

# ORALITY & STORYTELLING IN THOMAS KING'S **THE BACK OF THE TURTLE**

A Narrative Analysis by Louisa Kunze

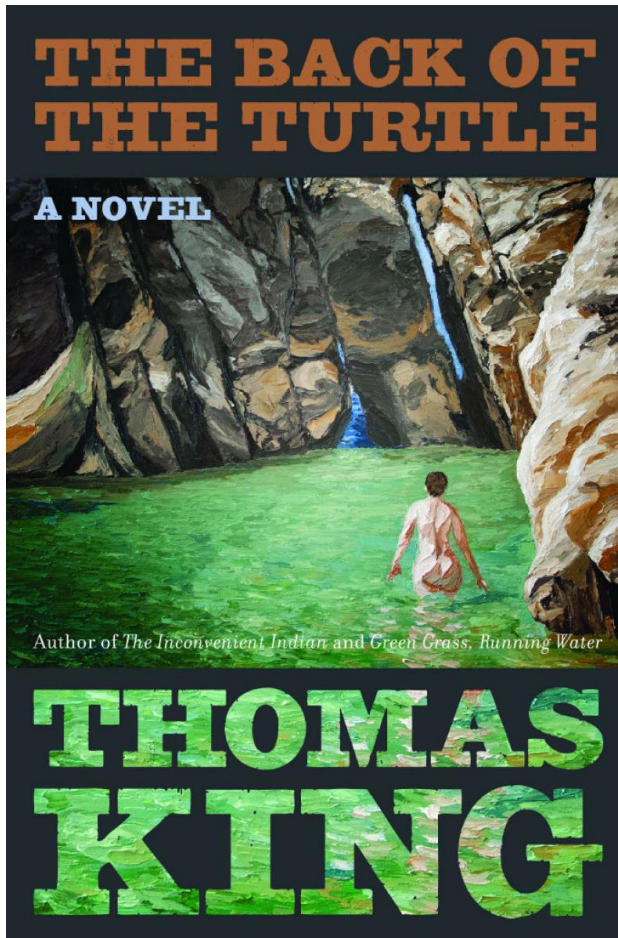
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# 1. THESIS STATEMENT



- By syncretizing oral and written form in his novel “The Back of the Turtle”, Thomas King contrasts Native to non-Native worldviews, and points out how important it is to take on responsibility for our planet.

[https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/books/2014/09/17/the\\_back\\_of\\_the\\_turtle\\_by\\_thomas\\_king\\_review.html](https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/books/2014/09/17/the_back_of_the_turtle_by_thomas_king_review.html)



# 2.1 THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES (1)

- “Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial” by Thomas King
- Suggests alternatives to the term *post-colonial* when talking about Native literature:
  - *Tribal* = literature in a Native language within a tribe/community, invisible for outside community
  - *Associational* = a rather “flat narrative line” following the daily life of a Native community (King 43)
  - *Interfusional* = blend of oral & written literature. Told & written in English, it still uses “patterns, metaphors, structures [...], themes and characters [...]from oral literature” (ibid. 41f)
  - *Polemical* = literature in a Native language, English, French or the like. Concerned with the “clash of Native and non-Native cultures or with the championing of Native values over non-Native values” (ibid.)



<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/arts-video/video-award-winning-author-thomas-king-talks-about-writing-non-fiction/article17419998/>

→ Avoid ethnocentric & nationalistic views



## 2.2 THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES (2)

- “The Man Made of Words” by N. Scott Momaday
- Imaginative use of language = a tool for survival and regeneration
- „(American) society has become disoriented“ (Momaday 12)
- need to take on responsibility for the environment, consider moral terms

→ Language as an imaginative tool shapes our very existence, the way and the world we live in



<https://www.poemhunter.com/nava-rre-scott-momaday/>



# 3. NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

- **3<sup>rd</sup> person narrator**
- **5 characters as focalizers**
  - Gabriel, Dorian, Mara, Sonny, Crisp
  - "Behind him, he could feel the sun roll out of the mountains like a bright wave" (4)
- **Different tenses**
  - present tense in Sonny scenes, past tense for the rest
- **Each subplot is interconnected with the others**
  - web around the environmental disaster on the reserve
- **Intertextual references**
  - Native creation stories
  - Christian Bible
  - King's own works

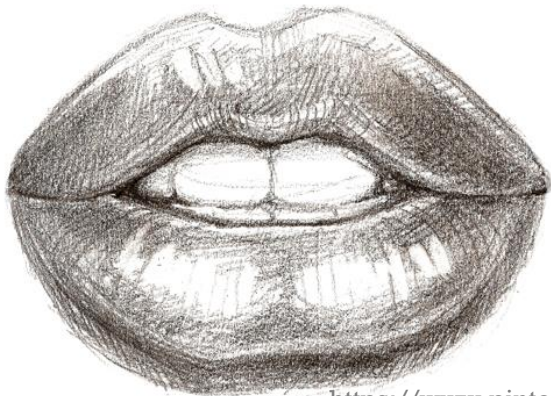


# 3.1 ORALITY AND STORYTELLING



<https://www.pinterest.ca/pin/504825439450187806/>

- “The Back of the Turtle” can be seen as an *interfusional* text, because it combines oral & written form, and draws from oral storytelling. This happens through:
  - Oral elements
  - Interconnectedness
  - Humor



<https://www.pinterest.ca/marvint/drawing-lips/>

*We are now going to take a closer look at these features:*





<https://everything.kz/article/8099180-rus25p>

## Orality is achieved through:

- Colloquial style
- Dialogue
- Wordplay
- Repetitions

(Schorcht 205)

*While reading the novel, did you ever feel the **urge to read something out loud** (did the oral elements enforce **aurality**)?*

*Let's look at some examples:*



- **Colloquial style, repetitions:**

“‘Heriquin.’ Wham-wham. [...]

‘Heriquin.’

New word discovered by Sonny.

But then ‘mannequin’ should be ‘himiquin’?

Wham-wham, hammer-hammer” (102)

“Pants.

Shirt.

Shoes. [...]

No salvage.

Wham-wham! [...]

If you want to die on Sonny’s beach, that’s okay, also.

Play. Die.

Okay. Okay” (26)



- **Onomatopoeia:**

“Dig, dig, dig. Hammer, hammer, hammer” (52)

“Wham-wham, hammer-hammer” (146)

“Lap, lap, lap. Step, step, step” (180)

- **Wordplay:**

“It’s a Sonny day in the neighbourhood” (180)

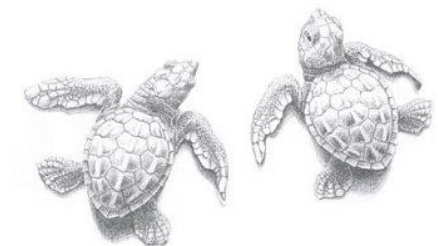


# 3.1.1 INTERCONNECTEDNESS



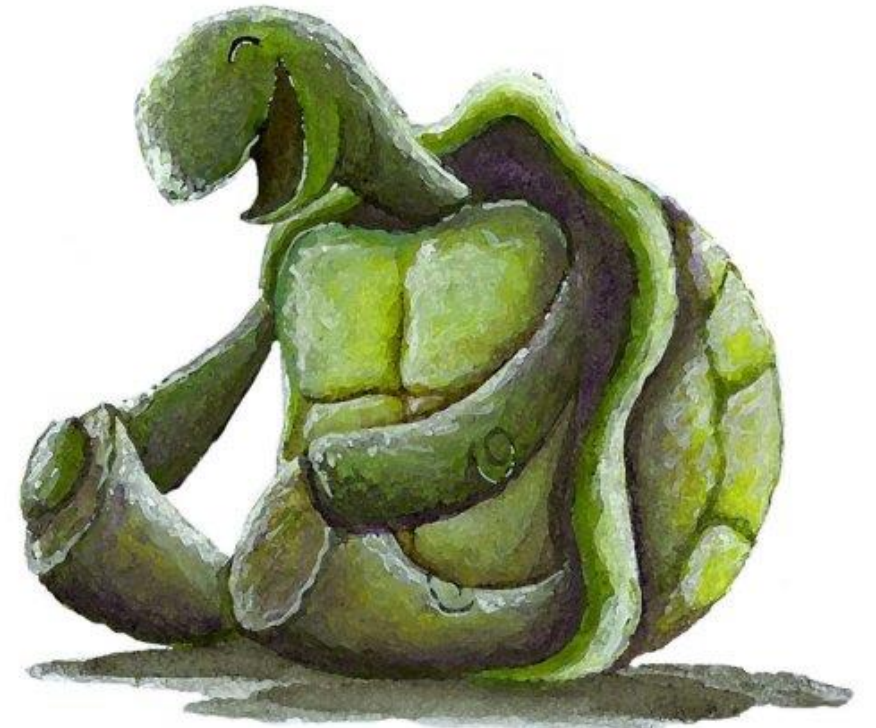
- Both past and present (tense) (Sonny/other characters)
- Both partial and complete
- Circular narrative structures: each story evokes another
- Many-layered references, parallelisms (Sonny & Dorian watch *The Sound of Music* at the same time in different places)

→ This resonates “with oral stories that are passed along from generation to generation, each story moving seamlessly from one into another, and with no single ordinary story underlying the **web of narrative**” (Schorcht 199)



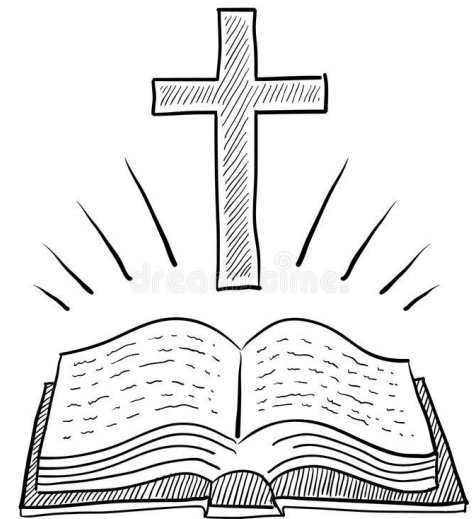
# 3.1.2 HUMOR

- **Wordplay, names**
  - “It’s a Sonny day in the neighbourhood” (180)
  - Tin Turtle (155)
  - GreenSweep (irony)
- **Dry humor (irony, sarcasm)**
  - Mara’s and Gabriel’s awkward attempts at sex
  - “World hunger can’t make the back page of *TV guide*, but an almost bare breast can destroy the morality of a nation.” (176)
  - “[Dorian:] ‘If you had one question you could ask, what would it be? [...] About life.’ [...] ,‘I’m sorry, sir,’ said the man. ‘We’re not allowed to ask such questions.’” (481)



# 3.1.3 INTERTEXTUALITY

- **Native mythology** (Creation story *The Woman Who Fell From the Sky*)
  - the turtle (at Domidion, café Tin Turtle (155), Big Red (429), Sonny's turtle bone (428) etc.)
  - the twins (9), muskrat/otter (4), etc.
- **Biblical references**
  - Gabriel (→ archangel)
  - Mara (→ Mary)
  - biblical language of Crisp
  - Sonny's god-like father
  - Apple, "'Tis the stuff of creation'" (1) → forbidden fruit
  - Climax: Mara, Gabriel and Crisp tell Native creation story while naked (219-227)
- **King's own works**
  - Sonny and the motel → King's short story "The Garden Court Motor Motel"



- King plays with **stories within the story**
- A “uniquely **humorous panorama** of contemporary Native [and Western] life” (Gruber 2008:14)
- **Modifiability** in storytelling:  
“Mara had heard Lilly’s mother tell the story any number of times. Rose was more delicate and particular in the telling. Crisp was bold and bombastic. Rose had spent time on why the woman was digging in the first place [...]. Crisp had none of that in his telling” (231)

*This leads us back to Momaday’s thesis:*

→ **Language as imaginative tool** (Momaday)

“Through multiplicity and syncretism, oral storytelling retains the power to transform the (real) world into and through the written word”

(Schorcht 199)

*Let us analyze the kind of world he creates in the novel!*



# 4. OPPOSING WORLDVIEWS



- The world that King creates inherits a *polemical* basis:

he depicts the **clash of Western science and Indigenous traditions.**

There are many opposing images and themes expressing this clash:



(non-Native) **anthropocentric** perspective

- Toronto (city)
- Domidion
- Dorian/Olivia
- Dorian's expensive meals
- Absence of Sonny's god-like dad (monodeity)
- Christian mythology



(Native) **ecocentric** perspective

- Samaritan Bay (town)
- Smoke River Reserve
- Gabriel/Mara
- Empty fridges in SB
- Animals in SB (Soldier, pelicans, turtle)
- Native mythology



# 5. RECONCILIATION?

There are various aspects in the novel which suggest that **reconciliation, decolonization** and a **(re-) turn towards environmental consciousness** are still possible.

*Consider the following:*



- **Survival & “punishment”**
  - The suicidal Gabriel lives on and deals with his mistakes
  - Wealth does not prevent illness: Dorian is going to die (“Will I be remembered?” (471))
- **Reunion, return**
  - Sonny’s tower brings everyone together on the beach (494)
  - ““Salmon, birds, turtles. They all come back. [...] Humans ain’t no different.”” (417)
  - The turtle disappears from Domidion and reappears in Samaritan Bay (492)
  - Life returns to the ocean (516)
- **New beginnings**
  - Big Red lays eggs (487) → birth, future
  - Even Dorian has a new beginning: “What will I do with my new beginning?” (484)
  - Present tense (Sonny) → children can design the present & future?
- **Diversity**
  - Crisp’s birthday party (219-227)
  - Warm welcome for the Taiwanese survivors (432, 495)



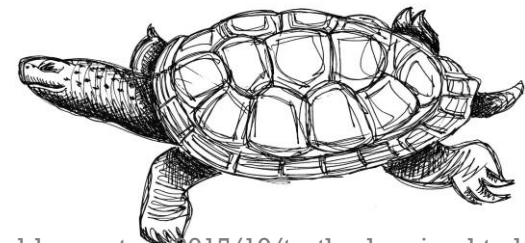
# 6. CONCLUSION

- *Interfusional*: written text, but oral elements (interconnectedness, Native & Judeo-Christian mythology, humor)
- *Polemical*: clash of Native vs. non-Native worldviews
- **Condemnation**: anthropocentric, capitalist perspectives fails
- **Hope**: new beginnings are possible

→ Employing oral themes in written form, King uses his language as a tool to shape a world in which greed fails, and he ultimately calls out to become aware of environmental ethics.



[https://de.freepik.com/freie-ikonen/warnung-ausrufezeichen\\_773347.htm](https://de.freepik.com/freie-ikonen/warnung-ausrufezeichen_773347.htm)



<http://bamazingwallpapers.blogspot.ca/2015/10/turtle-drawing.html>

# 7. DISCUSSION QUESTION



<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC3T0JNMnLnKDya4AAgRSxtg>

*Please choose one of the two questions:*

1. Do you think that transforming orality into written form can be problematic? Why/why not?
2. Despite the severe environmental disasters, do you think that King conveys hope in his novel, or is the message that lack of morality has already endangered our planet too much? If possible, try to refer to concrete examples from the book (if you cannot find the page number, just describe the scene/theme).



# 8. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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