

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Trickster, Renewal and Survival

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8rr0t7j8>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 4(4)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Hubbard, Patrick

Publication Date

1980-09-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

Trickster, Renewal and Survival

PATRICK HUBBARD

The nation was only a part of the universe, in itself circular and made of the earth, which is round, of the sun, which is round, of the stars, which are round. The moon, the horizon, the rainbow—circles within circles within circles, with no beginning and no end.

—*Lame Deer*¹

... all our power came to us from the sacred hoop of the nation, and so long as the hoop was unbroken, the people flourished. The flowering tree was the living center of the hoop, and the circle of the four quarters nourished it.

—*Black Elk*²

If the universe could be distilled from its infinite complexity to one basic symbol, that symbol would be the circle. The circle is endlessness and unity, having no point of arrival or departure and no divisions. It underlies all matter—the shape of the earth, sun and stars, the nucleus of the atom—and all process—the orbits of the moon, planets and electrons, the rain cycle, the life of a man; anything, in fact, which ends where it begins. For Black Elk, the circle's endlessness makes it holy, for therein lies the mystery of the world. "Everything the Power of the World does is done in a circle."

Within the concentric rings of the universe man spends his life. The relationship between man and nature is represented by a Chinese ideogram showing a cross positioned between two arcs—heaven above and earth below.³ The cross represents opposition, sets up polarities, a matrix upon which life structures itself. These are the axes of physics, of time

Patrick Hubbard lives in Los Angeles as a writer and musician. He obtained his B.A. from UCLA in 1980, graduating with honors.

and space, against which man's captivity in linear time may be plotted; this is the crucifix, the struggle of the human with the divine, the struggle of the forces of the earth and sky between which man must find a place. The grandfathers in Black Elk's vision name these axes the red and black roads, respectively the spiritual and earthly paths, both of which his people must walk (p. 24).

Not coincidentally, the superimposing of the cross upon the circle gives the astrological symbol for Earth: \oplus . This is the simplest form of mandala, a circle divided by four. In Native American cultures, as in many still older ones, four is the holiest number, and their positioning in nature is based on a squaring off within a circle. The Sioux set their teepees in a large ring open to the east, attentive to the powers of the four winds, and the Hopi pueblos as described by Frank Waters consist of round kivas surrounding a central rectangular plaza.⁴ The compass with cardinal points, the face of the sundial, the earth's orbit with solstices and equinoxes are all simpler forms of the mandala. In essence, to impose fixed points upon a circle is to add a dimension of time, to define return and renewal of a cycle. Onto the changeless and endless unity of the circle, the cross imposes division, hence restriction and finality; the other side of the coin is new beginnings. The opposing points of intersection become symbolically the dichotomies of life on earth. Furthermore, the intersecting lines give the circle its center, which may represent systole to the diastole of the outer ring. These are the simplest terms by which the life history of the sun and solar system, and possibly of the universe itself, may be described: an expansion into maximum diversity, followed by contraction into a single point surrounded by a firmament of nothingness. From the center of Black Elk's sacred hoop grows the flowering tree, the flowering of diversity which makes life both wonderful and dangerous.

Trickster and the Cycle

To divide is to create an opportunity, a necessity, for change; as the world moves from one phase into another, a creature existing under its laws must also change, or perish. The sacred mythological fool Trickster stands in for man as he tries to second-guess his environment. Trickster has the power to transform and to transmute; whether because of or in spite of this power—he seldom uses it wisely, nor can he control the repercussions—his behavior is therefore a lesson in survival, a primitive representation of the passage from one phase of the cycle to the next, a comic echo of man's everyday struggle to maintain his niche in a world which is constantly becoming something else. And even where middle

class living has made the material struggle obsolete, survival amid change remains very real on psychic and spiritual levels, for to live consciously in the modern world is to live from day to day, to plan and dream tentatively with the knowledge that forces beyond one's control may change the face of existence while one sleeps. Trickster, wearing the mask of profane clown, contrary or fool, can teach man to laugh at himself, at his romantic summertime image which the fall has torn away. Laughter breaks the bondage of death and leads to the resurrection of the world.

If, then, the concerns of all living things could be distilled to a single concern, that would be the renewal of the cycle, the unbroken sacred hoop, and Trickster plays the missing link. To demonstrate this I have chosen the cycles of the earth's revolution, the basic modes of literature, and the seasons; superimposing these on the cardinal points of the Earth symbol gives the guiding figure for this paper. My focus is on passing through the quadrant representing winter into that of spring, and coincides with three primordial questions: Will the sun rise? Will I laugh again? Will spring return? These may be further refined into one: Will I survive?

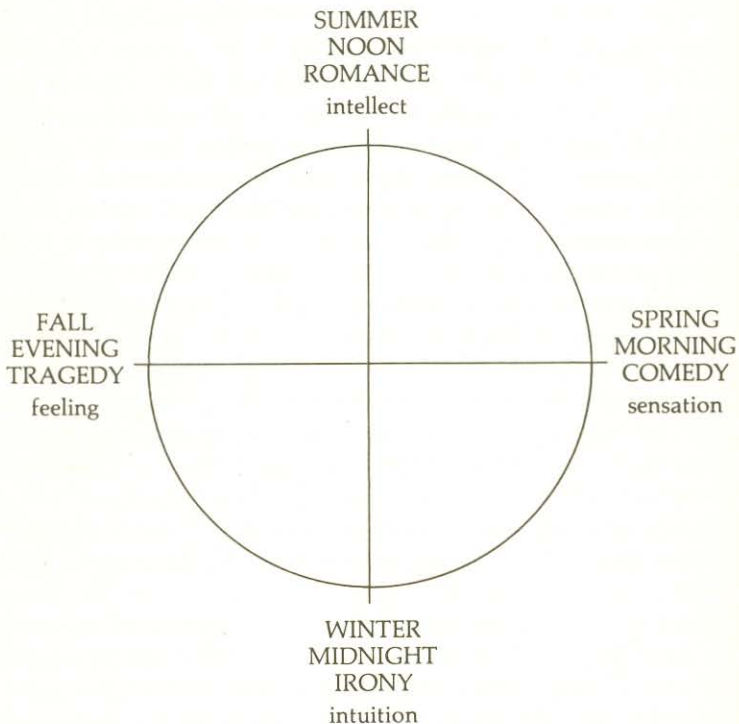
I have reversed the points of north and south as they are found on the conventional map; although this may be visually confusing, it serves to place winter in the bottom of the cycle, in a position of submergence, from which there is a rising into spring. Up and down are, after all, relative concepts of space. The reversal also allows visualization of the east-west axis as ground level, so that the sun rises into the daytime sky from the east.

Within each of the cycles, the association of a specific phase with a specific compass point automatically sets up the entire symmetry. Motion is counterclockwise. If morning is placed in the east with the rising sun, then north becomes the stroke of midnight (astronomically speaking, the sun is due north at midnight). If the analogous renewal of the year, spring, is placed with morning, then winter too falls in the north. And the four literary modes, or "narrative pregeneric elements of literature," are assigned by Northrop Frye to the four seasons as shown.⁵ Since their prevailing tone is ironic, Trickster narratives may be associated with the other northern phases of the compass by use of this concept.

Finally, I have added a minor cycle (in lower case) taken from Jung's "compass of the psyche,"⁶ consisting of four basic elements of human personality which I have arranged according to his explanation:

These four functional types correspond to the obvious means by which consciousness obtains its orientation to experience. *Sensation* (i.e., sense perception) tells you that something exists; *thinking* tells you what it is; *feeling* tells you whether it is agreeable or not; and *intuition* tells you whence it comes and where it is going.

Obviously this is a dynamic four-phase system which interfaces with the others, and since it is logical to place perception, the dawning of consciousness, with the dawn proper, intuition lands in the north where Trickster finds it.



Midnight to Dawn: The Night Journey

Suddenly he threw his arrowbundle away, exclaiming, 'You are unable to go on the warpath! It is only I who can do that. It is I who can fight, not you, and that is why I am going on the warpath!'... From there on he continued alone.

—*The Winnebago Trickster Cycle*⁷

Trickster is the archetypal wanderer, belonging neither to the realm of the gods nor to man's world. He lives as a scavenger on the fringes of society; he can belong, as Native American scholar Charles Ballard mentions, neither to the tribe of the Village nor to that of Nature,⁸ yet he depends on both for survival. Like the modern artist, he lives on hand-

outs from the very society he mocks, and he sometimes picks its pockets. Yet this sort of existence allows Trickster to play the Creator. Living between the operating planes of the two tribes—man and animal—he must take on and use characteristics of both, and only when normally dissociated elements come together can something new be engendered.

Wakdjunkaga, quoted above, behaves in the beginning of the Winnebago Cycle precisely as a chief should not, thereby shaming himself. In the first place, according to Winnebago taboo, the chief never goes on the warpath, but Wakdjunkaga insists that he will. More strangely, he insists on smashing to pieces the three necessities of war—his canoe, his warbundle, and his arrows—and for this reason, all his followers abandon him. Like Samuel Bennet in Dylan Thomas' *Adventures in the Skin Trade*, he breaks everything in the house before he runs away, to insure that his course will be solitary and his return unwelcome. This is typical "contrary" behavior of a trickster, but more importantly, it is an act of renunciation. When Wakdjunkaga throws out his arrowbundle, he renounces his last tie with civilization and becomes the same "unaccommodated man" King Lear must find in himself to learn wisdom.⁹ This is the "fall" into night, the journey begun in the west. No weapons or comforts will avail on the quest for wisdom, so Wakdjunkaga tells his arrows and other trappings of society, "It is I who can fight, not you."

Arthur Koestler, in *Insight and Outlook*, speaks of the "night journey" as a submergence into the primal state which existed before the foliation of separate egos had taken place.¹⁰ If the east-west axis on the compass is the surface of the earth, it is easy to visualize a return to the womb of Mother Earth herself between the dark and the dawn. Christ underwent such an ordeal before his resurrection, but more appropriate here is the example of the Sioux vision quest. After the correct spiritual preparation, a boy spends one or more nights alone in a pit (hence below ground level), and ultimately becomes a man through the blessing of his benefactor. The Nakota Siyáka "dreamed" of the elk and was given the following song, significant for its night imagery:¹¹

At night may I roam
 Against the winds may I roam
 At night may I roam
 When the owl is hooting
 May I roam

By giving up the pretense of isolation from natural laws, the neophyte remembers his true orientation in the world, or as Koestler puts it, "recovers his bearings" (p. 373).

The dream is the simplest analogy of the night journey. According to Jung, certain cultures have since ancient times considered the dream to be a message from the gods because it "arises from a part of the mind unknown to us . . . and is concerned with the desires for the approaching day."¹² The goal of the journey, then, is a return to the beginning. Wakdjunkaga's wandering is the equivalent of the wandering mind, the mind lost in dream-thinking, and at the cycle's end he remembers "the purpose for which he had been sent to Earth by Earthmaker" (Radin, p. 52).

In dreams, there is a suspension of rules and rationality which function during waking hours, so that what Koestler calls "operative fields" may associate freely. Within a single field, organized reasoning is possible; this is the process of intellect, which I place at noon on the compass. But an association between two ordinarily separate fields "disrupts . . . implicit habits of thought; it exposes to ridicule conventions which were taken for granted" (Koestler, p. 47). This "bisociation" is analogous to the metamorphoses which occur in Nibènegenesábe's Cree wishing-bone stories. In the "two moons" poem, Trickster admits to being disguised as "the whole night itself"¹³; he has thrown a cloak over the hemisphere and controls everything within. He is thereby able to "wish" an extra moon into the sky, hoping to startle a lone wanderer whom he has "wished" down an open path. The man being tricked fails at first to understand:

He stood looking
up in the sky
a long time.

He is searching for an explanation within the field of ordinary reality, which allows for only one moon, yet he unmistakably sees two. Only when his consciousness jumps to the "wishing-bone field" does he realize he is being gulled. Anyone who has become aware of dreaming while within a dream will recognize the man's reaction after his discovery of Trickster: he begins to play. As Johann Huizinga says in *Homo Ludens*, the answer to a riddle comes in a sudden flash which breaks the power of the riddle-maker;¹⁴ this is the *intuitive* process. By telling his friends upon his return to camp that there are *only* two moons, the man justifies his initial surprise contradicting what Trickster presumed to surprise him with; he creates a subjective reality to rival Trickster's own, so that Trickster is finally unsure of his own perception. The tension between these two false fields of reality strikes a sense of humor, which in turn allays the fearfulness of a perplexing transformation in the sky. Rational thinking may alert a man to his predicament; dream thinking shows him the way out, and the way to laughter.

Irony to Comedy: The Wit of Survival

Old Beaver don't you hurt my wife
said Old Coyote

Shut up Old Man Coyote
said Coyote Woman

I am crying out because I like it

—*Coyote and Beaver Exchange Wives*¹⁵

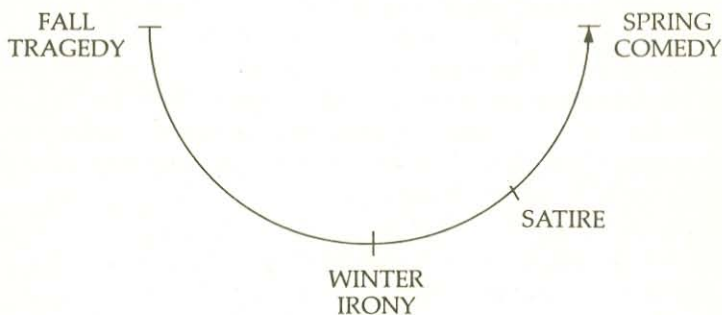
As basic to mankind as the age-old longing for the spring or the dawn is the need for laughter out of pain, for it brings the relief man needs to carry on. The tragedy of fall comes of simultaneously looking backwards and forwards, back to the joy and ease of summer when death was hidden from view, and ahead to the now undeniable reality of the dying year; the tragic hero is caught between the two, with death as the only escape. An alternative to the role of tragic hero, however, is to live on with the memory, to look Death squarely in the eye—not only eventual personal death, but the fate of all living things which, once man has come to recognize it, he is always surrounded with—and still survive. As Carlos Castaneda must learn in *Journey to Ixtlan*, man's role in life changes from passive to active only when he has accepted Death as a companion. At this point, he enters the realm of irony.

In the Cochiti tale quoted above, Coyote has instigated a hunting contest with Beaver, in the hope of sleeping with Beaver's wife. He has struck a reciprocal bargain with Beaver, taking his own victory for granted. Ironically, things have turned out quite differently, and Coyote is left alone in the outer room of his own house. The situation is potentially tragic, with not only wounded pride but the loss of friendship and love at stake; however, the narrator's disposition is not tragic. The ironic voice, according to Frye, "pretends to know nothing, even that it is ironic" (p. 40); it enters the spirit of a game which is implicitly disavowed. In this story, the reality of the situation is one operative field; the other is the suppressed attitude of the narrator that Coyote has made the bed and Beaver is lying in it. The fields are joined when Coyote realizes his wife and Beaver are only experiencing the same pleasure he hoped to gain for himself at their expense, and this awareness saves the situation from a lonely or violent outcome. Instead, there is a reintegration of society, which Frye calls the comic theme (p. 43).

Trickster often plays scapegoat for the *iron*; another example is Yellowman's version of the universal "shut-eye dance," in which Coyote tricks the prairie dogs into believing he is dead. As they dance around him, Skunk, his partner in crime, sprays them blind, and Coyote clubs

them. Once they have set their feast on the fire to roast, Coyote, a compulsive gamester, offers Skunk all or nothing for a race he feels certain he will win. By documenting the audience response to Coyote's disgraceful behavior in the race (which he loses), Barre Toelken is able to show what actions of Coyote's are subject to ridicule, and the source of laughter turns out to be a clash between Coyote's inflated self-image and the reality of his conduct, much as it is in the Cochiti story.¹⁶ But just as Trickster may represent the dreamer or the dream itself, so may he play *eirón* as well as ironic fool, for ambivalence is basic to his nature. Wichikapache, the Swampy Cree wanderer and adventurer, assumes the masque of a woman in order to marry and scorn a man who is too proud for his own people, and at the same time he calls the mores of society into question by playing with the powerful homosexual taboo (Norman, pp. 165-68). Wakdjunkaga pushes the same disguise even further when he plays with his mother-in-law, and he blows his cover by dropping "something rotten"—his self-fashioned vulva (Radin, p. 24). In both examples, the relationships are proper for the *assumed* circumstances, but the identity of one party is mistaken, that of Trickster; these are the two operative fields, and the tension is broken only with the divulgence of Trickster's true identity and his quick escape. Relief brings laughter and the reassurance that this is a fantasy after all. As Frye points out, "The element of play is the barrier that separates art from savagery" (p. 46).

It is important to relate the process in these examples to the dynamics of the compass, and in order to do so I differentiate between irony and satire. The Cochiti tale I take to be an example of irony; the position on the compass is due north, where humor is equally balanced by pain, hence realism at its peak (Frye, p. 224). Indeed, disregarding anthropomorphism, the story is completely feasible. Satire, on the other hand, admits an element of fantasy—Trickster's successful portrayal of a woman, his pregnancy and child bearing—and so distances itself from pain and draws closer to pure humor. The compass is revised in the following way:



Satire is encountered midway between the symbolic seasons of winter and spring, and the conclusions in the two stories of mistaken identity complete the cycle. The man whom Wichikapache has shamed himself goes walking (p. 168):

He came upon a cabin.
 He heard a woman's voice inside.
 So, he went in
 and saw a very round woman.
 He said to her, "Round one,
 marry me?"

He has learned to swallow his pride. And Wakdjunkaga says to himself, "Well, why am I doing all this? It is about time that I went back to the woman to whom I am really married" (p. 24). The theme in all three examples is one of human procreation, which requires a proper working relationship between a man and a woman. Any threat to this relationship is a threat of oblivion, of death, of a failure to renew life; this is the dark reality behind the taboos. Successful averting of the threat, however, leads to comedy and to spring, the mating season, the season of renewal.

Winter to Spring: The Ten Thousand Things

He walked all winter.
 Some said they saw him
 living in trees,
 under the ice
 and once
 he poked his head out
 of an owl nest.
 Then
 it was spring.
 He was out walking again.

—*Wichikapache Goes Walking, Walking*
 (Norman, p. 140)

Lame Deer remembers that the *heyoka*, the Sioux "contrary" who is compelled to act out his worst dreams for the world, taps the oldest and most sacred source of power: the lightning. "It contains the first spark to illuminate the world when there was nothing—no light, just darkness" (p. 240). Lightning is the creative force. It also symbolizes intuition or

bisociation; an oscillating flash between two separate planes of thought represents discovery. Through this symbol, Trickster may be called a creator and seer.

Before the division of the firmaments which created this world, the universe was chaos. The northern winter is analogous to the original chaos, for a landscape covered with snow is uniform; there is no figure to define the ground. The passage quoted above can, I believe, be interpreted such that Wichikapache is formless, yet the substance within all form; he is the sap of the trees, the water flowing under the ice, secret but present. With the approach of spring he pokes a newborn head from a nest—the return of procreation—and when the snow has melted and the world of winter foliated into diversity, he is “out walking” again. The water which had been dormant in the shroud of snow—the undivided firmament—is startled into motion again by the “spark” of the strengthening sun, and flows back into all living things, thus recreating the world.

The evolution of Wakdjunkaga's penis shows a similar process. A chaotic thing of immeasurable length, detached, with no determined structure, position or purpose, it enjoys a life of its own. Wakdjunkaga carries it in a box, and it is a source of amusement for him; it goes after the chief's daughter, and is oddly enough able to satisfy his lust while he waits across the lake (p. 19), but he is unaware of its procreative potential. Finally the chipmunk taunts Wakdjunkaga into arranging his penis and testicles on his body. The outraged penis probes a hollow tree in pursuit of the chipmunk, who chews it down to size from within, and Wakdjunkaga makes growing vegetables of the remaining pieces (p. 38). Here, then, is the emergence of diversity from a formless entity. Also interesting is the fact that his penis has penetrated a tree, a thing rooted in the earth, and that the earth consequently bears fruit. He plays at the role of original creator, and his penis is the spark, as well as the firmament.

When Wichikapache is bewitched by ptarmigans in the shape of men, and awakens half-frozen in a wilderness which had been a comfortable camp the night before, he shouts in anger, “I MADE THIS WORLD!” But according to Norman, he is only expressing his frustration at being unable to control the world; he is not the original creator but rather an imposter.¹⁷ He has the power to transform one thing to another, but no control over the results. Apparently his own tricks of metamorphosis have started a chain reaction in Nature which comes full circle, so that ptarmigans can be humans at nightfall and birds again in the morning. They owe no allegiance to their master, to him who played the first trick, nor does that which is unconsciously alive hearken back to the source of life; it merely lives. In this way, Trickster is a playful reflection of what is called the Tao:¹⁸

It nourishes the ten thousand things
 And yet is not their lord . . .
 The ten thousand things return to it
 Yet it is not their lord.

He is only a fool, yet he leads his followers to the center of things; he is ambivalently profane and sacred.

Among the ten thousand things are the foliated egos of women and men, isolated vantage points from which the cycles of the universe are difficult to comprehend. Ironically, by revealing the death of the ten thousand things Trickster teaches survival, for death is the backdrop against which life stands out. If he succeeds, Trickster convinces man to hold lightly to this "life," even as he learns the lesson himself. Faithfully, witlessly, without accommodation, he walks into the night searching for the back way to morning, and his vision transforms the segmented life of the tragic hero, man, into the endless circle of the comic survivor, mankind.

NOTES

1. John Fire/Lame Deer and Richard Erdoes, *Lame Deer: Seeker of Visions* (New York: Touchstone, 1972), p. 112. Subsequent references are parenthetical.
2. John G. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks* (New York: Pocket Books, 1972), p. 164. Subsequent references are parenthetical.
3. Jose and Mirriam Arguelles, *Mandala* (Berkeley: Shambala Publications, Inc., 1972), p. 54.
4. Frank Waters, *Pumpkin Seed Point* (Chicago: The Swallow Press, Inc., 1979), p. 47.
5. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 162. Subsequent references are parenthetical.
6. C.G. Jung, et al., *Man and his Symbols* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1964), p. 61.
7. Paul Radin, *The Trickster* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), p. 7. Subsequent references are parenthetical.
8. "The Boas Connection" (Lecture given at UCLA for the American Indian Studies Center, Jan. 23, 1980).
9. *King Lear* 3.4.99.
10. Arthur Koestler, *Insight and Outlook* (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1949), p. 373. Subsequent references are parenthetical.
11. Frances Densmore, *Teton Sioux Music* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1972), p. 186.

12. C. G. Jung, *Psychology of the Unconscious* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1965), p. 9.
13. Howard A. Norman, ed. and trans., *The Wishing Bone Cycle* (New York: Stonehill Publishing Co., 1976), pp. 29-30. Subsequent references are parenthetical.
14. Johann Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1955), p. 110.
15. William Brandon, ed., *The Magic World* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1971), p. 56.
16. J. Barre Toelken, "The Pretty Language of Yellowman" 2(3), (Sept. 1969): 225-27.
17. From a lecture given at UCLA, Feb. 13, 1980, for Professor Lincoln's English 180X: "Trickster's Bones."
18. Lao Tsu, *Tao Te Ching*, Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English, trans. (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), #34.