Mythic Themes

Enormous quantities of stories have been collected from the peoples native to North America, especially in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Still, the record is faulty in that the stories collected have rarely been adequately set in their cultural and historical contexts. Often, while the text of a story exists, little is known of the storyteller, the situation in which the story is told, and sometimes even the culture it comes from. A full description of a storytelling event, including the elements of performance style, motivating circumstances, and the audience composition and responses, is almost nonexistent. Furthermore, there has been remarkably little interest in the interpretive study of this literature.

Myth, Tale, and Legend. No standard exists for the use of the term *myth* to distinguish a segment or type of Native American oral tradition. Anthropologists and folklorists have not often discriminated between myth and the related term *tale,* using both simply to refer to narratives or stories. When a distinction is made several criteria are commonly used. Myths are sacred while tales are not. Myths are true while tales are not. The characters of myths are deities and primordial figures; humans and animals are the usual characters of tales. Myths deal with creation at the dawn of time or with cosmic transformations occurring in a prehuman era. Tales tell of fantastical and nonsensical events. Sometimes a subclass of tale or a wholly separate class of narrative is distinguished as *legend;* legend is closer to history and to human affairs. This threefold classification dates from distinctions made by Jakob Grimm in the early nineteenth century.

This manner of classifying Native American oral tra-

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ditions focuses on story content considered in terms of external criteria. Other classificatory criteria include the context and function of a story since these may vary for the same story over time and from culture to culture. As early as 1915, Franz Boas insisted that native classifications be considered; however, a full-scale study of native classifications of oral traditions has never been done.

From the point of view of the academic study of religion, *myth* has come to be widely used to designate narratives that have major religious importance. It is also commonly, and more narrowly, used to refer to creation and cosmic transformation narratives. Such events are set in the primordium, a setting signaling that the narrative and the events of which it tells are fundamental.

In contrast, from the modern Native American point of view, the word *myth* has the meaning the word bears in common usage: it refers to a misconception or a story without base. To many Native Americans, *myth* is a pejorative term that indicates insensitivity and misunderstanding on the part of those who apply it to their stories. Concern for native sensitivity is all but entirely missing from studies and presentations of Native American oral traditions that use the terms *myth* and *mythology*.

Story Types in North America. A great many of the stories in North America have to do with creation or with origins resulting from cosmic transformations; these stories often correlate with story types found throughout the world. Most tribes in North America have stories that tell of the beginning of the world that is presently lived in (not one of long ago); the origin of human beings; the origin of plants and animals; the origin of the sun, moon, and stars; and the origin of aspects of the human condition such as death, disease, laziness, and sexuality. I shall summarize the types of these stories, with a discussion of their variant forms and geographic distributions.

Earth diver. The distinctive feature of the earth-diver story type, as the term designating it indicates, is the attribution of the origin of the earth to the result of some figure diving to the bottom of primordial waters to get a bit of sand or soil from which to create the earth. The diver is most commonly animal, and usually there are a number of these divers who try in succession to dive for soil. Only the last diver succeeds, and this figure is usually gone a very long time, being dead or nearly dead when he or she surfaces. Beside the divers, there is a creator figure as well, and it is the work of the creator to take the bit of sand or soil and, through kneading, stretching, singing creation songs, or some other means, to expand this nascent earth to its present size. The created earth then floats upon the primordial waters. Sometimes it is not well anchored, and it shakes or wobbles. This condition is resolved by the erection of pillars in the cardinal directions or some other security measure usually associated with directional orientations.

Earth-diver stories commonly conclude with a post-creation inspection; the creator sends someone on a journey to inspect the newly made world and to measure its extent. Typically these figures do not attend only to the business assigned, but tarry to satisfy their own interests or desires. In consequence of this forbidden action, the figure is transformed in a way that explains his or her nature. In one story, for example, Buzzard is sent out but stops to eat. He is punished by being condemned to eat corpses; hence buzzards are carrion eaters.

This type of creation story is found throughout North America and is certainly the most common and widespread story type in the area. In some locations it appears only as an incidental theme, while elsewhere it has developed into long elaborate stories containing amazing detail and hundreds of elements. These stories are set in the beginning of time or following an era concluded by the cataclysmic event of a world destruction by deluge. [*For further discussion of earth-diver myths in North America, see* North American Indians, *article on* Indians of the Far North.]

Emergence. In emergence type creation stories, a world exists at the outset without its creation being described or in any way accounted for. There are also peoples living in a world below the present earth surface when the story begins. This story type is concerned with the ascent of these human beings and their search for or travel to a habitable world: it is more about finding the proper place in the world than the cosmic creation. Two major types of stories are commonly a part of emergence mythology: the story of the emergence journey onto the earth surface and the story of migrations from the emergence place to the current village site or homeland. The distinctive segment is the story of the emergence journey. Numerous elements are commonly found in that story. The plight of those in the depths of the earth is usually one of darkness, deprivation, filth, and ignorance. The pre-emergence peoples must await heroic figures, designated by a deity, to come to them and escort them on their emergence journey. The journey may be arduous, the way not well known. Sometimes there is no way out of the lower world; then, in a manner similar to the earth diver's diving for soil, various persons, or more typically animals, attempt to break through the earth's surface from below. Many may fail before one succeeds. The means of ascent may be a vine, a tree, a reed, or a mountain. It grows magi-

cally and bears the people upwards to the new world. The sequence of emergence sometimes establishes the universal social order: peoples of many tribes or clans, sometimes including European-Americans, emerge in a sequence that is correlated with status, material wealth, or character. Occasionally, the emergence channel is closed before all are able to emerge, often because someone defies a taboo; the result is that some people are left eternally in the lower world.

The story of the emergence is not always accompanied by one of migration, but such a pattern is very common. After emergence, the people discover that the place at which they have arrived is not suitable. The people must then migrate to the site of their present village or land. The migration may be a wandering in search of a suitable location, or it may be a prophetically directed journey to a designated place. There are also migration stories that are independent of emergence stories; either segment may be simple or elaborate, in any combination.

Emergence stories are not as common as earth-diver stories, but they are found widely throughout what is now the United States, with a few incidences recorded in southern Canada. [*See also* North American Indians, *article on* Indians of the Southwest.]

Two creators. Another type of creation story that appears widely in North America, especially throughout the United States, is one that features two creators. The creator figures are usually antagonists and the creation of the world the result of their struggles. The two creators are often related, and they interact in a variety of ways. Often they are brothers, sisters, uncle and nephew, father and son, or simply powerful figures who meet in the act of making a world according to their respective styles and plans. The elements of contest, of the duality of good and evil, and of positive opposed to negative forces are usually present. A well-known example is the Iroquoian story in which brothers, one good and one bad, create the world. The good brother creates in a manner ideal for human beings, while the bad brother follows him and reverses some of the good, introducing elements that hamper human life, such as disease, plant blight, pests, and dangerous animals. In the climactic moment the brothers meet at the world's rim and engage in a final determining contest: the one who can move a mountain the farthest will be the winner. The bad brother tries first. After great effort he moves the mountain a little. As he turns toward the good brother the good brother effortlessly moves the mountain up against the back of the bad brother. Turning back to boast of his accomplishment, the bad brother smashes his nose against the mountain and twists it into a permanently deformed shape. The good brother then spares him his life at the cost of his becoming the model for the False Face society by devoting himself to the curing of illness.

Theft. Stories of the theft of light, fire, water, game, fish, and many other things necessary for human life are found widely, but especially in western North America from the Southwest all the way north through the Northwest Coast area. As with the emergence story, theft stories account not so much for creation as for a primordial transformation. The condition that motivates the action in this type of story is the loss or lack of something—such as light or game—that is necessary for human life. Often, it has been secreted by giants, monsters, or deities residing in an inaccessible place. The story centers upon a heroic figure who, through courage, tenacity, or magic, and sometimes aided by clever disguise, enters the place where the missing life-necessity is being kept. By theft, the hero achieves the release of this necessity and, consequently, life becomes possible. A moral twist is sometimes added when the returning hero is humiliated or shunned; the result is that the ideal conditions that would have existed are lost, resulting in turn in discomfort and inconvenience.

World parent. The world-parent type cosmogony has been occasionally identified, particularly in the North American Southwest. Among the most common examples cited are stories of the Luiseño and Diegueño tribes of southern California. There is some suggestion of a sexual creation in these stories, yet a close consideration of the known examples suggests that they are more like the two-creator type of story. The primordial figures are brother and sister, and their struggles for dominance conclude with the brother sexually assaulting the sister (who later gives birth to some aspects of the world, usually including a small piece of earth). Another commonly cited example of world-parent creation is the Zuni story of creation recorded by Frank H. Cushing in the late nineteenth century. However, none of the many subsequently recorded accounts of Zuni creation involves the sexual creation by a sky father and earth mother that Cushing reported. It must be thus concluded that there is little, if any, evidence that world-parent cosmogony exists in North America.

Plant and animal origins. Throughout North America stories of the origin of plants and animals are very common, obviously correlating with the sustenance patterns of the respective tribes. Among the most widespread and complex of this type are the Corn Woman stories found throughout southern maize-growing portions of North America. A notable feature of many of these stories is the plight of Corn Woman during the events that introduce the plant to human cultivation. Particularly in Southeast Woodlands versions, Corn Woman pro-

duces corn by rubbing "dirt" from her flesh, or by defecating the kernels. People in this primordial era need not work for their food, they receive it as a gift from the Corn Woman. Several finally observe Corn Woman as she goes to gather food and they find out how she produces it. Being repulsed and disgusted by what they see, they accuse her of witchcraft and prepare to kill her. Through her prescience, Corn Woman knows her fate and tells her murderers what they are to do with her body; typically, her bleeding body is to be dragged about cultivated fields. Corn plants grow where her blood touches the soil, but now the people must cultivate the plants in order to receive the life-sustaining food.

Among the Pueblo tribes, Corn Women often appear in groups of four identified by the four colors of corn. The personified corn is identified as mother to the people, and so as identical with life itself. As Yellow Woman, Corn Woman is a character in an extensive range of stories about an adventuresome young woman. Yellow Woman may even suggest elements of a trickster figure.

Animal origin stories are widely known throughout North America. The Inuit (Eskimo) tell stories of Sedna, an unwilling bride who eventually marries a deceptive husband. Later, her father comes to visit her only to find her miserable in her husband's home. Attempting to rescue her, her father kills the husband and father and daughter flee by boat, but their flight is threatened by the husband's people. The father tries to sacrifice Sedna in order to save himself. He throws her from the boat, but she clings to the side by her fingers. Still trying to save himself, the father chops off Sedna's fingers, joint by joint. As these severed joints fall from her hands into the water, they are transformed into the game animals of the sea. Finally, as Sedna herself falls into the sea she descends to the bottom, where she takes up residence as the fearsome mistress of the animals. [*See* Sedna.]

A very different sort of figure is White Buffalo Calf Woman of Oglala Lakota oral tradition. As Buffalo she reveals the ritual cycle to the people, thus sustaining both their physical and spiritual needs. [*See* Lakota Religion.]

In the many areas where both agriculture and hunting are important, the origins of animals and plants are often combined or conjoined in a single story. In the Plains area this is commonly a story of the origin of buffalo and maize. In other areas, the Southeast Woodlands for example, it is a story that tells of a primordial transformation resulting in the necessity of human labor in cultivation and hunting—that is, it is a story of the origin of planting and hunting.

Trickster stories. The most widespread and best-known stories in North America center on a complex figure that has come to be known by the term *trickster.* This figure takes various physical forms, including Coyote, Raven, Mink, Blue Jay, and a variety of anthropomorphic figures. Although many collectors and interpreters of North American oral traditions have not considered trickster stories anything other than entertainment, more attention has been given in recent decades to the interpretation of these stories than perhaps to any other story type. It is important that the stories of the trickster are not all of a single type and the roles and characters the trickster plays are many and often complex. The trickster figure may also appear as the protagonist in many of the other story types I have discussed.

Basic human needs–sexuality, food, sense of self, sociability, and knowledge—almost always shape the character of the trickster, but by being exaggerated to their limits. The trickster is often grossly sexual. He has sexual relations with his daughter or mother-in-law, thus breaking the most unspeakable of taboos. He often has greatly exaggerated sexual organs, such as a penis so long that he must roll it up and carry it in a pack on his back. The trickster is often so concerned about satiating his hunger that he will eat anything (and assuredly food that is forbidden to him). Furthermore, he is unsociable, antisocial, or falsely sociable. He plays tricks on people, resulting in their suffering, embarrassment, or death. He is slow to learn, but tenacious to the point of foolishness. The trickster is a lively character; stories about him are without doubt entertaining, if sometimes bawdy. Yet the stories are almost always highly valued by native North Americans. Doubtless this is because trickster stories are rarely simply stories about a prankster or buffoon; they are stories about the nature of the world and the nature of being human. In some stories the trickster is actually the cosmic creator, but more often he is a transformer or fixer. Because of the mythic actions of the character, such things as death, suffering, lust, and many of the seemingly negative aspects of being human are accounted for and their meanings are explored. Even physical features of the cosmos such as the Milky Way are attributed to acts of the trickster. In some ways the trickster is comparable to the culture hero type of figure, who steals fire, light, water, or game; in fact, the trickster is often portrayed in this very role. Trickster stories seem also to be related to the stories of creation that feature two antagonistic creator figures, for the trickster often plays opposite a spiritual creator-deity. The antagonism is clear in many cases, for the trickster is not a deity or even a spiritual being, yet through his actions he reverses and

thereby reorders creation. [*For further discussion, see* Tricksters, *overview article and article on* North American Tricksters.]

"Orpheus." Another story type widely known among the peoples native to North America is one which depicts the death of one member of a close male-female relationship. Usually it is the woman who dies. The grief-stricken survivor ignores the interdiction that the dead are unreachable by the living and he (or she) departs on a journey seeking the dead loved one. This journey is often long and arduous, yet the tenacity of the seeker finally pays off and the place of the dead is reached. Contact with the departed lover is often contingent upon tests the seeker must pass; success leads to contact and renewed joy and happiness. An agreement is usually made establishing the conditions under which the lover may be taken back to the world of the living. Often this is an agreement not to touch the dead person or to look back until the pair is once again among the living. Sometimes the seeker must agree to treat the lover kindly after they return and to never strike or offend her. Invariably, the conditions are for some reason—eagerness, carelessness, or curiosity—not kept, and the loved one immediately disappears to return to the dead, closing forever the possibility of the dead returning to life. This story type, widely known throughout the world, is commonly identified by a reference to Orpheus, the male character of the version of this story in Greek mythology. It is a story about the finality of death, but also more broadly about the human condition.

Speech. The idea that speech is a creative force is commonly found in the stories of peoples native to North America. These peoples commonly hold the view that the appropriate tellings of stories are creative acts, that is, acts that perpetuate the creative ordering powers of which the stories tell. In some cases the power of thought and speech is identified with the power of creation, as in the Achomawi and Acoma stories of creation. For the Navajo, thought and speech are personified as important figures in the stories of creation; more significantly, as a pair their conjoined names signify the most profound and central element of Navajo religious thought.

Performance of Myth. Native American languages, with some significant exceptions in the historical period, do not have a written counterpart to utterance. Therefore, to write and read myths is alien to Native American cultures. The stories are kept alive in the minds and hearts of the living members of the cultures, who bear the constant responsibility of preventing their loss. The telling of many of these stories is restricted to particular seasons, to appropriate occasions, and to those who are qualified and deserve to tell them; in some cases stories are said to be owned by certain members of a community. Stories may serve as authority for, as interpretation of, or as directions for the performance of ritual, or they may have little if any relationship to ritual practices. Many Native Americans are reluctant to permit stories to be recorded either in written or taped form. More than anything, this reluctance is based on the extent to which such recording processes truncate and thereby violate the living dimensions of a story tradition, in which the telling of stories is a creative and nourishing act. In comparison, a written text extracted from a culture is a lifeless shadow of a story "event," and is inherently prone to misunderstanding and misuse.

Interpretive Approaches. What do we or can we learn of the religion and culture of a tribe from its stories? What can be learned from these texts about the story process and its formation, development, history, and function? One view holds that such stories are a culture's means for expressing fundamental social, cultural, and religious values. Another view maintains that they express feelings and structures common to all human beings. Clearly, the same story types and motifs are found over extensive geographic areas and on several continents, among disparate culture types, value systems, worldviews, ecological conditions, and sustenance modes, thus limiting the possibilities for culture-specific analyses of stories at the level of type, motif, or theme. The study of mythology in North America faces many challenges and obstacles.

A number of strategies have been adopted to meet the difficulties facing the task of interpreting the mythologies of North America. The most widely practiced approach, to use mythology as a measuring device for the diffusion of culture, largely avoids the matter of interpretation. Diffusionist studies are concerned primarily with the incidence of tale types and motifs identified according to a system devised by Antii Aarne and Stith Thompson. These studies are premised on the proposition that when a given tale type and motif appears in contiguous geographic areas, it is more likely accounted for by diffusion from one area to the other than by independent origins. The great majority of the collections and comparative studies of the stories of North America have been made with a concern for using them as a scale by which to measure the diffusion of culture over space and through time. Franz Boas and his many students provided the chief impetus behind this kind of study throughout the early part of the twentieth century.

Most strategies for interpreting Native American mythology are based on propositions about the nature of

mythology that are meant to apply universally. Various sociological and psychological functions of myth have been articulated by Malinowski, Durkheim, Jung, and others. While some notable studies of North American mythology have been based on these models, these approaches have had surprisingly little general impact on the study of North American mythology. While often valid and illuminating, such approaches limit interpretation to the functional perspective assumed.

While studies based on a proposed function of myth interpret the content of a text in the light of this function, a deeper level of analysis is sought in structural analyses of myth. Certainly the most widely known, but not the only form of structural study, is that articulated by Claude Lévi-Strauss. He demonstrates his analytical approach in several studies of North American mythology (including work on the Zuni, Tsimshian, Pawnee, and Winnebago tribes), although the bulk of his study of myth, published in the multivolume *Mythologiques* (4 vols., 1964–1971; translated into English as *Introduction to a Science of Mythology*, 4 vols., 1970–1981) centers on South America.

Lévi-Strauss holds that the substance of a myth is in the story that it tells, not in the identification of its motifs and themes. The meaning of a story is revealed by discerning the interrelationships among the story elements, that is, by analyzing the structure of the story. This analysis is based on his proposition that mythical thought always progresses from the awareness of fundamental oppositions toward their resolution. For Lévi-Strauss the structural study of myths is focused on the discovery of the values shared among the elements of a story—elements that align in a pattern reflecting the fundamental binary opposition that the story serves to mediate. [*For further discussion of Lévi-Strauss's work, see* Ge Mythology *and* Structuralism.]

Another form of structural analysis directed toward the study of North American mythology is presented by Alan Dundes in his *The Morphology of North American Indian Folktales* (1964). Developing upon V. I. Propp's classic work, *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928), Dundes identifies the motifs of stories in terms of their intent or value (such as lack, lack liquidated, interdiction, and violation). One can describe and typologize the structures of stories in terms of these constituents, thus permitting study, comparison, and analysis of mythology in terms not restricted to simple content identity.

In the last quarter-century there have been developments in the study of mythology that are directed toward a deeper interpretation of the texts of stories, enhanced where possible by consideration of the details of particular storytelling events including the native languages in which the stories are told. This approach attempts to demonstrate that Native American mythology is equivalent to literature and that its texts should be studied with as much effort and theoretical concern as any literature. But this approach also goes further by recognizing that a key difference between literature and mythology is that mythology, by its nature, is told; it is exclusively oral, and therefore it must be studied as a social and cultural event as well as a text.

Dell Hymes has made a range of important contributions to this development of the study of North American mythology, working primarily with materials from Northwest Coast tribes. Hymes has effectively demonstrated that the free translations of stories, the "texts" that we often use, are frequently radically different from the stories as originally told. Subsequently directing his analysis to the native language texts, he shows that we cannot comprehend the deeper levels of their meaning if we are not aware of the untranslatable linguistic markers, repetitious language, tense, and other features, which are often observable only when considering the story in the language in which it is told and as it is actually told. He has also called attention to the different ways in which a story may be performed, from an outline demonstration of a story for an outside inquirer to a full performance including many elements of style, such as gesture, facial expression, timing, articulation, and voicing. Consideration of the elements of performance should include such features as the motivation for the storytelling, the relationship between a raconteur and the audience, the audience's reaction, and the expected and actual effects of the telling. Hymes describes his approach as listening to the text in all its details while looking for covariation in its form and meaning.

Based on almost any criteria, mythology is important to the study of religion, and the study of Native American religions is no exception. The study of the religious aspects of Native American mythology has scarcely begun within the academic study of religion. The potential for and importance of such a study is significant.

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