

A Mythological Wrap

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Abstract

Connecting myths with prose, as a means of presentation, is the task of the author in writing "A Mythological Wrap." This piece is meant to entice the reader to the underlying lessons which are enshrouded in the oral history of Yukon First Nations people, in a more creative process, rather than strictly in the narrative.

The four stories presented are put through a simple analysis of connecting thoughts and reflections and are not intended to be the entire interpretation of each story.

The final component is meant to honour the people who have so graciously given their stories, offering their life experiences and wisdom to the collective pool of knowledge acquired in the Yukon for the benefit of future generations.

Résumé

Rattacher les mythes avec la prose, en guise de présentation, a été la tâche de l'auteure en écrivant "Une enveloppe mythologique." Cette pièce a pour but, dans un mode plus créatif qu'une narration traditionnelle, d'initier le lecteur aux leçons sous-jacentes qui sont incluses dans l'histoire orale des premières nations du Yukon.

En guise de conclusion à chacune des quatre histoires présentées, une analyse simple des pensées et réflexions est fournie, analyse qui n'a pas la prétention de représenter l'interprétation complète de chaque histoire.

La composante finale a pour but d'honorer les personnes qui ont gracieusement offert leurs histoires, leurs expériences de vie et leur sagesse à cette réserve collective de savoirs acquis, ici, au Yukon, pour le bien-être des générations futures.

Creation stories roar through the valley on the backs of harsh winter winds or flutter on leaves and crocus fur glistening in the spring sun; they lap up on river and lake shores each wave dashes forth memory-foam of past lifetimes of a people canoeing, fishing, hunting for food since the time before time.

She swallowed the hot rock and drank down the water too, she felt nothing. She didn't burn her lips, her tongue, her throat, even when she swallowed it, it never burned her stomach, nothing. And for the first time in many days she slept peacefully that night, like a baby, and when she awoke in the morning, she felt rested, she even felt hungry! Her spirit had lifted, she felt like living again!

Time passed and that hot rock grew within her and one day she gave birth to raven-boy, and we all know that it was raven who made the world.

And He set the world in order and created laws.

The loon's cry signals the end to greed; a blind man abandoned and alone amongst the lakeshore willows, whose only wish is to feed the starving and desperate people. She hears his cry and beckons him to climb aboard her back and takes him under the deep, dark glacial lake.

Once, two times, three times, four times she takes him down and pops up on the other side. She beckons the blind hunter to open his eyes. "Can you see yet?" she asks him.

"No, not yet. Just like it's muddy yet. Not clear for me."

Loon tells him to hang onto her neck tighter as she will take him down even deeper this time. Once, twice, three times and four, she pops up on the same side as she picked him up originally. "Can you see yet?"

The old man can hardly believe it. "Yes! I can see good now. Thank-you!" He places his dentalium necklace around her neck, a gift, an offering. It melts forever into her feathers, a symbol of the ceremony of giving sight. Sadly the hunter realizes the disease of greed and selfishness has

overcome his family. He takes their lives one by one, forever ridding the people of this infectious condition.

Many faced these tests of starvation, incapable of being able to thrive in the ravishes of winter temperatures and harsh conditions with little food, migrating caribou taking a different trail to their calving grounds. Despite the conditions, the people had faith and strong convictions that they would be spared, their needs would be met. The moon controls the weather and migrating caribou too. Found under a tree, moon baby was wished for by a mother of daughters. A small midget, born with incredible powers to move the herds and bring back sustenance.

“Tell the people that all I want is the stomach fat. That’s all I want for bringing the caribou back.”

The little boy went outside the caribou tent and pulled from out of a clump of bushes, a calf caribou. His mother was so surprised! She twisted its neck providing for the strips of meat her son requested and tied them onto the fringes of his dancing jacket.

With that taken care of, he pulled out the second clump, twelve willows which he peeled carefully and fashioned into dancing sticks. Outside the tent he sang the ancient caribou song. For hours he continued to call on the ancestors for their pity, for their assistance to prevent the people from perishing. And there on a rise, stood a lone bull caribou, the chief, checking out the land. Making sure of the safety of his people. And thousands followed him and the men got busy with their bows, arrows and spears, chasing, steering them into the fences. A frenzy, a much needed slaughter, and time passed quickly while they took the animals down. And Moon Boy waited in his parents’ tent. He waited all afternoon. Nobody came bearing the gift, the payment he had originally requested. He was disappointed as well as bewildered at the lack of trustworthiness of the people. He cried tears of disappointment.

“What’s the matter with these people? How come they don’t keep their promise? They are not to be trusted. I will have to leave here and go back to the moon if this is how it is going to be!”

His mother tried to console and reason with her son. "Be patient son, the men are busy with meat. They will come with the stomach fat. You wait and see!"

He waited but to no avail, nobody arrived to his parents' tent, even after dark when the slaughter was over and people went to their tents to rest. His tears were tears and cries of knowing what suffering would entail for not keeping their promise, for not paying for their service.

"I can't stay here no more, I must go back to my own people, moon people, the people here can't be trusted to keep their promise!"

Although his parents begged him not to go and tucked him safely between them in their bed, in the morning they awoke to see his marten skin pants hanging from the smoke hole; he had gone back to the moon; forever steering the herd at the full moon of spring and once again in the fall.

Ye are the stars in the heavens of understanding.

Stories focusing on the importance of trust are scattered throughout the entire repertoire of Yukon mythology and legends. This is an noble attribute in the matrix of survival. Unbiased without prejudice between couples' roles, in by-gone days. They would take on the tasks of each other whenever necessary. Women would take up the bow and arrow, and hurl a sure spear of the hunt, while men, finding themselves in need, would tan hides and sew much needed clothing. Reciprocity was unquestionably the bedrock for good partnerships. In the days of myth, the small, humble camprobber¹ portrays to humans, the necessity of this understanding. Sunsets testify forever and remind us of the challenge.

"I think it's you, you bring us bad luck. It's your fault that we don't get nothing when we are out hunting. Tomorrow you go your own way, and me I will go my way."

That camprobber's wife she's pleased that her husband suggests this, as she is quite fed up with his crankiness. She's as hungry as he is but is still civil towards him. In fact she is convinced that it is his negative attitude which is causing them to be unlucky. The next day they go out on

the land separately. After many hours she comes across one cranberry which she puts into her little packsack and makes her way back to their camp where she dumps it out on the floor of their little shelter. Taking an obsidian knife she cuts the berry in half, not a hair's breadth this way or a hair's breadth that way, half for her and half for her husband. She has every intention of waiting for her husband to return so they could feast on the berry together, but nightfall comes and her growling stomach dictates her decision. She eats her half. Night has been with the land for quite a while now, and her husband makes his noisy return to their house. He kicks the door open, grunting and growling and hissing under his breath, he throws his pack on the floor.

"Aah, I see you didn't get anything!"

"How do you know?" he shouts at his wife.

"I just can tell," she answers with a half smile. "I got something today. I found one cranberry. In fact, I cut it in half and ate my half already. I saved the other half for you."

"You look like you had more than just a half a cranberry!" he says to her. "I think you lie to me. If you lie to me, I'll kill you. You hear me?"

"Well I guess you'll have to kill me then", his wife says to him courageously, "cause I'm telling you the truth!"

Camprobber killed her on the spot. In his cruelty and belief of what he thought to be true, he cuts her open to prove the point that indeed she has lied to him. The only thing that he sees in her stomach is a half a cranberry. He feels very sad and foolish. He hits himself and cries out to the sunset.

"I'm going to go down with you when you go down too. I'm not any good and I don't deserve to go on living!"

This ended mistrust that sometimes creeps into relationships during phases of anger or physical discomfort.

Cause them to become the signs of harmony and unity until the end of time.

Frozen creeks melt in spring sun, from solid to fluid, from cold to warm, people traversed into the heavens and back again. The power of the almighty sun threatening with fire and heat. Hopeful, never doubtful of eventual consequence, the young man stretches willow up to the sun-world. Old Mouse-woman offers him objects of power remembering the favour; saved from cruel icy waters and cruel brothers.

For this he is grateful. Two shirts assure him of winning a young women's heart. Too warm he sheds humming bird shirt, is met with Father's angry revenge. Mouse-woman's tools and his own quick response, meets all three tests to win the Sun Chief's daughter.

"You, you deserve to marry the Sun Chief's daughter. Your wife she has driven you to this hasn't she?" Mouse-woman says to him. "Here's a willow. It has special powers it can stretch and grow. Stretch it up to the sun-world, that place where the sun-chief's daughter lives. Now you got to take these two shirts. This one is made with camprobber feathers. This one here, green and pink humming bird feathers and it can make you small and quick."

"Now take this flint, you will know when you have to use it. This last one, ice, is very special. Use it when things get too hot. Take good care of this stuff. Keep them in your medicine bag."

Balance: reward to be gained, strength to be sought in places never before traversed, the sun-world, holds its own tests and laws of behaviour. Girls choose humming bird and make a trade for shell spoons. No copper, gold, or silver spoon would do for the older sister. Slave alerted to stopping of the heavenly swing, meant only for sun-people.

"What you girls up to?" the slave asked the girls.

"We're just playing with this humming bird."

"Your father wants you to come and eat now!"

The sisters quickly eat their meal and rush to their living quarters to play with their new treasure, humming bird. This they did long into the night, keeping the Sun-

chief awake. In the morning he was tired and cranky and ordered his slave to wake the girls for breakfast.

Rules of relationship upheld to the highest degree, complete obedience to parents who give consent to marriage. Watchful eyes and special care for girl child; first educator of future generations.

The slave goes down to the girl's sleeping quarters. He looks in to discover a young man sleeping between them! Rushing back he tells the chief. The chief is furious! Angry the father insists that the man come for one last meal before he meets his death. This he does.

After being fed, the Sun-chief instructs him to get on the big swing. Humans are not permitted on this swing, and if they do, they will meet their death by the swing smashing them into a rock-cliff. The girls' pleading is for not.

"Quiet! It's your disobedience to me that has brought this on!" The Sun-chief bellows.

Honor your parents.

As the rock-cliff comes into view the young man pulls out flint from Mouse- woman. Holding it up to the rock-cliff, the swing halts to a sudden stop in mid-air.

"Aaha! You have pretty strong medicine! Take these buckets and get me some water!" The Sun-Chief orders.

At the river the man soon knew that he was heading into danger when he came upon two giant eagles , standing

sentinel at the water's edge. Once they saw him they started to attack him. And again his trusty piece of flint helped him out as he thrust their pointed edge into their sides and killing them with two final blows. Picking up the buckets of water he presented himself before the Sun-chief who as even more astonished that before at the strength of this little man.

Be not afraid if you perform this action alone. I will be with you.

“Aaha! You beat me again! Fill up that big pot. Build a big fire under it. Put the lid on too and make that water boil!”

The young man obeyed these instructions, and soon the water started to steam.

“Check! See if it is boiling yet! Take that lid off!”

As he bent over to check to see if the water had reached a boil, the Sun-chief shoved him into the pot.

Whew! He had to think quickly. He put on the humming bird shirt and grabbing his piece of ice curled himself up under that indentation on the lid. Soon that water stopped boiling, cooling down gradually until it was cool enough to throw the lid off. With that, the Sun-Chief gave his consent and blessing for him to marry his youngest daughter.

Marry o people, that from you will appear he who will remember me.

The Sun-chief gave private instruction to his child, and presented her with an eagle feather; told her to check the water everyday, to ensure her husband was faithful to her once they were living in his homeland. The father knew of his son-in-law’s sense of obligation to his parents. Equipping him with a small wooden canoe and his willow, he sent him on his way back to earth.

Once landed, he tossed that little boat into the water. It grew into a large canoe. Traveling down the river they finally reached his parent’s campsite on the river bank. His wife waited in the boat, while he went ahead to inform his people of their arrival. They were so pleased to see him again.

He instructed his younger brother to bring up his gear and bring his wife into camp to meet his parents. His brother went to the boat but only saw his gear. There was no woman there, only a ray of sunlight in the back of the boat.

“There’s no-one there. We just see daylight that’s all!”

“That’s her, I married daylight, that’s the Sun-chief’s daughter!”

His former wife is very jealous and plans to ambush him as he is getting fresh water. He tries to push her away.

“Get away from me!” he shouts to her.

His wife later checked the water and was very disappointed the feather came out wet. She returned immediately to the sun!

Her father was very angry! Infuriated! “When is the hottest time of the day on earth?” he demands of her.

“Mid-day,” she answers.

So, Sun-chief began to pour out his vengeance. He made it hotter and hotter until a huge forest fire erupted.

That son-in-law was wise. He quickly gathered up the most skilled and wisest people and took them down to the river. Under a hanging bank, where the ground stays frozen all year long. Pushing the people into this safe place he pulled out his little chunk of ice Mouse-woman had given him, and plugged up the entrance.

They waited it out. The fire burned over. Cautiously they all came out. From there they started up a new civilization. Time passed. How the man longed to set things straight with his father-in-law.

Finally one day he returned to the sun-world where he explained what had happened to the Sun-chief. Forgiveness was granted. They say that descendants of this couple are still here on earth and sometimes you can see them. They have light all around them and they are always happy.

Possess a pure, kindly and radiant spirit.

And as the raven flies through the towns and cities or croaks alone in the wilderness this ancient knowledge continues to educate the people, those who have the ears to hear, the eyes to have vision, and the heart to understand their import. Wrapped in the precious mythological garment, symbols to be interpreted, lessons to be learned, and remembered; each story shedding the musk of hidden meaning to understanding our place on the planet and how we each have a stake in the future unfoldment of an ever advancing civilization. This story is simply the most recent chapter of a much older story and each one of us today have the opportunity to lay blame on others with anger and hurt or take the more noble path of forgiveness, clearing our vision of the fog which has de-

tered us from finding solutions and becoming today's mythological heroes and heroines taking up that challenge of a much brighter future.

Note

¹ The camprobber is sometimes known as the Canada Jay.

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- Mary Vittrekwa—The Boy Who Went Back to the Moon,
- May Roberts—Camprobber and Cranberry story, and
- Angela Sidney—The Sun Story.

It is to their legacies and persistence that the stories will remain alive, restoring some of the life forces which have been depleted over the last century, empowering future generations with important wisdom and knowledge of the land, for the people.

Notes on Contributor

Louise Profeit-Leblanc is from the Northern Tutchone First Nation whose nation, the Nacho N'y Ak Dun reside in Mayo, Yukon. For the past 11 years, she has worked for the Heritage Branch as their Native Heritage Advisor. Her primary responsibilities include toponymy, oral history, and working as a liaison between the department of Tourism and Yukon First Nations. An avid storyteller herself, she is also the co-founder of the annual International Storytelling Festival which was established in 1987. This festival enables her to be involved with storytellers from the Yukon and abroad. Louise is also very involved with the development of First Nations art and presently sits as the chairperson for the Society of Yukon Artists of Native Ancestry (SYANA). She has lectured extensively in the Yukon, southern Canada and Alaska, on Yukon First Nations history utilizing

the medium of traditional stories and legends in her presentations.