

Native American Folktales



Trickster Animal Guides

- represents a complex psychological behavior
- acts as an anti-hero, vigilante, or clown
- he mainly represents everyone/anyone, an aspect of self identity, glorification of one's heritage
- not malicious, but self-serving, acting as a spoiled child
- oftentimes shown as a proud, vain figure, filled with self-importance
- will help out humans, for a price
- he often is shown as a shape-shifter
- he will allow himself to be shown as human — in order to gain notoriety
- sometimes in the story-cycle the trickster dies and later is reborn in another form.



*Illustration by F. N. Wilson, used in:
Curtis, Edward S. Indian Days of the Long Ago. Yonkers-on-Hudson: World Book Co., 1915.*

Trickster Animal Guides

- Most often depicted as a male but is willing to bend gender in order to achieve his goals. In some cases he has same-sex relations.
- as spirit-guides, rather than gods, they are imperfect and incomplete
- often make mistakes which result in a benefit for humanity
- they can be contradictory: selfish yet concerned for another's well-being; foolish or even childish yet intelligent enough to structure an organized and multi-tasked plan

From Western culture, a good example from the Greek myths, is embodied in the figure of Prometheus, stealing fire for humans, or Hermes and Dionysius.

For the Viking Norse culture, their trickster is named Loki.

Can you think of a modern example of a trickster spirit?

Shamanism

It is difficult categorizing the type of religious beliefs which exist for the Native American cultures.

- some of information we have is mere conjecture or reinterpretation by anthropologists who base their theories on Eastern or Western cultural experiences
- a majority of the tribes did utilize a system of shamanism somewhat similar to other cultures

shaman vs. priest

The Encyclopedia Britannica describes a shaman as a religious leader who is “an ecstatic figure believed to have power to heal the sick and to communicate with the world beyond” (“shamanism”).

Whereas a priest is trained as a functional aspect of established religious rites for a complex organization, a shaman possess personal, divine powers which are less structured (“Religion, Social Aspects of” 608).

Also, keep in mind each tribe operates under slightly different expectations and rituals. The shaman’s role changes from region to region, tribe to tribe.

What is common, the shaman exists as a communicator or mediator with the spirits, eliciting spiritual help in the mortal world.

Folktale || Mythology

Both types of stories relate a time before recorded time, a prehistory, or a “once upon a time.”

Mythology

Religious Mystery

Truth

History of a God

Folktale

Entertainment

Fiction

History of Folk Hero

Within the available canon of Native literature the defining notions of these two elements blur slightly. These types of stories are less likely to be easily cataloged by European notions of creative expression.

archetypes

(see English 1302 text: *Literature and the Writing Process*: p. 135)

In simplest terms, these are patterns, characteristics of personality traits which appear in fiction.

Northrop Frye, a Canadian literary critic, took the original Jungian concept of psychoanalysis and applied it to writing and criticism.

- He believed every concept which is re-invented in literature has a mythical origin which humans, as an analytical species, carry with us in our heads.

examples:

- the hero's quest
- the good mother
- a wise old man
- the innocent virgin
- a runaway, rebellious daughter
- the evil stepmother
- a fool-comedian
- the nerdy, isolated intellectual

archetypes

A basic image can translate to archetype, just by how an author chooses to illustrate the image.

A simple apple has multiple applications.



archetypes

Archetypes belong to the family of elements:

- epitome:

are representatives or perfect example of a type of person

- stereotype:

*are oversimplified and exaggerated characteristics which then
are applied to groups of people*

- > race

- > nationality

- > religion

- > creed

The Value of Folktales

So—why study folktales? What is their value?

The study of folklore combines studies such as:

- anthropology
- sociology
- theology
- literary criticism

Folklore may include references to a culture's beliefs, games, dances, and customs.

Verbal folklore includes sayings, proverbs, anecdotes, rhymes, riddles, songs, ballads, ghost stories, legends, and some form of myths.