**Forests of Symbols: *Tay John* and *The Double Hook***

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French poet Charles Baudelaire first used the phrase "des forêts de symbols" to describe the elements of nature that surround man, elements which he considered to be conscious. In his poem, "Correspondances" (1857) he draws parallels between sounds, colours and perfumes as they correspond to one another in an ecstasy of the soul and the senses--synesthesia. A symbolist and the father of modern poetry Baudelaire saw many different levels of meaning in the various works of art and literature that we have come to value over time.

We will use this modernist idea of symbolism in our comparative reading of *Tay John* and *The Double Hook*  and will try to determine the possible similarities between Howard O'Hagan's 1935 mythic narrative and Sheila Watson's 1959 poetic novel. Since it first appeared, Watson's novel has been associated with other symbolic narratives such as Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952). Some Canadian writers have suggested parallels between *Tay John* and *The Double Hook*. In his 1989 "Afterword" for *Tay John*, Michael Ondaatje identified it and Watson's novel as his literary touchstones, "The first Canadian novel to reach me this way was Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook.* The second was *Tay John.*" (209). See other examples that associate these two works in the appendix at the end of this essay.

During my many years of training and study in Comparative Literature I learned to look for *rapports de faits* among the texts and authors that I was comparing. In this study I have no evidence that Sheila Watson knew Howard O'Hagan personally. During the 1950s he worked as a journalist in Victoria, and also took odd jobs on the waterfront. By 1945 Sheila and Wilfred Watson were in Toronto, and returned to Vancouver in 1949 to teach a UBC and then they moved to Alberta in 1952. O'Hagan and his wife lived in Sicily from 1963 to 1974, when he returned to Victoria. Nevertheless I would expect that Sheila Watson had read O'Hagan's *Tay John* before she started writing *The Double Hook* in 1951-52. I would also expect that Frederick Salter, an English professor at the University of Alberta, was also familiar with *Tay John*, when in 1954 he gave Watson advice about revising the text of *The Double Hook*. I am not arguing here for any direct borrowing from one text to the other, but rather for similarities in setting, ritual language, narrative voices, characters, and the use of mythology and symbolism.

A reader from Alberta or B.C. will notice that the geographical settings for both novels are similar. *Tay John* is sent in the Athabasca River Valley in what is now Jasper National Park and west across the Yellowhead Pass to Tête Jaune Cache, a town west of the B.C. Alberta border. *The Double Hook* is located in the Cariboo region of central B.C., just south-west of Tête Jaune Cache and west of the North Thompson River. In both novels we have clear regional settings that are rendered universal by the adoption of modernist symbolism and of the mythology of Indigenous people. Both works use myths from the Shuswap First Nations communities.

While *Tay John* has a physical setting, the novel opens by suggesting that the story exists in a time of legend, a cyclical time. The first words are, "The time of this in its beginning, in men's time, is 1880 in the summer...." (3). There is an implied distinction between men's time, the time of history and convention, and another kind of time, that of legend and myth. This latter temporal dimension is cyclical like the seasons: *Tay John* begins in the summer and ends in the winter. The cyclical pattern of the legend is indicated again by O'Hagan's omniscient narrator when he repeats the year on page 5 and again on page 11, "This was in 1880 in the summer." It is as if the story were beginning all over again each time since part of the ritual of story-telling is that the story begins again each time it is narrated. O'Hagan's use of repeated phrases is in imitation of classical epics like those of Homer which are oral epics written down along with all the repeated ritual formulas as mnemonic aids. *Tay John* has the qualities of oral story-telling in each section of its three-part structure: "I, Legend" then, "II, Hearsay" and finally "III, Evidence--without a finding."

In legendary stories, the main character has qualities of the heroic figure. At this point in the novel the main character is called by his Shuswap name, Kumkleseem, and does posses supernatural qualities: his mysterious birth, lack of a shadow, unusual yellow hair, great strength and, finally a mysterious end. For his tribe, the Shuswap, the story of the warrior with yellow hair is part of a system of belief and thus it is a myth.

Kumkleseem has a mission to fulfill to save his people. It is a mission foretold in the beliefs of the tribe, visions of the elders and in his own visions. He is to lead his people west to a new life on the Pacific coast. During the ritual of his manhood vigil he hears many voices that foreshadow an unhappy conclusion to his relationship with the Shuswap people. At first he resists the lure of the voices but eventually succumbs and goes up the river of ill omen. While he acquires the bear-spirit as his guardian spirit he also brings back the dark sand from the dark waters of the river. He does not share it with his people and thus breaks an important custom. Within days white men arrive and realize that the sand is a valuable mineral. They pay Kumkleseem to take them to the hidden valley. The material goods the white men give him mark him off from the tribe and when he does not share the goods he separates himself further. Kumkleseem and the other young men begin to hunt with rifles, but not for meat rather for furs which they trade for more white goods. The women are idle, game becomes scarce, as does food. The tribe must move out of the valley. Kumkleseem leads them west but instead of the Pacific coast he abandons them by a lake in the sun. He becomes disenchanted with his role and with the personal sacrifices he is expected to make as their saviour His divorce from the Shuswap is symbolized by first changing his name to the French, Tête Jaune, and later Anglicizing it to Tay John. In this part of the novel, Tay John is a larger-than-life figure and O'Hagan has written the story as if it were a classical myth taking place at about the time of a epic historical event, the building of the rail road across the mountains in the 1880s.

In *The Double Hook* Watson also explores a community in crisis. Each of her characters, in their own way, are looking for a leader to guide them. The images of the physical setting are concrete and specific to a particular time and place, but they are also symbolic, universal and timeless. In the most convincing reading of *The Double Hook*, poet Steven Scobie argues that because the characters are speaking dialogue and doing every-day work the novel "has moved from the time of myth to the time of man; human society is now the foreground, and the symbolic background must emerge in indirect ways, such as [by] association and allusion." (30)

The story opens with James Potter killing his mother, Mrs Potter, who has dominated the town and haunts it still. Everyone is paralysed by fear. Like Tay John, James also abandons his community and runs off to town, but returns later and helps them confront their hopelessness. The spreading fear in the isolated community is symbolized by Coyote. This malevolent figure moves about counseling despair, division and darkness. In contrast to this, the apparently passive character of Felix Prosper helps those around him to face the fear and Coyote's tricks. The most striking example of this is Angel's vision of a bear in a storm:

Above him the blow and the answer. The rain pounding the tar-paper roof. The memory of

the time Angel had see the bear at the fishing camp. Seen the bear rising on its haunches.

Prostrating itself before the unsacked winds. Rising as if to strike. Bowing to the spirit let out

of the sack, Angel thought, by the meddler Coyote. The bear advancing. Mowing. Scraping.

Genuflecting. Angel Furious with fear beating wildly. Her hunting-knife pounding the old

billycan.

He chuckled, remembering the noise and the white face of Angel when he picked up the

bear in its devotions. Picked up paper blown off the fish-shack roof. (39)

At the beginning of the novel most of the characters are isolated, paralysed by fear, however not only do they show an inability to act but also a lack of understanding about their situation. James is lost in his anger; Felix trapped in his dreams and fragments of ritual.

The old lady, Mrs Potter, fishes for spite and hostility against her family and the rest of the community. Her evil influence is so powerful that many people in the valley still imagine that they see her fishing even after she is dead. Her psychological control results in James killing her and then striking out at those around him. His sister Greta is driven by anger and self-hatred to the point that she sees her only escape as suicide.

The secondary characters each have their own stories. For example, Kip seems to be free of the negative forces of the community because he moves about the valley freely, usually on his horse. But he also seems to spy on everyone, making trouble and as a result James blinds him, taking the one sense that was a vital part of his freedom. Lenchen, the daughter of the Widow Wagner, is made pregnant by James in a sexual relationship that they try to keep secret from their families. James in a rage later blinds Kip and takes a whip to both Lenchen and Greta before he runs off to the town in an attempt to escape the isolation and fear of the community. He seems to be following the pattern of a restless young man running away from the reserve in order to get lost in a town.

In *Tay John*,Part II: Hearsay, leaves the legend in the background and we read a collection of tales and gossip narrated by a number of story-tellers: Charlie the cook, McLeod, Denham and the narrator. In addition to this we are given the opinions of second and third parties to the story. In this part of the narrative we get an updated version of the story as if it were beginning again in another world: "He vanished as if he were leaving one form of existence for another" (65) Here our first person narrator is Jack Denham who presents the tale as a true high adventure in the mountains. He repeatedly insists on the truth of the story about witnessing Tay John wrestle a bear:

Do you see what I mean? (the tale continued.) An adventure. A real one. Blood in it. It was a

close call. I could have been in it too, but there was the creek in the way....(57)

The omniscient narrator casts doubts on this claim by calling it a tale that Denham would

relate after a few drinks, "talking, stretching the story the length of Edmonton.... Men winked

over it, smiled at it, yet listened to its measured voice, attentions caught, imaginations cradled

in a web of words" (56).

Denham describes the bear wrestling and killing scene in epic terms. As Tay John struggles out from under the dead bear Denham identifies him with the white man's conflict with nature,

A man's head appeared beside it, bloody, muddied, as though he were just being born, as

though he were climbing out of the ground. Certainly man had been created anew before my

eyes. Like birth itself it was a struggle against the powers of darkness, and Man had won....

Man had won against the wilderness, the unknown, the strength...beyond our understanding.

(64)

Denham's sensuous description of Tay John's hand-to-hand combat with the great bear is a synesthetic experience which he shares with the listener/reader. We not only visualize the action but we hear the roar of the mountain stream, the growl of the bear, the reaction of Tay John. We smell the sweat, the blood, the wet grass. We feel the suspense, the tension and then the calm.

After this scene Tay John is no longer a member of his tribe living off the land and killing only what they need for food. From this point he takes up the white man's occupation of trapper and sport hunting, killing for material gain and pleasure.

In *The Double Hook* Watson uses various characters to comment on the action. There is Kip who is always watching everyone else and sometimes spying on them. He tells Angel, "These eyes seen plenty." (56). Angel observes, "A man can peg himself in so tight that nothing can creep through the cracks." (57) and Theophil kicks Kip out of his house. "Put one foot in front of the other...By getting that carcass in motion." (57) The characters go on to make generalizations, so outside the cabin Kip observes, "Angel can see but Theophil's let fear grow like fur on his eyes... All the time... people go shutting their doors. Tying things up. Fencing them in. Shutting out what they never rightly know. "(58) The Widow Wagner cries out in despair, "Dear God...The country. The Wilderness. Nothing. Nothing but old women waiting." (55) And Felix Prosper uses Latin fragments from the Roman Catholic mass: "Ave Maria. Benedictus fructus ventris. Introibo....Bread breaking. Domine non sum dignus. Words coming. The last words." (51) The reader gets multiple perspective on the action and the other characters from the different dialogues of the people in the novel. The reader is not limited to the point of view of an omniscient narrator, but must learn to make up his or her own mind on the meaning of the action and the language.

In *Tay John*, Part III: Evidence--without a finding, Denham is still the eyewitness to some of the events. Tay John is the mountain guide to Ardith Aeriola, a social outcast because she was the kept woman of rich men. When the drunken land developer, Alf Dobble makes advances on Ardith, Tay John comes to her rescue. The whole camp turns against them and they escape into the mountains. From this point Denham is only able to piece together their story from hearsay and gossip. Finally he hears Blackie's story of his encounter with them "on the middle of a lake in a blizzard," a tale which has the elements of ghost story in which Blackie has an apparition: the two toboggan tracks disappear into the snow as if Tay John and Ardith had descended into the underworld.

O'Hagan's focus is on problems of story-telling and he uses a number of narrators identified by name. At times he gives them individual tones of voice or dialects. He has his narrator, Denham, explain the uncertain ending of the story with these words:

Indeed to tell a story is to leave most of it untold. You mine it, as you take ore from the

mountain. You carry the compass around it. You dig down--and when you have finished, the

story remains, something beyond your touch, resistant to your siege; unfathomable, like the

heart of the mountain. You have the feeling that you have not reached the story itself, but

have merely assaulted the surrounding solitude (125-26).

The use of different narrators and unreliable points of view make us question the veracity of the accounts and the constructed nature of reality. As Arnold Davidson points out "Published in 1939, this novel is Canada's first metafictional mythic Western and the prototype for subsequent postmodern fictions that will come to characterize the Canadian Western at its idiosyncratic best." (39)

Watson's *The Double Hook* ends with the burned out ruin of the Potter family house, Greta's dead body, and the community in shock. But James returns from town a changed man ready to take on the responsibility of leading the community:

He kissed away escape in the mud by the river. He thought now of Lenchen and the child

who would wear his face. Alone on the edge of town where men clung together for

protection, he saw clearly for a moment his simple hope. (121)

Without looking back James gets on his horse and crosses the bridge on his way home where everyone is waiting for him. Felix plays midwife at the birth of Lenchen and James's baby and everyone gathers at his house to celebrate the new hope for the community. Unlike *Tay John* which ends with death and disappearance  *The Double Hooks* ends with death, purging fire and a birth.

When James escapes from town he leaves behind all the mundane clichés and unreality of freedom. He lets his horse lead him back home in the darkness and Watson gives us a synesthetic experience based on her own love of horseback riding:

James leaned forward. The horse raced from the ridge through a meadow of wild hay

watered by some hidden spring. It slowed to a lope, to a canter, to a pace.....James could

feel the pull of the horse's shoulders as it stepped its way up through the rocks and bushes.

He could feel the muscles contract and tighten as the horse began its descent on the other

side.

At the bottom they came to a creek. James could hear the horse's feet parting the water.

He could hear the flow of water on stones....He shut his eyes and fastened his free hand

on his horse's mane. (122)

This realistic scene captures several elements in a few words: James and his horse become one in this ride into the blackness, James feels all the sensations of his horse, James is in communion with nature. He closes his eyes as in sleep and trusts his horse to take him home. He awakes as if from a bad dream. The reference to the hidden spring suggests regeneration and hope.

**Language**

In both *Tay John* and *The Double Hook* the language, rhythm and vocabulary have the quality of ritual. In her study of religious allusions in *The Double Hook* Beverly Mitchell asks "Why does the reader have a feeling of 'déjà vu' or sense that this story is vaguely familiar?" (63) This question could also be applied to O'Hagan's narrative since it too is full of allusions to the folklore of First Nations and the common places of epics and western tall tales. Because of these qualities each novel reminds us of the other. The treatment of language, however, is different in each work.

Howard O'Hagan's goal is to tell a good story in the tradition of the tall tale. Many scenes are presented as oral stories which just happen to be written down. Since the epic story of Tay John cannot be captured by a conventional novel O'Hagan uses many different types of story-telling:

the omniscient narrator, the unreliable narrator, hear-say, biased accounts, native myths, religious rituals, pseudo rituals, a letter from Fr. Rorty, references to conventional history, narratives of settings, and suppositions. We end with a story that is unresolved--a disappearance --"without a finding."

In her novel Sheila Watson is concerned with exploring the different levels of language and meaning. She uses many different types of language: everyday dialogue, clichés, aphorisms, backwoods expressions, Biblical phrases from the Old and New Testaments, native myths, Catholic rituals, and parody. "Everyone seems to talk naturally in aphorisms, transforming every particular incident into an occasion for universal truth." (Scobie 30) There are many examples: "I forget, Kip said. A man can't remember things all his life." (62) "How can a man know what he wants?" (64) "A man needn't hang himself because he's put his neck through a noose in the dark." (70) "The whole world is a big lot for one girl to wreck." (117) and "We don't choose what we will suffer. We can't even see how suffering will come." (119). Of all that characters, William is the one who speaks mostly in aphorisms: "He was like a gay cock on the outside in his plaid shirt and studded belt." (34) "There's things even a man's brother has to pass by." (74) "Suppose the rock should suddenly begin to move." (76) and "The curious thing about fire, he said, is you need it and you fear it at once." (128). These forms are repeated so often that we soon begin to question the intended meaning of the words as opposed to the ironic meaning.

In her study of literary style in *The Double Hook* Barbara Godard argues that the work is an exploration of the limits of language:

With its questioning of cliché, its divesting language of associations--thus creating a new

way of seeing--with its awareness of silence, with its dramatization of the origins of

creativity, *The Double Hook* stands beside contemporary works like those of [other women

writers who explore] linguistic experiments. (151)

Much like Baudelaire's notion, literature and language form forests of symbols for both Howard O'Hagan and Sheila Watson. Their deceptively simple styles hides many levels of meaning in their narratives. Their styles focus on the craft of using language to create symbolic narratives that can be read and appreciated on several levels. In reading, and re-reading *Tay John* and *The Double Hook* we continue to have déjà vu experiences.

**Coda**

One of the major differences between *Tay John* and *The Double Hook* is the representation of First Nations people. Howard O'Hagan deals directly with an Indigneous person as his main character. He examines Kumkleseem's relationship with his own people and with white society. Sheila Watson does not have any character in *The Double Hook* who is clearly identified as First Nations or Metis. Some readers have suggested that Kip may be an Indigenous figure and that some of the other characters, the Potter family and Felix, may be of Indigneous ancestry, but this is never made explicit. Sheila Watson explained that this was intentional. In her 1973 statement about writing *The Double Hook* she said, "I wanted to do something about the West, which wasn't a Western; and about Indians which wasn't about...Indians." (183) In a 1984 interview Watson explained, "All these voices echo in *The Double Hook*. I didn't want to it to be an ethnic novel--not a novel about Indians or any other deprived group, but rather a novel about a number of people who had no ability to communicate because they have found little to replace the myths and rituals which might have bound them together." (159)

Most critics and commentators of *The Double Hook* have ignored the Indigenous dimension of the novel. While much discussion has focused on the figure of Coyote, a mythic character from First Nations cultures, little has been said about the ethnicity of any of the characters. In discussion about post-colonial readings of the novel some critics have alluded to the First Nations background of the characters, see for example Leslie Monkman and Stephen Putzel. In her detailed essay "Representations of the 'Native Condition' in Watson's *The Double Hook* and *Deep Hollow Creek*," Samara Walbohm critically examines the assumptions of many critics and readers as they seem unable to deal with the Indigenous issues suggested by both Watson novels. Let us hope that in future studies this reluctance will change.

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**Appendix:**

In my experience teaching these two novels I have learned that the popular and critical attention given to Watson's *The Double Hook* has helped in the rediscovery of *Tay John*, Howard O'Hagan's forgotten masterpiece from 1939. McClelland and Stewart republished *Tay John* in 1974. Some of the comparisons that writers have made between these two novels are briefly given below.

George Woodcock, "At the end of the 1960s, when native Canadian publishing developed a crusading fervor with the appearance of new avant-garde enterprises like the House of Anansi and the New Press, experimental fiction became a vogue in Canada in a way anticipated by only a few isolated works of earlier decades like Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook* (1959) and Howard O'Hagan's *Tay John* (1939)." Quoted from "Armies Moving in the Night: The Fiction of Matt Cohen." *The International Fiction Review,* 6:1 (1979): 17-30.

Margery Fee briefly compares the use of First Nations people in *Tay John* and *The Double Hook* among other Canadian works. See "Romantic Nationalism and the Image of Native People in Contemporary English-Canadian Literature." in *The Native in Literature: Canadian and Comparative Perspectives*. eds. Thomas King et al. Toronto: ECW Press, 1987. See also Margery Fee, "Howard O'Hagan's *Tay John*: Making New World Myth," *Canadian Literature* 110 (1986): 9-25.

Michael Ondaatje's "Afterword." *Tay John* by Howard O'Hagan. 1989 edition.

Arnold Davidson compares the use of the coyote as a trickster figure in *Tay John* and *The Double Hook* in his book, *Coyote Country: Fictions of the Canadian West*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1994, 58-60.

Gerald Lynch in an essay on George Elliott's almost forgotten book of short stories, *The Kissing Man* (1962) compares the magic realism prose style of Elliott's fiction to *Tay John* and *The Double Hook*. See "To Keep What was Good and Pass it on": George Elliott's Small Town Memorial, *The Kissing Man*." *Studies in Canadian Literature* 22.1 (1997): 71.

J'nan Morse Sellery in a review of David Stouck. *Ethel Wilson: A Critical Biography*, quotes the Ondaatje's statement in his "Afterword" for *Tay John* in which he lists his four literary touchstones: *Tay John*, *The Double Hook,*  Wilson's *Swamp Angel* (1954) and Elizabeth Smart's *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept* (1945). See "Ethel Wilson: A Critical Biography." *American Review of Canadian Studies* (Summer, 2004).

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