

# **“Down the memory spilling out into the world” (Silko): The Spiral Cycle of Repetition With Variation in the Serious Comedy of Native American Traditional Mythoi as an Adaptive Bridge into the Future**

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Rabbit Boy, or We Ota Wicasa (Wichasha), the great mythic hero from Lakota oral tradition, is a miraculous child empowered by Takuskanakan, the mysterious sacred power that moves the universe, who is born from a ball of life-blood kicked about playfully by a rabbit-person inspired by that over-arching cosmic power of life, and he is adopted at his uncanny birth of emergence from the dynamic ball of blood by the rabbit and his wife.<sup>1</sup> Informed by his rabbit-person father that he is human, and guided by his vision of the sun, Rabbit Boy seeks his human home and identity in a place faraway in the primeval dawning of all human history. His encounter in the human village with wily Iktome (who plays the role of the malicious Trickster in this story), who resents Rabbit Boy’s sacred power and denies his relationship to the people, and who objects to his marrying a beautiful girl from the village who loves him, will send Rabbit Boy also into the archetypal realm of death and rebirth, but he will return to his winyan waste (wash-tay) when he comes back reborn from his journey to the sun to give the people the gift of his sacred power. For the slaughtered Rabbit Boy rises toward heaven in his rebirth on bright rays of sunlight bringing earth and sky mythopoetically together; so that his life, death, and rebirth affirm hope in the spiral cycles of life’s seasons, where death is incorporated into the spiral cycle and transcended, and evil’s impetus is transformed by good into purposive tension, as the force of Iktome’s deadly antagonism itself is recast into merely part of the variation in the flow of the sacred power through the cycle of life, death, and rebirth, the sacred cycle of repetition with variation. Rabbit Boy’s mythic odyssey from divine mystery to life, from life to the quest for identity and relationship, to a bloody death in a boiling pot of water, to a rebirth into the divine mystery, to a return to the people and the good young woman who loves him, brings the essential human balance and sacred power to the world, a sacred balance that transcends a tragic view of life.

Mythic heroes such as Rabbit Boy, Coyote, and Raven, and all the varying tribal protagonists, participate in the spiral cycles of creation as tricksters, transformers, monster-slayers, and culture heroes; they live for the people as they seek identity, and each becomes “someone” in the quest for homecoming in relationship to the people. Each

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<sup>1</sup> A Reading of Rabbit Boy: With some oral elaboration, I read from a fine example of a written form of the Rabbit Boy story, i.e., Jenny Leading Cloud’s version in the following anthology: Richard Erdoes and Alfonso Ortiz, eds. *American Indian Myths and Legends* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), 5-8.

one must experience the archetypal journey of life, death, and rebirth, like Corn Woman and Changing Woman, and each one must gain or regain life with the people to fulfill the hero's quest to give the people life and a world the people can thrive in. In engaging the archetypal pattern of life, death, and rebirth with its purposive tension moving toward a reborn future of life and identity shaped in relationship, each hero embodies in his odyssey a spiral pattern of repetition with variation which is a resonance of that archetypal pattern of life, death, and rebirth, and which moves with purposive plot tension toward a balance true to human nature, toward a place for the people to live in the balance of all our relations, and toward an experience of enlightenment offered to the audience of the hero's journey through the empathic pathway of storytelling. And this plot pattern is also the storytelling pattern throughout the generations, which I, as a scholar of literature, call serious comedy, a mode of interpreting life in a perspective as profound as tragedy in confronting mortal limitations and evil, and yet implacably comic in its inherent hope, and in its harmony with the spiral cycle of day and night and dawn, of the seasons, of DNA, and of all the cosmic spirals of repetition with variation. And like the dynamic pattern of comparison in a metaphor, which first structures creative tension in the difference of the two things in contrast, and then instantly leads to a moment of enlightenment in the realization of the resonating common ground, serious comedy creates a spiral bridge of purposive tension that leads to understanding, preservation, and affirmation. Signifiers and the signified are analogously intertwined in the very dynamic of human language itself, transcending via purposive tension the potentially tragic difference with the serious comic bridge of meaning and continuing spirals of communal repetitions of meaning amidst the variations of meaning in our mortal linguistic context, so that the phenomenon of human language itself is essentially driven by the life, death/difference, and rebirth as the archetypal cycle of language resonates in meaning.

Rabbit Boy is a mythic story told a thousand times over, repeating in the many variations of storytelling and time over uncounted generations, which are themselves expressions of the life, death, and rebirth pattern archetypally present in the story, living in the people, as the people in each generation adapt to live in the telling of their story.

Lesley Marmon Silko's beautiful poem *Where Mountain Lion Lay Down With Deer*<sup>2</sup> also exemplifies the archetypal serious comic pattern in substance and in form. The journey of returning in archetypal memory becomes the rebirth of the renewal of memory now "spilling out / into the world" as the "ancestors" and the "I" voice of the poem become one, and the "all forgotten" "old songs" and the "story of my birth" and "How I danced in the snow-frost moonlight" are reborn from the death of forgotten-ness in the journey of the poem. You see this mythic pattern again and again in the soul of Native American literature of the past two centuries, in Eastman/Ohiyesa's simile imbued *From the Deep Woods to Civilization*, in the rich, interwoven mythic texture and spiraling cycle of time in Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, in Harjo's consciousness-layered *The Woman Hanging From the 13<sup>th</sup> Floor Window*, in Tallmountain's adult/ child returning in *There Is No Word For Goodbye* (because there is no goodbye to all our relations in the

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<sup>2</sup> I read this beautiful poem from the following anthology: Silko, Leslie Marmon. *Literature*. Roberts and Jacobs, eds. 2<sup>nd</sup> Compact edition (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003), 785-786.

spiral cycle of life, death, and rebirth), and in the very process of sacred power that gave birth to the living text of *Black Elk Speaks*, so that a sacred vision would be reborn in a new cultural context, transcending the limits of all oppression.

Serious comedy as a genre affirms that identity is relational, as Rabbit Boy and the people shape their identity in relationship, just as William Apess is reborn from Pequot cultural disinheritance in a renewal of his Algonquin identity, leading the Marshpees into the re-assertion of their tribal sovereignty and a renewal of their identity: so that the significance of life transcends death, and so that the experience of our mortal limitations and frailties, when understood in this light, are the stuff of serious comedy, a pattern which embodies a purposive tension in the heart of the story which implies a movement toward an essential balance.

We can see as well that this imaginative experience is essentially educational, and that life itself, understood properly, is inherently a cyclic learning journey, an odyssey of education of past and present for the future. The imagery of this true mimesis resonates in our life experience and makes us aware of the significance of the imagery of our lives in the life-stories we live. The character development and plot tension of serious comedy, which leads to enlightenment in the experience of both characters and audience, is pedagogically applicable to teaching and learning, both formal and informal. When topics and specifics are presented in spiral cycles of repetition with variation, as in the traditional story cycles, when varying modes of teaching method are employed in an integrated spiral pattern of purposive learning tension, when the classroom becomes a cohesive community of individual scholars in constructive relationship, students tend to move in a plot of purposive tension toward personal recognition and deepening understanding of the subject matter in particular, yet also in the communal context of knowledge in which individual insight may flourish, and then in turn the insight of the individual may naturally tend to add to the richness of the communal context, affirming both the significance of each life beyond its mortal limitations, and also the value of the common good to which each individual life contributes in the classroom of life as a bridge to the future.

So Native cultures have survived the nightmare of history, incorporating the supposed death of the old ways into the new life of the old ways, which are reborn in this spiral of new old/new life in repetition with variation amid different circumstances, changed in variation, yet in the repetition of essence the same, from generation through generation in all historical variations. Serious comedy is the noblest and most human archetype of narrative, found in many traditions of world literature (see for example, the *Odyssey*, the *Tao Teh Ching*, the *Lucan gospel*, Dante's *Comedy*, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, and *The Old Man and the Sea*), yet universally present with a particular great emphasis in Native American cultures and traditions; in content and form this interpretive shaping of storytelling desire is central to the very hope embodied in essence, in the enterprise and purpose of education as renewal, because this archetypal perspective embodies the survival of the heart in the changing present into the unknown future, so that education becomes both the ancient way and the future. Rabbit Boy is always being reborn in every telling of the story in every future morning, and so the serious comic

## 60 Spiral Cycle of Repetition

archetype which is at the universal heart of the highly varied tribal traditions, histories, and heroes transcends each dark night of history and lives anew in each changing day. So in the story of the people, their tradition, their identity, and their language are empowered, not only in mere preservation, but potentially in a living renewal and continuing revitalization of the life of the people, the soul of living memory dancing the future into spiral rebirth.