

Prairie U-U Society
Feb. 20, 2000

The Trickster

Recorded Prelude: The Grouch Anthem

Welcome: Nancy

Chalice Lighting: WOH, to coyotes, crows, rabbits, and other tricksters

Joys and Sorrows

Story for children: "Zomo the Rabbit," Read by Anne Urbanski

Hymn #106, "Give Me That Old Time Religion" → T. an old-time religion.

words by Pete Seeger, = contemporary t.

Some Trickster Stories:

1. I have two major sources for this program, a recent book by Lewis Hyde, **Trickster Makes This World**; and a 1956 book by a UW anthropologist, Paul Radin, **The Trickster**, which is a collection of Winnebago Trickster stories.

A. Let me start with a story that Hyde opens his book with; if we have time, I'll give you his interpretation later in the program. (How should I pronounce "coyote"?)

Coyote Finds a Way to See Afar, Hyde pp. 3f. —WOH or *Deen S.*

2. The Trickster is a figure found in many primitive religions, i.e., religions without a dominant god but many gods. Frequently the Trickster is identified as an animal, such as the rabbit, coyote, or raven. Sometimes he has a more human form, such as Hermes in the ancient Greek myths, Loki in Norse myths, or Krishna in some Hindu myths. Tricksters are the lords of in-between; they are boundary crossers, like Hermes, messenger of the gods.....but, as we will see, they also create boundaries between the sacred and the profane. The Trickster is usually male, even if he can sometime take female form; it's not clear to me why this should be the case, since the stories are often told by women. Hyde has some speculations about this, and you can ask me afterward about them.

B. **Legbu Gets Mawu to Leave the Earth** (Hyde, pp.173f) — Al Nettleton
[Think about it.....]

You might say this is a kind of dirty story. The NW Coast Indians near Sitka had a similar story:

Raven and Petrel (Hyde, 189.1)

What does it mean? [.....discussion.....]

Religions generally involve a division of the cosmos into the realms of the sacred and the profane. Sacred things are things set aside, approached with awe and trembling. The profane is the realm

of everyday life, work, business, most sex, and so forth. Typically rituals are necessary before the sacred can be approached: perhaps fasting, washing up, or the like. A kind of operational definition is that if something is sacred, it can be profaned; every mass creates the possibility of a black mass, and sacred speech makes blasphemy possible. I've had Muslim students in sociology say that their religion makes no distinction between the sacred and the profane; everything is sacred. My response was to ask what happens when people wear shoes in a mosque, and I might have thought about responses to Salman Rushdie's book, *The Satanic Verses*.

In the story Al read, Legbu separates the worlds of the sacred and the profane. He is here a creative figure, creating a kind of order. The dirty is always a by-product of creating order; dirt is matter out of place. [Mary Douglas]

The Winnebago Trickster stories include some funny dirty stories, more or less obscene and scatological. It would be too embarrassing to me to read them to you, stories about how he lost his long penis, or became a woman for a while, or farted so violently that he knocked trees over, so I won't read them.

Having created the boundaries between the sacred and the profane, Trickster acts as a go-between. He is often associated with divination rituals in which people try to anticipate what is fated to occur. In a curious way, divination often uses chance, like rolling dice. If we have time, I'll come back to this.

C. The Trickster often plays tricks on others, humans or gods, as in the Legbu story. But very often the Trickster is a victim of others or of his own foolishness, like coyote in the first story. Barbara will read one version of a story told in many cultures. (Radin's book has 3 versions of the story for the Winnebago.)

The Bungling Host (Hyde, pp. 41f) ---- Barbara Rames

[Think about it.....What does it mean?discussion.....]

"The 'Bungling Host' is a tale of an animal that does not have, as Kingfisher says, 'a way.' Kingfisher, Snipe, Polecat, Bear, Muskrat—each of these animals has a way of being in the world; each has his nature. Specifically, each of them has his own way of hunting and, in these stories at least, he is never hungry, because he has that way. Coyote, on the other hand, seems to have no way, no nature, no knowledge. He has the ability to copy the others, but no ability of his own." (Hyde, pp. 42f)

So, in a way, the Trickster is more stupid than the animals. Animals have some inborn knowledge, a way of being, and trickster doesn't. But not having a single way can be of advantage. Although Trickster often bungles, he can learn. The other animals must follow their ways, but Trickster can change his ways if the situation changes. Having no way, Trickster can have many ways. It is not surprising that the Trickster is often personified by the coyote or the Raven. The coyote is a most adaptable animal. In the past, before we humans were so numerous, it hunted in packs, like wolves. In modern America, that doesn't work, so the coyote now hunts solo. [Who has seen a coyote in Dane county?] It can take your pet poodle in Madison. Wolves were not so adaptable and became an endangered species. And ravens, or in

this area crows, are similarly adaptable. If they don't have cornfields to raid, they'll try your garbage bags.

I don't know why rabbits are often the personification of the Trickster. [.....]
But then, I've never chased a rabbit.

We human beings are rather like the Trickster in *The Bungling Host*. We are so plastic, so adaptable, so able to learn from others, and so stupid. And we modern humans are especially like that. Some of the Indians identified the whites with the Trickster; the whites were so devious, they did not have a way. That's the kind of interpretation Lewis Hyde gives to the coyote story that I started with. Later on Hyde found an 1899 version of the story that began "White man comes along..." So here is this white kid, hitchhiking, burning up other men's gasoline, trying to see farther. Someone without roots, a way of being..

D. [If time permits, Loki and the Mistletoe. See below, but time probably won't permit.]

3. Is the Devil a Trickster? Is the Satan of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam a Trickster?

[.....Discussion.....]

One can make a case for the Devil being a Trickster, since that's the way he is often shown in art—he often plays tricks. There is Mephistopheles in Goethe's *Faust*, who plays tricks on the students in Auerbach's cellar. He can also be tricked, or at least controlled by Faust's mystic symbolism. And he professes to be on friendly terms with God. One can find many similar Devils in literature.

[....Any favorite examples?e.g., Stephen Vincent Benet, *The Devil and Daniel Webster*.....]

But I don't think the case of the Devil being the Trickster can be seriously supported.

First of all, the examples I just cited are from art, not from religion. They indicate nothing about what people who really believe in the Devil believe. Besides, even in Goethe, Mephistopheles is really rather consistently evil. To quote Goethe, Mephistopheles says,

"I am the spirit that always denies? A good thing, too,
for all that exists deserves to be destroyed.

It would be much better if nothing were ever created,
So I'm everything that you could call sin and destruction,

in short, evil—these are my proper element." [Mac Intyre]

But the Trickster is often a creative figure. The Trickster is amoral, not immoral. He embodies and enacts that large portion of our experience where good and even are hopelessly intertwined. (Hyde, p. 10) The Trickster creates values. And he often does this in a kind of random way. The Trickster goes along with chance, contingency, against determinism, fate.

And, evidently, if you ask people who really believe that Satan exists, they don't see him as a Trickster. Several years ago I heard a report given by some Italian sociologists; they devised an ingenious questionnaire to distinguish different meanings people might have of Satan, administered it to a sample of people in Turin, and found no evidence that people thought of Satan as a Trickster.

4. Is the Trickster Still Around? If not, do we miss him?

[....Discussion....]

If we no longer make a distinction between the sacred and the profane, we no longer need a messenger. If the gods are dead, we don't need a messenger for the gods.

But, is it true that we no longer distinguish between the sacred and the profane?

[....Discussion...]

Try the operational definition again: if things are sacred, they can be profaned. And it happens all the time, for really important things, where sacred ideals of human dignity are profaned, to everyday life. We have lots of little rituals in everyday life to protect our dignities. One of the characteristics of people defined as insane is that they often violate these little rituals, by not respecting others by asking too personal questions or not respecting themselves by conspicuous farting.

If so, we might still need some mediators between the sacred and the profane. Lewis Hyde argues that in the modern world these mediators are likely to be artists. Artists do often work on the boundaries between the sacred and the profane. One can think of persons like Richard Serrano, who created a scandal by creating an image of the crucifix bathed in his own urine, or the more recent figure of the Virgin decorated with elephant dung in the Brooklyn show called "Sensation." These Tricksters upset things. Picasso is a good example, and in the cinema one finds creators like Ingmar Bergman and Woody Allen. They do deal with sacred things, but they also shake things up.

5. Questions and Discussion

Offering

Introduction of Guests and Visitors

Prairie Announcements

Closing Hymn, #7, Unrest

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D. If I had time//Since I have time, I would have/will read an Icelandic story about the twilight of the gods ----- Hyde, pp. 101f

Human beings often fear chance, contingency. It makes the world so uncertain; what is, could as well be otherwise. One reason for creating gods is to overcome this fear. The divine world is unchanging, certain, not at all contingent. In this story, Friggs seeks to control contingency, to remove all possible threats to her son. And here the trickster Loki shakes things up, introduces contingency, in this case with disastrous effects, at least in the short run. But the story illustrates how the Trickster changes the world.