



FACULTAD DE FILOLOGÍA

UNIVERSIDAD DE SALAMANCA

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GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES

Trabajo de Fin de Grado

COUNTER-STORYTELLING IN THOMAS
KING'S *GREEN GRASS, RUNNING WATER*:
SUBALTERNITY, IDENTITY AND SUBVERSION OF
THE WESTERN IMPERIALIST DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this dissertation is to analyze and demonstrate the potential of King's novel *Green Grass, Running Water* as a contemporary subversive novel, using counter-storytelling as a tool to expose and challenge deep-rooted and injurious paradigms of Western society, literature and culture. In doing so, several aspects have been analyzed. In the first place, I study how the figure of Coyote uses humor and satire to establish a connection between oral and written traditions, while also exposing discriminatory behaviors and practices of Western supremacy and imperialism, as well as their pervasiveness in present-day society. In line with this, I examine the re-writing and deconstruction of the traditional Biblical story of the creation and the use of several symbols introduced in the novel for subversive purposes. Furthermore, I explore the issue of Natives' position as subalterns in North American society throughout history and the detrimental effect this has triggered in the different characters' attitude and understanding of their Native identity and heritage.

KEY WORDS: subversion of Western narratives, identity, ethnic subalternity, written and oral tradition, imperialism, counter-storytelling.

RESUMEN

El principal propósito de esta tesis es analizar y demostrar el potencial de la novela *Green Grass, Running Water*, del autor Thomas King, como una obra subversiva contemporánea. Esta novela ofrece una contra narrativa a paradigmas y nociones gravemente perjudiciales que han sido durante tanto tiempo predominantes en la sociedad, cultura y literatura occidentales. Para ello, se han analizado distintos aspectos. Se ha demostrado como la figura de Coyote usa la sátira como una herramienta para establecer una conexión entre la tradición oral y escrita, al mismo tiempo que expone comportamientos y prácticas altamente discriminatorios que denotan el sentido de supremacía occidental, todavía predominantes en la sociedad de hoy en día. En relación con esto, analizaré la deconstrucción de la tradicional historia bíblica de la creación, a la vez que numerosos símbolos usados en la novela con un claro mensaje subversivo. Además, analizaré la posición de los Nativos americanos como subalternos a lo largo de la historia norteamericana, y los efectos que esto ha desencadenado en algunos personajes en relación con su propio sentido de identidad.

PALABRAS CLAVE: subversión de discurso occidental, identidad, subalternidad, tradición oral y escrita, contra narrativa.

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1. Introduction

As long as the grass is green and the waters run. It was a nice phrase, all right. But it didn't mean anything. It was a metaphor. Eli knew that. Every Indian in the reserve knew that. Treaties were hardly sacred documents. (King 296)

In the 1860s, Canadian and American governments passed a series of treaties in order to show respect towards Indigenous' lands and territories. However, these proved to be a failure. Thomas King, a Canadian-American writer, thoroughly condemns the long-standing invasion, destruction and repression endured by Native Americans at the hands of the government throughout American history. The pervasive conflict involving Native American culture and Western culture is the key question guiding the plot and characters of all his literary production. In this essay I will concentrate on the novel *Green Grass, Running Water*, published in 1993. King's novel can be regarded as an act of subversion, introducing a revision of the predominant Western narratives of power and supremacy, and denouncing written literary tradition and its inflexibility as a way of perpetuating hegemonic violence and subordination of Native Americans. The author intermingles the written form with elements drawn from the oral narratives, as exemplified in the complex character of Coyote, the Trickster of Native tradition. Furthermore, King deconstructs and parodies one of the most prominent narratives in Western culture: The Biblical story of creation. Humor is used to underscore the irrationality of long-held assumptions, in an effort to challenge established roles of power and to rewrite the foundational narrative of Judeo-Christian tradition. The novel presents a broad range of characters in order to address different issues concerning their sense of identity and heritage, showing the Natives' position as subalterns in a society that has always misinterpreted, discriminated and displaced them. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to examine the potential of King's

Green Grass, Running Water as a contemporary subversive novel, satirizing and condemning deep-rooted stereotypes about Native culture and re-writing many of the narratives that Native Americans were forced to assimilate at the hands of whites, thus introducing counter-storytelling as a tool to expose and challenge master paradigms of ethnic superiority. In order to achieve this, I will analyze the dichotomy between oral and written tradition in the novel through the use of mythical Native elements, as well as the juxtaposition of characters and stories so as to delve into their different attitudes and visions of their Native American heritage.

2. The Figure of Coyote: Challenging the Authority of Written Tradition

The figure of Coyote significantly shapes the development of the events in *Green Grass, Running Water*. Coyote is a traditional and mythological character of the North American Plains and the Southwest Indians, usually depicted in oral stories as a trickster and creator. The significance, identity and meaning of Coyote in the novel has been long discussed, and many perspectives have been argued in that regard. In trying to define his/her identity, it is worth referring to the novel's intertextuality with other stories and novels. In King's story "The One about Coyote Going West" the reader gets to know that Coyote is originally a female, contrary to the traditional mythological narrative in which Coyote is frequently depicted as a male. However, the nature, identity and role of this trickster figure in the novel is elusive and complex. Her presence may be an attempt to symbolize the opposition between two different traditions, by combining Western literary forms with elements from Native cultures and oral tradition. Furthermore, Coyote's participation in other characters' dialogues adds a metafictional dimension to the novel, since Coyote is constantly blurring the line between the real and the fictional realms, as her decisions and actions significantly influence and shape the lives of the main characters. Everything the trickster does determines the unfolding of events, although the most significant instance is the water flood taking place in the last section of the novel. As Herb Wyile states, Coyote's "zealous attempts to fix the world usually result in a catastrophe, to subversively rewrite North American history from a Native perspective" (Wyile 113). The character of Coyote introduces a connection between the Native American oral narration and the written literary tradition, thus also confronting the issue between imperialism and counter-storytelling and performing a denunciation of the Western-centrism prevalent in North American society. According to Carlton Smith, Coyote "emerges to disrupt our acceptance of certain 'old stories' – stories that collude

in the oppression of Native Americans” (Smith 516). Coyote wants to start a new story about the creation of the world, constantly claiming that she would like to have a turn, but the four Indians do not allow Coyote to tell the story, as she is constantly making mistakes (King 253). The oral tradition is slightly distorted by including or eliminating details as it passes from generation to generation. In other words, the oral tradition is usually regarded as independent from a fixed meaning, while the written form is firm and invariable despite the passing of time. As Sharon M. Bailey argues, this rigidity and stability of the written word is the basis for Western propensity to believe and revere everything they read, as well as to establish the superiority of written texts while discarding oral narrative as a source of knowledge (Bailey 43). In this context, colonial forces used literature and the introduction of writing as an instrument to subordinate aboriginal communities and their cultures, hence creating a relation of subordination in which Natives and oral tradition constitute the description of otherness. In fact, as Brian Johnson states, “in the encounter between European settlers and First Nations peoples the [difference in the] mode of communication provided a determining marker of difference, which simultaneously constituted colonial ‘knowledge’ about native inferiority and justified the practice of domination in the name of the civilizing mission” (Johnson 1). While Coyote tries to complete one of the parodic retellings of the Biblical story of the creation through what he read in a book, Old Woman claims the necessity of forgetting the book (King 387), thus enhancing the importance of counter storytelling above the dominant imperialist discourse. In fact, this quote depicts the indigenous populations’ difficult and necessary task of “forgetting the book and reclaiming the voice” in order to “recover from the epistemic as well as the material violence of the colonial encounter” (Johnson 2). In this sense, through the figure of Coyote, King incorporates two conflicting literary styles, the oral tradition of storytelling versus the Western written literary form,

and assigns to Coyote the task of rephrasing a new truth about the world in order to show the detrimental effects of an authoritative and oppressive society, while also making a direct appeal to the reader, who becomes critically involved in discerning the connection and meaning of these two different worlds and narratives.

3. Re-writing of the Predominant Biblical Narratives

That G O D fellow doesn't eat anything. He stands in the garden with his hands on his hips, so everybody can see he is angry. Anybody who eats my stuff is going to be very sorry, says that G O D. There are rules, you know. (King 73)

As a subversive text, *Green Grass, Running Water* offers a re-writing of one of the pivotal narratives of Western culture: the creation of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. King uses satire as a powerful tool to challenge the traditional Christian story of creation and to denounce the unjust imposition of unfounded tyrannical rules by historically dominant groups. The character of God states that no one is allowed to eat his food although it is abundant; thus, his emphasis on this abusive rule demonstrates that his interests are focused on holding a position of power and authority, challenging the narrative of God as an altruistic and compassionate being. Furthermore, King's novel also aims to deconstruct sexist views that have long provided a basis for biblical stories by underscoring the illogical and contradictory nature of these assumptions:

Lemme see your breasts, says Noah. I like women with big breasts. ...

Don't do it, says one of the Turtles. ...

I have no intention of showing him my breasts, says Changing Woman.

Talking to the animals again, shouts Noah. That's almost bestiality and it's against [Christian] rules. (King 160)

Ibis Gómez-Vega argues that the intermingling of attempts to tell the story of the creation, as well as the humorous commentary in the characters' dialogues makes this novel "one of the most hilarious and subversive narratives in American literature, and one worth examining not only for what it says about what the Americans know, [but also for] what they have chosen to ignore" (Gómez-Vega 1). King's use of humor has a tremendous power in re-appropriating and resisting prevalent Western ideologies and myths and is a

key determinant in subverting prominent roles of dominance, imperialism, and masculinist power.

3.1 Water and the Dam: Symbols of Oppression, Liberation and Renewal

In this rewriting of the predominant Biblical narratives, water acts as an essential motif and foundational element, constituting the point of departure of this retelling of the creation stories and featuring First Woman, Changing Woman, Thought Woman and Old Woman. These women appear as first inhabitants in a world totally covered by water: “In the beginning there was nothing. Just the water. Everywhere you looked, that’s where the water was” (King 112). In this context, water, as a never-ending fluid medium, symbolizes new beginnings and regeneration. Furthermore, it is also a symbol of liberation and freedom, as it appears in the novel as an independent form that is pre-existent to any superior entity or creator, setting the tone from the beginning of the novel: “So. In the beginning there was nothing. Just the water” (King 1). As James H. Cox points out, “water precedes any act of creation or the existence of any creator. Rather than a god creating the heavens and earth then hovering over the face of the water, the creation in *Green Grass* begins with water” (Cox 223). Water appears as an independent and unstoppable force that resists government’s control. In this sense, water can be defined in opposition to the dam, as the attempt of constructing the dam on Eli’s land reflects the white’s encroachment on the Native American’s culture, history and beliefs. Thus, the destruction of the dam as a manifestation of oppression implies that water is also used as a symbol of resistance, resilience and even of denunciation: “the dam, that is, the physical manifestation of European American and European Canadian imaginations and narratives, no longer restrains the water” (Cox 239). Hence, in the novel there is a subversion of the predictable traditional Western narratives of domination, in which the Native Americans are always conquered and defeated. The final destruction of the dam

and its subsequent flooding introduces a cyclical pattern by returning again to the beginning and introduces the significance of water as a symbol of new life and cycles, liberation and resistance.

4. Ethnic Subalternity: Native Americans Marginalized and Disenfranchised

The term subalternity emerges to refer to communities, sectors, social groups or individuals that have been historically marginalized, neglected, oppressed and silenced through other peoples' narratives. In this context, white Americans have always tried to redefine Native people, invalidating the significance of their beliefs, notions, culture and traditions. In the novel, Sifton, one of the employees in charge of constructing the dam, perfectly embodies the vision of the Natives as the subaltern and the other: "Besides, you guys aren't real Indians anyway. I mean, you drive cars, watch television, go to hockey games. Look at you. You're a university professor" (King 155). He diminishes the importance of Native's rights as he tries to convince Eli of the fact that Latisha, Lionel and Eli himself are not truly Native Americans because they are educated, as if being educated was incompatible with being a Native American. Sifton's perspective of the Native Americans is utterly biased, and his statements prove his ignorant attitude, inherent racism and sense of supremacy. In this sense, as Aitor Ibarrola-Armendariz claims, Sifton is the clear depiction of "how white culture misinterpreted, ridiculed, and even outlawed native beliefs" (Ibarrola Armendariz 73). According to Sifton's ideology, Natives' identity becomes uncertain when they simply adapt to the functioning of the mainstream standards, forcing them into the constant struggle of reclaiming their own identity and self-definition, erased and distorted within the parameters of the dominant culture (Peters 66). Nevertheless, Sifton is just a specific representation of the prevalent attitude towards the Natives in Western society. The novel examines how Indigenous peoples' identity is always a matter of suspicion and misconception through characters such as Sifton or Bursum. In this sense, Native Americans are victims of a matrix of acts of violence, including not only concrete cases of violence exercised by specific individuals, but also systemic violence, a violence that is intrinsic in a system that leaves

many people out and disenfranchised: “that’s about all Indians ever got from the government, a goose” (King 127). In fact, there is a direct criticism of one of the prevailing foundations of Western contemporary society: the ideal of democracy as an inclusive and equal system. Contrary to this belief, the narrator adopts a critical position and condemns Coyote’s naïve perspective, affirming that “In a democracy, only people who can afford it get a turn” (King 365). The notions of subalternity are therefore built on the symbolic and ideological boundaries that are used to separate constructed ethnic categories, constantly emphasizing the distinction between the one who belongs and the other, the within-the-law and the out-law.

4.1 Longing and Affirmation of Identity

In line with this, King also presents the issue of the Natives struggling with their own culture and identity as a consequence of the detrimental stigmatization and discriminatory behaviors they have always endured. In this sense, the novel explores the discomfort and refusal of some characters towards their own identity and heritage, and this is clearly embodied in the figure of Lionel. Lionel is a middle-aged man of Blackfoot heritage living in the city of Blossom, whose sense of identity has been gradually degraded in trying to adapt to Western ideals. His life has become senseless because of being on a constant pursuit of being a white hero. This corruption of his identity is perfectly symbolized in his desire to become John Wayne, widely known as a symbol of “white America”, rudeness and masculinity: “[Lionel] knew what we wanted to be. John Wayne. Not the actor, but the character, not the man, but the hero” (King 265). Lionel’s future was destroyed because of a series of misunderstandings: as a child, he was mistaken for another boy and he almost had a heart surgery (King 34); as an adolescent, he spent one night in the hospital and five days in jail after being associated with members of the Indian American Movement (King 63). The result of these abusive behaviors towards

Natives is a character who has “lost his sense of selfhood and orientation in a world where Natives are confined to roles as losers and ‘limited beings’” (Ibarrola-Armendariz 77). Lionel constantly denies his Native American roots, as it is evident when he is invited to a rally in Salt Lake in honor of Massasoit, a recognized Indian leader, and he answers by insisting on the fact that he is Canadian (King 61). Lionel is thrown into a crisis characterized by a feeling of discomfort and shame towards his Indian heritage that leads him to the adoption and assimilation of Western conventions and Canadian standards. Moreover, immersed in this ambivalent position, he remains passive towards the dreary state of his life, both at a personal and professional level. As Patricia Linton states, Lionel represents the Native character who finds that “the rule-making authority of the dominant culture always works against them [the Natives], exerting constant pressure to force them to yield to the interests of the Euro-American majority” (Linton 225). Besides, King’s exploration of the multiple sides and forms of resistance to the mechanisms of colonial rules is further supported by the characters of Norma and Alberta. Norma is in the incessant attempt of reconciling his nephew Lionel with his Indian roots, always offering good advice and serving as a reminder of the validity and significance of Indian tradition, heritage and culture: “‘Your uncle wanted to be a white man. Just like you.’ ... ‘As if they [white men] were something special. As if there weren’t enough of them in the world already’” (King 37). She reminds Lionel of how sad it is to feel ashamed of one’s own parents (King 84) and undermines Lionel’s Canadian-like lifestyle. Moreover, the fact that Norma puts so much emphasis on the similarities between Lionel and his uncle Eli is significant, since she will later describe Eli in terms of a superficial nature and frivolous and ignorant attitude: “‘[Eli] married once a white woman. Brought her out to the Sun Dance one year. Should have seen him’” (King 67). In this sense, Norma plays a crucial role in encouraging “her relatives to join in the crusade against the invading civilization

... [and] to take up the attitudes and responsibilities that the ‘survivance’ of culture requires” (Ibarrola-Armendariz 85). Eli is thrown into a dilemma concerning his sense of belonging, or even non-belonging, as he presents a divided mind provoked by his pursuing of being a “white man”: “The Indian who couldn’t go home. It was a common enough theme in novels and movies. Indian leaves the traditional world of the reserve, is exposed to white culture, and becomes trapped between two worlds” (King 317). Although showing evident concern about these attitudes, Norma is a central figure in the protection and maintenance of the family’s foundational principles. Contrary to Lionel, Norma presents Alberta as an example of a Native that is truthful to her values and origins. Alberta is a history teacher who contributes to shaping the historical context in the novel by introducing some key facts and events, such as the masonry fort called Fort Marion, where myriads of Native Americans were imprisoned and forced to assimilate to some of the major elements of Christian religion and American culture. Alberta presents an outstanding knowledge of the misconstruction and ignorance that white Americans display against her community, so she tries to raise awareness among her students of the hardships and injustices that Native Americans endured and their impact on the loss of Indian life and culture: “As a college professor, she is the Native American who functions within the ‘mainstream’ world and who attempts to “get right” the story of her people by teaching the history of Native Americans” (Gómez-Vega 12). In addition to this, Alberta also introduces her students to “Plains Indian Ledger Art,” a collection of drawings produced by the Indian prisoners in Fort Marion which depicted their life in the plains (King 16), thus directing her teaching towards equity through visual counter-storytelling and introducing the power of art as collective memory.

5. Conclusion

This paper has attempted to illustrate the significance of the novel *Green Grass, Running Water* as a contemporary example of the hegemonic violence endured by Native Americans throughout history. In the novel, there is a constant emphasis on the necessity of telling the stories right, of presenting an accurate account of the facts, of giving voice to all those issues and ethnic groups that have been historically silenced, repressed and/or ignored. In this sense, Thomas King enhances the importance of counter-storytelling, and underlies the role of oral tradition as a tool to promote it: the understanding and conservation of one's own culture, tradition and heritage is crucial in order to resist the politics and economics of dominant groups and forces that will try to undermine them. In this context, the novel presents a dichotomy between characters who have an inherent understanding of their heritage, such as Norma or Alberta, and other characters who struggle to understand, maintain and convey their Native American identity, such as Lionel and Eli. The structural abuse they have undergone haunts them as a devastating force that makes them distant from their Native origins still in the present. Furthermore, King makes use of symbols, motifs and stories that convey a cyclical pattern in the novel; hence introducing two contrapositions that significantly contribute to establishing the potential of the novel as a subversive text: the opposition between the written literary form as a tool to enhance biased and unjust notions that favor dominant groups, and the oral form, which allows the emergence of new voices and stories; and the traditionally linear plot prevalent in Western literature in opposition to the cyclical structure presented in the novel. In conclusion, Thomas King offers a straightforward and elegant revision of the most widespread and detrimental Western narratives of supremacy, domination and power.

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