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The Importance of the Motif of Creation in Thomas King's
The Truth About Stories

Bakalářská práce

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TÉMA ČESKY:

Důležitost motivu stvoření v knize The Truth About Stories od Thomase Kinga

TÉMA ANGLICKY:

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ZÁSADY PRO VYPRACOVÁNÍ:

My aim is to explore the importance of motif of creation in Thomas King's The Truth About Stories. Each story in this collection proceeds from existing Native American creation myths that are followed by historical references to Native American history, together with essayistic and autobiographical parts. My objective is to analyse each story in this book and to explore how the question of Indianness is involved in these stories. Hence, my hypothesis is that Thomas King uses Native American creation myths as a springboard to a new solution to the Native American identity. Thomas King hopes for the future for Native Americans and implies that their cultural identity should overcome the shadow of the image formed by white men.

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Prohlašuji, že jsem bakalářskou práci vypracovala samostatně pod odborným dohledem vedoucího práce a uvedla jsem všechny použité podklady a literaturu.

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INTRODUCTION

This bachelor thesis deals with the importance of the motif of creation in Thomas King's *The Truth About Stories*. The objective is to analyse each story in this book and to explore how the question of Indianness is involved in these stories.

In my thesis, I want to find out the reason why Thomas King uses this particular motif. My hypothesis is that Thomas King uses Native American creation myths as a springboard to a new solution to Native American identity.

The reason I picked this topic is because I had seen King's short film *I'm Not the Indian You Had in Mind* which made me think about this particular theme for the first time. The short film challenges the stereotypical perception of Native Americans and it made me interested to find out more about the problematics.

This thesis consists of two parts—theoretical and analytical. The first part has three major chapters and the analytical part has one chapter with several subchapters. In the first chapter, Native American tradition of storytelling is introduced along with terminology of a creation myth. The second chapter is concerned with Thomas King's biography and Gerald Vizenor's impact. Moreover, terminology regarding Native Americans is introduced. The third chapter explores trickster narration and observes its reflection in *The Truth About Stories*. The analytical part opens with analysis of a creation myth that is found in each chapter of the book. The following part of the thesis explores features of Native American oral narration found in the chapters of the book. Further, this part contains synopsis of the five chapters and of the afterword according to their themes. The last part of the thesis searches for the possible cause of author's impulse to use the motif of creation in his stories. The fourth chapter is followed by conclusion, Czech summary of the thesis and attachments of four pictures illustrating different depictions of Native American identity.

1. NATIVE AMERICAN ORAL TRADITION

The focus of this chapter will be on Native American oral tradition because it is a recurring theme in every chapter of *The Truth About Stories*. This thesis will explore the importance of the motif of creation myth that is also connected to Native oral tradition. Therefore, its terminology will be stated in this chapter as well.

1.1. Definition of creation myth

Various cultures as well as various Native American tribes have their own story about how the world was created. In other words, each community has its own mythology. No matter to what religion stories refer to, “the myths that are told are in some important sense true.”¹

Native American myths introduce specific culture, habits and religion and they even have a healing function in some Native American tribes. Mythology makes a great part of Native American cultural tradition. Myths explaining the origin of the universe were created as a response to inexplicable mysteries and show the importance of nature for Native American culture. Native American creation stories are about supernatural characters and they usually contain several animal figures, from which is coyote the most familiar. Myths are based on experience from everyday life and mark problems of the world. Although, many unrealistic events and mythological creatures appear in myths.

There are many definitions of a creation myth and one of them is even presented in the first chapter of *The Truth About Stories*. Thomas King states that a creation myth is

... a story that recounts how the world was formed, how things came to be, for contained within creation stories are relationships that help to define the nature of the universe and how cultures understand the world in which they exist.²

Generally, myth is described as a story that tries to demonstrate something, describes natural wonders or the origin of the Earth. Such a story can be also told

¹ John Badertscher, “On Creation Myths,” *Implicit Religion* 13, no.2 (2010): 195–209, doi:10.1558/imre.v13i2.195.

² Thomas King, *The Truth About Stories*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 10.

with the purpose of passing on a knowledge “in contrast to the more common use, in which it means an assertion made to deceive, or one accepted uncritically.”³

However, myths are important no matter what intention of the narrating is.

Mythical stories were passed from one generation to another and they are part of a cultural heritage, not only of Native Americans but of every nation.

Myths were created with dual functionality. Firstly, they served to explain natural or cultural facts; secondly, their function was to “justify, validate, or explain the existence of a social system and traditional rites and customs.”⁴

Creational myths that will be discussed in this thesis are mainly focused on the first mentioned function, that is, they are the ones providing explanation of natural phenomena. The tradition of narrating myths serves as “vehicle for instruction”⁵ with its main purpose to explain events that can not be understood or experienced.

1.2. Native storytelling

Native American myths were transmitted orally and they often experienced light planned changes due to the type of the audience they were narrated to. Native American myths are told in a different manner than Western stories. Therefore, non-Native American spectators might have difficulties with their understanding. For instance, the moment of suspense is not decisive for Native American stories because the form of the story differs. Native American stories were retold from one generation to another and the hearers of the story retold it to others, therefore thrilling moments of the story often disappeared entirely.

The contrast between Native American narrative and the Western story can be explained by the fact that evolution of Native American culture happened without collecting stories in written form. The first written documentation of Native American myths were from colonists. Further interest in myths came in 19th century when Native American population decreased. That is the reason of the obligation that was felt to protect recordings of the vanishing culture, being called “salvage ethnography.”⁶

³ Badertscher, “On Creation Myths.”

⁴ Dawn Elaine Bastian and Judy K. Mitchell, *Handbook of Native American Mythology* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2004), 2.

⁵ Bastian and Mitchell, *Handbook of Native American Mythology*, 3.

⁶ Joy Porter and Kenneth M. Roemer, *The Cambridge Companion to Native American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 70.

Storytelling constituted a great part of Native American culture and was perfected through many years. Native American storyteller added sounds to the speech, even if they did not cause any radical effect to the hearer. Constituents of a good story that were added over time covered “vocal inflections, verbal innovations, rhetorical omissions and additions, shifts in the order of events, modifications of character”⁷ and many more. The above-mentioned features granted a new presentation that was relevant for the current situation. Moreover, the speaker made variations of the plot; therefore, the story could fit the specific audience. At the same time, the narrator could address contemporary issues related to the tribe, for example, a situation when a member of the tribe was not respecting rules or acted in inappropriate ways. If so, the speaker used a character that caused same troubles to demonstrate the issue. Hence, the one that caused nuisance to the tribe was not embarrassed in public; the critique came in a subtle and gentle form of moral narrative.⁸

In addition, storytelling had another function; modifications of one story served as a reply to the preceding speech. Alternatively, this change could be an expression of “a rebuttal or challenge that might suggest a different fashion of applying traditional ideas to immediate circumstances.”⁹ Thus, storytelling served as a method of solving issues and discussing various opinions.

Whereas non-Natives tell a story, in most cases, in one form and without repeating it, Native American stories were told more than once and they had purposeful and effective variations; “the dynamic character of myth thus renders definitive interpretation impossible.”¹⁰ Kroeber in his book about Native American storytelling states that:

Constantly revised, the stories became more dense, more subtle, their form gradually perfected to an economical sharpness like a well-flaked arrow point – with every word and sentence contributing to an increasingly complex and nuanced meaningfulness.¹¹

⁷ Karl Kroeber, *Native American Storytelling: A Reader of Myths and Legends*, (Malden: Blackwell, 2007), 2.

⁸ Kroeber, *Native American Storytelling*, 2.

⁹ Kroeber, *Native American Storytelling*, 2.

¹⁰ Badertscher, “On Creation Myths.”

¹¹ Kroeber, *Native American Storytelling*, 3.

Adaptations mentioned above show the dynamics of Native American culture. Nevertheless, this may be the reason why Native American literature and culture may stay uncomprehended for non-Native people. Kroeber suggests that the hearer of an indigenous story has to make an effort to understand its structure, dynamics and Native American humour through imagination. Only then we can learn what impact the story had on the first audience.¹²

¹² Kroeber, *Native American Storytelling*, 2.

2. THOMAS KING AND NATIVE AMERICAN BACKGROUND

This chapter covers Thomas King's biography, discusses influences on his writing and includes basic terminology. Thomas King's novels devote to the theme of Indianness which will be also discussed in the chapter.

2.1. Thomas King's biography

The author of *The Truth About Stories* is an American and Canadian novelist, Thomas King. He was born in Sacramento in 1943 and has Cherokee, German and Greek ancestors. King grew up in California, raised only by his mother.¹³ However, in an interview with Constance Rooke King stated that he considers himself a Canadian writer. He has Canadian citizenship and he mainly deals with Canadian landscape in his books. Nevertheless, King avoids a question of nationalism and rather refuses to emphasize the border between Canada and United States because he is "not at all interested in reinforcing stereotypes and clichés"¹⁴ that are not beneficial to Native Americans.

After his photojournalist career in Australia, Thomas King completed Ph.D. degree focused on English and American studies in Utah in 1986. Thomas King's interest in Native oral tradition was even reflected in his PhD dissertation.¹⁵ He became a teacher of Native Studies at the University of Minnesota; moreover, he was chair of American Indian Studies.¹⁶ King continues at the University of Guelph where he is now a retired professor with his main specialities in Native Literature, Creative Writing and American Literature.¹⁷

His enthusiasm for oral narrative "also leads to a reliance on dialogue in his fiction."¹⁸ King likes to employ dialogues of characters which represent the principle of oral narration. King is also a screenwriter—he adapts his stories for screenplays "which allow him to exercise his ear for dialogue."¹⁹ *Medicine*

¹³ Jace Weaver, "Thomas King," *Publishers Weekly* 240, no. 10 (March 1993): 56-57, Literature Resource Center.

¹⁴ Constance Rooke, "An interview with Thomas King," *World Literature Written in English* 30, no. 2 (Autumn 1990): 62-76, Literature Resource Center.

¹⁵ Weaver, "Thomas King."

¹⁶ Lee Skallerup, "Thomas King," *Athabasca University*, accessed October 29, 2018, <http://canadian-writers.athabascau.ca/english/writers/tking.php>.

¹⁷ Weaver, "Thomas King."

¹⁸ Weaver, "Thomas King."

¹⁹ Weaver, "Thomas King."

River (1989) was turned into a movie as well with Graham Greene as a principal performer; even Thomas King had a small role in this film. King's *Medicine River* was his first novel and narration of anecdotes and the theme of indigenous people is already apparent. Such a signature is evident in his other books. Usage of humour and contact with the reader through his gripping storytelling form King's specific style of writing.²⁰

Besides these elements, he embodies mythology and contemporary issues into his stories. In his second novel *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993) King expands on this theme and incorporates creation myth into this novel that was nominated for a Governor General's Literary Award in 1993.²¹ This book is divided into four parts each of which begins with a creation myth. A trickster character of a coyote appears in the first chapter, and further, other mythical characters emerge in the novel. Creation myth is told in several perspectives by various characters, such as the Lone Ranger, Robinson Crusoe, Ishmael and Hawkeye. In the novel *Green Grass, Running Water* Thomas King "blends various Native, Judeo-Christian and literary stories in such a way as to expose both the truth and the falsity in each."²² Four Native Americans regularly escape from mental hospital to save Canada from an environmental disaster and to return harmony of the nature. The motif of desire for maintaining a balance appears in King's other works.²³ In this novel, Thomas King concentrates on oral tradition of Native American storytelling and cultural identity that makes noticeable part of his entire work.

In 2014, Thomas King won a very prestigious Canadian literary RBC Taylor Prize for *The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People* (2012) that explains Native-American and white American relations with his typical ironic humour.²⁴ King's *One Good Story, That One* (1992) is another famous piece of work incorporating humour and Native American background.²⁵ Many of King's books interrogate the question of Native American identity, hence

²⁰ Corey Coates, "The Trouble with True Stories: Thomas King's *The Truth about Stories*," *Canadian Ethnic Studies Journal* 36, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 111-114, Literature Resource Center.

²¹ Skallerup, "Thomas King."

²² Weaver, "Thomas King."

²³ Weaver, "Thomas King."

²⁴ "Thomas King Tops Literary Field," *Guelph Tribune*, accessed December 16, 2018, <https://www.guelphmercury.com/community-story/5868198-thomas-king-tops-literary-field/>.

²⁵ Skallerup, "Thomas King."

it becomes one of the most recurring motifs in his work. In this collection of stories Thomas King interacts with biblical creation story about Adam and Eve. He adds a figure of coyote into the traditional Christian story, and thus he reopens a question of cultural conflict that he presents in humorous and ironic way. The book contains also a story about Christopher Columbus that is entirely told from a different point of view. This story shows King's playfulness with the truth being told. King's uses particular humour that has both an ironic and subtle touch.

2.2. Gerald Vizenor's influence

It is apparent that Thomas King's work came from Native American background, thus it represents a major influence on his literary works. Another possible influence on King are the Native writers who are cited in *The Truth About Stories* including Gerald Vizenor who was also King's friend.²⁶

It seems that these two writers have some literary elements in common, such as the theme of Indianness and trickster narration. To give a clear illustration of that, *The Truth About Stories* has recurrent comments on the question of cultural identity. The need for being recognized as a real Native American, that first appeared in 1970s, was supposed "to substantiate the cultural lie that had trapped us."²⁷ For Native Americans it rather meant to be "a kind of "pretend" Indian, an Indian who has to dress up like an Indian and act like an Indian in order to be recognized as an Indian."²⁸ This question of Indianness occupies an important position in both King's and Vizenor's novels.

Thomas King makes several references to Vizenor's work. Not only King mentions the Indianness and his unique usage of trickster narrative but he also points out his perspective on storytelling. According to Gerald Vizenor "you can't understand the world without telling a story."²⁹ Vizenor respects and follows the Native American cultural tradition; he claims that the oral narrative "stimulates epistemological reconsideration and powerful imaginative engagement with the process of textual creation."³⁰ Thus, Native American writings are open to

²⁶ Weaver, "Thomas King."

²⁷ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 45.

²⁸ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 45.

²⁹ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 32.

³⁰ Porter and Roemer, *The Cambridge Companion to Native American Literature*, 44.

various interpretations mainly because they are based on the tradition of storytelling that tends to change.

Vizenor's and Thomas King's novels also share the attempt of creating a novel by fusing Native American oral narrative and written literature. Vizenor is famous mainly for his "fabulist elements"³¹ and trickster figures in *Wordarrows* (1978) and *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart* (1978), his tricksters are set in an imaginary futuristic era. The second mentioned Vizenor's novel also contains the motif of myth that merges with the reality in the novel. That is a common theme, for instance, in King's *Green Grass, Running Water* and also for *The Truth About Stories*.³²

2.3. Terminology: "Native American," "Indian" and "American Indian"

To cover the essential terminology in the thesis, the terms mentioned above will be examined. A related point to consider is that none of these terms does not express the diversity of Native American tribes.

It is obvious that the term "Indian" is ambiguous, so it seems that "American Indian" is more fitting. However, Thomas King uses the term "Indian" in his book the most often. Using a name of the particular tribe is also not possible because *The Truth About Stories* is not only about the Cherokee nation.

The concept of "Native American" seems to be the most accurate to use regarding their land of origin. This term is also the most politically correct because it suggests that Native Americans were the original inhabitants of America.³³ Hence, I will use the term "Native American" in my thesis.

2.4. The Indianness in *The Truth About Stories*

In order to investigate why the Native American cultural motifs appear in the book in such an extent, it should be noted how the Indianness and Native American culture are described in the book. In *The Truth About Stories*, there are

³¹ Porter and Roemer, *The Cambridge Companion to Native American Literature*, 177.

³² Porter and Roemer, *The Cambridge Companion to Native American Literature*, 177.

³³ Dennis Gaffney, "'American Indian' or 'Native American'?" *PBS*, accessed January 16, 2019, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/roadshow/fts/bismarck_200504A16.html.

several references to the perception of Native Americans and they appear along with historical events.

In the chapter called “Let me entertain you”, King argues that:

Within the North American imagination, Native people have always been an exotic, erotic, terrifying presence. Much like the vast tracts of wilderness that early explorers and settlers faced. But most of all, Native people have been confusing.³⁴

We have to take into consideration that this fact is generalized because Native Americans cannot be referred to as a single culture due to the diversity of tribes. King mentions that the first stories that were told about Native people came from Christopher Columbus, apparently, these stories were far from the truth. This conflict of completely different cultures may have caused the first spreadings of untrue stories about Native Americans. Columbus could not understand the different mentality of Native Americans; therefore, his publishing of first impressions about Indigenous people made a general view of White society on Native Americans which they could not be divested of for many decades. It must be said that Christopher Columbus even took many Native Americans from his voyage that ended up as slaves. Even Amerigo Vespucci’s statement about Native American’s being “indecent, immoral, and cannibalistic”³⁵ did not help to create a better public opinion about Native Americans.

Thomas King points out that Native Americans were even imprisoned for the reason of their identity and they became an entertainment for tourists. To that point, in *The Truth About Stories* he mentions a story about Ishi who had to become a museum curiosity in order to survive. In the 19th century, with the general opinion of society that Native Americans were vanishing, the attitude towards a Native American who was wild and dangerous was transformed into “a singular semi-historic Indian who was a friend to the White man, who was strong, brave, honest, and noble.”³⁶ King explains that this change was welcomed; however, Native Americans were not very truthfully labelled as dying. This

³⁴ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 79.

³⁵ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 71.

³⁶ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 82.

attitude “persuaded many Native people that they had no future as Indians”³⁷ and that “White culture [was] the only future that was available to Native people.”³⁸

Spreading the information that Native Americans were disappearing triggered the quest for a true Indian that became a source of entertainment for White people. This pursuit caused the division of Indians who were labelled according to the fact whether they were Native American enough according to the public opinion. King himself did not escape this fallacious marking, and was thus named as “a bundle of contradictions”³⁹ with his non Indigenous “sins [such as] insisting on flying business class, playing golf with Graham Greene, owning a big house in Guelph, having three cats, and vacationing in Costa Rica.”⁴⁰ It may seem that such an approach is an improvement compared to how Native Americans were perceived earlier, but this attitude is still far from the truth. King argues that: “maybe being entertainment isn’t so bad. Maybe it’s what you’re left with when the only defence you have is a good story. Maybe entertainment is the story of survival.”⁴¹

By King’s references to historical events and quoting important Native American authors, he may use *The Truth About Stories* to subvert this distorted perception of the Indianness and to defend Native American culture. King “sees the native experience as hybrid.”⁴² Native American characters in Thomas King’s book are not typical American Indians. King presents them in reality; they are people who look for a good job and want to feel good in a society which was not always possible in the past. Even when Native writers started to write, they had to deal with “the North American version of the past [that] was too well populated.”⁴³ This past which was known did not correspond with the Native American version and

... was unusable, for it had not only trapped Native people in a time warp, it also insisted that our past was all we had.

No present.

³⁷ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 84.

³⁸ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 87.

³⁹ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 88.

⁴⁰ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 88.

⁴¹ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 89.

⁴² Kevin McNeilly, “Thomas King: Overview,” review of *Contemporary Novelists*, by Susan Windisch Brown, *St. James Press*, 1996, Literature Resource Center.

⁴³ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 105.

No future.

And to believe in such a past is to be dead.”⁴⁴

Thus, this situation provoked an interest of Native American writers to prove society the opposite and this might also be the intention of Thomas King.

In his books, King presents the ancient Native American culture through trickster figures and myths that are reflected in the modern world. Thomas King especially captures features of Native American storytelling and suggests that Native American identity should not be formed by prejudiced views. It seems that he applies this particular theme because of the substance of narrative:

Storytelling transgresses the racial or social limits that all human beings place upon themselves and injects a welcome complexity into narrow-minded understandings of human experience.⁴⁵

Storytelling may help to perceive the Indianness from a different point of view; thus, it can assist the reader or the hearer to create new (perhaps more objective) feelings about Native Americans.

⁴⁴ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 106.

⁴⁵ McNeilly, “Thomas King: Overview.”

3. TRICKSTER NARRATIVE

This chapter introduces trickster narrative that is a part of Native American heritage of storytelling. Traditional trickster figures as well as the usage of trickster narrative and its purpose in the book will be mentioned.

3.1. Trickster figures in Native American narrative

Trickster narration is connected with the figure of trickster that is significant for Native American mythology; furthermore, for Thomas King. The trickster is only a trope, a figure of speech, not a character. It's just "a modality of spoken discourse."⁴⁶ Native American storytelling contains a substantial dose of imagination that is a base for stories about tricksters. Trickster can be understood as

...a dramatic paradox, like every paradox revealing the conceptual limits of both our social and linguistic systems that define the character of the community in which we live.⁴⁷

It can be suggested that by showing that limits can be exceeded, the trickster brings liberty and helps us "to discover the structure of our mindset,"⁴⁸ thus to see new possibilities. Kroeber suggests that if we can understand this, we will realize how important trickster stories were for Native American community; trickster stories make everything possible.⁴⁹

Trickster stories were narrated more likely as an entertainment for hearers. However, they were sometimes narrated to small children with an educative purpose. The trickster could be represented in various images; however, he was usually an animal exhibiting human behavioural traits and was notorious for his skills of confounding people by being smart. The typical animal for trickster figure is coyote that usually appears in Native American stories in connection with his craftiness.

⁴⁶ Kroeber, *Native American Storytelling*, 76.

⁴⁷ Kroeber, *Native American Storytelling*, 76.

⁴⁸ Kroeber, *Native American Storytelling*, 76.

⁴⁹ "Trickster," *Merriam Webster's Encyclopedia of Literature*, Literature Resource Center, accessed January 17, 2019, <http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/A148924252/LitRC?u=palacky&sid=LitRC&xid=adda8771>.

Trickster may have characteristics of a human and, on top of that, he could be perceived as actual human being having magical abilities. Tricksters might change their form to become an animal, female or male of undefined age. Thus, the figure of trickster was ambiguous—anthropomorphic. Tricksters may be understood to be a reincarnation of Native American people having a supernatural origin. Their super power was not in being strong but in their shrewdness, sometimes being too sly that they caused themselves trouble.⁵⁰

Tricksters have a big significance for Native American culture. The trickster is “a transformer”⁵¹ that changes society and the land around. Tricksters learnt people how to adapt to new circumstances that came with the evolution. The trickster is deemed to be an inventor or a creator of various profits for the society, by reason of, he is called a culture hero. They helped people often unintentionally by an accident or a joke that could subsequently meant evolution in technology. By these means, tricksters learnt people how to survive, for instance, by introducing them fire and light.⁵² Nevertheless, the trickster can have a dark side as well—he might be a thief and a manipulator.⁵³

Further, the trickster may have similar abilities that God has in the Christian faith. The trickster might be a maker of human beings and nature and can be “a deliverer who, for example, rids the world of the monsters that make it uninhabitable.”⁵⁴ However, the motive to use tricksters in the narrative was not to represent a god because these figures had very disgraceful behaviour sometimes. Their heroic actions, if any, were usually unintentional as well.⁵⁵

The figure of trickster is aptly named; the trickster played tricks intentionally. He was breaking rules, yet his behaviour made a contribution to create a better world—the chaos that the trickster caused generated order. Moreover, the trickster showed human beings that old rules need to be changed sometimes to keep balance and harmony. Therefore, the imagination was used

⁵⁰ “Trickster.”

⁵¹ Bastian and Mitchell, *Handbook of Native American Mythology*, 208.

⁵² Patricia Ann Lynch and Jeremy Roberts, *Native American Mythology A to Z* (New York: Chelsea House, 2010), 82.

⁵³ Carlton Smith, “Coyote, Contingency, and Community: Thomas King’s *Green Grass, Running Water* and Postmodern Trickster,” *American Indian Quarterly* 21, no. 3 (Summer 1998): 515-534, Literature Resource Center.

⁵⁴ Bastian and Mitchell, *Handbook of Native American Mythology*, 83.

⁵⁵ David J. Minderhout, “Tricksters (Native American Culture),” *Salem Press Encyclopedia*, accessed January 17, 2019, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ers&AN=99110228&lang=cs&site=eds-live&authtype=shib&custid=s7108593>.

when the old order held society in the past by using trickster figures in Native American narrative.

3.2. Trickster narration in *The Truth About Stories*

Thomas King's novels highlight the significance of Native oral tradition where "narrative structures, and implied reading experiences reflect communal oral traditions of trickster stories and ceremonial healing."⁵⁶ When King is writing about Native American issues he feels "a sense of responsibility to that community."⁵⁷ He initially writes to Native American audience that, according to his own words, "becomes a lost audience"⁵⁸ due to the fact that not many Natives are willing to spend money on books. The writing yet keeps the spirit of the audience he is concentrated on.

Thomas King's storytelling may be perceived as a trickster narration in view of the fact that he skips details so the audience has to make its own point of view. Moreover, King writes in a humouristic way even when telling the stories about unfortunate situations either from his life or from Native American history. Native American humour that mostly consist of jokes applied to Native Americans themselves can be considered to be an "ethnic glue in that it elicits empathy from those who recognise or share such difficulties."⁵⁹ The irony and humour is also used when reminding hard living situations and racial discrimination of Native Americans. Thus, all of these aspects as well as imagination, trickster figures and play with words are crucial elements of trickster narration.⁶⁰ By being a trickster narrator, he suggests that it is essential to modify and revise stories that we heard. In King's afterword he quotes Ben Okri to point out that "if we change the stories we live by, we change our lives."⁶¹ Thus, if we only know non-Native stories, it is primarily important to hear Native American ones.

⁵⁶ Porter and Roemer, *The Cambridge Companion to Native American Literature*, 16.

⁵⁷ Rooke, "An interview with Thomas King."

⁵⁸ Rooke, "An interview with Thomas King."

⁵⁹ Maggie Ann Bowers, "'Ethnic Glue': Humour in Native American Literatures," *Contemporary Literary Criticism* 276, no.1 (2009): 247-255, Literature Resource Center.

⁶⁰ Bowers, "'Ethnic Glue.'"

⁶¹ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 153.

The main feature of trickster narration in *The Truth About Stories* is that the narrator confuses the audience while telling story. For instance, the narratives “abruptly intersperse the private with the political.”⁶² Each story begins with a myth that is followed by autobiographical anecdote and a cultural-political issue. To give a clear example, the first chapter concerns prejudice and discrimination of King’s Greek mother and the issues she had when finding a suitable job, whereas the father left the family in King’s early childhood. In view of this fact, *The Truth About Stories* may be understood as a search of (Native American) identity and of real version of historical events.

Moreover, Thomas King affirms “that the only legitimate history North America has is Native, hence the American fetishization of the Native through branding, from butter and baking soda to beer and baseball teams.”⁶³ The problem of the truth of history was caused by writings about Native Americans from entirely non-Native point of view. That makes a challenge for native writers “to use the native present as a way to resurrect a native past and to imagine a native future.”⁶⁴

Thomas King claims that “stories can control our lives”⁶⁵ and that “the truth about stories is that that’s all we are”.⁶⁶ The issue of storytelling is that stories vary because of different narrators that tell them. In direct consequence of this problem, the truth also differs. Thus, everyone has a different truth; this statement may be also applied to the perception of history in relation to Native Americans and the Western world.

The stories we tell notably form our lives; nonetheless, “we can only progress if we tell new stories that are based on our consideration of other stories.”⁶⁷ King’s trickster narration “is at once trying to represent himself and to represent who he feels he is variously represented as.”⁶⁸ Thus, he opens a question of Indianness and “desperate desire for acceptance.”⁶⁹ The stereotypical portrayal

⁶² Coates, “The Trouble with True Stories.”

⁶³ Coates, “The Trouble with True Stories.”

⁶⁴ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 106.

⁶⁵ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 9.

⁶⁶ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 2.

⁶⁷ Coates, “The Trouble with True Stories.”

⁶⁸ Coates, “The Trouble with True Stories.”

⁶⁹ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 92.

of Native Americans is disrupted because King presents Indigenous people as individuals rather than stereotypical warriors or spiritualists.

However, it seems that Thomas King is not much worried that Native traditions may disappear. He does not want to illustrate Native Americans as a dying nation that had to go through many cultural changes as well as assimilation and enduring colonization. Thomas King highlights the importance of Native American culture that is valuable not only to Indigenous people but also to every culture:

Along with that is the periodic revival of Native traditions and language. Whether the languages will all survive or not I don't know. I hope they do, because within the language is contained much of the literature, the oral literature that is a pool for all of us to use.⁷⁰

In the interview with Rooke he points out that many Native American tribes were under pressure for many years but they still survived until today. They even are “in better shape than many people give them credit for being.”⁷¹

It is likely that Thomas King uses trickster narration because the narrative method is also related to the Native American tradition. King's narrative keeps the form of Native American style by questioning the typical pattern of the storytelling. By these means he may perform that Native American literature is accessible even to the non-Native readers. Following the tradition of Native American style of storytelling, Thomas King's stories seems to be narrated with indefinite direction. This circular style of narrative is different from typical Western literature where the dominant action is usually clear.⁷²

Moreover, King does not address issues in a straightforward manner because building the action is not always the purpose of Native American narrative.⁷³ Another reason why it seems that King narrates stories in a non-Western way is that images take priority over simple words in King's narrative. This might be also the case of creation myths that reflect culture of Native American society.

⁷⁰ Rooke, “An interview with Thomas King.”

⁷¹ Rooke, “An interview with Thomas King.”

⁷² Kroeber, *Native American Storytelling*, 9-10.

⁷³ Badertscher, “On Creation Myths.”

By these means Thomas King challenges the stereotype of traditional Western narrative, “stereotypes about Indian taciturnity”⁷⁴ and about general Indianness. As it was mentioned earlier, King was not an authentic Native American which we might “have in mind”⁷⁵ but he came from multicultural family background. He grew up outside of the Cherokee tribe. This lack of Cherokee cultural experience might bring “greater freedom in writing about Native American themes.”⁷⁶

3.3. The role of the truth

In a literary interview, Thomas King mentions that there are many non-Native writers who publish Native American stories and do not bother whether these stories are right. He further states that this is an offence to Native American community because these narratives are part of Native American cultural heritage and there were several cases that these stories were simply taken from Indigenous communities and were published to be sold without any permission. In such case he proclaims that

... offense is that Indians sort of become the flavour of the month. You have all these writers jumping on the bandwagon and writing about Indians because it's going to sell. I find that offensive.⁷⁷

Thus, when writing *The Truth About Stories*, he makes effort to give non-Natives insight into Native American community without being disruptive to Native American culture because he considers important not to reveal “too much about the Native community....”⁷⁸

The Truth About Stories retells Native American myths “in the service of healing collective trauma.”⁷⁹ King continues in the tradition of Native American storytelling; thus, Indigenous stories are changed in his interpretation. This manner of storytelling serves to pass on a message that “such stories discourage

⁷⁴ Weaver, “Thomas King.”

⁷⁵ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 57.

⁷⁶ Weaver, “Thomas King.”

⁷⁷ Rooke, “An interview with Thomas King.”

⁷⁸ Rooke, “An interview with Thomas King.”

⁷⁹ Irene Morrison, “Stories to Stop the Apocalypse: Indigenous Mythmaking as Solidarity-Building Practice in Thomas King's *The Back of the Turtle*,” *South Atlantic Review* 83, no. 3 (Fall 2018): 44+, Literature Resource Center.

unifying and implacable moralism, and they do not simply prescribe ways of living and being in the world.”⁸⁰ *The Truth About Stories* shows how storytelling as method of diffusion of cultural issues may inform multicultural audience how important is the role of interpretation of the truth—clarification of the question of Indianness in this case. Storytelling in *The Truth About Stories* might exemplify that healing through narration is possible to achieve return to balance.

Not only Thomas King implements elements of the oral narrative into his work but it also seems that he uses this style of narration to point out its importance. In *The Truth About Stories*, Thomas King claims that literature as well as storytelling have a big value for society and that they are “the cornerstones of our culture.”⁸¹ It can be suggested that written literature seems to be more complete because of its written form. However, storytelling does not have deficiency of “an inherent sophistication.”⁸² Thomas King proves that oral stories had been also written on examples such as the library of Tenochtitlán and of Alexandria that were both destroyed by settlers. Because of this, some stories were lost but “if we stopped telling the stories and reading the books, we would discover that neglect is as powerful an agent as war and fire.”⁸³ Thomas King claims that it does not matter whether the stories are written or oral, they are still powerful and important implements that should not be unheeded.

King’s storytelling exemplifies that Native American narrative structure might bring balance to society. The most significant passage from the book: “The truth about stories is that’s all we are”⁸⁴ reappears several times throughout *The Truth About Stories* and emphasizes the value of the truth. King highlights that storytelling enables freedom and expresses hope. Humour in his stories and the narrative structure of stories thus may help with “creating communities and inter-community dialogue.”⁸⁵ King proposes a new view on truth about Native Americans and the question of Indianness “through defining community priorities and guiding individual actions.”⁸⁶

⁸⁰ Morrison, “Stories to Stop the Apocalypse.”

⁸¹ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 95.

⁸² King, *The Truth About Stories*, 100.

⁸³ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 98.

⁸⁴ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 2.

⁸⁵ Morrison, “Stories to Stop the Apocalypse.”

⁸⁶ Morrison, “Stories to Stop the Apocalypse.”

4. ANALYSIS OF THE STORIES

This chapter will introduce a brief synopsis of the stories in *The Truth About Stories* as well as an analysis of creation myth that appears in the stories. The book is composed of smaller fragments and there is no central plot. Thus, only major stories and themes will be covered. The five chapters and the afterword will be analysed with the aim to examine features of Native American oral tradition.

4.1. The back of the turtle

The novel starts with a creation myth that reappears in each of the chapters and thus represents a frame for the structure of the book. It is a creation story about a woman who fell from the sky.

Originally, this myth about Sky Woman was narrated by the Iroquois and it had “various explanations of how she fell from the sky world.”⁸⁷ For example, some versions involve her husband who caused her to fall from the sky. In other tellings, she fell because of an accident she got into.⁸⁸ Even if Thomas King is of Cherokee descent, the myth is not narrated in connection with a specific tribe. King uses this myth to illustrate the beginning of Native American oral narration rather than represent a particular tribe.

According to the myth in *The Truth About Stories*, this woman was once hungry and wanted to get Red Fern Foot because of which she dug through the ground to a new world. She was curious about what was behind the ground and it caused her to fall from the new world’s sky. This world was nothing but water but the woman was rescued by water animals that helped her build a land from mud situated on the back of the turtle. The story continues on this new land where she gave birth to twins. Her children were both very powerful—one had creative powers and the other had destructive powers: “The good twin, Ioskeha, formed the trees and plants on the earth while the evil twin, Jawiscara, created earthquakes, storms, and sea monsters to ruin his brother’s work.”⁸⁹ In other variations of the Iroquois tribe, the Sky Woman gave birth only to a daughter who

⁸⁷ Lynch and Roberts, *Native American Mythology A to Z*, 103.

⁸⁸ Lynch and Roberts, *Native American Mythology A to Z*, 103.

⁸⁹ Lynch and Roberts, *Native American Mythology A to Z*, 54.

was later mother of the twins.⁹⁰ Names of the twins differ in other tellings as well as other details. In some versions, we can even find that the evil twin caused his mother's death or that the good twin killed the evil one.⁹¹

This creation story is common in many Native American tribes. Although each of the communities implemented minor changes, “the world never leaves the turtle’s back.”⁹² For example, the Cherokee tribe tells a story about a beetle that successfully brings mud to create the world, whereas the Arapho has a turtle who dives for mud.⁹³ Many more characters perform the role of the main character in this “Earth Diver” story. However, Thomas King chooses the woman and also makes some changes in the narrative:

... we should give this woman a name so we don’t have to keep calling her “the woman.” How about Blanche? Catherine? ... I say we call her Charm. Don’t worry. We can change it later on if we want to.⁹⁴

King shows how Native American story can differ according to the narrator. For this reason, he chooses his own name for a character who may also be depicted in many more variations (Kodoyanpe, Manabozho, Na’pi, Old Man Coyote, Sky Woman and Wee-sa-kay-jac).⁹⁵

The creation myth about earth divers is “one of the most common creation accounts, found all over North America.”⁹⁶ The figure of turtle also occurs repeatedly in other Native American creation stories and has a great significance. For instance, the Lakota tribe believed that turtle helped the new born babies to the world and guarded them. For this reason, mothers “beaded turtle-shaped amulets to contain their daughters’ umbilical cords and grant them the turtle’s longevity.”⁹⁷

⁹⁰ Lynch and Roberts, *Native American Mythology A to Z*, 103.

⁹¹ Bastian and Mitchell, *Handbook of Native American Mythology*, 109.

⁹² King, *The Truth About Stories*, 1.

⁹³ Lynch and Roberts, *Native American Mythology A to Z*, 103.

⁹⁴ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 11.

⁹⁵ Lynch and Roberts, *Native American Mythology A to Z*, 28.

⁹⁶ Lynch and Roberts, *Native American Mythology A to Z*, 28.

⁹⁷ Lynch and Roberts, *Native American Mythology A to Z*, 117.

4.2. The conflict of Christian and Native American creation story

The first chapter in the book called “‘You'll Never Believe What Happened’ Is Always a Great Way to Start” is mainly devoted to Native American and Christian creation story. The myth about Sky and her twins who have different powers highlights obligation to preserve balance between creation and destruction in Native American narrative.⁹⁸ This harmony which prevails in Native American narrative is contrasted with the Christian creation story that, according to Thomas King, operates on a different basis.

In comparison to the myth about the woman Charm, Christian creation story incorporates the infinite power of Christian God. Christian God created a world and paradise where Adam and Eve could live on condition that they will accept the rules of God. As is well known, Adam and Even broke his commandments. From this example, it is visible that the role of the human is more important in the Christian story than in the Native American one. King proposes that the Christian creation story is “governed by a series of hierarchies;”⁹⁹ animals and nature are not as important as in the Native American myth. However, Native American creation stories are “governed by a series of co-operations”¹⁰⁰ together with balance and the power of nature.

Thomas King further argues that Christian creation story is more familiar to the majority of society; thus it makes Native American tellings more unheeded in non-Native society. As for Native American stories, he states that “we listen to them and then we forget them, for amidst the thunder of Christian monologues, they have neither purchase nor place.”¹⁰¹ King mentions that the Christian story is well-spread because “we live in a predominantly scientific, capitalistic, Judeo-Christian world governed by physical laws, economic imperatives, and spiritual precepts.”¹⁰² Native American narrative avoids this focus on supremacy of human beings. As Thomas King states in the book, the perfection of Christian God’s world later turned into disharmony and chaos, whereas the harmony between people and animals remains in the Native narrative.¹⁰³

⁹⁸ Morrison, “Stories to Stop the Apocalypse.”

⁹⁹ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 23.

¹⁰⁰ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 23.

¹⁰¹ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 21.

¹⁰² King, *The Truth About Stories*, 12.

¹⁰³ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 24-25.

Being a trickster narrator, Thomas King is allowed to make such a strong statement; however, it seems a bit black-and-white. It may have been his intention to force us to think about the cultural differences. Thomas King has rightfully said that balance and spiritual relationship with nature are “the territory of Native oral literature.”¹⁰⁴ But as Native Americans cannot be understood as a single nation, there is not only one nation behind the Christian creation story as well. *The Truth About Stories* has a straightforward attitude and rather seems to be a one-way mirror of Native American society that does not take the Christian society into notice. However, it should be considered that Thomas King wants to point out “the difference [which] is this: instead of waiting for you to come to us, as we have in the past, written literature has allowed us to come to you.”¹⁰⁵

If we take one story as the right one, we won’t understand the other story. As for non-Native society, the role of the truth in *The Truth About Stories* is problematic. Thomas King suggests that the two different creation stories may serve as an example of “dichotomy, the elemental structure of Western society.”¹⁰⁶ The contrast between good and evil is easy to be understood; however, Native narrative has no such contradiction. That may be the reason why the Native American story is not as simple to be easily trusted by non-Native audience.

4.2.1. The play with narration

Creation myths as well as the whole stories in *The Truth About Stories* are narrated in the spirit of Native American oral tradition and meet the requirements that are essential for such storytelling. For example, the same creation story is never narrated in the same way:

I’ve heard this story many times, and each time someone tells the story, it changes. Sometimes the change is simply in the voice of the storyteller. Sometimes the change is in the details.

Sometimes in the order of events. Other times it’s the dialogue or

¹⁰⁴ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 114.

¹⁰⁵ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 114.

¹⁰⁶ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 25.

the response of the audience. But in all the tellings of all the tellers, the world never leaves the turtle's back.¹⁰⁷

The creation story always continues with the interaction with an audience—it is a little girl that reacts on the myth in the first chapter. She is curious why the earth does not float in the space and asks: “What was below the turtle? Another turtle, the storyteller told her. And below that turtle? Another turtle. And below that? Another turtle.”¹⁰⁸ This interaction that is more like a game is another feature of Native American storytelling. The subject of the story is then changed, as it is usual in Native American narrative, and the Okanagan storyteller Jeannette Armstrong is mentioned to illustrate the importance of the truth about stories. The following paragraph that includes citations of Armstrong point out the ability of a story to be changed. In the following chapters, the character of the girl that asks narrator the question is replaced by a boy, a woman, a man and a woman with a baby.

The story is then directed in another way. To follow the pattern of trickster narration, Thomas King tells stories to amuse his audience but also incorporates serious issues. For instance, King describes how he as a kid wanted to escape from his town mainly because his family was poor and Native American. It caused major problems to him and his family. These autobiographical stories appear in every chapter of the book. Thanks to such passages, the reader gets an authentic insight into everyday life of Native American family. King's mother raised Thomas and his brother herself and conditions were far worse because women were supposed to be more housewives than workers. This position of woman in society got even more challenging by being a single mother of Native American family; she was thus “caught between what she was supposed to be—invisible and female—and what circumstances dictated she become—visible and, well, not male.”¹⁰⁹ Due to these circumstances she got a smaller salary than her male colleagues and had to repeatedly change her jobs. King mentions that despite all of this “she has lived her life with an optimism of the intellect and an optimism

¹⁰⁷ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 1.

¹⁰⁸ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 1.

¹⁰⁹ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 3.

of the will. She understands the world as a good place where good deeds should beget good rewards.”¹¹⁰

It seems that Thomas King might have a similar belief, although his interpretation does not seem to be implicitly consistent with his mother’s attitude. According to King, good rewards for Native American culture are not only powered by good deeds and optimism. That also corresponds with the trickster narrative: “One of the roles of the trickster is to try to set the world right...”¹¹¹ Thus, he incorporates elaborated essays and lessons from history into his stories to show not only hope for better future but also reality. In following chapters, we find out that he would like to change what history brought to Native Americans and he is circumspect about its possible causes. In the review, King even claims that: “When I do my Native material, I'm writing particularly for a Native community ... It's just that as a Native writer. I think you take on responsibilities and obligations.”¹¹² Thomas King strives to present the truth about Native Americans, however the truth about them was not objective in Columbus’ stories about Native Americans and the same case seems to be with *The Truth About Stories*. King affirms that his intention is to:

... tell the stories not to play on your sympathies but to suggest how stories can control our lives, for there is a part of me that has never been able to move past these stories, a part of me that will be chained to these stories as long as I live.¹¹³

Obviously, the truth cannot be objective in any sense. But after disregarding the one-sidedness, Thomas King finds a rare way how to defend Native Americans through their own culture of storytelling. He further argues that “stories are wondrous things. And they are dangerous”¹¹⁴ due to the fact that they can bend the truth as it was mentioned earlier in the chapter 3. The hearer has to be careful about what stories are being told him as well as the narrator should be aware of his responsibility for the stories he tells. Thomas King uses this ambivalence to Native Americans’ advantage.

¹¹⁰ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 4.

¹¹¹ Rooke, “An interview with Thomas King.”

¹¹² Rooke, “An interview with Thomas King.”

¹¹³ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 9.

¹¹⁴ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 9.

When telling the stories, Thomas King applies features of Native American oral tradition in a way that he as a narrator imprints his unique style into the old story. For instance, he interacts with the audience while telling the stories; thus he uses phrases like: “You’ve probably figured this part out ...”¹¹⁵ and makes the hearer think that he is involved in the story. This example also demonstrates how Native American myths are different from the Christian story. When narrating the Native American story, King endeavours to “recreate an oral storytelling voice and craft the story in terms of a performance for a general audience”¹¹⁶ that expresses “the exuberance of the story but diminishes its authority.”¹¹⁷ Whereas the Christian story is narrated with “rhetorical distance and decorum while organizing the story for a knowledgeable gathering”¹¹⁸ to make the story more credible.

The end of the first chapter turns again to short autobiographical story about King’s father and essayistic thoughts in order to preserve the structure of Native American story where the plot always twists.

4.2.2. Simple oppositions

Thomas King writes in an entertaining way; however, the stories are narrated with noticeable generalization. As a narrator, King uses simple oppositions. For example, he shows contrast between Native American and Christian creation story with reference to good and evil, human and nature, chaos and order. However, King also makes a distinction between “you” meaning non-Natives and he uses “we” as a substitution for Native Americans. These terms seem to be used too forcefully in the chapter five where King talks about the perception of Native Americans:

What is it about us you don’t like? Maybe the answer to the question is simply that you don’t think we deserve the things we have. You don’t think we’ve worked for them. You don’t think we’ve earned them. You think that all we did was to sign our names to some prehistoric treaty, and, ever since, we’ve been living

¹¹⁵ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 14.

¹¹⁶ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 22.

¹¹⁷ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 23.

¹¹⁸ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 22.

in a semi-uncomfortable welfare state of trust land and periodic benefits. Maybe you believe we're lazy/drunk/belligerent/stupid. Unable to look after our own affairs. Maybe you think all we want to do is conjure up the past and crawl into it.¹¹⁹

The fact that King is a trickster narrator may be seen as an explanation of this move. He condemns the way stories were narrated about Native Americans; nonetheless, King's narrative tone may evoke negative emotions that will not help non-Natives to create a better view about Natives. By splitting the world into two halves on Natives and non-Natives, he may just try to provoke any response that will make the reader think about the problematics of Native Americans.

I do not think Thomas King wants the reader to take his words literally. Obviously, he is a trickster narrator; however, the simple distinction between Natives and non-Natives seems to be exaggerated. Nevertheless, this extraordinary type of narration makes *The Truth About Stories* a book that has to be read with an effort to understand the story about Native Americans.

4.3. Aimed at Native American cultural identity

The second chapter called "You're Not the Indian I Had in Mind" opens with a reference to Gerald Vizenor's approach to storytelling. According to him, the importance of a story is that we can only comprehend the world with the aid of a story.¹²⁰ In the case of *The Truth About Stories*, it is the world of Native Americans that Thomas King helps us to identify with.

The story in the second chapter introduces issues concerning Native American identity which was disrupted by a general belief that Native American culture was vanishing. To that point, Thomas King shares a story from his youth about him traveling and taking pictures of Native Americans and collecting postcards of Native Americans. However, King's collection of these pictures was to have a depiction of the true Native American identity. In King's interpretation it rather means an image of Native Americans playing golf or lacrosse. By mentioning this example, Thomas King wants to present that "Native culture ... is a vibrant, changing thing."¹²¹

¹¹⁹ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 147.

¹²⁰ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 32.

¹²¹ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 37.

In contrast, King mentions a photographer Edward Sheriff Curtis who “took along boxes of “Indian” paraphernalia—wigs, blankets, painted backdrops, clothing—in case he ran into Indians who did not look as the Indian was supposed to look.”¹²² King mentions that Curtis had taken pictures of Indigenous people to capture the Native American cliché that seems to be a fixed image. The similar attitude to Indian identity was held by a Native American photographer Richard Throssel who took pictures of romantic and heroic Indians as well as modern Native Americans. The aim of his photographs was to show “that Indians were contemporary as well as historical figures.”¹²³ The photographs of Curtis and Throssel are included in attachments to illustrate the difference in perception of Native Americans.

It seems that Thomas King approaches Native American identity in the same manner as Throssel does. On the one hand, he represents the traditional Native American culture through Native American stories and myths and follows the rules of Indigenous storytelling. On the other hand, Thomas King shows more modern image of the real Native American via autobiographical stories and humorous representation of racial issues that give the reader an idea of the true Indianness.

4.4. Racism and issues of power

Stories in the third chapter tell about relations between non-Native and Native Americans. The story plot line moves to the conception of Indianness, life story about Ishi and presentation of the real story about colonists and Christopher Columbus, all of these major issues were already incorporated in previous chapters. Even if it may seem that Thomas King includes only major problems and conflicts, he states the following: “Complaint is not my purpose. This little history lesson is simply my attempt to call attention to the cultural distance that separated Europeans and Indians.”¹²⁴ The title of the chapter “Let me entertain you” speaks itself about the approach to Native Americans. King tells us about this struggle of Native American identity: “Somewhere along the way, we ceased being people and somehow became performers in an Aboriginal minstrel show for

¹²² King, *The Truth About Stories*, 34.

¹²³ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 43.

¹²⁴ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 78.

White North America.”¹²⁵ King writes about how he perceived this cultural difference at college and he writes about what value he attributes to it now. The harmfulness of this cultural gap caused not only bad working conditions and low salary for Native Americans but also numerous suicides.¹²⁶

The last chapter called “What Is It About Us That You Don't Like?” is focused on racial issues and the problem of power. This chapter tells a story about a coyote who wants feathers from the ducks. In order to get their feathers, he plays tricks on the ducks and he is not satisfied with a little. Eventually, the ducks gave all feathers to the coyote because they are convinced that they have to and the coyote wins. Thomas King uses this story as an allegory and compares the situation of Native Americans in the past with the ducks in this story. The ducks as well as Native Americans had to sacrifice one part in order to keep the rest. In the past, the coyote was for Native Americans represented by legislation which wanted the land and “to legalize us out of existence.”¹²⁷ Further, the Indian Act specified “who is an Indian and who is not”¹²⁸ but this step was of no help for Native American community.

The question of Native American identity is still an issue. To that point, Thomas King mentions that Native Americans disappear legally because of the status that is controlled by the law.¹²⁹ The status of being Native American is very confusing because it can be easily lost according to marriage. Thus, Thomas King points out that Native Americans

... have two identities, a cultural identity and a legal identity, and the argument that I want to make is that we should be able to take both of them with us wherever we go, whatever we do, and with whomever we do it.¹³⁰

This may be the reason why many Native writers, including Thomas King, “go to the past for setting in order to argue against the rather lopsided and ethnocentric view of Indians that novelists and historians had created.”¹³¹ Having *The Truth About Stories* as a substantiated evidence, we see that King chooses to try to make

¹²⁵ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 68.

¹²⁶ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 92.

¹²⁷ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 130.

¹²⁸ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 132.

¹²⁹ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 143-144.

¹³⁰ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 149.

¹³¹ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 102.

improvements in the conception of Native Americans. As King says, stories shape the way “how we imagine the world in the way we do.”¹³² Hence, the stories he tells might have positive effect on our judgements about Native Americans.

4.4.1. Cure for the past

In the chapter four, Thomas King highlights the importance of the stories because “they are all we have.”¹³³ The message which King wants to pass through his story is its power. By mentioning how Native American lives were violated, King shows how some stories can hurt and how others can contribute to the past.

This chapter denotes that telling a true story about Native Americans can help the future and that misinterpreted story has consequences. The plotline continues with King talking about suicides of Native Americans who were “mixed-bloods”¹³⁴ and thus they “occupied those racial shadow zones that have been created for us.”¹³⁵ King also mentions the loss of his friend Louis Owens for the same reason. In *I Hear the Train*, Owens writes about his experience of the last year of the Bracero program. This program was created by American government and it “brought half a million migrant workers up from Mexico each year to work in the fields of California”¹³⁶ to satisfy “the continuing need for cheap labour.”¹³⁷ By mentioning this “experiment in economic opportunity”¹³⁸ King illustrates bad working conditions of Native Americans and their position in American society. The workers did not even make any money because they had to pay for food and other expenses. One day, they ended up in the camp alone because the guards left when the camp was being assaulted by “a White mob.”¹³⁹

King’s another illustration is Robert Alexie’s work *Porcupines and China Dolls* after which he named the chapter “A Million Porcupines Crying in the Dark.” In the past, girls and boys at residential school in Aberdeen were abused: “The girls had been scrubbed and powdered to look like china dolls and

¹³² King, *The Truth About Stories*, 95.

¹³³ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 92.

¹³⁴ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 92.

¹³⁵ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 92.

¹³⁶ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 93.

¹³⁷ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 93.

¹³⁸ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 94.

¹³⁹ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 94.

the boys had been scrubbed and sheared to look like porcupines.’¹⁴⁰ They cried each night in the beds. After this terrible experience, the main characters of the book are “making amends and finding truth”¹⁴¹ in order to heal.

On these two narratives King shows that stories can heal or they can cause harm. It depends on the way the stories are told. Owens and Alexie were Native authors who wrote about the past rather than about the future. King states that this aim to defend the past is a common theme for the majority of Native American writers. On the other hand, some Native writers decided not to avoid the future and “creat[ed] small panoramas of contemporary Native life by looking backward and forward with the same glance.”¹⁴² To that point, King mentions “the advent of the modern period in Native written literature”¹⁴³ which strived to preserve Native American past—Native writers started to write about the history as a kind of healing. This type of writing also seems to be Thomas King’s case. The motif of creation in *The Truth About Stories* shows the history and thus helps to heal the past. In this sense, the creation myth contributes to Native American future.

4.5. The question of ethics

The book *The Truth About Stories* is a written version of King’s CBS Massey lectures.¹⁴⁴ These lectures were later turned into a book containing five chapters (“‘You’ll Never Believe What Happened’ Is Always a Great Way to Start,” “You’re Not the Indian I Had in Mind,” “Let Me Entertain You,” “A Million Porcupines Crying in the Dark” and “What Is It About Us That You Don’t Like?”). The afterword was not included in the lectures; however, it forms an additional part of the book which Thomas King calls “Private Stories.”

In the afterword, Thomas King mentions the problem the Native American story has to face. There are specific stories which are meant to be narrated only during certain occasions and by a certain person—stories usually belong to specific Native American tribes. Thus, their written form represents an issue because

¹⁴⁰ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 116.

¹⁴¹ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 115.

¹⁴² King, *The Truth About Stories*, 112.

¹⁴³ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 101.

... the context in which these stories had existed was in danger of being destroyed and the stories themselves were being compromised. The printed word, after all, once set on a page, has no master, no voice, no sense of time or place.¹⁴⁵

Even if Thomas King represents this as a problem, he deals with it in his own way: "... I think of oral stories as public stories and written stories as private stories."¹⁴⁶

The story of the afterword section is about a family of King's friend John which he stopped visiting. It all started when King's friend and his wife adopted a girl with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder and this state turned their daughter into a problem child. When the parents started to have hard times with their daughter, Thomas King distanced himself from them. King says that this is the story he does not want to say out loud, so he integrated this story into the afterword and thus makes it a "private story."

This chapter, as well as stories from previous chapters, brings moral—it is the question of ethics in this case. Thomas King goes further with the theme of drugs to highlight the importance of the stories we believe about them: "The stories we tell about alcohol are romances ... The stories we tell about cigarettes are action adventures."¹⁴⁷ However, stories about other drugs such as heroine are not as acceptable even if alcohol abuse and nicotine dependence are none the better. This story contributes to the significance of the stories we decide to tell. This statement provokes the question which are the stories that are acceptable and which are not. It is answered in King's typical way—by telling another story. Thomas King relates the story once more to Native Americans. He claims that North America lacks "ethical responses."¹⁴⁸ In other words, the problem is that the story about Native Americans was retold to be more comfortable as the story we tell about wine.

King draws another analogy between the situation of Native Americans and fishing of cods in Canada where the problem of overfishing was tried to be resolved after cods were already gone. According to King, this issue could have

¹⁴⁵ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 153-154.

¹⁴⁶ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 154.

¹⁴⁷ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 158.

¹⁴⁸ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 159.

been prevented only if people cared more about ethics. King affirms that “it’s just that we care more about our comfort and the things that make us comfortable—property, prestige, power, appearance, safety.”¹⁴⁹

Thomas King also points out that stories play an important role even in the question of possible reconciliation. King shows that we bear the responsibility for the world in which we live:

Perhaps we shouldn’t be displeased with the “environmental ethics” we have or the “business ethics” or the “political ethics”... After all, we’ve created them. We’ve created the stories that allow them to exist and flourish. They didn’t come out of nowhere. They didn’t arrive from another planet. Want a different ethic? Tell a different story.¹⁵⁰

King’s cynicism shows up towards the end of the afterword and he finishes his thoughts about the possible outcome of the alternative past with: “Would it have made a difference? This is the question we always ask *after* we have given up.”¹⁵¹ King uses the story about the family of his friend to show that he also could have helped this family more if he would not have left his friend but it did not happen. Thomas King states that the past would not change because he lives in “a world in which I allow my intelligence and goodwill to be constantly subverted by my pursuit of comfort and pleasure.”¹⁵²

It should also be pointed out that the story about King’s friend is probably not true. After telling the whole story, Thomas King implies that the narrative might be invented. King’s trickster narration leaves holes in the story; however, it forces the reader to think about the problems presented in his narrative. According to King, it does not matter if we heard the story earlier because it would not change anything. The important thing is that now, after hearing the story, we are responsible for what we will do with it:

I could have made this up, you know. A sad story to play on your sympathies ... I didn’t... You can have it if you want ... Do with it what you will ... Just don’t say in the years to come that you would

¹⁴⁹ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 163.

¹⁵⁰ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 164.

¹⁵¹ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 166.

¹⁵² King, *The Truth About Stories*, 166.

have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story.
You've heard it now.¹⁵³

King's stories serve as a parable to show that we are shaped by the stories we believe and we also have to take responsibility for the story we choose to believe. If we change this story, we may also change the way we live.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 166-167.

¹⁵⁴ King, *The Truth About Stories*, 153.

CONCLUSION

Originally, Native American storytelling served to address contemporary issues of the community, to resolve problems and to entertain the public. The analytical part of the thesis proved that these features can be found in *The Truth About Stories* as well.

The stories narrated according to this deep rooted tradition of storytelling serve as a transmission of Native experience. The *Truth About Stories* does not only illustrate Native American culture but also it refers to Native American struggles. The stories tell about Native history from Native point of view and they emphasize the role of the truth in the stories about them. The analysis showed that author's narration is one-sided which reflects the division in the text on Natives and non-Natives. Nevertheless, the trickster narration of the stories enables King to use biased statements.

Many stories in the book serve as a parable and highlight issues regarding Native American identity. They also illustrate a cultural difference between Natives and non-Natives that is represented, for example, by Native and Christian creation story. Moreover, *The Truth About Stories* serves to affirm Native American cultural identity and reveals the importance of cultural heritage.

The thesis' analysis stressed that the stories highlight the overlooked fact that Native culture evolves and that its position does not remain in the history. Stories in the book narrate historical events which is a common topic for Native American writers. It serves as a kind of reconciliation with the past thanks to which King hopes for a better future. Hereby it contributes to the new solution to Native American identity.

RESUMÉ

Bakalářská práce se zabývá analýzou jednotlivých povídek knihy Thomase Kinga *The Truth About Stories*. Cílem mé práce je zjistit a pochopit důvod, proč se na začátku každé kapitoly knihy objevuje motiv stvoření. Tvoří ji čtyři hlavní kapitoly, z nichž každá se zabývá různými tématy knihy.

Úvodní kapitola podává definici mýtu o stvoření a vysvětluje význam povídek pro indiánskou kulturu. Dále je v kapitole proveden rozbor znaků indiánského vyprávění, které je velmi specifické. Vypravěč při něm například přizpůsobuje příběh tak, aby mohl následně nabídnout případné řešení problémů celé komunity.

Druhá kapitola je zaměřena na biografii autora a poukazuje na vliv spisovatele Geralda Vizenora na Kingovu tvorbu. V této kapitole je také vysvětlena terminologie týkající se pojmu Indián. Poslední část této kapitoly pojednává o indiánství, kterému je kniha věnována a které je pro Kinga velmi důležité. King si uvědomuje, že představa indiánství bývá v současnosti pro mnoho lidí mlhavá a jeho pravá podstata je přehlížena. Tento fakt je zároveň důvod, proč jsem se rozhodla věnovat v mé práci výše uvedené problematice. Po zhlédnutí krátkého Kingova filmu *I'm Not the Indian You Had in Mind* mě zaujalo zobrazení Indiána jako člena moderní společnosti. King v něm informuje veřejnost o tom, že Indián je stále tady, jen se změnil jeho způsob života. Je součástí civilizované společnosti, pracuje, zajímá se o politiku, má potřeby jako my všichni. Své osobní zkušenosti s integrací do majoritní společnosti uvádí King i ve svých povídkách. Kapitola dále stručně pojednává o způsobu, jakým první kolonisté popisovali Indiány ve svých příbězích a které negativně ovlivnily pohled na ně samotné. V závěru této kapitoly je popsáno Kingovo pojetí indiánské identity, které se od historického klišé velmi liší.

Třetí kapitola definuje pojem tzv. podvodného vyprávění (trickster narration), které je důležitou součástí indiánské tradice vyprávění povídek. Následující část představuje typické postavy těchto povídek a uvádí, za jakým účelem byl podvodný způsob vyprávění tradičně používán. Zároveň zkoumá, jak se tento způsob vyprávění objevuje v knize a jakou roli v povídkách hraje pravda.

Analytickou část mé bakalářské práce uvádí čtvrtá kapitola, která se zabývá rozбором jednotlivých povídek. V rámci analýzy textu kladu hlavní důraz

na motiv stvoření, který se v uvedených povídkách pravidelně opakuje a uvádí každou z nich. Současně se snažím na každou povídku nahlížet jako na celek. Svá tvrzení, která z analýzy vyplývají, dokládám citacemi z textu. Analýzou indiánského mýtu o stvoření světa v porovnání s křesťanským příběhem o stvoření ukazují na rozdílnost obou příběhů. Motiv stvoření je znázorněn indiánským příběhem, původně z kmene Iroquois. Proto následně uvádím, proč King jako příslušník kmene Cherokee, použil právě tento mýtus. Kapitola také stručně analyzuje Kingův osobitý způsob vyprávění povídek z hlediska použitých prvků z indiánského tradičního vyprávění a zároveň reflektuje poselství povídek knihy *The Truth About Stories*.

Navazující část kapitoly se zabývá rozdělením v knize na “vy” a “my,” které poukazuje na Kingovo zevšeobecňování Indiánů a lidí, kteří do této komunity nepatří. Povídky jsou analyzovány z hlediska jejich témat, každé z nich řeší určitý problém spojený s indiánstvím. Jedná se například o rasismus nebo o postavení Indiánů v současné americké společnosti, jejíž zákony indiánství neprospívají.

Závěr bakalářské práce zkoumá a zdůvodňuje užívání motivu stvoření ve všech povídkách díla Thomase Kinga. Součástí analytické části práce je také rozbor doslovu, který zahrnuje další příběh, tentokrát o rodině Kingova přítele. Jako předešlé povídky, i toto vyprávění řeší otázku indiánství, a to z hlediska etiky. Analýza tohoto příběhu zkoumá mravní ponaučení, který příběh přináší, a otázku možné prevence problému spojeného s indiánstvím. Ke čtvrté kapitole se vztahují přílohy nacházející se na konci bakalářské práce. Jsou zde uvedeny čtyři fotografie dvou autorů, Edwarda Sheriffa Curtise a Richarda Throssela. Kontrast těchto fotografií zachycuje odlišný pohled na indiánskou identitu. Throsselovy fotografie znázorňují Indiány jako členy moderního světa, zatímco Curtis je zachytil jako historické klišé.

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LIST OF ATTACHEMENTS

Figure 1 *Interior of the Best Indian Kitchen on the Crow Reservation* by Richard Throssel, 1910.

Figure 2 *A portrait of Chief Plenty Coups and Bull Snake* by Richard Throssel, 1908.

Figure 3 *Dancing to restore an eclipsed moon* by Edward Sheriff Curtis, 1914.

Figure 4 *Little Hawk* by Edward Sheriff Curtis, 1907.

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Figure 2 *A portrait of Chief Plenty Coups and Bull Snake* by Richard Throssel, 1908.¹⁵⁶



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Figure 3 *Dancing to restore an eclipsed moon* by Edward Sheriff Curtis, 1914.¹⁵⁷



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ANOTACE

Příjmení a jméno: Šímová Barbora

Katedra: Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky, Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci

Název práce: Důležitost motivu stvoření v knize *The Truth About Stories* od Thomase Kinga

Vedoucí práce: prof. PhDr. Michal Peprník, Dr.

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Anotace:

Bakalářská práce analyzuje sbírku povídek *The Truth About Stories* spisovatele Thomase Kinga. Cílem práce je zjistit účel motivu stvoření, který uvádí jednotlivé příběhy. V první kapitole je stručně definován pojem mýtu o stvoření a význam indiánské tradice ve vyprávění povídek. Druhá kapitola zahrnuje Kingovu biografii, vysvětluje terminologii týkající se Indiánů a představuje skutečnosti, které ovlivnily autorovu tvorbu. Třetí kapitola se zaměřuje na způsob vyprávění indiánských povídek a zkoumá v nich roli pravdy. Čtvrtá kapitola analyzuje jednotlivé povídky a mýty o stvoření. Závěrečná kapitola objasňuje opakující se výskyt mýtu o stvoření v povídkách knihy *The Truth About Stories*.

ANNOTATION

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Thesis title: The Importance of the Motif of Creation in Thomas King's *The Truth About Stories*

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Annotation:

This bachelor thesis analyses a collection of short stories *The Truth About Stories* written by Thomas King. The objective is to find the purpose of the motif of creation which can be found at the beginning of each story. In the first chapter, the term “creation myth” is briefly defined. Furthermore, it includes the importance of Native American oral tradition. The second chapter contains King's biography, brief terminology concerning Native Americans and introduces those aspects which influenced author's works. The third chapter deals with trickster narration and explores the role of the truth in the stories. The fourth chapter consists of analysis of the stories and of the creation myths. The last chapter clarifies the occurrence of the creation myth in *The Truth About Stories*.