

# COYOTE AS TRICKSTER IN THE DOUBLE HOOK

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**F**OR A SMALL BOOK, Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook* contains so many implications and allusions that some readers have come to regard it as a prose-poem.<sup>1</sup> Some elements in the book's structure have already been examined<sup>2</sup> but the figure of Coyote, one of the most intriguing sources of mystery and meaning, has been relatively ignored. Yet it would appear that Coyote is based upon an ancient and widespread mythic personality serving as the very focus for the establishment of a new moral and social order.

In *The Trickster: A Study In American Indian Mythology*, Paul Radin has noted the prevalence of a trickster-figure in the myths of both Eastern and Western cultures. In discussing the manifestations of this figure in Amerindian folklore, Radin says:

In what must be regarded as its earliest and most archaic form, as found among the North American Indians, Trickster is at one and the same time, creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others and who is always duped himself . . . He possesses no values, moral or social, is at the mercy of his passions and appetites, yet through his actions all values come into being . . . Trickster himself is, not infrequently, identified with specific animals such as raven, coyote, hare, spider, but these animals are only secondarily to be equated with concrete animals. Basically, he possesses no well-defined form.<sup>3</sup>

Watson's Coyote embodies many of the qualities outlined here. In his role as amoral "giver and negator" he has driven the community into silence and submission. Yet Coyote, "plotting to catch the glory for himself is fooled", and in the face of the seduction and death which he has inspired, comes a new sense of meaning and integration.

In the opening lines of Watson's book, each character is introduced "under Coyote's eye". However, his presence does not rest at the level of an unseen divinity; indeed, the whole landscape is presented as embodying his immediacy.

A harbinger of sterile east winds, "Coyote made the land his pastime. He stretched out his paw. He breathed on the grass. His spittle eyed it with prickly pear." While such a stringent environment where "the men lay like sift in the cracks of the earth" has excluded the concept of a loving and compassionate deity for the inhabitants, they have easily adopted the Indian's belief in a force which is manifested daily in the blood-curdling howls of the prairie-wolf.

Initially, Mrs. Potter is the figure most closely associated with Coyote. The thoughts of fear and death which she inspires before and after her murder are linked with the community's adoption of a belief in the Indian deity. Thus, when Ara investigates the river bank where she saw the old lady's spectre, she finds the paw mark of a coyote. In a similar vein, the passive herd cows "turn their tails to her and stretch their hides tight."

Mrs. Potter has rebelled against the will of God:

If God had come into the valley, come holding out the long finger of salvation, moaning in the darkness, thundering down the gap at the lake head . . . asking where, asking why, defying an answer, she would have thrown her line against the rebuke.

In her defiance, she unwittingly allies herself with Coyote, who functions here in Satanic opposition to Old Testament Jehovah.

The parallel operating between the defiance of the old lady and Jonah is clearly developed. Ara reflects the dejection of the community as she recalls the history of Nineveh:

Even God's eye could not spy out the men lost here already, Ara thought. He had looked mercifully on the people of Nineveh though they did not know their right hand and their left. But there were not enough people here to attract his attention. The cattle were scrub cattle.

She later envisages "the old lady, lost like Jonah perhaps in the cleft belly of the rock, the water washing over her." After his penitence in the belly of the whale, Jonah accepted God's will and warned the people of Nineveh. A merciful Jehovah decrees:

I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, Mrs. Potter could have effected the salvation of the community if she had allied herself with God's will and functioned as a benevolent matriarch and

spiritual guide. However, she defies the light of God with her own lamp, and her fish bring neither sustenance nor salvation to the community.

**A**LTHOUGH COYOTE possesses the power to incite individuals against God, he is clearly lower on the scale of deity in *The Double Hook*. Kip comments that neither James nor his mother realizes that “Coyote, plotting to catch the glory for himself is fooled and everyday fools others.” The old lady forgets that her defiance does not alter God’s control over life and death, and thus Coyote carries her away “like a rabbit in his mouth.” Coyote, of course, will be fooled when suicide, seduction and matricide lead not to despair but to an affirmation of faith and love. Even the old lady shares in the changes which come to the community. Felix describes her last appearance by the creek:

I saw James Potter’s old mother standing by my brown pool, he said. I was thinking of catching some fish for the lot of us. But she wasn’t fishing he said. Just standing like a tree with its roots reaching out to water.

As the rest of the community undergoes renewal, water assumes its proper symbolic value for Mrs. Potter as well.

Although Kip recognizes both the power and weakness of Coyote, he too is finally “fooled”. Mrs. Watson’s short stories offer a possible explanation of Kip’s crucial vulnerability in spite of his unique awareness. At the end of “The Black Farm”, Uncle Daedalus announces:

Ghede has already chosen me, he said, the eternal figure in black . . . death at the cross-roads. He stands at the intersection of time and eternity. He is corpse and phallus, king and clown. He introduces men to their own devil. He is the last day of the week and the cross in every cemetery. He sings the song of the grave-digger.<sup>5</sup>

The reference here is to the Guédé figures of Haitian voodoo. As this passage indicates, the members of the Guédé family are represented as spirits of death and guardians of cemeteries. Although they inspire fear because of their associations with death, they also serve as obscene jesters: thus, the reference to phallus and clown.

Just as Coyote and God both play a role in the spiritual landscape of *The Double Hook*, practitioners of Haitian voodoo have no difficulty in assimilating beliefs in their gods with the creed of the Roman Catholic church. The Christian God is regarded as the supreme deity while the voodoo gods provide simple ex-

planations for daily occurrences. The conception of these spirits is anthropomorphic as seen in the description of Guédé. "By conceiving his spirits as in manner and desires resembling himself, the Haitian can understand his little universe without subjecting himself to the bewilderment which faces a simple Christian, trying to reconcile an all-loving Father with the obvious evil he allows on earth."<sup>6</sup> The parallels with Coyote's role in *The Double Hook* are evident.

The power of these voodoo gods to possess their worshippers has special application to Kip's behaviour. "When a god seizes a man, he 'mounts' him; the possessed person forthwith becomes the god's 'horse' . . . The person mounted does nothing of his own accord while he is possessed."<sup>7</sup> This concept is alluded to in Watson's "Antigone": "My father ruled men who thought they were gods or the instruments of gods or at the very least, god-affected and god-pursued."<sup>8</sup>

Kip's role as an agent for Coyote's designs is made explicit when Ara and Felix hear Coyote crying through the thunder, "Kip, my servant, Kip." Although he is aware that Coyote practises his duplicity by "reaching out reflected glory. Like a fire to warm. Then shoving the brand between a man's teeth right into his belly's pit," Kip is drawn to attempt to seduce Lenchen and to deliberately taunt and antagonize James. Later, Kip justifies his behaviour by saying: "The old white moon had me by the hair." This comment is closely related to an earlier description of Kip just before the crucial events leading to his blinding:

He stood on the doorstep looking at the moon. Stood roped to the ground by his weight of flesh. Reaching out to the white tongue of moonlight so that he might swing up to the cool mouth. Raising his hand to the white glory for which he thirsted.

Kip seems to have no more control over his faculties in this scene than the possessed victim of the Haitian voodoo god. In his uncontrollable thirst for the illusory "reflected glory" of god-like perception and control, Kip is victimized by Coyote, just as Mrs. Potter was. When he is alone in the barn with James, Kip thinks: "He's only to loose the force in his own muscles", but his prudence has deserted him and by mis-judging James, he loses his sight. Kip's complete forgiveness of James can also be accounted for by his recognition that an extra-human power was operating: "I keep thinking about James . . . I kept at him like a dog till he beat around the way a porcupine beats with his tail."

While James is the cause of both his mother's death and Kip's loss of sight, he is also the principal victim of these agents of Coyote's will. Images of eyes and seeing are used to convey the intimidation which moves James and Greta to

desperation. "Eyes. Eyes and padded feet. Coyote moving in rank-smelling." The link between James' fear and this constant surveillance is reiterated in his cry when he blinds Kip: "If you were God Almighty, if you'd as many eyes as a spider, I'd get them all." Like his mother, James defies both God and nature. However, while the old lady's defiance and denial ended in death, James lives to share in the community's renewal. Coyote's song extolling the peace of passivity and death only reminds James of the confinement of death and like Europa in "The Black Farm", he realizes that "no one ever found abundance of life in a six-foot plot."<sup>9</sup>

Greta believes that she has been freed of her mother's bonds by James' revolt but she learns that such vicarious release is impossible. When she finally comes to defy her mother's spectre as she prepares for her suicide, she sacrifices herself to Coyote:

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

The sexual innuendo in these lines is linked not only with Greta's repression but also with a recurring image of Coyote's excessive sensuality in many Indian myths. He functions as the great seducer both to sex and death.

In the destruction of Greta's suicide, Ara sees new hope for an end to the purgatorial existence of the community. Earlier, she envisages God: "the glory of his face shaded by his hat. Not coaxing with a pan of oats, but coming after you with a whip until you stand and face him in the end." William is quick to point out that this conception "sounds only a step from the Indian's Coyote." While William, like Theophil, is sufficiently sophisticated to reject the god of Indian myth, his self-enclosed mind cannot admit any higher conception of deity. "I've never seen God, he said, but if I did, I don't think I'd be much surprised." After Greta's suicide, however, Ara has a vision of a renewed world conveyed in Christian symbols:

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.

Coyote delivers a typical benediction on the attractiveness of death but now Ara sees him as a simple prairie-wolf "on a jut of rock calling down over the ledge." Thus, she conclusively reduces the power which the crippling superstition of death-dealing Coyote has had over her.

The Widow Wagner, with her many invocations to God, shares Ara's earlier conceptions of a deity of vengeance and justice:

Dear God, she cried. Then she stopped. Afraid that he might come.  
 Father of the fatherless. Judge of widows. Death and after death the judgement.

Finally, maternal instincts mingled with a strong fear of the judgement after death move her to participation in the redemptive process centred on the birth of her grand-child.

Angel interrupts one of the Widow's many profane invocations with "There's no use wailing on God." She views the latter's conceptions as inapplicable to the way of life imposed on the community by the stringent environment and replaces these ideas with a stronger belief in Coyote than we see in any other individual. Her meaningful role in the community is maintained by relegating Coyote to the status of "meddler" where the Indians originally placed him. Angel's world is not particularly complex, and when she has problems or doubts she assumes Coyote as the cause. Like the voodoo gods, Angel's Coyote offers simple explanations for daily occurrences. The daily frustrations imposed on her in the community are viewed as "spirits let out of a sack . . . by the meddler Coyote." The reference here is to Indian myths which relate that the world was originally created as an Eden until Coyote released from a sack the spirits of fatigue, hunger and disease. In spite of her pessimism regarding a benevolent deity or the possibility of communal action and responsibility, Angel will provide the pragmatic element essential to the achievement of those same concepts.

**I**F ANGEL stands as the epitome of positive practicality, her husband Felix clearly engenders the spiritual affirmation evident at the end of her book. Felix rejects the oblivion offered by Coyote's promise of forgetfulness in retreat and death by reiterating, "I mustn't forget." Instead, having accepted Lenchen and Kip into his house, he assumes his communal responsibilities and asks Angel to return. Thus, he picks up the troubles which William accused him of leaving on other people's doorsteps. As he comforts Lenchen in childbirth, Felix reflects that he may begin again with the help of remembered phrases from the Christian liturgy. Kip's pain and the birth of his namesake break through the "huge indifference" in which Felix previously cloaked himself. The other characters, conditioned by their sterile relationships with each other and with the land can only conceive of God in terms of either Coyote or the just but cruel patriarch

of the Old Testament. Felix functions as an illustration of the Christ-like love of the New Testament which can bring others into peace and harmony.

Although Theophil is implicitly damned for his refusal to participate in the renewal of the community, there is no instant nirvana for those who do share in this development. In the midst of the joy of birth and re-birth surrounding the arrival of young Felix, Coyote cries:

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

Ara foreshadows this final pessimistic note when she thinks of the baby Felix: "I never see baby-clothes . . . that I don't think how a child puts on suffering with them."

Even in their moment of triumph against the fear and passivity which has crippled their lives, these people must remember that their environment will continue to place the same stringent demands upon them. Only through a continued affirmation of the human spirit and of the essential worth of all human existence can they continue the renewal process into a reconstruction of their lives in a more meaningful way. The figure of Coyote will always be present whether manifested as the Satanic tempter of Felix and Ara, the fear of life in the Widow or the mystical force which can drive the passions of men like Kip and James to such desperate heights. Yet out of the recognition of the dual aspects or "double-hook" of glory and darkness in human existence rises the promise of a benevolent deity, implicitly affirmed in the character of Felix who will supersede both the malevolence of Coyote and the cruel justice of the Old Testament Jehovah.

FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Philip Child, "A Canadian Prose-Poem", *Dalhousie Review* 39 (Summer, 1959), pp. 233-236.
- <sup>2</sup> Margaret Morriss, "The Elements Transcended", *Canadian Literature* 42 (Autumn, 1969), pp. 56-71.
- <sup>3</sup> Paul Radin, *The Trickster: A Study In American Indian Mythology* (London, 1956), pp. ix-x.
- <sup>4</sup> Jonah 1:11.
- <sup>5</sup> Sheila Watson, "The Black Farm", *Queen's Quarterly*, 65 (Summer, 1956), p. 213.
- <sup>6</sup> James Leyburn, *The Haitian People* (London, 1966), p. 145.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.
- <sup>8</sup> Sheila Watson, "Antigone", *Tamarack Review*, 11 (Spring, 1959), p. 22.
- <sup>9</sup> Sheila Watson, "The Black Farm", p. 209.