



**HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS**

**Hugvísindasvið**

**How Thomas King Uses Coyote in his  
Novel Green Grass, Running Water**

*Canadian Literature*

**Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs**

**Veneta Georgieva Petkova**

**May 2011**

Háskóli Íslands  
Hugvísindasvið  
**Canadian Literature**

# **How Thomas King Uses Coyote in his Novel Green Grass, Running Water**

*Canadian Literature*

**Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs**

**Veneta Georgieva Petkova**

**Kt.: 241179-2579**

**Leiðbeinandi: Anna Jeeves**

**May 2011**

## Introduction

Thomas King is one of the most acknowledged Canadian writers and novelists. Referred to as a Native writer of Greek, German and Cherokee descent, King was born in California 1943. (Schorcht ix) He completed his doctoral dissertation on Native American literature at the University of Utah. As well as teaching at both the Universities of Guelph and Lethbridge in Canada, King has published a children's book, a collection of short stories, and three novels. Among them is *Green Grass, Running Water*, known as a novel that "develops a complex sense of what it means to be a Native writer who crosses all kinds of borders." (Schorcht x) However, one of the most precise descriptions of King's novel is the one comprising the following words: "In *Green Grass, Running Water* a narrator and the trickster Coyote preside over two loosely interwoven plots: one based on the myth of the creation of the world, and one based on the quasi-realistic events on and near a Canadian Blackfoot reservation." (Bailey 43) Another look at the book and the title itself make it possible to conclude that it is a title, which has a special place in the history of the Indian tribes in North America, because it was one of the most neglected part in the treatise created by the new settlers. This is a metaphor, a famous line from the contracts that the Europeans signed with the Indians. But besides used as a metaphor, this sentence symbolizes that King's book counts on readers' ability to interpret the signs from the mythological and realistic worlds. The metaphoric title of King's novel foreshadows that the main themes in his book are going to play around the tricky definitions of real and mythic, right and wrong, justice and injustice. These are the themes that are connected to the trickster Coyote, as under trickster here the author means the traditional for the Indian stories

hero who had resisted against the European cultural influence and who seems to be the connection between these opposite realities. That is why we shall examine the questions concerning the character of Coyote and more precisely who is the Indian trickster, how his intricate nature relates to the major characters from the novel, and the reason and the meaning of the water flood and Coyote's place in it.

Therefore, firstly the question about Coyote's identity will be explained and how this identity influences the narrative. Then the trickster's actions will be referred to some of the characters of the contemporary part of the King's novel. And finally, the role that Coyote plays in the water flood will be considered, and how the mystic heroes of the novel in the face of the four old Indians are connected to both Coyote and the flood.

## Chapter 1

### Description of Coyote

Because of the many years of co-existence between the Aboriginal and European societies in Northern America, and more precisely in Canada, certain traces of entanglement between the two cultures of the oral tradition and the written world are observed. Interestingly, there is a statement today that describes the situation around the Indian oral tradition on the following way: “Aboriginal writers emphasize the importance of their oral cultural heritage both as a source of meaning in their lives and as a resource for their writing.” (Kroller 24) Native American culture is all about stories and conversations so that is a dialogic culture in which human and non-human persons talk to one another. Consequently, the image of Coyote takes a central place in this culture, because of his never-ending desire to start the next story for the creation of the world and to have everything right in it. Furthermore, as an inevitable part within the traditional oral cultures the figure of Coyote in Thomas King’s novel *Green Grass, Running Water* reminds us “of trickster’s sacred function... as a healer, but also as a disruptive semiotic element that resists colonial representations and stories of containment.” (Smith 531) Thus, Coyote is an important part of the plot of King’s story and as such we have to look closely at some questions, which are- what is the gender of Coyote and what is his or her meaning for the novel *Green Grass, Running Water*.

In order to fulfill these tasks we have to concentrate on two short stories- the first one is called “The One About Coyote Going West”, written by Thomas King and published in 1993, the same year as *Green Grass, Running Water*, in the short stories collection *One Short Stories, That One*. The second story is the one of Harry Robinson’s stories, called “The Flood”, which is published with other Native stories in

the collection of short stories *Write It on Your Heart: The Epic World of an Okanagan Storyteller* in 1989. Harry Robinson is a Native writer, who as well as Thomas King wants to preserve the unique culture of the indigenous population in North America. Both writers use Coyote's character and the two stories here describe best the mystic nature of the Indian trickster. Robinson's story is based on the trickster's character and gender. On the other hand, in order to find out more about Coyote's function in King's novel we shall consider some aspects of it, related to another characters and personal stories.

First of all, according to King Coyote possesses female identity. This is obvious from the story "The One About Coyote Going West". From this narrative we understand not only that Coyote is a female but also that the Native trickster is again in the business of fixing up the world. This can be proven from the following text:

"Coyote comes by my place. She wag her tail. Make them happy noises. Sit on my porch. Look around. With them teeth. With that smile. Coyote put her nose in my tea. My good tea. Get that nose out of my tea, I say. I'm going to see my friends, she says. Tell those stories. Fix the world. Straighten it up. Oh boy, pretty scary that, Coyote fix the world, again." (King, "The One About Coyote Going West")

Furthermore, what the reader understands from King's story too is that Coyote is described like a God, a Creator: "There was nothing else in this world. Just Coyote.... So she starts to make things. So she starts to fix this world." (King, "The One About Coyote Going West") But unfortunately, this Goddess is quite unsuccessful in her attempts to create a new and better world, and that is why she makes a lot of mistakes. That is why Thomas King wonders after the narrative continues:

Maybe it's because she is mean, I says.

Oh, no, says Coyote. That one is sweet and kind.

Maybe it's because that one is not too smart.

Oh, no, says Coyote. That Coyote is very wise.

Maybe it's because she made a mistake.

Oh, no, says Coyote. She made one of those already. (King, "The One About Coyote Going West")

Therefore, in order to protect the world from Coyote's mischief the narrator suggests to the trickster that: "This world is pretty good all by itself. Best to leave it alone. Stop messing around with it." (King, "The One About Coyote Going West") However, Coyote refuses to fulfill this wish and leaves again, but this time "to fix this world for sure." (King, "The One About Coyote Going West") In conclusion one can say that in contrast to all creation stories and the contemporary theological knowledge in the story "The One About Coyote Going West" King exposes the idea of the Goddess, called Coyote that creates the world and could mess with it in order to fix it.

Nevertheless, what is the most important conclusion to be drawn from all of these quotations from King's story "The One About Coyote Going West" is that there is no such thing as a simple definition about Coyote. This conception King continues in the novel *Green Grass, Running Water*. In both literary pieces the role of the Indian trickster is controversial. The readers are confused by the facts of Coyote's mischievousness, which are consequences of the trickster's kind intentions to help fixing up the world.

Interestingly, in contrast to King's comprehension of Coyote as she-hero, Harry Robinson, on the other hand, in one of his stories describing the world creation refers to the trickster as he-hero. This can be observed in the story "The Flood":

Mr. Coyote was coming along

Right by where Aberdeen is right now

And he stop and look, and thought to himself,

At one time I went by this place.

And now this is the second time I went through here.

Looks like the water was rising.

At one time, the first time I go by here,

And this rock was kind of a ridge.

A ridge all along.

But now is all cover with water.

But only to the upper end.

He could spot that, the upper end. (qtd. in Schorcht 49)

What is evident from the quoted passage here is that in this particular story the leading part of the narrative is the journey of Coyote, or "Mr. Coyote", as Robinson refers to him. In contrast to the first story, written by King, where the trickster wants to fix the world and have everything right in it, here in the Harry Robinson story it seems that Coyote has accomplished his mission to fix the world. Ahead of this contrast there are a lot of similarities between the two stories as for example the flood, Coyote's expeditions, the strange conversations between the narrator and the trickster, and Coyote speaking to himself. Both writers, Harry Robinson and Thomas King, create

narratives that are saturated with mystic expressions, which leaves the readers in a permanent expectation that something strange and extraordinary will happen.

Actually, this story of Robinson's treats not only the question about the male identity of Coyote, but transfers to us some features of the trickster that can be found in both King's short story "The One About Coyote Going West" and the novel *Green Grass, Running Water*. These features are: the ability to engage in a conversation, existing on the verge of two opposite spiritual worlds, indifferent to social and political ranks, helpful, and strange, even often misunderstood.

But the question if Coyote possesses a male or female identity is not the only one that creates controversy. As one can witness and conclude the trickster is the symbol of the binarity in King's novel, therefore we can continue by saying that: "Coyote intervenes at the level of perception, and challenges us to conceive of new, even audacious possibilities...New stories emerge in the process; old stories change." (Smith 516) Therefore, King's Coyote is inevitably related to the semiotic realm - "...a realm where cultural signifiers and politicized discursive structures produce meaning and coherent stories." (Smith 516) Furthermore, to what Smith's statement leads is the idea that Coyote can be seen as "comic holotrope." (Smith 516) This fact can be explained as a consequence of the trickster's interpretations and misreading of the world that he can not understand, because it symbolizes the superiority of a different culture and political model, that are incomprehensible for the natives, and Coyote in private. But even though the fact of the importance of such questions concerning the origin and cultural identification, the heroes from the contemporary part of the King's novel try to find their own place in a world that does not tolerate much different forms of cultural diversion. That is why one of the heroes in Thomas King's novel *Green Grass, Running*

*Water* Lionel, as well as other members of his Indian tribe, finds a new life, outside of Blackfoot territory.

Furthermore, we can describe Coyote as one of the significant figures in Indian mythology. That is why Thomas King gives to the trickster an important role in his novel *Green Grass, Running Water*. Coyote is in a permanent dialogue with the writer, heroes and even himself. But these are not fruitless dialogues. From one hand they appeal to the reader to take an active position in the story, and on the other hand Coyote's dialogues aim for the truth, or for the right story that will put everything on its place. But trickster's positive motifs do not always have positive consequences, from where comes the controversy in his deeds. It seems that it does not matter if Coyote's deeds bring something good or a mishap, as the water-flood, he is a hero who has always an agenda, a plan that activates the readers to become politically or socially involved.

Obviously that brings us to the next important step, which is to clarify the question how these intellectual plays with our subjective knowledge involve, the Indian trickster. It will be interesting to find out whether Coyote is a comic figure or a mythic one, or may be some kind of well-implemented metaphor. That is why all of these heterogeneous definitions have brought the necessity of one real description. It is not unreasonable to refer to Coyote as mythical creature that possesses a complex identity, which gravitates between the opposite realms of wisdom and foolishness, right and wrong, generosity and theft, as well as truth and falsehood. (Smith 518)

Logically, next to the question of the nature of the trickster the one of the specifics of the "comic holotrope" needs to be clarified too. One of the best descriptions is given by Vizenor who says: "Comic holotropes comprise signifiers, the signified, and

signs, which in new critical theories provided a discourse on the trickster in oral narratives, translations and modern imaginative literature.” (qtd. in Smith 518)

Consequently, as well as Vizenor, Thomas King undertakes a mission to create a story which has its own trickster, a trickster who is entrusted the mission of reformulating the truth about the world. And the comic element here comes from Coyote’s determination to fix everything following only his/hers own naïve world-view.

Moreover, deeply related to the idea of Coyote’s trickster and comic holotrope’s nature is the notion that in a trickster world everything happens for a reason. That is why Douiehi says: “[I]n the trickster world, everything is already a sign of something. It is a sign because it is a part of a sacred world; it is a sign of the sacred.” (qtd. in Smith 519) Consequently, *Green Grass, Running Water* is a story in which Coyote plays a central role and becomes an active participant in a wide palette of mythic and real episodes of heroes’ lives, a real combination of two opposite cultural and social traditions. Interestingly, all of these elements are brought together into one narrative and appeal to our attention and understanding. It means that the Native trickster is the metaphor of the bridge that connects the contemporary with the mythic world.

Actually, to strengthen even more the idea that Coyote is the embodiment of the notion about bridging different realities, it will be proper to state here that the Indian trickster brings to the readers the two main stories that the book is all about. First of all, this is the realistic story of a few Blackfoot Indians having troubles to find their real identity. The four main characters from the contemporary part of the novel are Lionel, a TV-seller, Lionel’s uncle Eli-an university professor, Alberta- a history teacher and a feminist who is romantically involved with both Lionel and the next important hero-

Charlie Looking Bear, a lawyer working for the Duplessis. In contrast to the first story the second one is magical, which comprises various creation cycles, with the four old Indians who have left a Florida hospital to save Lionel. These four heroes just like Coyote move back and forth between the narratives influencing the contemporary part of the novel. But most importantly what connects both stories is the figure of the trickster and the possessed by him power of signification and ability to bring different pieces into one whole.

Furthermore, one of the most important functions of Coyote in the novel *Green Grass, Running Water* is to give freedom to the readers, so that they can make their own conclusions. That is why Smith says:

King's *Green Grass, Running Water* theorizes itself, performatively "making readers into tricksters." It is "performative" in that it is an active text, a text that acts on the reader and requires new ways of seeing. This performativity ultimately lies at the center of King's story and is intricately tied to the novel's central lesson concerning Native American survival. (Smith 520)

The first evidence to support this fact is the one, which concerns Alberta's lecture when she explains in front of her students about the four Indians- Robinson Crusoe, Hawkeye, Lone Ranger, and Ishmael. But suddenly it seems that they hopped into another century with the important mission to change the world. Ahead of encountering the four old Indians, the other thing that happens during Alberta's lesson is her request toward the students to come up with ideas about the meaning of the drawings, belonging to the "Plains Indian Ledger Art." None of the students seems to understand a thing, which symbolizes the fact that the students are culturally distanced and that is why they are

unable to understand them. All of these relate without no doubt to Coyote, because he is entrusted with this very important task to bring two opposite worlds- one of the European invaders and the other of the Native population- into piece with one another, while fixing up the world. This is a proper explanation of what the word trickster means, which is not just a designation for some hero from the stories about Indians but a mystic figure that has to bring the balance and mutual respect in two totally opposite worlds- the first one is the one of the Indians, who pay enormous respect to the natural forces, and the second one is that one of the European invaders who want to control these forces.

In conclusion one can say that the role of Coyote in the novel is enormous and that can be supported not only from the Native oral tradition but also from that flexibility of the trickster's image that has helped him to survive in the written texts until these days. This genuine Native character has survived to our days because of his audacious ability to exist on the verge of two polar worlds, and not only to exist, but also to play with elements in both of them. Exactly this ability of Coyote's, to act and at the same time to influence the lives of the heroes from the contemporary part of the novel, will be the topic of the next chapter, which focuses on the actions of the Indian trickster.

## Chapter 2

### Coyote's Actions and Their Consequences

One of the successful definitions bestowed on Thomas King's novel *Green Grass, Running Water* refers to it as "keenly attuned to the complex relationship between imperialism and communication." (Johnson, "Plastic shaman in the global village...")

From a historical point of view this relationship has been understood as a way for the predominant European culture to slowly overtake the positions of the oral tradition among the Native population. This overtaking took decades to be completed, but finally its real meaning for both sides was to become a battle for protecting the authentic in each culture- European and Native ones. That is why in *Green Grass, Running Water* King not only celebrates hybridity, but also defends cultural differences. Here the term hybridity means the existence of two different literature traditions in one novel; the first one is the tradition of the written language, while the second one represents the oral tradition, which remains the paramount for the Indian literary world for centuries. These differences in the development of literacy explain the existence of a cultural gap between the indigenous Indian population and the European settlers. Furthermore, it is important to point out that Coyote's character becomes a symbol of this dual reality, which is the foundation for the construction of the plot of King's story. Therefore from now on we will refer to Coyote, as a fictional hero who gets the readers involved in the personal stories of the heroes from the contemporary part of the novel. Consequently, one of the most important questions that have to be resolved here is the one concerning Coyote's actions and how these actions influence the lives of the major characters in the novel *Green Grass, Running Water*. These characters are the ones of Alberta, Lionel, Charlie Looking Bear, Eli Stands Alone, Latisha, and George Morning Star. In order to

understand better why Coyote's deeds have such consequences for these heroes, we need to start first by looking at their own private worlds and the reasons for their double role.

That is why, before looking at Coyote's actions and how they concern the other important heroes in the novel, we need to mention a few words about the hybridity that is introduced through Coyote's character and is used in the creation of the other images in the novel *Green Grass, Running Water*. This is important in order to understand better why Coyote acts in the way he does and how these actions change the lives of the other heroes. For example in the construction of the characters of Lionel, Charlie Looking Bear, Latisha, Eli Stands Alone, Alberta, and in some respect George Morningstar, even though he is not an Indian, King more than ever embraces the idea of dualism in character building. First of all, Charlie is a Blackfoot, but as a lawyer defends the rights of the Duplessis, whose intention to build a dam on the territory of the tribal reservation has been successfully resolved. Unfortunately the company cannot use it because of the resistance of the next important hero Eli Stands Alone. Just like Charlie Eli leaves the reserve to follow his dream to study, which consequently brings him to the professor position. That is why Eli is teaching English literature in the University of Toronto, when he finds out that he is not able to go back to his home-place. Meanwhile what connects these two characters is that both leave the Indian lands for good, but to be able to go back to their roots they have to leave all privileges in the world of the European invaders, which on the other hand gives both heroes opportunity to become again part of the community.

In contrast to Charlie and Eli's interests in the sphere of the literature and law, which are fields of knowledge introduced in the North America from the Europeans,

Alberta's interest in the Plains Indian ledger art seems to bring her closer to her predecessors ideas about the price of human life. Moreover what inclines us to think that the history teacher possesses hybridity is that the heroine, even though Indian in origin, seems to evoke the idea of the individualism. This dualism that can be found in Alberta's character comes from her desire to preserve the Indian spirit, which defies her as a person, while on the same time she wants to continue to live not only as a single woman, but as a single mother too who can provide alone for her family. Interestingly, the history teacher respects the traditions of her own community, which is obvious from that she visits the annual Indian gathering around Blossom, Alberta, regularly, but during the rest of her time the young Indian woman prefers, and even more enjoys, the idea of being alone. This is evident from the following lines in the novel *Green Grass, Running Water*, where the control over the four-wheel vehicle can be accepted as a metaphor of Alberta's desire to be the only one person, who can take decisions and governs her own life:

Alberta liked to drive. She liked to drive her own car, and she liked to drive alone. She didn't like the idea of a trip, but once she was on her way, once the lights of the city were behind her and the roar narrowed into the night, a feeling of calm always came over her, and the world outside the car disappeared...Marriage was like that. (King 90)

What this text proves is that, actually, one strong Indian woman, who was more likely to be seen a hundred years before riding a horse in the vast North American prairies, is now a days driving her car, an innovation that belongs to the white civilization, and even enjoys it, feeling comfortably and protected. Evidently, Alberta is far from the reserve but is close to the spirit of her predecessors by teaching Canadian children the

history of her people. The interesting moment here is that King's heroine is very emancipated, because she likes her freedom and prefers to be the only one to control her life, something obvious from her need to drive alone. This emancipation was not familiar to the Indian women from the previous century, who could not survive if their strong male-mates were not close to protect them. Logically, here we can conclude that the dualism in Alberta's character comes from that she looks like Indian woman and likes the history and artistic nature of her predecessors, but on the other hand she acts and lives as an individual who prefers her freedom and not the living in a tribal community.

As a consequence of all of these one can conclude that as well as Coyote's character is playing double role in Thomas King's narrative, the same can be said for the other five heroes- Charlie Looking Bear, Eli Stands Alone, Lionel, Latisha, and Alberta. Furthermore, the questions about Coyote's nature and the double role that he is playing in King's narrative are inseparable from the next important topic concerning the consequences. It is even more useful to explain how the trickster actions reflect over the lives of some of the protagonists from the contemporary plot of the narrative. Without any doubt we shall start by looking at one of the protagonists in the story Lionel to whom Charlie refers as "Mr. Television. Mr. Stereo. Mr. Movie." (King 124) There is an interesting definition given to Lionel, according to which he is represented as "...a television salesman who resists returning to the reserve, Lionel exemplifies the "false consciousness" of one who is complicit in his own oppression." (Johnson, "Plastic shaman in the global village...") It seems that the Indian hero who resembles the most the movie star John Wayne is unable to resist the newest achievements in technology,

such as television is, and that is why he accepts the job of a TV-salesman, rather than becoming more involved with the social life of his Indian community.

Inside, through the plate glass windows, past the video posters and the clearance sale banners, he could see Bill, all smiles in his gold jacket, talking to a young couple and patting the new Panasonic.

Outside, the night air was cold, but standing there, looking back at the store, Lionel felt exhilarated, intoxicated. For a long time, he stood there in the dark, smiling and swaying until the edges of his ears began to burn and he started to shiver. And as he came back through the darkness and into the light, he caught a glimpse of his own reflection in the glass. (King 90)

This scene of King's novel follows immediately the one where Charlie has driven away in his red Porsche, which renews Lionel's hopes to go back to his university education. But exactly in this passage it seems that King wants to finally awake his hero, while making him familiar from outside with the job that he has. The darkness and the cold from outside are paralleled to the emptiness and absence of purpose in Lionel's life. Interestingly, at this point the novel questions the limits in human's existence, both physical and spiritual. Because of that Lionel needs some external spiritual stimulation to find exactly the meaning of his life. It looks that just like the sleepy Coyote who suddenly wakes up at the beginning of the first part of the novel *Green Grass, Running Water* Lionel too awakes from a long dream that cost him years of his life. According to me there is a symbolic connection between the first episode of King's book when the Dream of Coyote sees all the water around and this sudden spiritual awaking of Lionel's that is described in one of the last scenes at the end of the first part of the novel. If it is

true that everything done by the trickster means something for the development of the story, then it explains the fact why King uses Coyote and his Dream- to prepare the readers for the forthcoming awaking of Lionel,

Moreover, one of trickster's actions that interferes the most with the lives of Lionel, Alberta, and Charlie is described in the last four-section water flood. As Coyote explains to the four old Indians: Ishmael, Lone Ranger, Hawkeye, and Robinson Crusoe- he didn't do anything but "sang a little, danced a little, and helped that woman", he refers to Alberta, "who wanted a baby to get pregnant." (King 456) It looks like after the flood both nature and people get to start a new life. Therefore, the trickster's mischief helps the river floods, which brings nutrients to the cottonwoods. And the cotton trees are necessary for the tribe Blackfoot to perform their annual Sun Dance. This gathering of Indians of the tribe Blackfoot is followed from the flood, a flood that brings the desired baby into Alberta's life and in the same time helps Charlie to quit his job for the Duplessis and finds a new mission in his life- to reunite with his father, who is a movie actor, in Los Angeles. It means that Coyote's actions help two of the protagonist of the story *Green Grass, Running Water* to find a new and hopefully better beginning in their lives.

Even though the fact that there is a real connection between Coyote's actions of helping the four old Indians to fix the world and the consequences that this fact brings into Lionel, Alberta, and Charlie's lives, it is necessary to shift the focus towards George Morningstar who is the hero that embraces the idea of violence and intolerance towards the Native culture. He resembles in a way the dog that has no manners from the beginning of the first part of the book, a dog that seems to be god that is why Coyote says to it to sit and relax and watch some television. (King 3) It is interesting to find out

that it does not matter that George Morningstar adores at first his wife Latisha, because of her Indian origin, as the plot of the novel progresses we can witness how the American:

“becomes a wife-beater and a would- be exploiter of Native culture when he tries to photograph the Sun Dance at the end of the novel. He represents the worst that white culture has to offer Native people.”

(Johnson, “Plastic shaman in the global village...”)

It is Coyote who helps Lionel to see that while arguing with his wife Latisha, actually the bold American is taking pictures with his big black briefcase. Here the Indian trickster successfully protects the authentic Indian culture and shows to Latisha and her family that George Morningstar does not deserve any attention or compassion.

Interestingly, it seems that from all the characters that we have become familiar with as readers, the trickster Coyote is most connected with the hero of Eli through the image of the water. First of all we need to support the idea that the Indian trickster is connected to the water, which can be seen in the following lines from the beginning of the first part of the King’s novel *Green Grass, Running Water*:

“Hooray, says that silly Dream, Coyote dream. I’m in charge of the world. And then that Dream sees all that water.” (King 1)

It is interesting to find out that Coyote is once more connected to the image of the world. water at the end of the first part of the Thomas King’s, where is said the following:

“Is this a puzzle?” says Coyote. “Are there any clues?”

“We are going to have to do this again. We are going to have to get it right.”

“Okay,” says Coyote, “I can do that.”

“All right,” I says, “pay attention. In the beginning there was nothing.  
Just the water.” (King 107)

It seems that Coyote waits for the second chapter of the novel where Eli is in his cabin, which is surrounded with water:

Eli Stands Alone stood at the window of the cabin and watched the water slide past the porch. It was getting higher, but they had done that before, open the gates just a little and let the stream come up over the sides of the channel and wash against the logs. A lot of trouble for nothing. (King 118)

In these passages can be found not only examples for that both Eli and the trickster are closely related through the image of the water. It seems that both heroes are waiting for something to happen- Coyote anticipates the right story to be told from the narrator, while Eli stays in his mother's cabin expecting the dam problem to be resolved. An interesting point to be made here is that the water behind the Grand Baleen Dam is not circulating freely as the one in the rivers from the multiple Creation stories. Eli's intention to stop the exploitation of the dam is both a political and spiritual form of opposition against the inevitable progress. (Johnson, “Plastic shaman in the global village...”) In the final fourth part of the book the reader actually witnesses the earthquake and the consequent water flood, for which the Indian trickster is to blame. Actually, what is more important here is not the fact that the professor from Toronto drowns and his mother's house is almost destroyed, but “the liberation of the water may provide a symbolic defeat of settler technology and inaugurate yet another creation story...” (Johnson, “Plastic shaman in the global village...”) Here it looks like Coyote helps Eli to leave the story in a mysterious but a great way, becoming a hero for his

family, and that is why Norma, Eli's sister, and Lionel want to continue his spiritual fight against the signs of inevitable progress.

In conclusion here it can be said that the book of Thomas King is not just "a playful, humorous story of the famous trickster's adventures" (Lavery 107) but is more importantly a story that celebrates the idea of hybridity, which can be seen in Coyote's character, as well as in the other heroes too. Furthermore, what the reader witnesses is how this hybridity has been used through Coyote's actions. This is a fact that concerns all the heroes from the book *Green Grass, Running Water*. What is more important is that Coyote, used as an image that connects the spiritual and the reality domains of life, needs to be examined in relation to the water flood. Therefore, we have to take closer look at the characters of the four old mystic Indians, which is the topic of the next chapter, because they possess a power of signification, just like Coyote does. The spiritual meaning of the four old men for Indian's society will be scrutinized, while looking at the images of the four mystic women with great importance for Native mythology. This connection between Coyote and the four old Indians as mystic heroes will be delineated because of the image of the water.

## Chapter 3

### Coyote, the Water, and the Four Old Indians

Interestingly, one of the most significant parts of the whole novel *Green Grass, Running Water* is the one that contains the climax of the narrative. As one can expect a leading part in it is given to Coyote and his enchanting song, which brings the earthquake and the subsequent water flood. The literature professor Eli disappears without a trace probably drowning in the water flood. These events have devastating consequences for the fictional heroes, among which are Lionel, Alberta and Charlie, but in a way beyond the personal level it seems that the whole Blackfoot community will not be the same after Eli's death. Nevertheless, this is the part of the novel where the Indian trickster Coyote and the water flood as a literary devices, that have been exploited in both Indian and European literature, symbolize the idea that King's fiction "mediates between cultures and belief systems while simultaneously privileging cultures and belief systems historically marginalized by the invading culture's exclusive and dominative discourses." (Cox 219) Even more, the novel *Green Grass, Running Water* unifies two conflicting storytelling traditions- the European literary tradition of the written language and the Native oral tradition of storytelling, which means that the reader can expect everything to happen. Therefore, it can be concluded that Coyote is the symbol of the bridge, or the mutual influence between these two literary traditions, which is obvious from the connection between the Indian trickster and the image of the water, but most importantly Coyote is connected with the water through the images of the four old Indians, who just like the trickster are on a mission of fixing-up the world.

First of all, we need to clarify the question about the way King is telling his story and how this concerns the role of the water in the narrative. Therefore, the

assumption can be made that Thomas King gives signs from the early sections of the novel that he is telling a story, which combines the conventions of both Native American and European/European North American literary traditions. (Cox 222) What Cox says can be found at the first few pages of the novel *Green Grass, Running Water*. For example immediately after the part where Coyote has a conversation with God follows the part where Lionel and his aunt Norma are introduced, the heroes from the contemporary part of the novel, and after this introduction there is again another hopping into the mystic world with the presentation of the four old Indians-Lone ranger, Hawkeye, Robinson Crusoe, and Ishmael. This constant changing of scenes with heroes that seem, at first, to have nothing in common means that the reader will be invited into different worlds, where his/hers inner knowledge has to be in constant use in order to understand why Thomas King creates these shifting realities and what the connection is between these different worlds. It seems that the figure of Coyote is the one that connects these opposite realities and that is why from the prologue of the novel we understand that Coyote is in charge of everything and not God. This is evident from the next lines:

“I don’t want to be a little god, says that god. I want to be a big god!

“What a noise,” says Coyote. “This dog has no manners.”

*Big one!*

“Okay, okay,” says Coyote. “Just stop shouting.”

There, says that GOD. That’s better.

“Now you’ve done it,” I says.

“Everything’s under control,” says Coyote. “Don’t panic.” (King

3)

Evidently Coyote and not God is in charge of the world. This is how Thomas King decides to start his novel with one helpless and angry God who is quite concerned with the fact that he has lost his control over the waters. Thus, the Indian trickster is the one who is entrusted the power to calm down the Christian God, which means that Coyote is the active element; he is the one who will have a leading part in the events that follow, while God is unable to take a part.

Moreover, every story has some theme to gravitate around. In *Green Grass, Running Water* it seems to be the water. More precisely the novel starts with Coyote's dream and in it is the water. Furthermore, we witness that the figure of the trickster continues to take part in scenes where the water is always present. Interestingly, in order to support this fact it is enough to look at the four mystic parts of King's novel where the creation stories are introduced with the First Woman, Changing Woman, Thought Woman, and Old Woman playing essential parts. It seems that these four creation stories with the water present in them are the foreground to what brings Eli back to his homeland and consequently draws him to death. Therefore it is very reasonable to find out what stands behind the definition of water. Cox says that the water in this particular novel of King's "...functions as a fluid symbol of creation, destruction, or both simultaneously. In addition, water is the source of creation in many Native American origin stories and in King's novel..." (Cox 223) At the very beginning of the book is stated the following thought: "So. In the beginning, there was nothing. Just the water." (King 1) This means that the water existence precedes that of God's. One can go even further by saying that the water is represented as a figure that is necessary for the creation of the animal and human worlds. (Cox 223) This idea is central for the Native American spirituality and oral tradition and that is why Thomas King starts his novel

with it. I personally agree with this idea and respect the way in which the Native North American culture has existed for centuries before the European invasions started.

Interestingly, the thing that deserves the most respect in the Indian psychology is the respect that the Native people pay to each other as human beings and every creature in the world that surrounds them. That includes the water and all natural forces. According to the Indians, natural forces, and all other creatures have to live in harmony, but there are certain circumstances when the harmony disappears and as we witness in *Green Grass, Running Water* one natural force, like the water, has to expand out of proportion in order to clean the world and bring back the equilibrium.

Although the fact that the story in *Green Grass, Running Water* is without no doubt a narrative, which explores the meaning of the water in human's lives, evidently all of these facts would have never become apparent to us without the figure of the trickster Coyote. To him Cox refers in the following way: "...Coyote is a representative of non-proselytizing, polytheistic Native American cultures. He is powerful but appears uninterested in the act of creation and jests nonchalantly." (Cox 224) Here Cox refers to Coyote as a powerful figure, which is a fact that is well understood even from Coyote, as obvious from the text that follows: "I am Coyote," says Coyote. "And I am very smart." (King 2) The trickster's power reaches even the Christian God, to whom Coyote says:

"I'll bet you'd like a little dry land," says Coyote

What happened to my earth without form? Says that GOD.

"I know I sure would," says Coyote.

What happened to my void? Says that GOD. Where's my  
darkness?

Hmmmm,” says Coyote. “Maybe I better apologize now.” (King 37-38)

The idea of apologizing to God means that the Indian trickster has done something against the will of the mighty Christian ruler. On the other hand we can look at this text as an example of Coyote’s power, because only a powerful creature could have been the one behind the changes that have been brought in God’s perfect world. Furthermore, it is interesting to find out that through the whole novel there is no evidence to support the idea that Coyote is interested in the act of the creation. The only thing that he wants to do is to help fixing-up the world, that is why he yells: “Earthquake, earthquake!” yells Coyote. “Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee.” (King 451) Furthermore, as an important part of the Indian oral tradition Coyote symbolizes the balance between community expectations and individual convictions, concerning the storytelling. (Cox 224) It is reasonable here to agree with Cox, because if we follow King’s narrative we can witness how the trickster helps the individual heroes as well as the Indian community to get what they fight for. For example Eli dies as a hero, fighting his own cause, but at the same time the water flood helps the river to flow again, which means nutrients for the cottonwoods and preserving of the traditional Native ritual called Sun Dance. That is why both Coyote and the water are very important for the understanding of the novel *Green Grass, Running Water*.

Nonetheless, the story of Coyote and the water are inseparably connected to the four Old Indian men with the awkward names- Hawkeye, Lone Ranger, Robinson Crusoe, and Ishmael. What connects these four heroes with Coyote is that they all are taking part in the realistic as well as the mythic part of the plot of Thomas King’s story. In contrast to Coyote who is represented as a protagonist with the same identity in both

plots of the novel, the four Old Indians are taking different names in the mythic part of the story, which are First Woman, Changing Woman, Thought Woman, and Old Woman. This fact becomes clear to us because of the second conversation between Coyote and the narrator. Consequently, the trickster's curiosity and attempt to start the right story are the reason for the first creation story to be represented. In this mythic part of the novel take leading roles First Woman, Ahdamn, Old Coyote, God, and of course Coyote and the narrator are the ones who make the events, in this native tale, happen. Interestingly, what we understand from this first of the creational stories is that First Woman falls from the sky into the water, which means that the water as a figure is being introduced again as one of the necessary world building substances. Ahead of the role that Coyote takes in this story and the reintroduction of the water image, what one can say here is that Thomas King uses one quite unorthodox way of describing the Christian Eden, where nobody obeys the Christian rules. That is why God answers to First Woman: "I am GOD, says GOD. And I am almost as good as Coyote." (King 72) Unfortunately, this comparison does not help the Christian God to regain his authority, because First Woman, Ahdamn, and old coyote continue to eat against his orders. Even more, after Old Coyote answers to God that he didn't eat anything he says carelessly with a note of total uncomprehending "Christian rules." (King 75) That is why at the end of this creational stories Coyote says to the author about the Christian God: "He's missing all the fun." (King 76) It seems that what King means here is that following all these Christian rules stops us from living our lives, which clashes with the Native understanding about the world that teaches us to live in harmony with the nature that surrounds us. Later in the novel First Woman put a black mask on her face to assume Lone Ranger identity and heads west with the other three Indian friends. Here the west

is used as a symbol with polar meaning for the two cultures of the Natives and the Europeans- for the former one is a symbol of the defeat, while for the later one the west is embodiment of the new beginning. Nevertheless, what is most important here is the fact that Coyote and the First Woman, who becomes Lone Ranger, are connected not only because of the place they have in the Indian oral traditions, but because of their opposition to the Christian God and desire to fix the world going against the orthodox knowledge.

However, the part of the story in *Green Grass, Running Water* bestowed on Changing Woman is important too. This second part of the narrative begins with a similar opening, where Ishmael is the name that disguises Changing Woman, who starts the second part of Thomas King's novel as a narrator that begins a new creational story. This creation story refers again to the figure of the water. But there is one occurrence in this second creational story, which transforms Changing Woman into the Biblical Eve. At the same time Noah has been used by King as a metaphor, which comprises the rules and the principles of the politically stronger ethnos of the European invaders. (Cox 228) That is why when Changing Woman refuses to follow Noah's rules he says to her that every resistance to the new order will be punished. Therefore, Changing Woman, just like First Woman, ends in the prison of Fort Marion. But Changing Woman is unable to escape from the prison, probably because of Coyote's intervention. The same happens to the next mystic figure of Thought Woman, who just like the previous mythic hero is arrested and incarcerated in a prison. What connects these two heroines, ahead of the fact that they are taking a central part in the mythic part of the Thomas King's novel, is that both are protagonists in Indian creational stories with the water image central. To summarize all of these mythic images with the place of Coyote and the water image in

these old Indian creative stories, I have to say that it appears to me that there is a connection between all this water and creational stories about it. Interestingly, there is one restless Coyote who wants to start the right story and help fixing the world, but on the other hand we have the four old Indians who appear in the native creational stories with women's names and have the same idea as Coyote does: to fix the world.

Furthermore, one of the four mythic Indian figures that is the most connected with the image of the water is the figure of Old Woman. In this fourth and last mythic part of the novel *Green Grass, Running Water* we can witness how Old Woman is involved in a conversation with the Christian God, but when it comes to the controlling of some of the natural forces, such as the water is, then the mighty man is helpless. Therefore, one can say that "his attempt to dominate the waters fails; her attempt to communicate with the water succeeds." (Cox 230) It seems here that Thomas King questions again, as in the previous three mythic parts, if the Christian rules are adequate to cooperate with the real world and real nature. Even though the saved man decides to follow Young man Walking on Water and not Old Woman, this still does not mean superiority for the Christian dogmas, but represents more the power of habit in people lives. The image of Old Woman is close to Coyote because they are both mistrusted by the heroes around them. That is why the saved man refuses to follow the Old Woman, while Coyote has to explain to the four old Indians that he didn't do anything to start the earthquake, he had been only quite creative and had expressed his artistic gifts. As a consequence of that all of this water that has been stagnant and therefore a passive figure in both mythic and realistic plots of the novel starts to move and float in order to clean the world and make everything right in it.

Actually, immediately after the earthquake comes the water flood which leaves Coyote as the only one to blame for all of these events. This is a fact obvious from the episode where the four old Indians do not believe Coyote's explanation that he has nothing to do with the earthquake. But what the Indian trickster does is to help the heroes from both plots- the mythic and the realistic one- to resolve their problems. For example, the four old Indians finally get to help the world, because their main concern was Lionel, who will not be any longer a TV-salesman. Lionel will continue his uncle's mission, which is to fight for the solving of the Indian problems. As well as Lionel Alberta gets what she wants too, because she is pregnant. As a consequence of Eli's death in the water flood, the Duplessis do not need Charlie's assistance any longer, so he is free to start his life anew, heading west to California to meet his father. All of these facts strengthen the idea that Coyote brings this water flood to the Blackfoot community for good, to help the heroes from the mythic and realistic part of the story to find a new beginning in their lives. Therefore, the function of the water is to clean the old memories.

In conclusion here can be said that King uses Coyote as a symbol of change and new opportunities. As evident from the very beginning of the novel Thomas King connects the Indian trickster with the image of the water and transforms both of them into one united symbol of the constant change and new beginning. King imposes this idea through the figures of Ishmael, Hawkeye, Lone Ranger, and Robinson Crusoe. The four heroes and Coyote have to prepare the readers for the big water flood, and most of all have to explain to them the meaning and significance of the water, as a natural force, in the life of the Native Indian community.

## Conclusion

In his second novel *Green Grass, Running Water* Thomas King uses the figure of Coyote not only to virtually bridge the two realities of realistic and mythological worlds but to impose the idea, that Coyote's mishaps represent a big part of his life, which does not shadow the fact that the Indian trickster is a positive hero. In King's narrative Coyote plays a dual role. As a consequence of this fact the readers witness how the Indian trickster takes part in the realistic and mythic parts of the novel *Green Grass, Running Water*. The hybridity is important characteristic not only for Coyote's character, but also for the characters that take part in the contemporary part of the King's novel. On the other hand while concentrating on Coyote's and contemporary heroes' hybridity we can understand better the trickster's actions and their consequences for the other heroes. But the Indian trickster is connected to the mythic part of the novel too; therefore he is closely related to the four old Indians and the image of the water. Their relation can be seen in that Coyote as well as the old Indians are the necessary heroes for the realistic and the mythic part of the Thomas King's story. They take part in the old Indian narratives about water, where the Indians appear in the disguise of First Woman, Changing Woman, Thought Woman, and Old Woman. It is obvious that King uses Coyote as a hero who can explain to the readers the power and the strength of the Native traditions, while at the same time paying respect to the European rules. What is interesting about the novel *Green Grass, Running Water* is the fact that Thomas King describes, from his own point of view, the existing gap between these two different cultures. The message of the author towards the readers of his novel is that as long as the human beings prefer to separate themselves in ethnic and other different kind of

groups, there are going to be misunderstandings and people, or spiritual images, who will try to fix them up, just like Coyote tries to do.

## Works Cited

- Bailey, Sharon M. "The Arbitrary Nature of the Story: Poking Fun at Oral and Written Authority in Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water*." *World Literature Today* 73. Norman: Winter 1999. (43-52). Print.
- Cox, James H. "All This Water Imagery Must Mean Something: Thomas King's Revisions of Narratives of Domination and Conquest in *Green Grass, Running Water*." *American Indian Quarterly*. Berkeley: Spring 2000. 24. 2. (219-247). Print.
- Johnson, Brian. "Plastic Shaman in the Global Village: Understanding Media in Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water*." *Studies in Canadian Literature*. 25. 2. (2000): pg. 1-15. Print.
- King, Thomas. *Green Grass, Running Water*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1993. Print.
- King, Thomas. "One About Coyote Going West." *An Anthology of Canadian Native Literature in English*. Eds. Daniel David Moses and Terry Goldie. Ontario: Oxford University Press, 1998. (203-210). Print.
- King, Thomas and Medbh. Lavery. *The Medium*. Saskatoon: Spring 2005. (106-107). Print.
- Kroller, Eva-Marie. *The Cambridge Companion to Canadian Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. (24). Print.
- Robinson, Harry. "The Flood." *Storied Voices in Native American Texts: Harry Robinson, Thomas King, James Welch and Leslie Marmon Silko*. Eds. Blanca Schorcht. New York: Routledge, 2003. Print.
- Schorcht, Blanca. *Storied Voices in Native American Texts: Harry Robinson, Thomas King, James Welch and Leslie Marmon Silko*. New York: Routledge, 2003. Print.

Smith, Carlton. "Coyote, Contingency, and Community: Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water* and Postmodern Trickster." *American Indian Quarterly*.  
Berkeley: Summer 1997. (515-535). Print.