

Sky Woman, Trickster, Windigo: Reflections of Traditional Storytelling in Contemporary Canadian Indigenous Novel

Žena z nebe (Sky Woman), Šprýmař (Trickster), Windigo: Reflexe tradičního vyprávěčství v současném kanadském indigenním románu

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ABSTRACT

Storytelling is an essential constituent of Indigenous cultures in Canada which transmits and preserves Indigenous knowledge and value systems. This work examines the way contemporary Indigenous writers work with the tradition of oral storytelling in their writing. At first, the role and importance of storytelling for Indigenous cultures, and consequently for literature, is discussed. The following analysis of individual novels is centered around three characters significant and recurrent in Indigenous storytelling – Sky Woman, the trickster, and the windigo, and it studies the way oral storytelling shapes the narrative styles, and how Indigenous referential frameworks are manifested in this process. The theoretical background is informed mainly by sources from Indigenous scholars and the texts are analysed through concepts based on Indigenous perspectives on storytelling, which hopes to bring a different view on these texts than the readings based on postcolonial and postmodern theory frequently applied in recent decades.

This dissertation searches for answers to the following questions: How is oral storytelling reflected in contemporary Canadian Indigenous writing? In which ways do these three characters contribute to the manifestation of orality in written texts and what meanings does their usage create? What are the specificities of Indigenous narratives using the oral tradition, and how do they differ, if they do, from Western narrative strategies?

The work shows that concepts of orality are transferred to written texts in the form of values based on the notion of relationality – the perception of reality as a set of relations and indispensability of balanced relationships with all creation for individuals as well as for communities. Chapter 2 presents definitions and aspects of storytelling emphasized in Indigenous theories – dynamism of storytelling, the equal role of the teller and the listener in the process; it also provides an overview of Indigenous typologies of stories, discusses the importance of

spirituality, cyclicity, and the use of stories as theories, and examines the correlations between the oral and written storytelling. Chapter 3 deals with the controversial, but for contemporary literature very important issue of cultural appropriation in relation to Indigenous stories; it explains the causes of the different approaches to using and sharing stories stemming from the legacy of colonial practices and from the diverse understanding of knowledge use in Western and Indigenous views, and presents the necessary steps to prevent these affairs from happening, as explained by Indigenous scholars and artists.

Chapter 4 examines the Sky Woman creation story and its reflections in two contemporary novels with the help of the term “enstoried principles” – principles of relationality, respect, reciprocity, and responsibility that the Sky Woman story embodies and that influence not only the themes of the novels but also the narrative strategies. The trickster is discussed in Chapter 5 in relation to these principles after an overview of the critical debate about misconceptions around this character in academia is provided. The analyses of three trickster novels show various aspects of this figure – humorous transformability, his teachings about the necessity to reconsider preconceived notions as well as harmful consequences of his actions. Chapter 6 deals with the windigo, which teaches by embodying oppositional values to the enstoried principles. The shift in signification of the windigo towards representation of colonialism and consumerism is explained and subsequently illustrated by two texts. The conclusion summarizes the main findings, demonstrates that relationality and enstoried principles can be used productively to approach Indigenous texts, but concurrently points to the limitations of this research, and outlines possible future steps in this regard.