

Native American Folktales



overview

- The First Americans themselves are a diverse collection of various social groups.
- These groups are made up of networking tribes of unique people.
- Most origin myths related by the different bands do have common attributes:
 1. often show the people emerging from out of the land itself; some explain that their ancestors arrived out of a labyrinth-like cave underground
 2. some tribes say the first people emerged from lake-beds to settle in nearby territories
 3. all of these stories establish a divisional hierarchy of nature and human
 4. all of these are anonymous stories told in an oral tradition, passed down from generation to generation
 5. very few First Americans developed written form of communication in North America

overview

- The system of oral traditions strengthened social knowledge for their individual structured cultures.

These traditions include:

- myths
- rituals
- songs
- poems
- prayers
- parables
- legends
- narratives

(Kenneth Lincoln 88)

overview

To complicated matters: when white Europeans began the process of removing First Americans out of their territories, the natives were forced to relinquish their languages, their society structures, their religions, their oral traditions as well as their land. Many stories have been lost and entire cultures erased due to Spanish and English settlement policies—but also because *the people themselves did not want to have their culture bond by the printed word.*

In a manner of speaking, Native languages exist as a living, spiritual, *and* meditative practice. Those who were able to maintain their ancestral histories and folk tales did not want to translate their beliefs into English: an aspect of the holiness of the prayer would be lost. The living word, the spoken phrase, would become static and penned up. The original intentions of a love chant or death prayer would be lost.

overview

- The oral tales more often were chants, performance pieces, art recitations.
- Extreme amounts of cultural meanings are lost in the appropriations.

Critic Kenneth Lincoln proposes, the reality of the song-poems is altered since the original word does not lie flat on the page—the spoken word may be visually presented in one line of text, or broken into stanzas and restricted to form.

The original First American poems and stories were created specifically by an unknown author. The intentions was to leave the works anonymous. No one could “own” the work, nor own the idea. The idea itself “found” the chanter. The song-poem was intended for the tribe and for nature. Through performance the poet, or story-teller gives the song, prayer, chant, story back to the world. **The spoken word is a living thing; language is a sacred idea.**

overview

Story Tellers themselves serve as:

- historians, record keepers
- educators of natural history and science
- a source of culture; a physical representation of art
- a means to establish sense of self for a collection of people
- educators of traditional customs

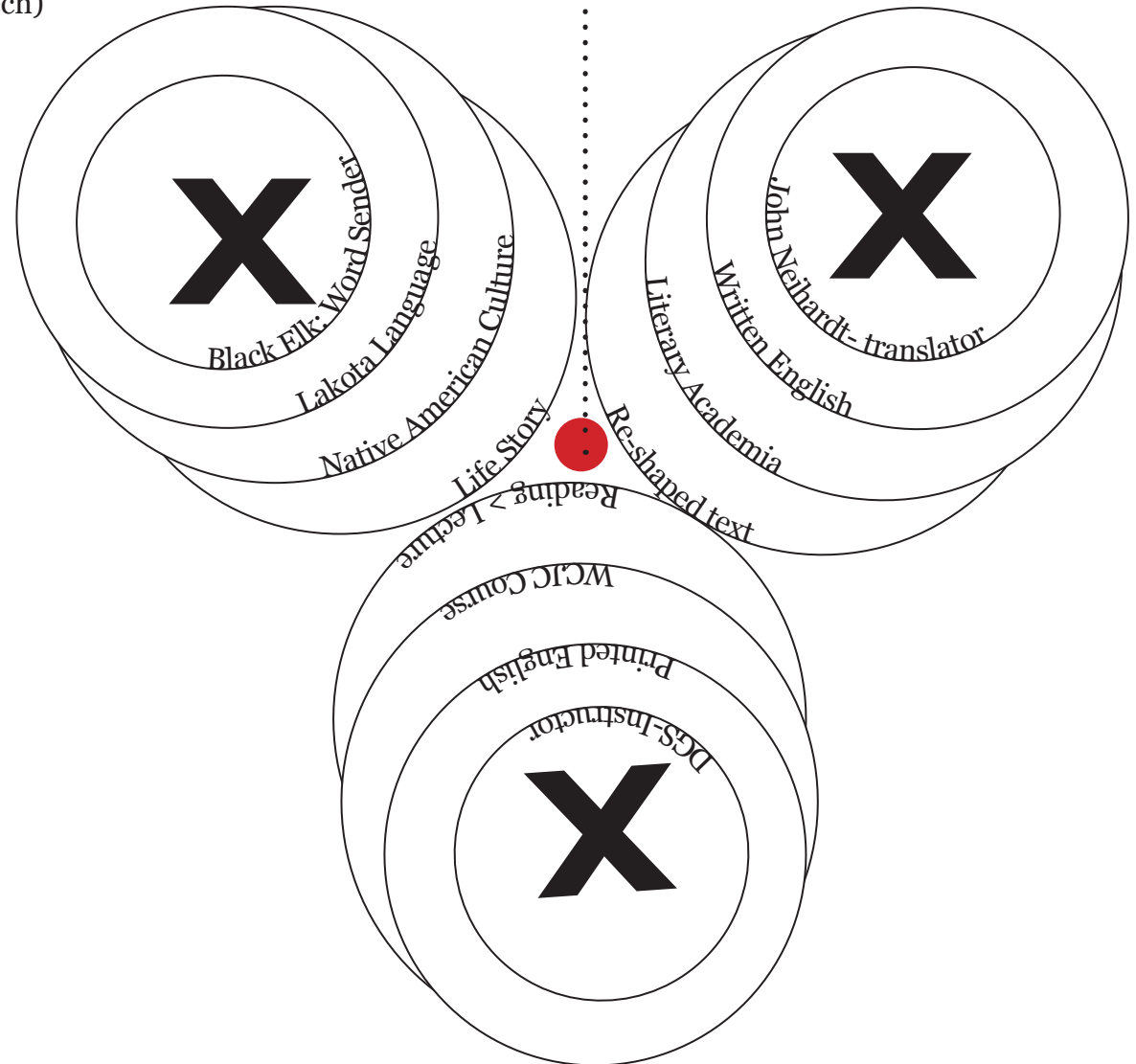
Communication through Translation

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Same Language Communication:

Author > <the printed Word > < Reader

.....
the Word

(spoken language / emotive prayer / living speech)



Myth • Fable • Parable • Folktale

Myth: is a religious teaching—the culture which developed these stories viewed them as a truth, as a religious mystery to explain how a god or goddess became a deity.

Fable: allegorical story with a moral; explicit message presented to reader at closing.

- Short fictitious work (some are only three sentences long).
- Usually involve animals or inanimate objects as actors within the story
- Animals and natural elements represent human characteristics or personality-types
- Some do use human-centered actors.

Parable: is a brief story, based in realistic terms and contain an explicit teaching of morality or philosophy.

- Deals with human characters
- Does not contain magic nor fantasy aspects; strictly contain teachings of a social, political, religious, and/or moral issue.

Folk-Tale, Fairy Tale: based on fantasy. These in turn can teach a moral lesson.

- More of an entertainment value rather than a religious, moralistic teaching.
- Shows a magical representation of the world;
- Is based on children’s notions of the world as divided into black and white, no gray areas.
- Prepares children for the violent world of their times.

FolkTale characteristics

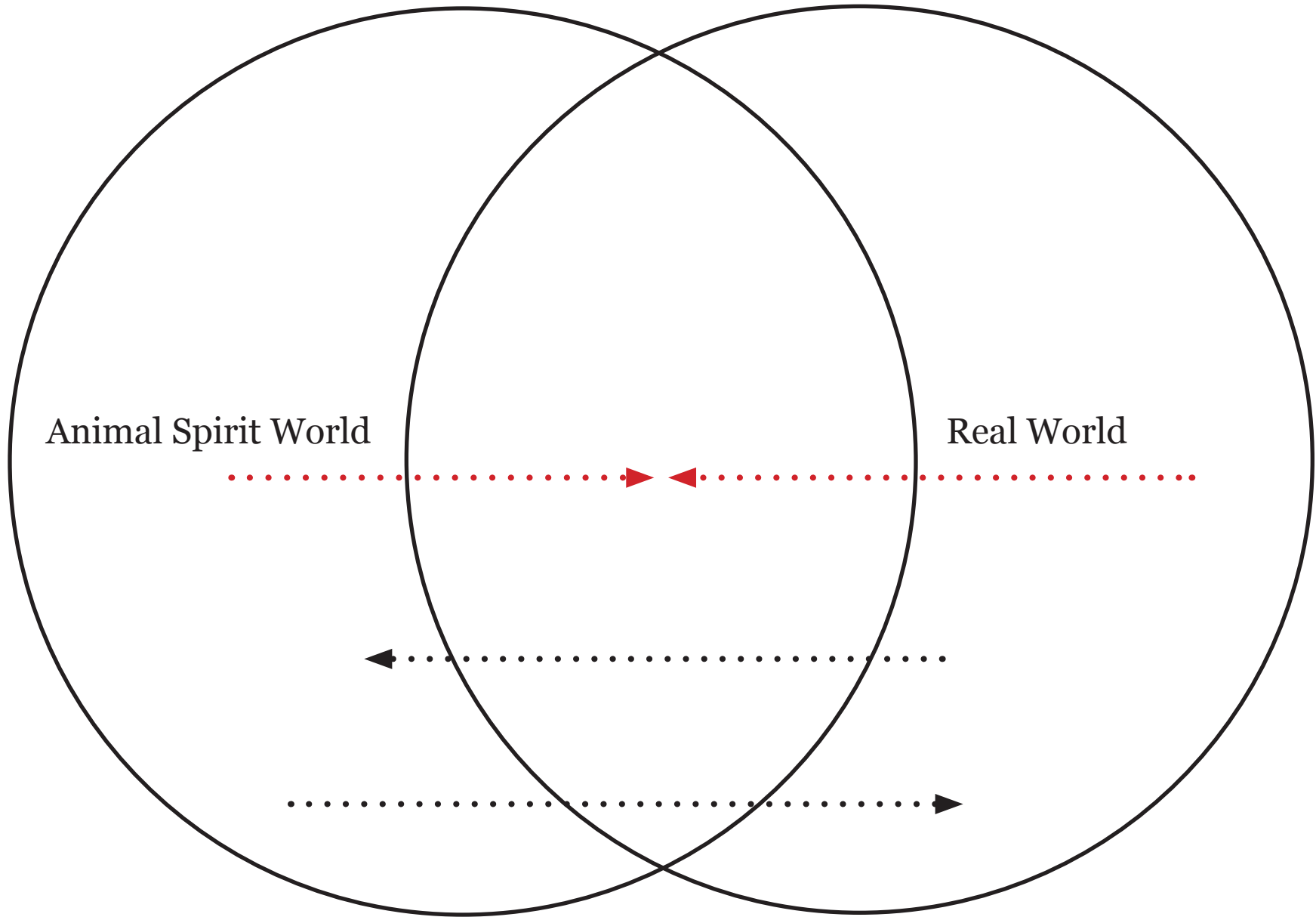
- magical creatures abound
- magical situations frequent
- protagonists down-trodden: orphan, stepchild, cast-out prince, prodigal son
- protagonist goes through psychological, physical, spiritual transformation
- protagonist must prove worthiness before transformation; must earn title
- protagonist is pure good
- antagonist is pure evil } no in-between grey areas
- extreme violence, gruesome situations
- pattern numbers
 - > in the Old World Europe: three: three tasks, three wishes, three journeys
 - > in the New World: four

Animal Guides

Animal spirits or inanimate object spirits exist everywhere, some in disguise, some in plain sight.

- It is the aim of humanity to recognize the spirit and to gain its good will in order to benefit their lives.
- An element of the supernatural exists in everything, including human-made objects. These spirits are present in everyday waking life interacting with humans.
- Each tribe often designed their own Trickster animal spirit; cycles of stories involve a specific hero-character who tricks a higher authority into action.

Spirit World || Real World



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.



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.

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

archetypes

(Literature and the Writing Process: p. 135)

- In simplest terms, these are patterns, characteristics of personality traits which appear in Literature. Northrop Frye, a Canadian literary critic, took the Jungian concept of psychoanalysis and applied it to writing.
- He believed each and every concept which is re-invented in literature has an original mythical origin which we as an analytical species carry with us in our heads.

Some examples:

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

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*

symbols

(*LWP*: p. 134-135, 136)

In basic terms, a symbol is an image which acts as a representation of something else.

- The Venus of Willendorf are early humanity's attempt at rationalizing a chaotic world. Numerous discussions are centered on the function or artistic value early people placed on these statuettes.
- In fiction almost any image within a story can be argued as an intentional or even subconscious symbol on the part of the author.



The Value of Folktales

So—why study folktales? What is their value?

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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.