

Indigenous Literature: Reading Conventions for Non-Indigenous Readers

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Editors' note: In streamlining this piece for publication, Angelina cut a significant amount of content, including all discussion of a second literary text. We also encouraged her to add context, so her analysis would appeal to readers who hadn't read the central text; ensure every paragraph connected to the central argument; and rework her introduction and conclusion. Finally, at the copyediting stage, we urged her to carefully consider her terminology and diction to ensure accuracy and respect for the communities whose cultural vocabulary and critical conventions she is writing about. Angelina was impressively open to our suggestions, and we congratulate her on her efforts.

At its inception, “critical theory” rested upon the foundational assumption of the singular dominance and influence of European culture and history. This Eurocentric viewpoint marginalizes cultures on a global scale, leading to the exclusion of vital voices such as Indigenous literature. The pre-eminence of European literary criticism makes this theoretical approach unsuitable for any other culture. Furthermore, it necessitates Indigenous authors and writers to formulate a “critical theory” appropriate for Indigenous literature, paying homage to the “complexity of Native American literary texts, including the richly textured and layered worlds of the oral tradition” (Pulitano 260). Therefore, Indigenous epistemologists and theorists created a “complex, hybridized” theory centred on “discursive strategies” firmly rooted within Indigenous oral tradition and wisdom but also “conducts dialogues with the larger critical discourse of contemporary theory” (Pulitano 256-257). Without literary criticism, it would be impossible for Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike to appreciate Indigenous literature, including its profound value to humanity. In the *Introduction from Towards a Native American*

Critical Theory, Pulitano articulates the need for a “Native American critical theory” that “brings to light Indigenous ways of articulating the world and that uses Indigenous rhetoric along with the instruments of Western literary analysis” (Pulitano 257). For hundreds of years, “critical theory” has been a significant contributor to “shaping literacy and cultural studies” (Pulitano 255). In *Gdi-nweninaa: Our Sound, Our Voice*, Simpson attests that the context of Indigenous literature lies within the bounds of language and culture. Indigenous languages, such as Cree and Ojibway, comprise the defining fabric of the culture, as they “carry rich meanings, theory, and philosophies within their structures” (Simpson 289). In similar capacities, literature is grounded in the spoken languages unique to specific Indigenous cultures. The mere arrangement of words on a page falls short of capturing the depth of meaning and the intricate threads of connection that exist beyond the confines of texts; rather, the construction of texts, rooted in Indigenous cultural influences, unfolds through a language system that serves as a profound conduit for expression and connection.

For example, the language of “Nishnaabemowin” is vital to “Nishnaabeg” or the Anishinaabe people as it speaks about their cultural heritage and viewpoints and is critical for “literary criticism.” Such “learning through language,” Simpson argues, is crucial in understanding the richness of Indigenous contexts while providing a non-Indigenous “window through which to experience the complexities” (Simpson 289). The language of *Biskaabiiyang*, familiar to Anishinaabe, explores “what liberation and resurgence look like within Indigenous thought” (Simpson 293). An action word indicating “returning to ourselves” or “to look back” that considers life before the era of colonialism (Simpson 289). Simpson introduces another language, *Aanjigone*, which centers around the transformational leadership of oneself and being the bigger person instead of “blindly reacting out of anger” (Simpson 295). The language of

Naakgonige is the “careful or mindful” existence, deliberate and cautious considering all other living creatures (Simpson 296). *Debwewin* is the wisdom that we each possess different truths from each other, and together, we invent a “plurality of truth” (Simpson 297). Lastly, the *Gdinweninaa* characterizes the aspect of full-body listening with “our hearts, our minds, and our physicality” in tune together as one (Simpson 299).

Embarking on Thomas King’s *The Back of the Turtle* using the lenses from the “Native American critical theory,” language perspectives, and literary *criticisms* originated by Indigenous authors and critics to uncover the rich tapestry, the convergence of tradition and innovation, and the transformative power of Indigenous narratives in shaping our shared understanding of humanity. In this novel, King takes up post-colonial thematic concepts of reckless environmental exploitation for corporate greed, industrialization, and redemption in a language-rich oral style. The storytelling elements in colloquial, dialogue, wordplay, and repetitions indicate a strong mark of Indigenous oral traditions in “discursive strategies.” The flashes of verbal irony, sarcasm, and humour throughout this novel help the reading experience to be pleasantly memorable in an otherwise tragic story. Incorporating Indigenous myths and generational stories beautifully in the narrative manifests an aspect of intertextuality. This novel is a manifestation of the language of *Naakgonige*, reminding us about deliberate actions and prudence. The element of colloquial writing style characterizes casual and informal conversations that primarily revolve around Sonny’s character and his mumbling episodes. King portrays this young lad as one of the survivors of “The Ruin,” living alone in a deserted motel with a hammer. He loves to find salvage “[b]ody found on the beach by Sonny. [w]ham-wham, hammer-hammer!” (King 28). There are onomatopoeic repetitions within Sonny’s conversations with himself, such as “[d]ig, dig, dig. [h]ammer, hammer, hammer” and “[d]ub-dub-dub” further illustrating the colloquial

style (King 52-53). Furthermore, King employs intertextuality by bringing a few Indigenous mythologies into the novel. The allusion to the Indigenous creation stories successfully delivered a common understanding for Indigenous readers, allowing King to communicate using mythical language. On the other hand, it might appear peculiar and strange encounters for non-Indigenous; nonetheless, it richly provided awareness and educative opportunities. The creation story of *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky* foregrounds the thematic concept of redemption. Mara recalled Lily's mom retelling this creation story and named the left-handed twin "who had brought chaos to the perfect world" Gabriel (King 49). In Domidion, Dorian and Winter found this creation story in one of the files for "GreenSweep," written by the protagonist Gabriel Quinn (King 408). Samaritan Bay, illustrating everything on the "Turtle Island" folklore, further intertexts the two settings as one idea extrapolating a long-forgotten myth to the present. The language of humour also made this novel relatable and entertaining to read despite the unfamiliar contexts for non-Indigenous. The splash of literary languages or devices successfully breaks the monotony, boredom, and tedium. This technique mostly appears throughout the novel as biting wit but meaningful and offers the lighter side of life. An example of humour is seen in Mara's approach to Gabriel's failed drowning attempts as blunt and witty humour, "Are you trying to kill yourself, again?... "Would you like some assistance?" (King, 165). Similarly, Dorian's character encapsulates humour, irony, and sarcasm into one cohesive personality. King portrays him as a fashionable CEO who, for the most part, could not care less about the fatal devastations brought by his company but the matching colour ties for his suit. Although Domidion maintains a "major partnership with the humanities" in a university, Dorian is indifferent to environmental destruction and inhumanity (King 57). One day, while travelling in a limousine with a copy of *Sports Illustrated*, Dorian ironically thought that "[w]orld hunger cannot make the back page of

TV Guide, but an almost bare breast can destroy the morality of a nation” (King 176). Another example of dry humour and sarcasm is when Dorian converses with a restaurant server: “If you had one question you could ask, what would it be? About the hotel? No, said Dorian. About life. Life in general. Your life. I’m sorry, sir, said the man. We are not allowed to ask such questions” (King 481). King also portrays a language system theoretically in direct opposites, which means binary oppositions. In this story, he creates a world depicting clashes between science and humanity. Furthering human knowledge and intelligence in science is a valuable human character; nevertheless, a causal effect should not be taken lightly. Theoretical oppositions are at play between Domidion’s headquarters in Toronto, an eastern city, and Smoke River Reserve along the coast in British Columbia, in the west. The conflict of industrialization versus traditional subsistence living generates an apocalyptic risk to Mother Nature. Binary oppositions also appear between characters like Mara and Gabriel. Both are brilliant Indigenous with career aspirations in arts and sciences, but individual talents led both to opposite sides. Gabriel’s brilliance and intelligence were inadvertently used for environmental destruction, while Mara’s gift in the arts preserves Indigenous beliefs and wisdom. For good measure, King illustrates the concept of decolonization as the understanding of life before the era of colonization. In the Anishinaabe people, it is the language of *Biskaabiiyang*, or a process “to look back” (Simpson 289). Resurgence is about paying attention to anything that poses risks to Indigenous ideals, our environment, and our collective existence. Simpson asserts, “we need to act against political processes that undermine our traditional forms of governance, our political cultures, our intellectual traditions, the occupation and destruction of our lands, violence against our children and women” (Simpson 292). King challenges these concepts in the form of survival and sarcasm. Gabriel, with his engineered exfoliant known as “GreenSweep,” lives on to witness the loss of

life, including his loved ones. Conversely, Dorian confronts a profound, life-altering crucible challenge in the twin trials of illness and divorce, which his accumulated wealth could never prevent, especially the looming thought of dying, “Will I be remembered?” (King 471). King portrays Gabriel, the protagonist, as the embodiment of reconciliation and forgiveness, standing as an exemplar of these profound concepts. Gabriel’s remorse became a healing balm for Smoke River and its inhabitants, fostering forgiveness and restoration. The resurgence of life in Samaritan Bay, coupled with the symbolic act of Big Red laying her eggs, heralds a profound era of new beginnings and jubilant celebration (King 487). This time around, the narrative extends a warm embrace of cultural diversity through the inclusion of a Taiwanese family (King 432). Looking at this novel from the aspect of the Indigenous language *Biskaabiiyang* and *literary criticism* in “discursive strategies,” King’s message is clear about the shared guardianship to our planet and nature, including humanity.

Language shapes our thinking, and literature exemplifies our thought process. Like an artisan crafting a masterpiece, literature emerges as the vibrant canvas on which the intricacies of our thought process are painted. In the symphony of words, language and literature entwine, orchestrating a dance that not only mirrors the mixture of human thinking but also invites us to make meaning through the corridors of imagination and introspection. Pulitano and Simpson’s Indigenous language lenses, framed within the context of the *Native American Critical Theory*, serve as indispensable tools for bridging King’s *The Back of the Turtle* for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners alike. Without the illuminating guidance afforded by these critical frameworks, unravelling the intricacies of King’s narrative would have been a formidable and insurmountable challenge. These lenses not only decode the nuances embedded in the text but also act as a cultural compass, enabling readers to navigate and pay homage to the rich fabric of

Indigenous perspectives. In many ways, Pulitano and Simpson have significantly paved the way for the study and interpretation of Indigenous literature, broadening the scope for readers from diverse backgrounds. Their contributions not only enable a broader and more comprehensive global readership to appreciate Indigenous contexts but also facilitate a deeper understanding and engagement with Indigenous literature.

Works Cited

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