

Story-telling Technique in the Novels of Thomas King

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“Stories, you see, are not just entertainment.
Stories are power.”

-Lenore Keeshig Tobias

Thomas King was influenced by Native writers who were inspired by Oral literature, ranging from D'Arcy McNichol, Navarre Scott Momaday, Leslie Silko and Gerald Vizenor to Basil Johnston, Beatrice Culleton, Rubby Supperjack and Louise Erdrich. King hailed their ability to look beyond the things and make them easy to see (poverty, unemployment, alcoholism). King was quick to stress an attachment to oral literature or orature-not just to its narrative material as structural cornerstones, but also to its music, its rhythm.

Jace Weaver, in a *Publisher's Weekly* interview with King, first noted the story-telling technique in his famous novels like *Medicine River* (1991), *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993) and *Truth and Bright Water* (1999). As an outgrowth of the Native practice of story-telling, the novel is part of the growing body of aboriginal literature. As novelist Louise Erdrich describes, the experiences of King's characters are set in Canadian Contemporary times, so that we may learn more of Native people; yet the stories are timeless in their vision of a world all may appreciate.

The novels of Thomas King are means of revealing as well as celebrating the indigenous historical and cultural identity with dignity. There is a preoccupation with the theme of resistance and reclamation in his works. He uses the literary space to give expression to the various historical, socio-cultural experiences and memories of the indigenous people. King prefers to write in the fictional form of reclaiming his rich oral tradition and reviving the socio-cultural aspects of his own communities.

King's three novels present a clear and close assessment of the lives of the Natives in the reserve. In *Medicine River*, the protagonist Will's involvement in the lives of the people in the reserve and the bond he establishes with them act as a medicine which heals and soothes the loneliness and emptiness in him. Similarly, the characters in *Green Grass, Running Water* shed light on a Native world-view which resists white western patriarchal assumptions about culture and tradition and suggest entirely different roles for women and a new paradigm for human relationships. Tecumseh, the adolescent protagonist of *Truth and Bright Water* involves himself with various truths of life behind human relationships, their poor economic conditions and the loss of Native values and traditions. Monroe Swimmer, the trickster artist tries to revive their culture and restore the ecological balance again.

In *Medicine River*, Harlen's relentless gossiping and storytelling have the goal of taking care of members of the community. Like the spider, he repairs the web of community wherever it is damaged (31). Because of his constant awareness that “people are fragile” (31), he takes great care with how he talks to people and he approaches the truth with care and consideration. He establishes with his listeners, including Will, the kind of interaction that the orally-influenced narrative establishes with the reader. Kimberly M. Blaeser argues that the aesthetic goal of aboriginal oral-based texts is to “encourage a response-able way of reading an imaginative, interactive, participatory creation of story” (65).

This story-telling technique prioritizes the narrator-listener relationship, conferring more significance upon the narrator's present intention in conjunction with both the narrative and the audience, rather than on the mere imparting of a fixed, descriptive meaning or perspective, such as written and visual/graphic discourses offer. Percy Walton has noted that Will is constructing stories that will afford him the view of himself and his father that he prefers (82). Louis Owens (*Other Destinies*) says that Will is convinced that the stories told by his mother that feature “Some one” and other named male subjects actually involve his father: “Each time my

mother told her stories, they got larger and better. Sometimes it was Howard, sometimes it was Martin and sometimes it was Eldon. But she never used my father's name" (128). "Will requires a past to forge his own identity through story telling", Walton asserts (82). Whatever be the preferences of his audience, Lionel James has kept the tradition of storytelling alive. The fact that Lionel James and many others like him still tell stories proves how this 'First Nations' art form has resisted and survived cultural imperialism. King's story telling is an assertion of his identity. Story telling is an art form which sets the Natives apart from the rest. Lionel James himself claims that in his travels he "didn't see any white story teller" (174). The best part about Lionel James' story telling is that he not only tells traditional stories about old woman, Raven and Coyote but he also recalls some amusing incidents about Will's childhood days.

For King the idea of community and family is not an idea that is often pursued by non-Native writers who prefer to imagine their Indians as solitary figures poised on the brink of extinction. Will's mother, Rose narrates her memories of Bob, the husband who left her. However, she does not malign him either. And through anecdotes from the time Bob was still with the family.

King's *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993) has been understood in terms of the meeting of oral and literate cultures and the ways in which literacy was employed as a tool by imperial powers in the destruction or subjugation of indigenous peoples and cultures. Terry Goldie suggests that the novel "Combines elements of the Aboriginal oral tradition with the settler novel genre to re-present it as a creative hybrid text" (83). Marlene Goldman concurs and aptly locates the division between writing white and oral indigene on the level of a different episteme. Clifford Sifton insists that King's novel diagnoses the parodic rewriting of Biblical narratives in the ongoing dialogue between the narrator and coyote. Glenn Willmott has argued that *Green Grass, Running Water* is based on the characters from Native myths and Christianity, giving a magical quality to it. As a result of the use of supernatural characters such as the coyote, four old Indian women and men there are numerous voices in the novel with their manifold stories. The actions of the magical characters affect the lives of the people living in the real world. Alberta gets pregnant because the coyote magically wills it to be so. The coyote's dance causes the earthquake and the dam to break.

"Everybody makes mistakes", said the Lone Ranger. "Best not to make them with stories"(11). This quotation occurs early in the novel as the four Indian elders struggle to decide how to begin telling a story. The lone Ranger tries, beginning with the opening lines of the Judeo-Christian Bible, but the others stop him and explain the importance of beginning in the right way. Lone Ranger's false start symbolically reveals the way in which the history and traditions of Aboriginal peoples have been eclipsed by European traditions. Even the Lone Ranger, an Indian, is more familiar with a European, Christian tradition. Ishmael's response to the Lone Ranger's protest that everyone makes mistakes reveals the theme of the importance of narrative in shaping history and widespread perceptions. It is important not to make mistakes which can give rise to prejudices and mistaken views, such as the idea that Aboriginal people lacked a rich history of cultural traditions prior to European contact and exposure to Christianity. The quotation is also an echo of the conversation which Norma and Lionel are shown to be having in the scene where they discuss choosing a colour for carpets and Norma explains that if one makes a mistake when choosing a carpet, one has to live with the consequences for a long time. The echo implicitly suggests that the mistakes in historical narratives can also inflict long-standing and enduring damage: "That GOD fellow doesn't eat anything. He stands in the garden with his hands on his lips, so everybody can see he is angry. Anybody who eats my stuff is going to be very sorry, says that GOD. There are rules, you know" (73).

The above lines are from the first creation story and reveals how the novel satirizes the traditional Judeo-Christian story of creation. In the Book of Genesis, the old Testament God punishes Adam and Eve for eating an apple after they were forbidden to do so. Here, the God figure also tries to control what first woman and Ahdamn are eating, but this is presented as petty and silly. There is an abundance of food in the garden, and no reason for him to make them stop eating. His insistence on rule suggests that he cares more about power and obedience than anything else. The preceding quotation is therefore critical of how organized religions can impose arbitrary rules.

The extract is also significant because it shows a western figure trying to lay claim to land and resources that are not his own. God is originally outside of the garden, and has no reason to believe that the food within it belongs to him. He, however, thinks he has the right to control. This behaviour reflects how European settlers entered North America and laid claim to it, believing they could make rules and insist on having Aboriginal peoples follow them.

King's rendition of the encounter between 'Oral' and 'Literate' cultures is far more complex than the binary opposition between reading and telling in the narrator's retort to coyote might suggest. Dee Horne argues that this novel combines elements of the Aboriginal oral tradition with the settler novel genre to represent it as a creative hybrid text (71).

King writes with an awareness of the ways both Natives and non-Natives speak and tell stories and thus makes steps towards overcoming the kind of alienation. In the present novel, the chapters begin with Cherokee syllabics and rely on narrative structures derived from oral literature. The novel essentially records cycles of interconnecting stories, told and retold in the same way a Native story-teller might tell them. In an interview with Jace Weaver in *Publisher's Weekly*, King speaks enthusiastically about his own experiences of listening to Native story tellers. "They're going down the line at 150 miles an hour and make a right turn! You're following close behind them and you just run off the road" (56). In another interview with Jeffery Conton, King adds: "Oral stories taught me a little about repetition and the kind of cadences that you can create in a written piece of work that you normally think of as associated with poetry" (4). Yet at the same time, King notes that he also relies on non-Native narrative strategies to give structure to his writing.

The communities in *Green Grass, Running Water* are cycles of stories which are retold and revised in every generation in the form of myths, remembering the past, old photographs and through which the future can be reimagined and transformed. King's refusal of narrative closure and problematization of beginnings signal this process and he describes it through his themes of family memories, procreation, sunrise and flooding. In this novel, the four old Indians take elaborate pains to begin the story "Okay; said" the Lone Ranger 'is everybody ready'? 'Hawkeye doesn't have a nice shirt, said Ishmael' (12). Later, the Indians are still trying to get the story going. "But you have to get it right, said Hawkeye, 'And' Robinson Crusoe, 'You can't tell it all by yourself' (14). Through the employment of native story telling techniques and the reoccurring water motif, this novel can be viewed as a way of reclaiming native culture. In addition, King uses humour to undermine Christian biblical narratives, including its archetypal figures. The structure of King's narrative can be seen as the Sundance in the narrative form. The novel has various voices and speakers tell stories. We are given their thoughts which create intimacy and a polyphonic atmosphere that mimics oral discussion. The circular narrative model is different from the western literary tradition that tends to be linear or teleological; narrative sequences progress in a linear manner to an ending. King enacts the importance of the circle in native ritual in textual terms in order to emphasise and reclaims this cultural tradition that sees the circle as an inseparable component to native culture and spirituality.

King's novels subvert the notion that the written word is discrete from its oral genesis. Critics concern themselves almost exclusively with the author's allusions to Native oral tradition. King's numerous references to Greek mythology tend to be treated as peripheral or supplementary to the projects attributed to his Native references. But given their complex historical relationship to oral communication, King's allusions to Greek culture are central to *Truth and Brightwater's* engagement with tensions between speaking and writing. Their mythological connection to family conflicts of epic proportions also makes them essential to understanding a related aspect of the text, i.e. Oral story telling technique. Jennifer Andrews opines that King's preservation of oral culture lies in a rejection of binary thinking that insists on the discreteness of categories like "Oral" and "Written" (161-185).

For years the Natives have been taught and made to feel ashamed of themselves and their culture. This has divested them of their self-respect and self-worth. In *Truth and Brightwater*, Monroe Swimmer, the acclaimed Native artist returns home with a purpose to save the world. The artist-cum-trickster places buffaloes made of flat iron wire all over the prairies as if the disappeared buffaloes have returned home.

According to Lum if a Native desires to be popular then the person must either change the colour of the skin or the hair. Most of the Natives have learnt to associate white skin with goodness, cleanliness and prosperity and brown skin with violence, dirt and poverty. As a result, Natives are ashamed of their identity and hide it like Lucy Rabbit. They cannot construct a popular identity by being a Native. Unemployment is a major problem for the Natives of *Truth and Bright Water*. As a result, they are left with no other choice but to sell and commercialize their culture. A feeling of worthlessness and uselessness steers them towards drugs, alcohol, violence, illegal jobs and finally to prison.

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