The Search for Identity in Native American Literature

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Introduction

The topic of identity is central not only to literature, but also to human existence, for everyone has a unique identity that is formed in different ways. My research follows the journey of identity for the main characters in four Native American literary works of fiction and identifies a four-step process of identity through these characters' journeys that can speak to the topic of Native American identity today.

Crossing of Worlds

- Occurs when a character leaves his or her home world to experience the non-native world.
- The home world: the world rich with traditions and stories that the character was raised in and eventually returns to in order to form his or her identity; the character's comfort zone.
- The non-native world: the world outside of the home world in which each character ventures into and has new experiences in; no established comfort zone.

Tension Between Worlds

- Occurs when the characters experience difficulties in the foreign, non-native world.
- Characters begin to feel the effects of the crossing of the home world and non-native world because they are at a loss with how to carry on in both worlds after experiencing the non-native world.
- Characters have no knowledge of the "rules" to play by in the non-native world.
- Characters carry these new and foreign experiences with them without knowing what to make of them.

Self-Loathing

- Occurs when a character's confusion and isolation manifest into negative feelings.
- These negative feelings include or are a combination of self-loathing, self-blame, and guilt.
- Characters turn inward to reflect on the uncertainties they feel about their places in their two worlds.
- Characters do not yet know how to ease these tensions and establish their identities, and they feel frustration and transition into hanging in a negative limbo and turn against themselves, questioning who they are now and how to heal.

Return to Roots & Traditions

- Occurs when a character returns to his or her home world and finds healing to form an identity.
- Characters turn to the traditions and stories of their home worlds to find healing.
- Characters apply aspects of their home worlds to their current struggles to find answers, healing, and thus their identities.

Characters leave their comfort zones, and their current identities are challenged.

Characters face difficulties after their new experiences and struggle to find their place in the home world and non-native world.

Characters turn against themselves because they are at a loss with what to make of the tensions they face.

Characters find healing in their home worlds through traditions and stories and are able to form their identities based on these factors.

The Characters and the Works

- Tayo from Ceremony by Leslie Marmon Silko
- Abel from House Made of Dawn by N. Scott Momaday
- Arnold Spirit, Jr. (a.k.a. Junior) from The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian by Sherman Alexie
- Linda Hogan as herself from "The Truth Is"

Conclusions

A character's identity is challenged when he or she enters an unfamiliar world, the non-native world. Characters are forced to find inner peace and acceptance through an understanding of their new experiences in this world and how they have changed from them. Characters' identities become heavily rooted in the home world, the world of traditions, because they find peace and form their identities in this world. The Native American identity makes itself apparent though this final step. Because these are works by Native American authors and because Native American people today similarly must traverse between two worlds with different cultures and histories, the final step in the journey of identity for these characters parallels that of the real world. Through these works of fiction, a truth is heard; a voice is given to the Native American identities that have historically been silenced.

Citations

Photos:
- Linda Hogan: http://english2350project.wikispaces.com/Linda+Hogan

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