

UNDER COYOTE'S EYE

Indian Tales in Sheila Watson's "The Double Hook"

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BACK IN 1975 H. R. Ellis Davidson delivered a paper to the Annual General Meeting of the Folklore Society entitled "Folklore and Literature." Her call for co-operation and co-ordination of the folkloric and literary disciplines can still serve to frame our studies of the way tales and legends are interwoven in world literature. Professor Davidson noted "an increasing interest in analysing certain works of literature from the medieval period to modern times, to observe how folktale motifs and folk beliefs may be woven, instinctively or deliberately, into the very texture of the work itself, enlarging its scope and giving it significance and power." She adds that "this is not a matter of dredging our literature to search for nuggets of folklore lurking in the depths, while literary scholars stand aloof from such mundane pursuits, but a new recognition of how knowledge of folklore motifs can help literary scholars and folklorists alike to understand and interpret."¹

Although many readers have recognized the rich texture and lyrical mastery of Sheila Watson's 1959 novel, *The Double Hook*, Professor Davidson's folkloric approach can enhance our ability to understand and interpret this demanding but rewarding text. Leslie Monkman and more recently George Bowering have examined Watson's use of Coyote tales, Monkman noting that "the figure of Coyote" is "one of the most intriguing sources of mystery and meaning" in the novel. But Monkman sees Coyote as totally malevolent, as a "Satanic opposition to Old Testament Jehovah."²

Bowering's recent contribution to *Modern Times*, the third volume of John Moss's *Canadian Novel* series, not only comments on Monkman's reading but surveys over twenty years of critical response to the novel, concentrating on the many theories concerning Watson's use of Coyote as trickster. Bowering structures his essay around Watson's 1973 comment: "I don't know now, if I rewrote [*The Double Hook*], whether I would use the Coyote figure."³ He postulates that the reason for the author's ambivalence toward Coyote might be her realization that she can only present an outsider's view of Coyote, a "white Coast author's

Coyote.” He builds upon this to develop the theory, borrowed from Robert Kroetsch, that the author herself is a Coyote-like trickster. He concludes that “the reader who does not want to bolt out of the present does not so much desire to know what Coyote is but rather what she says” (Bowering, p. 222). In a folkloric reading of the novel Watson’s position as outsider, far from being a reason for dropping Coyote, is part of the reason for the success of the novel.

A more detailed look at British Columbian Indian Coyote tales, at the new meaning these tales take on when filtered through the imaginations of the white settlers, and at the relationship between the Indian’s trickster and the settlers’ Judeo-Christian God demonstrates both the sophistication of Watson’s novel and the value of Davidson’s folkloric approach as a guide to the novel’s intricate structure. *The Double Hook* begins with a lyrical introduction to the folk tradition I want to examine and to the folk themselves who live with and pass on the tradition:

In the folds of the hills
under Coyote’s eye
lived
the old lady, mother of William
of James and of Greta

lived James and Greta
lived William and Ara his wife
lived the Widow Wagner
the Widow’s boy
lived Felix Prosper and Angel
lived Theophil
and Kip
until one morning in July.⁴

The stark, closely circumscribed lives of these settlers in a small community in British Columbia unfold under the eye of Coyote, the North American Indian culture hero and trickster par excellence. The Faulkneresque characters speak through a third-person narrative voice that seems to issue from the land itself. I will show that Watson achieves this voice largely through her use of folk motifs. But this old lady of the north is psychology’s Terrible Mother, the constricting death-force that prevents her children from living full lives. As the novel opens James has murdered the old woman by pushing her down the stairs, but her spirit continues to haunt the community. Character after character sees her fishing at different points along the stream. But as Ara, the old woman’s daughter-in-law, realizes, “it’s not for fish she fishes.” The novel traces James’ desperate attempt to break free from this fisher of souls, Greta’s inability to break free in any way short of suicide, and the struggle of Ara, William, Kip, Felix, and Angel to live meaningful lives.

Sheila Watson does not take her plot or characters from Coyote tales, she does not build her novel on folk motifs concerning the Coyote, nor does she adopt the straightforward, playful tone of the tales. Because she uses folklore in a more complex manner, a folkloric approach to her novel not only illuminates this specific text but also suggests approaches and questions that we can bring to other literary texts. For example, to understand *The Double Hook* we must identify the Coyote as an Indian folk figure, locate probable sources, determine how Sheila Watson's Coyote is like and unlike her sources, and we must see the way the author interweaves the tradition with her own plot, themes, and characters. The result should be a fuller understanding of all aspects of the novel.

Coyote stories have a prominent place in American Indian folktales from the Zuni and the Navaho of the Southwest to the Omaha and Crow of the Great Plains to the Shoshonis and Sioux of the Rockies and to the Thompson Indians of the Northwest.⁵ Since *The Double Hook* is set in the Cariboo area of British Columbia and since Watson lived for a time in this area, it is likely that she was familiar with tales of the Salishan tribes, particularly the Thompson Indians. She could also have drawn upon the volumes that followed Franz Boas' famous Jesup North Pacific Expedition, *Traditions of the Thompson Indians of British Columbia* (1898) and *Folk-Tales of the Salishan and Sahaptin Tribes* (1917).

Even when I limit my examination of Coyote tales to the Salishan language group or even to one tribe within that group, the tradition is far too large and complex to adequately convey here. These Coyote stories fall into many groups, categories, types, and motifs. For example, some could be grouped and categorized as creation myths (B200), some as animal tales (B260). Classified by motif, they could be indexed in the A500's as culture-hero tales, in the B200's as tales of talking animals, and in the D100's as transformation tales. Rather than losing myself in the morass of classifications, I will follow Sheila Watson's interest in the Coyote as meddling trickster and life-giving culture hero. In an entry in *The Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend*, Erminie Voegelin uses the Coyote as her chief example when she characterizes the trickster as "greedy, erotic, imitative, stupid, pretentious, deceitful"; she adds that "he attempts trickery himself in many forms, but is more often tricked than otherwise. In a sense, trickster is nearly always on the side of evil; if people die, he votes that they stay dead."⁶ In contrast, the entry under "Culture Hero" characterizes Coyote as a sometimes human, sometimes animal character who lived in the mythical age and who is "regarded as the giver of a culture to its people. All good and useful things are either [*sic*] given by him, invented, originated, or taught by him. . . ."⁷ According to the Thompson Indians these useful things include fire, the sun, food, arts, ceremonies, hunting techniques, and knowledge of sex. In her *Dictionary of Folklore* entry on the Coyote, Voegelin comments on the contradictory nature of this culture hero-creator-trickster-transformer. She notes that

“the dual character of Coyote — as the culture hero who releases game, imparts knowledge of arts and crafts, secures fire or daylight or the sun, etc., and as a bullying, licentious, greedy, erotic, fumbling dupe, — is hard for Indian narrators of tales to resolve. . . .”⁸ This dual nature of Coyote is a key to resolving difficult aspects of the themes and characters in *The Double Hook*.

Before examining the way Sheila Watson employs the full spectrum of Indian Coyote legends, I must introduce one more complication. The characters in the book are not Indians; when they speak of Coyote, they speak of a tradition alien to their own Christian background. So what George Bowering sees as the author’s problem (i.e., that she is “an outsider from a canned-food environment”) is in a different way the characters’ problem. Their knowledge of Coyote is vague and they fear what they do not know. Coyote is a demiurge who has lost his people, a creator whose chief creation has all but disappeared. Watson forces this fact into our consciousness when James saddles his horse and rides off at full gallop, thinking he can escape the constraints of the Terrible Mother. “He wanted one thing. To get away. To bolt noisily and violently out of the present.” In doing so he passes what is left of Coyote’s people:

At last he came to the pole fence of the Indian reservation. The cabins were huddled together. Wheels without wagons. Wagons without wheels. Bits of harness. Rags and tatters of clothing strung up like fish greyed over with death. He saw bone-thin dogs. Waiting. Heard them yelping. Saw them running to drive him off territory they’d been afraid to defend. Snarling. Twisting. Tumbling away from the heels they pursued.

He sees no one. Coyote’s people, the Indians, are dead or dying and Coyote’s tales are imperfectly remembered by the white settlers who now eke out a living on the land.

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ATSON RECOGNIZES THE CONTRADICTORY NATURE of Indian Coyote tales; she realizes that these tales are at best imperfectly remembered by the settlers (and by herself), and she turns these complications to literary advantage. She is able to transform the straightforward, playful Coyote into a ubiquitous and mysterious force, always connected (in the minds of the settlers) with darkness, the wind, the dry land, and the rocks, and thus with fear and death. But Watson allows readers to see what the characters do not — the Coyote as culture hero, the Coyote who is also connected with water, fish, and the potential fecundity of the land, and thus with hope, life, and salvation.

Although they know little of Coyote, James, Greta, William, Ara, Felix, Angel, Theophil, and Kip all live out their lives on Coyote’s land and under Coyote’s

ever-watchful eye. We as readers learn a great deal about each of these characters by examining their attitudes toward and relationship with Coyote. As Ara notes, "Coyote made the land his pastime. He stretched out his paw. He breathed on the grass. His spittle eyed it with prickly pear." Ara believes in Coyote, but she sees him only as the purveyor of fear, the harbinger of death, and the creator of life's prickly obstacles.

For other characters the Coyote is even darker. When Greta, sitting in her mother's rocking chair, realizes that the constricting force of the mother is still present, she thinks of Coyote. "Eyes everywhere. In the cottonwoods the eyes of foolhens. Rats' eyes on the barn rafters. Steers herded together. Eyes multiplied. Eyes. Eyes and padded feet. Coyote moving in ranksmelling." Greta's feeling of entrapment and her sense of guilt lead her to think of Coyote and of approaching death. James too feels the continued presence of the mother and of Coyote: "He felt on his shoulder a weight of clay sheets. He smelled the stench of Coyote's bedhole." For the priest-like Felix Prosper, Coyote is also a spirit that beckons toward death: "He saw a coyote standing near the creek. He wanted to follow it into the hills. He felt its rough smell on his tongue." Kip, who is called Coyote's servant, tells James and Greta that he saw the old lady "climb down through the split rock with Coyote, her fishes stiff in her hand." In each case the characters associate Coyote with the stench of death and with the Terrible Mother who still plagues the land.

The connection between the Coyote that these characters fear and the Coyote of Indian tradition is most clearly presented in two passages in the novel. First, Watson alludes directly to a Thompson Indian trickster tale. Felix recalls a time when Angel mistook a sheet of tar paper blown from the roof for a bear "rising on its haunches." She thought she saw it "prostrating itself before the unsacked winds. Rising as if to strike. Bowing to the spirit let out of the sack . . . by the meddler Coyote." This could have been taken directly from the tale "Coyote, Fox, and the Sun People" in which Coyote and Fox see a "bag hanging from the end of a pole" in Sun's house and argue over whether the bag contains a sun-ray or hot winds. When Fox and Coyote pierce the bag "the hot wind and the sun-rays came out and made a great noise. Coyote and Fox ran away."⁹ In another Thompson tale, "Coyote and the Salmon," Coyote becomes more explicitly a Pandora figure. He is shown four wooden boxes and is told "Do not take the lids off these boxes. . . . Remember that they must never be taken off." When the keepers are away, Coyote immediately opens them. "From one box, smoke came out; from another wasps; from the third, salmon-flies; from the fourth, beetles."¹⁰

The second passage is an argument between Angel and her lover Theophil. Here Angel sees Coyote as the "trouble" in life that man cannot keep out. Angel tells Theophil that Kip saw Coyote carry the old lady away "like a rabbit in his mouth." She sees Coyote as the beast, the hidden fear, waiting around the corner:

“A man full up on beer saying in that beer how big he is. Not knowing that Coyote’ll get him just walking around the side of the house to make water.” Theophil is the pragmatist of the novel, the believer in what is rational, the man who sees life only on the literal level. He “don’t set no store by Coyote.” To him Coyote is just a lower case coyote, an animal to be killed for the bounty offered by the government. Theophil is the one character who does not recognize the power of Coyote and he is the one character who will end up alone and unredeemed.

Kip sums up the characters’ view of Coyote in a passage that provided Watson with her title. Kip compares James to the old lady:

There’s one thing he doesn’t know. He doesn’t know you can’t catch the glory on a hook and hold on to it. That when you fish for the glory you catch the darkness too. That if you hook twice the glory you hook twice the fear. That Coyote plotting to catch the glory for himself is fooled and every day fools others. He doesn’t know, Kip thought, how much mischief Coyote can make. Coyote reaching out reflected glory. Like a fire to warm. Then shoving the brand between a man’s teeth right into his belly’s pit. Fear making mischief. Laying traps for men.

The yin/yang double hook of life is Watson’s own, but Kip also seems to be echoing the Indians’ Coyote tradition. The passage presents the dual role of Coyote; he holds out the gift of fire but then uses the gift to destroy man. Two tales can serve as a gloss for this central passage of the novel. Coyote is fooled in the beginning of the Thompson tale, “Coyote Goes Fishing”:

One time in winter, Fox saw Coyote coming, and sat down on a beaver-hole in the ice. Coyote asked him what he was doing. Fox said he was fishing with his tail. Coyote thought that he would like to have some fish. Fox agreed, and told Coyote not to get tired if the fish did not bite at first. . . . Coyote sat down on the hole, and Fox left. Then later Fox caused a cold wind to come, and Coyote’s tail froze in the hole.¹¹

Later Coyote gets his revenge by fooling Fox in a similar manner. This reflects the humorous side of Coyote’s mischievousness, but Kip also suggests the more ominous side in his reference to Coyote shoving the offered brand into man’s belly. An Okanogan tale provides a folk source for Kip’s image. In “Coyote Devours His Own Children” Coyote asks his son to cut a spit, presumably to cook their dinner. The child obeys and Coyote “took the child across his knee, pushed the stick which he had prepared through his insides, and stuck him up by the fire to roast.”¹²

BY NOW IT IS CLEAR that the Coyote tales interwoven throughout *The Double Hook* have been filtered through the alien culture of the

settlers and as a result have been given a more ominous, less playful form. Simple and direct tales conveying Coyote's creations and tricks have become bogey tales, tales of evil lurking in the dark. But there is more similarity between the settlers' Coyote and the Indians' Coyote than the characters in the novel suggest. There is no simple answer to the question of how tales of tricksters and culture heroes arise among a people, but it is safe to speculate that the constant presence of coyotes, their stealthy way of life and their eerie call played an important role in the genesis of the tales. Perhaps Indians felt a kinship with this animal that had such a gift for survival. In any case, they moulded tales of the Coyote in their own image; their tales use the physical characteristics of the animal to convey their own beliefs and to express their own hopes and fears. What is important to our reading of the novel is that the settlers in *The Double Hook* use the Coyote in the same way. Now the same physical characteristics of the animal, together with the terrifying, half-remembered tales of the old Indian demiurge combine to express the settlers' view of their land, their lives, and their innermost fears. By understanding the relationship between these characters and these tales we increase our understanding of the novel.

In *The Double Hook* Coyote's voice is created by the sounds from within the settlers and conveyed in lyrical passages that echo throughout the novel. As a result, a folkloric approach helps us to read and interpret Watson's original and sometimes baffling language. Felix's hounds hear "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.

Here Coyote is more than skulking death waiting to lunge at man as he turns the corner. He has Jehovah-like power to send across the land the Canadian version of the *sirocco*, *kadim*, or east wind. Coyote is like the Old Testament God who brings the locusts to Egypt with the east wind in Exodus (10:13), or who can carry away man with the east wind in Job (27:21), or who warns Ephraim's people in Hosea (13:15) that "an east wind shall come, the wind of the LORD shall come up from the wilderness, and his spring shall become dry, and his fountain shall be dried up." Coyote's biblical echoes transform the dry rocks of British Columbia into a Palestine, a holy land. Coyote's God-like nature becomes clearer in other lyrical passages. When Greta realizes that she will never be free from her mother's spirit as long as the mother's house stands, she sets fire to the house and burns with it. As she dies, Coyote is heard in the hills:

I've taken her where she stood
My left hand is on her head
My right hand embraces her.

Coyote has gone through a transformation; his paws are now hands and although he is still connected with death, he is death as comfort, freedom, and release, death as the lover Greta never had in life, the lover of The Song of Solomon (2:6): "His left hand is under my head, and his right hand doth embrace me." Later Ara sees Coyote and hears his voice echoing back over the valley:

Happy are the dead
for their eyes see no more.

The easy peace and happiness of the dead is not for Ara, Felix, Kip, William, and James.

It is especially not for James. He considers drowning himself in the river, "But along the shore like a nightwatch drifted the brown figure he sought to escape." James wishes to escape not from life but to life. As he stands by the river, he wonders what he had intended to do "when he'd defied his mother at the head of the stairs." The answer comes from the hills and from within:

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.

Here more than ever the Indians' trickster and culture hero is transformed into the Old Testament God and James, like Isaiah before him, hears the prophecy of "the terrible day of the LORD." Coyote echoes two passages from Isaiah: "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" (2:19); and ". . . they shall come, and shall rest all of them in the desolate valleys, and in holes of the rocks, and upon them all thorns. . . all the land shall become briars and thorns" (7:19-24). James had to kill the old woman, to descend into the "valley of adversity," to confront his fear, before he can be redeemed.

Coyote brings down those, like Greta, who cling to the rocks, but those, like James, who descend into the holes of the rocks and who confront their fear will live. Images of life, images of the Coyote as creator as well as destroyer, begin to appear after the fire that purges the spirit of the old lady and thus frees Greta. This purification prepares for a change in the settlers' lives. Felix finally learns to leave the rocks and to take an active part in life (as a result he wins back his wife Angel and his children). James turns from death and from his attempt to escape by running and returns to Lenchen and to the birth of a son. Towards the end of the novel Ara, looking at the smoking doorsill of the fire-gutted house, has a vision:

She 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.

This vision of life, of the revitalization of the waste land recalls Salishan stories such as "Coyote and the Water or Rain," and "Coyote and the Salmon," stories in which Coyote is a life-giving force that brings the salmon up the river, teaches his people how to fish and hunt and how to procreate. "Coyote and the Salmon" ends: "Because of Coyote, his people had many kinds of food, and life became much easier than it had been when the world was very young."¹³

Coyote, like the LORD of Isaiah, brings a promise not only of adversity but also of hope, not only of drought and death, but also of fecundity and life. To confirm the promise of Ara's vision, the last lines of the novel are Coyote's. Just after dawn James' and Lenchen's child is born and Ara hears "the voice of Coyote crying down through the boulders":

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

Sheila Watson again echoes Isaiah: "The people that walked in darkness have seen the light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined" (9:2). And more explicitly: "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder . . ." (9:6).

The Double Hook allows Coyote, the Indians' great transformer, trickster, and culture hero a transformation he never quite made in the Thompson tales. But Sheila Watson is not too far from the spirit of the tales when she sees the Judeo-Christian God as Coyote and Coyote as the Judeo-Christian God. One last Thompson tale seems to bring these traditions even closer. In "Coyote and the Old Man," the trickster meets the all-powerful Great Chief, who tells Coyote, "Soon I am going to leave the earth. You will not return until I do." The tale ends with a promise:

Some time in the future Coyote and Old Man will return and will again work wonders on the earth. When all is ready, they will bring the dead from the Land of Shades. Then there will be loud beating of drums, and the dead will appear, borne on the top of red clouds, the northern lights, and tobacco smoke.¹⁴

Perhaps as Bowering and Watson herself have suggested, Coyote's voice has subsumed the authorial voice. But far from being detrimental, this is one of the novel's greatest strengths. Watson has created a voice which resonates with the Indians' past, the settlers' present, and with prophecies of their future. The critical debate over the function of Coyote in *The Double Hook* will probably continue.

But for those who are outsiders to the Indian traditions and to the settlers' way of life, a folkloric approach provides the information needed to understand the all-important dualities of the novel. Coyote brings death and life; he is a fool, but he is a wise fool. A knowledge of the Indian tales shows us how Watson has altered the tradition to create a voice who speaks a universal, archetypal language. Post-Nietzschian, post-Einsteinian, and post-modernist we may be, but we still tend to look at the world and at literature from our own culturally biased perspective and we still tend to think of dualities as mutually exclusive opposites. Indian Coyote tales tell us that the hook is one, and double.

NOTES

- ¹ H. R. Ellis Davidson, "Folklore and Literature," *Folklore*, 86 (Summer 1975), 74.
- ² Leslie Monkman, "Coyote as Trickster in *The Double Hook*," *Canadian Literature*, 52 (Spring 1972), pp. 70, 71.
- ³ George Bowering, "Sheila Watson, Trickster," in *The Canadian Novel, III: Modern Times*, ed. John Moss (Toronto: NC Press, 1982), p. 209.
- ⁴ This and subsequent quotations refer to Sheila Watson, *The Double Hook* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1969).
- ⁵ I have examined many general sources of Coyote traditions, including: Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Origin of Table Manners*, 1978; Paul Rabin, *The Trickster*, 1972; Virginia C. Trenholm and Maurine Corley, *The Shoshonis: Sentinels of the Rockies*, 1964; Stith Thompson, *Tales of the North American Indians*, 1929; Roger Welsch, *Omaha Tribal Myths and Trickster Tales*, 1981.
- ⁶ Maria Leach, ed., *The Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1949), II, 1124.
- ⁷ *Dictionary of Folklore*, I, 268.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 257.
- ⁹ Franz Boas, ed., *Folk-Tales of Salishan and Sahaptin Tribes, Memoirs of the American Folk-lore Society*, XI, 1917, pp. 3-4.
- ¹⁰ Ella Elizabeth Clark, *Indian Legends of Canada* (1960; rpt. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1981), p. 28.
- ¹¹ *Folk-Tales of Salishan and Sahaptin Tribes*, p. 62.
- ¹² Donald M. Hines, ed., *Tales of the Okanogans* (Fairfield, Washington: Ye Galleon Press, 1976), p. 86.
- ¹³ *Indian Legends*, p. 29.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 31.