

The tales of coyote: a cultural, mythological, and literary analysis of chabon's ...



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The legends of Coyote go back hundreds of years, finding their beginnings in ancient Native American roots. In fact, the tales of Coyote have no real origin; many American Indian tribes have their own perspective of him. However, one of the most frequently occurring similarities that are found in any story about Coyote is that Coyote is always a male figure, clever even in the slightest of ways. Almost all of the time, Coyote has a bit of a mischievous atmosphere that follows him everywhere, which allows him to have the personality of a trickster, usually for entertainment purposes. In some older, and more traditional stories, to explain the ways of time and nature, Coyote is usually seen as a darker and more harsh of a character. An instance of this type of primitive genre is found in the tales of the Caddo tribe, who lived in the southeastern territory of North America (" Facts for Kids: Caddo Indians (Caddos)"). This myth is known as Coyote and the Origin of Death, and plays a deep yet surprising role in Michael Chabon's modern novel Summerland.

As one of their stories go, the chiefs were having a council about overpopulation, as it was a time before death. Everyone agreed on temporary death so that the overcrowding of land and natural resources would disappear, with happiness still remaining among their people. Coyote objected, saying that all should, at one point in their lives, die and never return to the mortal realm, but no one, even in the slightest bit, agreed with him (Dorsey 15-16). The medicine-men, agreeing upon the new rules, built a house, where they could rejuvenate the ones who died. There was a magical feather, which would fall, bloody, when someone experienced death. And

after the spirit, of the dead body, had entered the house, as a world-wind, the medicine-men would sing the dead back to life (Dorsey 16).

Coyote watched these new rules be put into effect (Dorsey 16). He was terribly disappointed and upset (Dorsey 16). And so, for a few days, he watched, sitting with the medicine-men singers (Dorsey 16). Then, after several days, when the feather had finally fallen and a whirlwind had approached the entrance, once again, he closed the door (Dorsey 16). And with that permanent death became eternal (Dorsey 16). As one can see, in this myth, Coyote is depicted as a sly, cunning animal, patiently bringing out his mischievous plans with no signs of mercy.

In the novel *Summerland*, Chabon cleverly integrates Native American mythology of this sort into the plot and characters. This approach allows the reader to understand the text in more depth and detail, or “read between the lines”. This claim is especially true for the antagonist of the book; Chabon uses the American Indian mythology at hand to describe and explain the troublesome actions, and overall mischievous personality, of Coyote the Changer. He uses the aspects from the mythological Coyote, the prominent character of Caddo literature, to make his own version that fits his novel: Coyote the Changer.

To begin, one characteristic that Chabon borrows from Coyote, in the myth *Coyote and the Origin of Death*, to form his own antagonist is patience. In the text, when Coyote is unable to take away the Splinter, the last ingredient in finishing the universe, away from Ethan, he puts him aside to wait for despair to overtake him (Chabon 434-436). Coyote says that he has waited

ages for the moment to come and that he could wait a little bit longer (Chabon 434-436). This dialogue demonstrates Coyote's patience, something that is also found in the Native American myth of the Caddo: Coyote and the Origin of Death. In this myth, Coyote sits "with the singers for many days, and when... he... [hears] the whirlwind [at last]" he fulfills his plan of making death permanent by closing "the door," (George 16). As they say, patience may be bitter, but its fruit is definitely sweet.

Another character trait that the author takes from the Caddo's myth is determination. In the text of *Summerland*, Coyote is always seen pushing towards his goal of ending the universe, even if an obstacle blocks him from the finish line. Such resolve is seen when Angry Betty, a giant, stops he and his raid of skriker from proceeding to Murmury Well (Chabon 417-416). Going against his principles and ethics, Coyote seduces the female giant by displaying false affection and doing whatever she pleases (Chabon 420-423). This determination of Coyote the Changer is also borrowed from the Caddo's mythological literature. The Caddo's Coyote also demonstrates a sense of determination when he waits for a long time for his chance to permanently create death (George 16). As they say, no goal can be met without a little sweat.

Without Chabon's allusions, the reader understands only the slyness of Coyote. As stressed before, many kinds of literatures express Coyote in sly and roguish character. If allusions are introduced, the writing will allow for the character to develop beyond the traditional stereotype. With the author alluding to the myth, the audience understands how organized and clever of a mindset Coyote, in Chabon's novel, holds. Basically, the reader, with the <https://assignbuster.com/the-tales-of-coyote-a-cultural-mythological-and-literary-analysis-of-chabons-antagonist/>

comprehension of these allusions, will be able to understand one of Michael Chabon' main characters, Coyote, more descriptively and thoroughly.

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