

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Interpreting Native American Literature: An Archetypal Approach

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3t94w7cc>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 10(1)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Sevillano, Mando

Publication Date

1986

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

Interpreting Native American Literature: An Archetypal Approach

MANDO SEVILLANO

Investigators of traditional Native American literature typically point out arcane dissimilarities between "their literature" and the western (non-Native American) literary tradition. The implication is that they possess special insights and methods that western critics fail to possess. Such an approach can be instructive, but I suggest that unique ethnic approaches to literary criticism are not the only enlightening ways to look at a traditional narrative. On the one hand, I wholly concur with Del Hyme's suggestion that for a critic to analyze traditional narrative solely for the light it sheds on what interests him (structure, perhaps, or language) is to falsify the tradition from which the narrative emerged.¹ On the other hand, investigating similarities between Native American traditional narrative and western narrative, using an appropriate western method, may also illuminate and inform.

I intend to do three things in this article. First, I wish to quarrel with Paula Gunn Allen's "ethnic approach" to criticism of Native American literature that she uses in her essay, "The Sacred Hoop: A Contemporary Indian Perspective on American Indian Literature."² Second, by using an archetypal approach, which I will demonstrate is transcultural, I will investigate a Hopi traditional story. And finally—almost as a by-product of the above—I wish to point out the accessibility of Native American literature to the non-Indian, thereby supporting a stance for a plurality of interpretations.

It goes without saying that in order for a non-Indian to fully

Mando Sevillano holds Master's Degrees in ethnomusicology and Native American literature. He teaches in California.

and fairly analyze a piece of Native American literature, the investigator must familiarize himself or herself with the traditions of that culture. Such a familiarity is possible today, even for the non-Indian.

Paula Gunn Allen favors what I have labeled the "ethnic approach" to criticism in her article, "The Sacred Hoop." I do not intend to investigate fully Ms. Allen's perception of Native American literature, but simply to point out that no single method of analysis is likely to produce a definitive analysis of a piece of traditional literature. Ms. Allen begins her essay by stating, "Literature is a facet of culture," and "its significance can be best understood in terms of its culture, and its purpose is meaningful only when the assumptions it is based on are understood and accepted."³ She goes on to say:

American Indian literature is not similar to western literature because the basic assumptions about the universe and, therefore, the basic reality experienced by tribal peoples and westerners are not the same . . .⁴

The rest of the essay illustrates the many perceived differences between western and Native American concepts of the universe and reality. From the outset, western concepts are equated with Christian concepts. In the main, one is justified in making this equation. I take exception, however, to the assertion that western literature and Native American literature are dissimilar for the reasons offered, and that, as a result, it requires a different method of interpretation. I suggest that the examples given exhibit, on occasion, a faulty grasp of some western, specifically Christian concepts.

Ms. Allen states that Native American literature is never one of "pure self-expression," that it does not celebrate the "individual's ability to feel emotion." Indian literature is tribal, she says, not personal, and it "shares reality in an attempt to bring the isolated private self into harmony and balance with this reality."⁵ Two points must be considered with reference to this assertion. I have spent more than eleven years in field work on the Hopi reservation, and I am aware that within the cycle of ceremonial songs of the Hopi Indians—and presumably some other groups as well—some of the songs are personal, having been freely composed by an individual. Yet they are not pure self-expression. Although these freely-composed songs are per-

sonal, they are not *purely* personal expression; they embody, articulate, and above all share the personal reality of the composer in an attempt to bring all the individuals of the tribal community into harmony and balance with the universe. All tribal literature is not without a known author. Although the Hopi example has a known author, it is also true that the song is never ascribed to an individual. Nor is it regarded as a personal song. Nor is the western work, Euripides' *Bacchae*, pure self-expression. Virtually all of the playwright's material was given: fixed plot, fixed formal characters, fixed structure. Is the *Bacchae* traditional or personal? In the same sense as the Hopi example, it is both. The author and the community are representatives of each other. It is difficult to imagine any important piece of literature of any culture as being pure self-expression. A sampling of any great literary figure—Yeats, Eliot, Shakespeare, Momaday, Silko, James Welch—shows that they all shared their understanding of reality in an attempt to bring the isolated individual—the author as well as those who partake of his work—into harmony and balance with their community. "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone," says T. S. Eliot. "His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead . . . if we approach a poet without his prejudice we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously."⁵

Ms. Allen suggests that Native American literature is different from western in that it does not simply preach the "majesty and reverent mystery of all things," but through the sacred power of utterance (song, ceremony, legend, myth, tales) it seeks to shape, direct, and determine "the forces that surround and govern our lives and that of all things."⁷ It occurs to me that "the sacred power of utterance" is precisely the Christian concept of speaking things into existence, as seen in the Genesis account, Gen. 3.3. Rather than continue a possible confusion, the term, "western," although not identical with "Christian," when referring to the non-Native American, non-oriental, European literary tradition, is so nearly synonymous as to be interchangeable with it. Western man does not, in fact, simply preach "majesty and reverent mystery of all things." Otherwise, why would he pray

for rain, success in battle, or a healthy family? The New Testament, as well as the Old, clearly requires man to cooperate, shape, direct, and determine "the forces that surround and govern our lives and that of all things." In addition, western man is required to do so regularly and in ritualized ways. The notion of man's cooperation with the Deity as well as other men is seen in the old Keres song text quoted by Ms. Allen:

I add my breath to your breath
That our days may be long on the Earth . . .
May my Father bless you with life
May our Life Paths be fulfilled⁸

There is an analogue with the numerous Biblical admonitions that are cast in the familiar If-you-obey-Me, I-will-bless-you cooperative formula. The admonition to love your neighbor as yourself is reciprocal, implying in the same manner and to the same degree. Prayer is an example of man's reciprocal cooperation with the Deity.

I do not suggest that Native American and Christian approaches to what Barre Toelken calls "religious reciprocity" are the same.⁹ They are not. The Native American typically asks permission of an animal, and often a plant, to take its life *before* taking the life. Western man gives thanks *after* taking the life, not to the animal or plant, but to the creator. The hierarchical implications are different.

The issue of hierarchy in Ms. Allen's essay also needs amplification. She states that in the Native American system there is no hierarchical ladder of being on which ground, trees, and animals occupy a lower rung than humans, asserting that all are seen as brothers or relatives. First of all, this notion is not borne out in practice. There is in fact a hierarchical ladder, again not identical with the Christian, in the Native American system. Plants and animals are killed (typically with their permission) in order to feed man. The reverse is unknown. Here, one must not confuse the animal with the supernatural being in animal form. A hierarchy is implicit. Secondly, in the western view, plants, animals, earth, and humans are clearly understood as belonging to a vital cycle, each dependent upon the other. The fact that westerners do not typically call non-human objects relatives, while some Native Americans may, does not negate a similarity of understanding. While it is true that the Native American in his tribal

existence may be closer on a daily basis to an awareness of this vital cycle, western man may be just as cognizant of this cycle when considering the larger frame of life.

Likewise, the westerner is cognizant of the presence of both the physical and the metaphysical realms of existence. The notion of speaking in the physical realm in order to affect a change in the metaphysical realm is just as Christian an idea as it is Native American. Prayer is the most obvious example, and a Christian prayer—whether sung, danced, recited, played upon instruments, or all in combination—is performed for precisely this purpose. Ms. Allen's definition of ceremonial literature is that literature which produces a metaphysical state of consciousness or condition.¹⁰ Her definition is a perfect definition of Christian prayer also, a form of western ceremonial literature.

Let me expand upon this analogy by commenting upon some of the similarities of concept between Native American and western prayer that Black Elk (through Joseph Epes Brown) demonstrates in "Hanblecheyapi: Crying for a Vision."¹¹ The Siouan lamentation ritual—including much singing and prescribed movement—is, in Black Elk's words, "a way of praying." The ritual is at once sacred literature and prayer, and it shares much conceptually with its counterpart in western literature. According to Black Elk, the prime reason for lamenting is that "it helps us to realize our oneness with all things."¹² Christian churches regularly call for intercessory prayer in order to draw the intercessor close to God and His creation, for the sake of the individual, his family, community, and the entire world. The blessing of the ritual objects, willows and tobacco, which Black Elk mentions, compares favorably with similar practices in both Catholic and protestant churches—in their case, bread, wine, incense, handkerchiefs, candles, and so forth. An almost perfect analogue can be made between Native American and western concepts when Black Elk explains that the closer the "lamerter" draws near the "great powers of Wakan-Tanka" the more the "bad spirits" try to frighten and test him. Practicing Christians everywhere speak of the phenomenon of being tempted and tormented by evil spirits whenever they try to draw close to God. In their end notes, Joseph Brown and Black Elk clarify the issue of the "material form representing the animal or object from which [the lamenter] received his 'power.'" These forms have been incorrectly called fetishes. These material forms,

the authors say, correspond more nearly to "what the Christian calls guardian angels."¹³ I would add that Christians frequently possess or wear tokens and other sacred objects representing various holy personages or places.

An observable difference between Native American and western prayer is that the western typically is less ritualized. Western prayer less often incorporates music, dance, and instruments, although all of these are employed at times. "Singing in the spirit" and "dancing in the spirit" are common occurrences among many Christian sects.¹⁴

Western thinkers separate that which is sacred from that which is secular, and because of this division, have produced one body of traditional literature that is sacred and another that is secular. Native Americans, on the other hand, do not dichotomize; to them, all of life is sacred. All Native American traditional literature, therefore, can be called "sacred," as Ms. Allen suggests. An understanding of these distinct categories is vital to the study of Native American literature. Ms. Allen's essay seeks to contrast Native American ("sacred") traditional literature with western secular literature (whether only traditional or all literature is unclear). Some lines of distinction need to be drawn.

I have not proven, nor have I suggested, that Ms. Allen's essay is singularly and particularly flawed. I have, I believe, shown that any one analysis of a piece of Native American literature is not likely to produce definitive results.

I turn now to my reasons for using an archetypal approach to analysis. I suggest that traditional Native American literature can be explained with confidence by a non-Indian reader by using an archetypal mode of analysis, since in such an approach the critic is dealing with trans-cultural concepts. Jung points out that since psychology is a study of psychic processes, it can be brought to bear upon the study of literature, for the human psyche is the womb of all the arts. Psychology and the study of literature will always have to turn to one another for help, and the one will not invalidate the other. As a story is built upon a groundwork of implicit psychological assumptions of which the author is by and large unaware, they reveal themselves pure and unadulterated. The experience that furnishes the material for artistic expression is not consciously familiar to the artist; it derives its existence from the recesses of his or her mind; this is the collective unconscious, a psychic disposition shaped by the forces

of heredity, which is a repository of archetypal motifs that are transcultural and not bound by time-horizons. Jung likens the collective unconscious to "echos of previous epochs."¹⁵ He goes on to say that an epoch is like an individual; it has its own limitations of conscious outlook, and therefore requires adjustment. It follows, then, that the individual is an appendage of the collective unconscious and a repository of its hereditary motifs.¹⁶ Since archetypal motifs are transcultural, it is reasonable to assume that a non-Indian critic, by using an archetypal approach to analysis, could investigate the presence and function of these universal motifs in a piece of Native American literature.

Writers have used the term, "archetype," in a variety of ways, and it has therefore lost its specificity. I use the term in a narrowly defined way. According to Jung, an archetype is a "primordial image" or "psychic residue" of repeated types of experiences in the lives of our ancient ancestors that are inherited in the "collective unconscious." Jung's definition is precisely what I mean when I use the term. Furthermore, unlike some other writers, when I use the label, "universal archetype," I refer to those "primordial images" that are shared by all men, at all times, globally. Like Jung, Bodkin, Campbell, and others, I realize the present inability to prove conclusively that universal archetypes in fact exist. Notwithstanding, I concur with these people that after much research, the existence of certain universal archetypes seems self-evident.

Consequently, I offer commentary on two universal archetypes that I find in the Hopi story, "Poowak Wuhti." Since the story is available in print, a brief summary of the plot should suffice.¹⁷

A young Hopi husband becomes suspicious that something is out of order because the rabbits that he brings home for food never show up at mealtime. He sees his wife skin and roast the rabbits, but "he would never get any rabbit stew." Feigning sleep one night, he watches his wife put on her best clothes and leave the house with "her pottery full of rabbit stew" and "her bundle of rolled *piki* [bread]." He follows her to a "witch house," hides outside to see what is going on, and is discovered by "the witch people" who are practicing witchcraft.

"You have to join us now," the witch people tell the

husband. The husband reluctantly agrees to do so. Because he does not join the society wholeheartedly, the witch people make several attempts to kill him. Each time his life is in peril, he is protected, first by Spider Woman herself, then by a number of other supernatural beings sent out by Spider Woman.

Ultimately, the husband is freed from the influence of the witch people, but his wife is destroyed: "She threw herself over the cliff and ended her life."

"Poowak Wuhti" reflects two archetypes that I wish to inspect. The archetype of the unfaithful wife is a tool of destruction, usually of herself as well as her husband.¹⁸ Although the Hopi wife does not desert her husband simply for a more virile and desirable man in this story, she clearly desires more than she has with him. The beginning of the story describes her as one who has strayed from the role of the ideal wife: "Coming home from the fields each day, the man would hunt and kill rabbits . . . his wife would skin and roast them. But he would never get any rabbit stew." In addition, she does not make *piki* bread for him. We soon learn that she is stealing household food to feed someone else. Her husband suspects adultery: "I'll pretend to sleep and see what she does." Her unseemly behavior increases as she becomes more and more involved with witchcraft. Secretly, her husband watches her leave his bed at night and disappear in the darkness.

The wife's nightly involvement in the witch gatherings continues. The husband's curiosity grows, and he follows her to a witch kiva, where the other ritual participants discover him. The unfaithful wife seems to take no pity on her husband. When the participants bring her husband inside the kiva to decide whether he is to live or die, she says nothing. With death as an alternative, the husband accepts their demand—"You'll have to join us now." He kills his beloved turkey and is forced to participate in their ritual. The wife lacks compassion for her husband; she fails to speak up for him and simply tells him to do what he is told.

The witches try to kill the husband by exposing him to danger upon "a little pinnacle of a cliff," but he is assisted and rescued by a number of supernatural beings. Ultimately, Spider Woman (a wise old woman archetype) aids the husband in getting rid of his bewitched wife. The wife's unfaithfulness and her involve-

ment with witchcraft bring about her husband's rough treatment and near-death. Her faithlessness is punished; she goes crazy and ends her life.

The second archetype is that of the wise old woman (often wise old man), a redeemer or spiritual guide, a personification of the spiritual principle representing good will and readiness to help.¹⁹ At the beginning of the story, the protagonist, "a man who was a good farmer," is successful. He is blessed by the earth for his cooperation with her: "He had lots of plants, and he grew good crops. When he gathered in his crops, he had plenty." There is, however, something evil in paradise: his wife does not fulfill her proper role as a good Hopi mate by cooking and serving her husband the food that he brings home. In addition, she goes on mysterious trips at night after her husband has gone to bed. The tension builds until the husband, as well as the reader, discovers that the wife is a witch. The husband is faced with a terrible dilemma. A wise Hopi avoids contact with a witch as much as possible, according to the Hopi narrator of "Poowak Wuhti." Yet a husband can scarcely avoid contact with his own spouse. Additionally, in trying to discover the secret of his wife's mysterious nocturnal trips from the house, the husband places himself in mortal danger.

The husband, as well as Hopi listeners, for whom the story typically is narrated, and who are fully cognizant of the dangers of witchcraft, know the peril that the husband faces. The husband knows that he cannot extricate himself from this hopeless and desperate situation without profound reflection or a lucky idea. Since he cannot solve this dilemma himself, the solution comes in the form of a personified thought, in the shape of the wise old woman, Spider Woman.

The central appeal of "Poowak Wuhti" is that the protagonist (and by association, the listener or reader) always is under the watchful eye of one spiritual being or another. At the moment of the husband's greatest peril, when his life is in jeopardy at the hands of the evil witches, Spider Woman comes to his assistance. She acts as his guide; she prophesies: "They're going to come and try to break you. They're going to ask you to go down with them, but don't do it." According to the narrator, "The mere mention of Spider Woman, to a Hopi, means that you can breathe easily. There is help. Everything is okay." Probably a wise old person popping up in a tense circumstance is a comfort

to anyone anywhere, for this person offers something definite in an indefinite situation. The appearance of Navajo Kachina Uncle is comforting, says the narrator, but the appearance of Spider Woman, in the Hopi Way, is an analogue to the appearance of Christ, the Holy Spirit, or an angel in the Christian Way.

Quite likely, each of the supernatural helpers is sent out by Spider Woman, for there is some evidence—in Hopi theology—that all the kachinas dwell in her house, or at least frequent it.²⁰ Navajo Kachina Uncle, the Bluebird Girls, and the Chipmunks are not to be thought of as manifestations of Spider Woman herself; they simply are sent out by her instructions. She is one of the creator deities, and, therefore, presumably is concerned for the welfare of her children. She is sometimes called Spider Grandmother, and often appears in person when one of her children is faced with peril. Spider Woman, clearly personifying the universal archetype of the wise old woman in "Poowak Wuhti," gives the husband some "strong medicine": "Chew this medicine and spit it on them, the witch begins, and they will crumble. They'll die," she tells the husband.

In this investigation, I have addressed the question of whether a non-Indian can fully grasp and critically deal with Native American literature. As Paul B. Armstrong points out, there are those for whom a piece of literature can never be fully grasped, for there is a plurality of meanings to all literature, and no simple definitive interpretation exists. I have shown, I believe, by using an archetypal approach to analysis, that Native American literature is accessible and can be comprehended by a non-Indian.

I do not wish to imply that the archetypal approach is the only one. Nor do I suggest that a reader need be thoroughly steeped in Jungian theory to apply this method. Other methods may work equally well, and I hope that other investigators will apply them.

It is evident to me that a non-Hopi cannot possess all the potentials of even a single word of Hopi, if Hopi is a foreign language to him. I have not attempted such a close linguistic interpretation. Nor have I pretended to speak for the Hopi people. Archetypes, on the other hand, are universal by definition; they can be responded to and analyzed by a non-Indian whose interest need not be dismissed out of hand.

An extensive hearing and reading of Hopi traditional narratives

suggests that this body of literature provides abundant archetypal motifs, including menstrual taboos, cannibalism, trickster figures, and others. A mere glance at W. David Laird's *Hopi Bibliography*²² shows just how many traditional narratives are available in print, and Ekkehart Malotki and Michael Lomatuway'ma have recently published two sizeable collections of coyote tales.

I have responded to Ms. Allen's article for three reasons. I wish to clarify some of the issues she addresses. I take exception to her too-glib stance that Native American literature can be understood and appreciated only by Indians and other experts in tribal studies, and finally, I wish to support a stance for a plurality of interpretations of Native American literature.

NOTES

1. Dell Hymes, *"In vain I tried to tell you": Essays in Native American Ethnopoetics* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1981), 132.
2. Paula Gunn Allen, "The Sacred Hoop: A Contemporary Indian Perspective on American Indian Literature," *Literature of the American Indians: Views and Interpretations*, ed. Abraham Chapman (New York: New American Library, 1975), 111.
3. Allen, "The Sacred Hoop . . . ," 111.
4. *Ibid.*, 112.
5. *Ibid.*, 112.
6. T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," *T. S. Eliot: Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Hugh Kerner (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962), 149.
7. Allen, "The Sacred Hoop . . . ," 113.
8. *Ibid.*, 113.
9. Barre Toelken, "Seeing With the Native Eye: How Many Sheep Will It Hold," *Seeing With the Native Eye*, ed. Walter Holden Capps (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1976), 20.
10. Allen, "The Sacred Hoop . . . " 129.
11. Black Elk (through Joseph Epes Brown), "Hanblecheyapi: Crying for a Vision," *Teachings from the American Earth*, Dennis Tedlock and Barbara Tedlock (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1975), 20.
12. Black Elk, " . . . Crying for a Vision," 21.
13. *Ibid.*, 41
14. I Cor. 14:15 and II Sam. 6:16, respectively, are two of many references to spiritual singing and dancing.
15. C. G. Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, trans. W. S. Dell and Cary F. Paynes (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Ind., 1939), 152.
16. Jung, *Modern Man . . .* , 166.
17. Mando Sevillano, *The Hopi Way: Tales of a Vanishing Culture* (Flagstaff: Northland Press, 1986), 43.

18. Walter K. Gordan, ed., *Literature in Critical Perspectives: An Anthology* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), 509.

19. Wilfred L. Guerin and others, *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1979), 160.

20. Hamilton A. Tyler, *Pueblo Animals and Myths* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press), 47.

21. Paul B. Armstrong, "The Conflicts of Interpretations and the Limits of Pluralism," *PMLA*, 98, No. 3 (1983): 341.

22. W. David Laird, *Hopi Bibliography: Comprehensive and Annotated* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1977).