

Themes of the Trickster

The theme of the trickster exists not only in oral traditions (folklore) but also in modern written language. We first examined the trickster's role in an oral tradition with the Winnebago culture, and came to the assumption that it also exists in modern written literature, one example that we looked at of this was *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain.

The trickster figure is a prominent one in society, not only in just the American society/culture but others as well. There are different oral traditions where there is a trickster figure present, in at least one figure of other people's cultures. It might not be always be present in a main figure but is seen through different stages by others. I'm not just saying that one person may always be considered a trickster, though it is possible, but that if this doesn't exist in a being in an oral tradition or modern written literature, various aspects of the trickster figure can be seen throughout. That it is possible to be a trickster one day but not that other, so just sometimes you might have the trickster personality.

The trickster figure in the oral tradition of the Winnebago culture is very selfish and chaotic, I felt. Always in the search for food and sex. The figure pursues things for the good of itself, as an example, in the beginning the trickster tricks a buffalo into running out the exit he set up as a trap to kill him because he told the buffalo he was surrounded by people and that exit was the only one to escape. So the buffalo listened and he tried to exit where he told him to, but he killed him to eat, and you see the figures

trickery. Throughout his mischief, trickery, and motif is commonly seen in animals. The trickster really knows how to use his ability in tricking the animals as that of a sibling, for example, he says when tricking the buffalo, “Listen younger brother, this place is completely surrounded by people! Over there, however, is an opening through which you might escape.”¹ With that, I feel that he is successful in tricking them by using that family connection, by doing that I feel that the “victims” of his mischief and trickery lower their guard which allows them more vulnerability.

Other cultures have their own trickster figure, in the Sioux culture it is Unktomi, the spider. As an example, Unktomi tricked two widows into searching for these fine red plums, and they said they wished they could go pick some but there was nobody to watch their children. So Unktomi said he would, and they let him because he used the family connection I talked about by saying he would take care of his little nephews. The widows leave in search of the red plums and Unktomi actually makes soup out of the children and eats the soup with the widows when they returned. Not noticing their babies until after they had eaten, then chased Unktomi trying to kill him but he hid in a hole. Again they are tricked by him when he comes back to their house in disguise and says he would kill Unktomi and goes into the hole making it bigger and “kills Unktomi”. He tells them to go into the hole to get some revenge, they listen, and that is when he traps them inside by setting it on fire.² Once again, the trickster figure is seen in other cultures.

However it is possible to suggest that the trickster figure in the Winnebago culture is kind of careless in his actions leading to him always getting caught. Maybe if he was more careful, he would be more successful, but would that be a good think? I feel that it

1 Paul Radin, *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), Pg.7.

2 Marie L. McLaughlin, “*The Unktomi (Spider), Two Widows, and the Red Plums,*” in Myths and Legends of the Sioux (Nebraska: Bison Books, 1990), Pg. 142.

is okay to play tricks and pranks, but it's usually the other one that doesn't like it because who likes being tricked anyway.

Another example of the trickster's carelessness is shown when Unktomi (spider) is searching for the fat man and finds him skinning a deer. He says to him cut the meat into six sections for my family and I by the time I bring them here. So Unktomi leaves to get his family, and in the meantime the fat man hides up in the tree with all of the deer meat, throwing sand and dirt on the blood so there was no trace left of the deer. When Unktomi and his family return they find no trace of him or the meat. Until his children see the fat man's shadow in the water because the reflection of the tree was in the water. So the children tell their father Unktomi and he goes into the water with rock tied to him to reach the bottom to get the fat man. The rocks being too heavy keep Unktomi under water and is eventually eaten by a fish.³ The fat man tricked the spider, which in my culture is our trickster figure by hiding in the tree and covering the blood with sand and dirt. Again we see that same theme in the trickster figure as being careless in the Winnebago culture as well in this myth and legend of the Sioux, with the spider being careless by going into the water with rocks tied to himself, knowing that he wouldn't be able to get back up.

We see the main trickster figure as itself in the oral tradition of the Winnebago, but we also see it in Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer as well, in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, but not as a whole. It's like he takes form in them, but it's not himself doing the trickery just giving them inspiration like the bad side of your conscious. That's just what I see anyway. I see the trickster more or less just as a shadow until he takes

3 Marie L. McLaughlin, "The Wasna (Pemmican) Man and the Unktomi (Spider)," in Myths and Legends of the Sioux (Nebraska: Bison Books, 1990), Pg. 142.

form in other things from human beings to animals, etc. That is when you can actually see the figure and that is why there is so much trickery because he constantly gives inspiration to other things leading to all the trickery, mischief, etc.

In *Huckleberry Finn* I can see aspects of the oral tradition when Huck says, “I heard an owl, away off, who-whooping about somebody that was dead, and a whippowill and a dog crying about somebody that was going to die...”⁴ In my cultures oral tradition the owl means someone is going to die, and the dogs barking is never good. It’s fascinating to see aspects of your culture in modern written literature. The trickster figure is present practically everywhere.

You see the trickster figure coming out in Tom again when they are sneaking out of the Widow’s house and Jim hears them so he comes and sits against a tree, but ends up falling asleep. So Tom slipped Jim’s hat off of his head and hung it on a limb right over him.⁵ I would say that the trickster figure is most often seen in Tom. Tom enjoys lying and tricking other people far too much, and loves telling stories. Both Tom and Huck find enjoyment and rush in pulling pranks on others.

With the Tom and his sense of the trickster figure, I feel that he just seizes the moment and likes to be free from the rules which portray the figure in him. When I refer to people having the figure in them, I don’t necessarily mean that it’s the trickster figure but characteristics of him in them. Huck’s similarity to the trickster is that in the Winnebago tradition the trickster is always moving around, on one adventure to the next, and Huck had that quality when he moved around in the woods and sailed. There is also concealment and deception shown in Huck when he cleared the dust and covers up the

4 Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (London, England: Penguin Group, 1994) Pg. 4.

5 Twain, Pg. 8.

hole, which again are all characteristics of the trickster.

There is also the theme of the conjurer in both Tom and Huck when they are eating and birds fly over and he says its going to rain, but don't shoot those birds because its bad luck. It is also seen with Jim's charm, he says that it knows things.

I saw that the trickster figure was present not only in oral tradition, in the Winnebago culture to modern written literature leading to Huckleberry Finn and to others as well. It was also alive in the Sioux culture, but in the form of a spider. The Navajo also have a trickster figure, but it is the coyote. I feel that it is a common figure throughout history, and is often seen. In saying that, I feel as if we will continue to see the trickster figure because we still see it now and it has been around for centuries. I feel that we might need the amusement that it brings along. With that the trickster figure will continue to evolve fitting into modern day times. It is something I feel will always be present.