order or a need to impose organized patterns on experience in order to make it meaningful. Equally important is Coyote's**

traditional energetic restlessness and uncontrollable impulsiveness, which King's Coyote manifests in a strong element of curiosity and an inability to resist meddling in things to see what might happen. Finally, the natural mischievousness of the traditional Trickster figure emerges in King as a form of humorous playfulness which delights in disrupting expectations and often functions as a testing of established order. Both authors incorporate the character of Coyote into their fictions so that the traditional Coyote is still readily recognizable while, at the same time, their particular depictions of Coyote's character serve the purposes of their narratives.

Watson's critics have generally viewed her use of Coyote as an integral part of a Christian moral narrative. Watson herself was much more sensitive to the problem of distorting the meaning of Native traditions when drawing a character like Coyote into a cross-cultural context: "I was concerned ... with the problem of an indigenous population which had lost or was losing its own mythic structure, which had its images destroyed, its myths interpreted by various missionary societies and later by anthropologists" (Watson, "Shelia" 159). What confuses the issue is that Watson presents Coyote's language in terms of Biblical speech, consistent with the way contemporary anthropologists translated Native myth. Coyote's language makes it appear that the narrative has absorbed the figure into a Judeo-Christian allegory. But Coyote's role in the story is never simply good or evil; Christian moral dualism does not explain Coyote's function. Watson's depiction of this character is consistently tentative, even evasive, and through allusion, she maintains a link to Coyote's Native amoral origins. Coyote emerges as a paradoxical figure, a kind of parody that simultaneously presents two differing value-systems without compromising the integrity of either. This kind of parody allows Watson to defend

Coyote from being absorbed into a reductive allegory as a pseudo-Christian symbol by placing Coyote in a more complex relationship beside (rather than under) Biblical mythology. What emerges is a form of dialogue that permits an exploration of similarities and differences, allowing the reader to recognize the possibilities cross-cultural encounters offer for expanding the range of perception.

Viewing the role of Coyote in more complex terms has an important effect on the way the reader approaches the novel. It is difficult to read the story simply as a heroic quest narrative leading to a process of redemption. Such readings depend upon three moral judgments: that James is the hero, that Mrs. Potter is a repressive force, and that Coyote is a manifestation of destructive forces (even if later seen as benevolent). But recognizing the ambiguity in Coyote's character and role calls these assumptions into question. If Coyote does not clearly represent an intentionally destructive force with an evil moral intent, then James' status as hero is cast in doubt, and the morality of his actions is decidedly unclear. Even James' own response to his actions is muddled; he appears never to understand fully their moral implications. Following his "heroic" journey, he emerges as a confused, passive figure. In the end, there is no comfortable resolution and Coyote gets the last laugh. Through the complexities and ambiguities of Coyote's character, Watson is able to challenge our impulse to impose simplistic patterns of interpretation on the narrative.

Like Watson's, King's fiction works to resist the imposition of dominant Euro-American cultural values on Native life. But King's basic approach to the problem differs distinctly. King's fiction has an explicitly satiric perspective designed to criticize the way Natives are generally treated in their encounters with Euro-American society, focussing

attention on insensitivity, misunderstanding, and injustice in cross-cultural relations. King's aggressive satire is an effective strategy for articulating wrongs and displaying justifiable moral indignation, but it necessitates depicting cross-cultural encounters in terms of confrontation and conflict.

In the hands of the disempowered, aggressive satire works as an instrument of subversion, but (in King's view) it is essentially unproductive. King presents several episodes where his Native characters use subversive satire (usually in the form of sarcasm) to strike back at ignorance and injustice. However, those narratives conclude in forms of self-humiliation or evasion. Under the influence of anger and frustration, the characters act in a way that compromises their sense of their own dignity. Through these satiric episodes, the novel thematizes King's dissatisfaction with an exclusively satiric approach. For King, confrontational satire does not adequately examine the sources of the conflict or offer constructive approaches to reconciliation. It privileges the values of one side over the other, while damning the other side for doing the same thing, and can result in a form of repetitive diatribe. In King's view, "There are all sorts of other ways to [talk about oppression] which are much more powerful" (King, "Thomas" 112).

The way King broadens the effect of his narrative is through a complex use of parody. In King, parody is not simply ridiculing imitation. His parody works to expand the effects of the narrative by playing with the ironic incongruities offered by the conjunction of Native and Euro-American traditions. In his use of parody, King sets images and story patterns from these two cultural contexts in ironic juxtaposition to develop a narrative that is unpredictable, incongruous, and often humorous, without compromising the criticism implicit in his satire. The potential for humour in King's

parody deflects attention away from confrontation and conflict. His complex use of parody moderates the satire, diversifying the effects of the narrative and offering him an opportunity for more imaginative engagement in the materials forming the narrative.

In the figure of Coyote, King presents a complex character whose approach to experience reflects the kind of imaginative process that informs King's use of parody. Unlike Watson, King does not focus his parody around the role of Coyote. In King, Coyote plays a role that is mostly peripheral to the action, but Coyote's constant presence throughout the novel is influential. King exploits the complexities of Coyote's character: its playful spontaneity and unpredictability, its non-critical and non-confrontational curiosity, and its delight in incongruity and in disrupting patterns of expectation. Through Coyote's character, King offers a model to guide the reader in appreciating the patterns of imagination and the type of humour found in the parodic narratives. Coyote's approach helps the reader engage with the underlying issues of the text without feeling the need to define the lines of confrontation and assess blame. Coyote's presence in the narrative allows King to moderate the satiric aspect of the novel and engage the reader's imagination in a broader vision of cross-cultural encounter.

The climactic episode of the novel demonstrates the satiric and parodic dimensions of King's narrative. The action is set in motion when Coyote's dancing and singing precipitates the earthquake that breaks the dam. From a strictly satiric perspective, the story develops a confrontation between Native values (represented by Eli) and the forces of progress as defined by Euro-American culture (represented by the dam and its builders) that ends disastrously (the dam is broken and Eli killed). Not much appears to have been gained. But when also viewed as a parody of the kind of apocalyptic

vision that acts as a backdrop to Euro-American perceptions of progress and civilization, the narrative functions to bring Native and non-Native materials together in order to play ironically with a perceived nightmare (the end of the world). It demonstrates that the claims of doom are exaggerated. Things are not inevitable; they can be changed. Through the use of parody, King shifts the emphasis of the episode onto the opportunities offered by new beginnings and the chance to re-assess the validity of fixed assumptions. In the end, Coyote emerges from the floodwaters, shakes off the mud, and is ready to go forward.

In both novels, the authors strive to draw their readers into more sensitive and complex understandings of the inherent integrity of the differing sets of values that define the cultural encounter depicted in their fictions. The purpose is to effect a re-assessment of erroneous assumptions about the relative worth of differing traditions. In addition, both novels demonstrate the value of non-confrontational forms of cross-cultural encounter. In spite of (or perhaps, because of) the contradictions, paradoxes, and ambiguities that result from such meetings, perceptions of reality can be changed, and the imagination engaged more fully in the process of exploring human experience in a shared world.

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