

**UNIVERSITY OF TARTU
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH STUDIES**

**SEARCH FOR IDENTITY
IN THOMAS KING'S *MEDICINE RIVER***

BA thesis

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**TARTU
2020**

ABSTRACT

The present thesis focuses on the search for identity of a mixed-blood Canadian Native, as depicted in the novel *Medicine River* by Thomas King. The aim of this thesis is to explore how the protagonist Will manages to make peace with himself and whether the Indian community, which he has never truly belonged to before, also plays any role in this.

This thesis contains four parts — an introduction, a literature review, an empirical part, and a conclusion. Both the literature review and the empirical part have three subsections.

The introduction places the novel in the context of the Native storytelling tradition and specifies the aim of this thesis to explore why someone would lose their identity and which external factors can help a person find one's true identity as well as establish a sense of belonging.

The literature review first outlines the development of the genre of Canadian Native writing and states the importance of Thomas King's works in this tradition. Next, the literature review contains an overview of critical reception to date on *Medicine River*. Finally, the literature review introduces the key notions relevant for an interpretation of *Medicine River*.

The empirical part provides a close reading of the novel. The first subsection of the empirical part explores the novel's protagonist and explains his loss of identity. The second subsection of the empirical part analyses the protagonist's search for identity, and the last part reveals the outcome of his quest.

The conclusion summarizes the main findings of the thesis.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	2
INTRODUCTION	4
LITERATURE REVIEW	6
Canadian Native Writing and the Works of Thomas King	6
Reception to Date on <i>Medicine River</i>	9
Key Notions for Interpreting <i>Medicine River</i>	11
EMPIRICAL PART	13
The Protagonist	13
The Path	18
The Finale	24
CONCLUSION	27
REFERENCES	29
RESÜMEE	32

INTRODUCTION

“Lionel has been to Japan, too,” said Harlen.

— “That’s right. I’ve been to Japan. People want me to talk about what it’s like to be an Indian. Crazy world. Lots of white people seem real interested in knowing about Indians. Crazy world.

— “So, I go all over the world now, and talk about Indian ways and how my grandparents lived, and sometimes I sing a little. I used to dance, too, but my leg hurts too bad now. Most of the time, I tell stories.” (King 2005: 162-163)

Contrary to the oral literary legacy of the Canadian Natives like storytelling, chants and songs which all date back to eternity, Canadian Native writing is a rather new literary genre. According to Thomas King (1990b: ix), the transition of Canadian Native literature from the oral to the written form has suddenly increased the audience “as Native storytellers have become bilingual - telling and writing their stories in English, French, Spanish - they have created both a more pan-Native as well as a non-Native audience”. As opposed to oral literature that was shared within a small circle, inside one tribe or community, the written stories can now reach a wide audience of different cultures.

Thomas King is a Canadian author of mixed “Cherokee and Greek heritage” (Schweninger 2013: 81) who is regarded as probably the most famous Native writer in the country (Sugars 2004: 179) and is frequently engaged in writing “oral creation narratives” (Siemerling 2005: 64). Often using the recurring theme of “the inferior Indian” (Siemerling 2005: 64), King’s fiction has a tendency to focus on “the implications of colonial contact and its problematic legacy for Native peoples” (Sugars 2004: 180), but simultaneously, to show “the resilience of Native cultures, their ability to survive by transforming and adapting as circumstances change” (Van Toorn and Justice 2017: 42).

In my thesis, I will explore *Medicine River* by Thomas King as a fine example of Canadian Native writing. *Medicine River* is set in the present-day Canada. King (1990b: xii) has argued that “consciously setting our [the Canadian Native] literature in the present, /.../ allows us the opportunity to create for ourselves and our respective cultures both a

present and a future.” The novel dates back to the period when Canadian Natives wrote mostly to the non-Natives as an audience. *Medicine River* is King’s first novel and often described as a “short story cycle” (Siemerling 2005: 72). Even though this novel touches upon various problems and challenges of the Canadian Natives, such as poverty, alcoholism, and domestic violence, my intention is to explore how Thomas King has depicted an individual’s search for identity. Simultaneously, I will take a look at the features in the novel that are characteristic to Native culture and the elements of the Native folklore that King refers to.

The aim in this thesis is twofold. Firstly, the thesis will focus on the protagonist of *Medicine River* and explore why he would have lost his sense of identity. Secondly, the thesis will analyze what circumstances or events the author has included which can help a lost Native person to find himself again. The thesis intends to determine whether identity is something fixed that one is simply born with, or it can change during one’s life, or possibly, even be shaped by others.

The main body of the thesis consists of two parts — the literature review, and the empirical part. In the literature review, the thesis aims to provide an overview of the development of Canadian Native writing and introduce Thomas King as well as the aspects from Native folklore that he has included in *Medicine River*. The empirical part will provide a close reading of the novel to find answers to the research questions — why would someone lose their identity and which external factors can help a person find one’s true identity and establish a sense of belonging.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review of the thesis will outline the development of Canadian Native writing¹ and explain the importance of Thomas King in this genre. This chapter will also provide an overview of the critical reception published to date on *Medicine River*, and introduce the aspects related to Native Canadians and their culture that are crucial to interpreting the narrative of *Medicine River*.

Canadian Native Writing and the Works of Thomas King

The Native Peoples of Canada have their own literary tradition. For countless generations, it has been an oral one, but “over the centuries, cultures of the voice and the written word have become entangled in complex ways, both within and between Aboriginal and European societies” (Van Toorn and Justice 2017: 26). The literature of Native Canadians lies on the oral storytelling traditions. William Toye explains that “storytelling included all types of myths, legends, tales, and folklore, while compositional elements of ceremony offered a wide range of songs, ritual chants, drama, poems, prayers, and orations” (Toye 1983: 383). The origins of Indian written literature can be traced back to the seventeenth century when the French missionaries started writing down Indian myths and tales and translated them to French (Toye 1983: 383).

After the advent of the Europeans and the rules imposed by the newcomers, it took the Natives two centuries to learn the new languages and adapt the foreign storytelling

¹ In his essay *Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial*, Thomas King (1990a) made an attempt to clarify the terminology concerning Canadian Native writing, arguing how Native literature has existed in the oral form long before colonization, and that it would seem appropriate to refer to both the oral and written Native literature created after the advent of the Europeans as ‘*post-colonial*’ literature. He dismisses this term as it focuses too much on the conflict between cultures, and also explores the suitability of ‘*tribal*’, ‘*polemical*’, ‘*interfusional*’, and ‘*assocional*’ literature, finding the latter to be the most suitable one for Canadian Native writing. For the purposes of clarity, I have not included King’s term ‘*assocional literature*’ in my thesis and am using the phrase ‘*Canadian Native writing*’ instead because this should be universally understandable to all readers, regardless of how informed they are about the Canadian literary scene.

techniques until the “first signs of literary creativity in English among the Indians appeared as a result of organized missionary efforts to convert them” (Toye 1983: 384), with the first book written by a Canadian Indian published in 1847, containing memoirs (*ibid.*).

Since the first attempts, a century passed before writing really commenced among the Indians. The introduction to *Before the Country* notes how “in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Canada witnessed an explosion in the production of literary works by Aboriginal writers, a development that some critics have called the Native Renaissance” (McKenzie 2007). Since the middle of the twentieth century, the Canadian Native writing in English can broadly be divided into three eras: the 1960s to 1980s concentrated on identity politics through biographical writing, the 1980s to 1990s witnessed the rise of the novel, addressed to the non-Native audience and using elements of Native culture, and since the new millennium, the Native Canadians write to the Natives, and no longer for the white audience, heavily drawing on their rich storytelling tradition and their oral heritage (Van Toorn 2017: 35-53).

The Canadian Native writing has always combined two goals — the artistic, and the political one. When looking at the artistic side, it is apparent that some elements of the oral traditions of the Natives have survived the transition into written form well, like the Trickster figure and circular storytelling patterns, both present in *Medicine River* too. The political goal has been to draw the attention of the non-Native audience to Native experiences and show the aftermath of colonialism. This agenda is included in *Medicine River* as well as King touches upon the ‘*Status*’ and ‘*Non-Status*’ Indians, for example. As Akiwenzie-Damm (1998: 89) marvellously sums up, for many contemporary Indians:

Writing, storytelling, performance, and multi-media art are forms of activism, are creative (and therefore positive and giving) ways both to maintain who we are and to protest against colonization. In the simplest terms, we protest by dispelling lies and telling our own stories, our own histories, in our own ways, according to our own concepts of truth and beauty.

Thomas King, of mixed “Cherokee and Greek heritage” (Schweninger 2013: 81), is a Canadian author who has, over the years, gained publicity and respect, even to the extent that he is thought of as “perhaps the most well-known Native writer in Canada today” (Sugars 2004: 179). His storytelling patterns, ideas, and critically honest Native perspective of the world have attracted much attention, and his later works like *Green Grass, Running Water* and *The Back of the Turtle* have received substantial critical interest and praise. His style is to address the difficult issues through humour and it has been noted how “King’s fiction might make us feel good, but the sting that accompanies the laughter also makes us think” (Andrews 2003: 14).

The entry on Thomas King in the online *Canadian Encyclopedia* begins with a list of his talents, calling him a “novelist, short-story writer, essayist, screenwriter, photographer,” and continues with the statement that “King is often described as one of the finest contemporary Aboriginal writers in North America” (*Canadian Encyclopedia* online). Another source adds that one of the themes persisting throughout his work is “the resilience of Native cultures, their ability to survive by transforming and adapting as circumstances change” (Van Toorn and Justice 2017: 42). “A university professor of Native Studies and Creative Writing at the University of Guelph, King is the author of critical studies of Native writing, an editor of anthologies, and a master storyteller” outlines New (2003: 314). Thomas King has also written over twenty five scripts for television and feature films, and for radio shows, with the *Dead Dog Café Comedy Hour* as the most memorable one (Christie 2012: 67).

Nowadays, Thomas King has retired from active teaching at the university, but is still actively engaged in researching the narrative history of Indians in Canada, and bears the honorable Professor Emeritus title (University of Guelph website).

Reception to Date on *Medicine River*

In my thesis, I will take a look at Thomas King's first and less-examined novel *Medicine River*, published in 1989. Database searches do return results when one types in 'Medicine River', but many of these listed sources do not actually concentrate on the book because soon after the novel was published, it was adapted into a television motion picture for CBC in 1993, bearing the same title (Turbide 1993: 64). Reviewers have also noted that there have been "few critical studies of the novel before 1995" (Robinson 2006: 76), and how "only a handful of articles have been written" (Stratton 2005: 11) on it. I believe that *Medicine River* deserves a closer look, as Simard (1991: 73) eloquently sums up, "its narrative is familiarly fragmented, defying location on any time continuum; its conclusion is tentative, in the contemporary Indian manner; and its humor is bittersweet, laced with many of the undeniable, ugly realities of Indian life today". Reprinted at least twice, in 2005 and 2018, I believe that *Medicine River* is gaining popularity and attention as people are curious to find out what King has written in addition to his more-known later works.

Language has been one of the most thoroughly examined aspects of *Medicine River*. The novel was initially seen as "bold in neither subject nor approach" (Simard 1991: 73), but further investigation has uncovered marvellous subtext, wordplay, and trickstery targeted at the readers. Robinson (2006: 85) describes the novel as "vibrant, evocative, and not always easy to decipher, with its cross-references to other episodes within the novel and its allusions to Aboriginal cultural history". Language-wise, Zichy (2009) has interpreted the novel from a fresh perspective, exploring how the *Medicine River* story is actually told in negative statements.

The structure of *Medicine River* has also been of interest and Wylie (1999: 112) has noted how the novel is made up from "juxtaposed pieces" that help to shift the emphasis

from the protagonist to the surrounding community, and “give the narrative a composite rather than linear structure”. Andrews and Walton (2006: 604) note how King attempts to “retain the oral tradition” while sharing the fragmented story in a repetitive or circular form. By using a fragmented structure and prolonging the sharing of information, “King makes sure that, at least on some level, they [the readers] experience what it feels like to be an outsider” (Hirsch 2004: 158).

Reviews concerning the topics and issues covered by *Medicine River* vary from author to author. Some have been interested in the messages conveyed through photography and how the narrator’s self-images change in time (Christie 1999). Others have used King’s novel as one example of Native writing addressing the gruesome reality of contemporary Aboriginal life that is limited because of legislation in force (Anderson 2008).

The individual’s search for identity is also a recurring topic in reception as it is the main storyline of the novel. For example, *Medicine River* has been investigated from the homecoming perspective as Darrell Jesse Peters has rendered the narrative from the angle of rejoining a lost extended family. I found his article “Beyond the Frame: Tom King’s Narratives of Resistent” (Peters 1999) a fascinating source and although it is not exclusive to *Medicine River* as it discusses King’s later fiction as well, I will use it as one foundation stone for my empirical part and explore some ideas from the article further. The first one concerns Will’s development from the point of meeting the Trickster, which I find insufficiently explained and the second one is related to the mentioning of Will being raised away from the reservation, whose reason is not dealt with, while it points to a significant aspect of historical legislation, which has a major impact on Will’s life and identity. I want to use this as a point from where to start explaining the *Indian Act* limitation about Non-Status Indians.

Key Notions for Interpreting *Medicine River*

Thomas King uses several notions and ideas in *Medicine River* that I will now briefly introduce before the empirical part of my thesis.

A significant element from the Native Canadian oral tradition that has survived the transition to written form, and is vividly present in *Medicine River* as well, is **the Trickster**. According to the online *Canadian Encyclopedia*, this supernatural figure present in the folklore of different cultures around the world also appears in the teachings and oral stories of the Native peoples in Canada and although each tribe or region calls their Trickster by their own names and gives it their own description and face, the Trickster does have certain cross-tribe similarities as these characters are often seen as protecting human life and well-being while educating the community about society, culture and morality, yet they also entertain their community members and could, in part, also be seen as “curious pranksters” (*Canadian Encyclopedia*). The Trickster figure that the reader meets in King’s fiction “confronts the tragic issues of economic underdevelopment, social dysfunction, and personal frustration” (Pettigrew 1997: 219). In an interview, Thomas King commented how “one of the roles of the trickster is to try to set the world right” (Parker 2003: 156).

When it comes to *Medicine River*, it is the Trickster who “weaves the **close-knit community**” (Anderson 2008: 183) — a crucial element for a complete Native identity. “Family and community give us a knowledge base, a way of being, a world view”, stresses Akiwenzie-Damm (1998: 90), adding that once the community connections break, a Native person will become lost, drifting, and disconnected as they have lost their spiritual base (*ibid.*). When displaced from the community, the Indian does not feel in place and is innately unhappy — as will be seen later in the empirical part, when I will take a look at an

individual's search for identity in *Medicine River*. An important aspect that provides for a complete identity is the traditional Indian family which does not only comprise a man, a woman, and their child or children. Instead, the **traditional Indian family** is much bigger, containing also the parents and grandparents, brothers and sisters with their offspring, nieces and nephews. The Indian family model is indeed an extended family, a community.

Ever since the new settlers suggested Treaties, got control of their lands, and reorganized the aboriginals into reserves, Canadian legislation concerning the Native Canadians has been depriving, delimiting, and unjust. The legal position of Canadian Native peoples is "complex" (Elliot 1992: 11), to say the least. In addition to universal laws which apply to all Canadians, the lives of the Natives have been and are regulated by specific legal instruments, the most notorious being the *Indian Act* which distinguished between '**Status**' and '**Non-Status**' Indians, prescribing, among other limitations, who is to be considered as an Indian, and who is allowed to live on the reserve (Elliot 1992: 11-13). As clarified by Anderson (2008: 187), "[the *Indian Act*] decreed that status Indian women automatically lose that status upon marriage to a non-Indian male, and must move from the reserve, and may not return, even if widowed or divorced". She continues with another detail relevant for reading *Medicine River*, namely, when an Indian woman lost her status through marriage, "her children and all of their subsequent progeny lost the right to claim Indian status in perpetuity" (*ibid.*). In 1985, the *Indian Act* was amended and the Indian status was given back to Indian-born women who had married non-Indian men. This amendment also re-indianized the children born into such a marriage, and there was "no longer any legal provision for losing status under the *Indian Act*" (Elliott 1992: 13).

Now, as I have given a brief overview of Canadian Native writing and Thomas King's importance in it, identified the scarcity of scholarship on King's first novel and stated my aim to contribute to filling this gap in research by drawing on the criticism to

date to elaborate on *Medicine River*, and introduced some background information that enhances the reading of, I will continue with the empirical part.

EMPIRICAL PART

As with interpreting all pieces of art, each reader will understand *Medicine River* in their own way, and decipher a different message from it. While the array of topics that King covers in the novel also include the staggeringly honest overview of the modern-day problems that the Natives must tackle, then to me, the story told in *Medicine River* is primarily that of searching for identity and finding oneself a real home — a place where one can belong and lead a fulfilling life. In other words, this is a quest novel concerned with Native experience.

In the empirical part of my thesis, I will take a look at how King depicts this search for identity, and do so in three subsections. First, I will explore the present-day narrator of the novel to pinpoint where his quest begins, then I will continue by taking a look at the path of his search for identity, and in the last subsection, I will examine what has changed and where he has arrived at.

The Protagonist

Medicine River revolves around a man, a “fatherless, passive, displaced protagonist” (Simard 1992: 73). The protagonist of Thomas King’s novel is called Will. The book does not reveal his last name, although some reviewers call him Will Horse Capture (Wylie 1999: 111). It can be considered as characteristic of King’s style that he would keep some details, such as an individual’s last name, from being served to the reader

on a silver platter. Instead, the writer hides the pieces of the puzzle for the reader to find for interpreting the story because “tricks, transformations, and disguises are crucial both to King’s handling of language and narrative, and to his mode of engaging with readers” (Van Toorn and Justice 2017: 41). The same has also been remarked by Hirsch (2004: 145) who notes that King “asks of his readers what the oral tradition has always demanded,” namely, to listen (or read) attentively.

King shares the *Medicine River* scenes in several parallel storylines, switching between what seems to be the narrator’s present-day, and images from the past, which alternate several times within a chapter. With the present-day narrator being around forty (King 2005: 13), the novel covers fragments from approximately three decades of Will’s life — from vivid memories dating to his early teenage years, up to his present-day search for identity. Peters (1999: 68) has noted how “having been raised away from his extended family, away from his culture, it is obvious that Will /.../ has lost his way”. In this exploratory subchapter about the protagonist of *Medicine River*, I will try to take a look at what factors King has introduced as reasons why a Native might get lost in the contemporary world. I will place the book scenes to be discussed in a chronological order, starting from Will’s childhood.

Will has had his fair share of negatives and disappointments to cope with starting from his childhood. In a remarkable scene, and without using any softening metaphors, King introduces the reader to the delimiting mixed-blood reality. When Will was young then one day, unexpectedly, the single-parent two-child family moved back to his mother’s home from Calgary — or actually, to the outskirts of home, with the help of Will’s uncles. During the movement scene, a young relative, the son to the brother of Will’s mother, a kid approximately the same age as Will and his brother, suddenly boasts out “you can’t [go back to the reserve]. You guys have to live in town cause you’re not Indian any more. /.../

Your mother married a white” (King 2005: 8). Indeed, King has chosen to bring in the sensitive topic of Non-Status Indians by marrying Will’s Native mother to a white man — Will’s absent father. A cross-cultural marriage is in itself nothing extraordinary, except that the novel is set in Canada and according to the then-applicable *Indian Act*, such marriage deprived Will’s mother of her Indian status, and “hence her right to live on the Stand Off Reserve, which is her home” (Stratton 2005: 13). The reader learns from the book how Will’s grandmother visited them once in a while when Will was growing up in Calgary, and they could visit the relatives on the reserve — but that is not the same as being allowed to stay. Thus, King has drawn the readers’ attention to the gruesome reality shared by all mixed families during the time when the most delimiting version of the *Indian Act* was in force. After the author has introduced this theme, I find it not surprising that growing up in such an environment where one is prohibited from something only because of who they are, one might certainly get confused about where one belongs. Surely, in King’s novel, young Will cannot completely belong to his mother’s family, the Blackfoot family.

I started my empirical part with a quote describing the protagonist as a fatherless figure. However, that is not utterly true because the author does include the father in the *Medicine River* stories — but as a separating, not a unifying figure. As has been noted, the novel is “also a story of the abandonment of two brothers by their white “father”” (Stratton 2005: 23). The father has left when Will and his little brother were young, leaving behind this “isolated, nuclear family” (Peters 1999: 70) of three. King depicts a scene from Will’s schoolboy age as he first discovered and browsed through a pack of hidden photographs and letters that his absent father had sent to his mother. Regardless of Will’s “attempt to convince his mother that he has the right to see his father’s letters” (Zichy 2009: 30), his mother got really angry with him, and slapped him in the face. Hard, and more than once (King 2005: 5). The author ends the scene with Will’s Blackfoot mother giving him a

lecture about the meaning of ‘private’, which is slightly odd as “even the most intimate matters are often shared in the Blackfoot community” (Zichy 2009: 30).

Just like Will’s Blackfoot family is *there*, right across Medicine River, but forbidden as a home, the only tangible thing that Will has from his father — the letters — are likewise *there* too, but forbidden to him. This prohibited yet only physical link to his father does not contain much. What every reader can witness for oneself from the excerpts that King has scattered across the novel is also aptly summed up by Anderson (2008: 180) who notes how “this ‘deadbeat dad’s’ infrequent correspondence contains the typical rhetoric: questionable tales of his travels, equally questionable excuses for unfulfilled promises, missed visits/birthdays/Christmases/child support, and the inevitable supplication for forgiveness”. So, there is nothing much in these letters, other than the fact that they are pretty much the only link that Will has to his father, a significant yet absent character. In the *Medicine River* reality, “Will’s father is doubly a negative /.../ since he is not only not Blackfoot, and therefore responsible for making Will himself less than fully Blackfoot, but he is also not present in Will’s life as a positive ‘Whiteman’” (Zichy 2009: 26). The narrator contemplates — “I must have seen my father, heard his voice. But there was nothing. No vague recollections, no stories, no impressions, nothing” (King 2005: 7).

Even though Will did not have any vivid memories of his father and could not talk about him with his mother, it does not mean that he had forgotten all about him. Thomas King is considered as a master of oral creation narratives (Siemerling 2005: 64), and the reader meets a wonderful creation narrative in the *Medicine River* story too when Will suddenly finds him inventing a father for himself:

I mean, I wasn’t a kid. I was at least twenty-five when I told that woman on the plane that my father was a senior engineer. And there was no reason to do that. I didn’t miss him. I didn’t even think about him. I had never known the man. /.../
 Sometimes I’d sit in my apartment and try to think up new professions for my father. And then I’d tell myself to quit fooling around. /.../ What if someone back home heard about my father being a rich opal miner in Australia? (King 2005: 76-77)

Through giving his father an imaginary and important role, the narrator attempts to fill a void in his life, building himself alongside and making himself matter, too.

One short overview of *Medicine River* describes it as “a novel about the situation with mixed-bloods, especially in Canada, where only full-bloods have the right to live on the reserves, which results in drifters who are disconnected from home and culture” (Susag 1998: 203). The preceding quote introduced the word ‘*drifter*’, and in my opinion, this is indeed characteristic of Will as he seems to be out of place and uneasy everywhere he is, and King has depicted the narrator’s identity as shifting between the Blackfoot and white parts of him, depending on where he is. While a child in Medicine River, the narrator could not overlook his white heritage, as this kept him separated from his relatives. Zichy (2009: 27) suggests that when Will grew up and moved to live and work in Toronto, he was able to “ignore his White self and pass as an attractively exotic Indian”. In a big and anonymous town, the Indian could finally forget about his partial white self. Will had had a close relationship with a woman who did not seem to care for the small detail that Will is also part white — to her, Will was the exotic Native - his father’s ancestry being a completely irrelevant small detail. Like also noted by Zichy (2009: 28), it seems “ironic, and might be somewhat bitter, for a person who was not allowed back on the Blackfoot reserve as a child, that a Toronto White woman unerringly identifies him as a ‘real Indian’”.

It is widely known that an Indian, when detached from the land and put into an urban setting, will become innately unhappy. It is indeed the land, the community, and the Native culture which makes a Native person complete, as also argued by Akiwenzie-Damm (1998: 84). Paradoxically, the protagonist in King’s novel seems to cope with and even be content with his anonymous life in Toronto, in isolation and in hiding — from himself, mostly, but also from his Native family. But then, Will receives a phone call from back home:

My brother James called, and I caught the first plane to Calgary. It was evening when I arrived in Medicine River. James met me at the airport. His eyes were red, and his hair was greasy and matted. I wanted to do something, but we both just stood there. Finally, he grabbed my bag and threw it in the trunk. (King 2005: 88)

The Path

Every quest has a trigger, and the search for identity in *Medicine River* by Thomas King begins with a phone call about the death of the protagonist's mother. Will recalls:

I was in Toronto when my mother died. I didn't even know she was sick. James didn't know, either. She kept things like that to herself. James came home from work and found her in bed. She was just feeling tired, she said. James took her to the hospital that evening. (King 2005: 230)

James stayed with my mother in the hospital. The first day she was there, he tried to call, but it was a weekend, and I was off with friends. /.../ My mother talked a lot there in hospital. James said she remembered all sorts of things that we had done. /.../ James was with her each evening. "She talked about you a lot, Will." (King 2005: 232)

The protagonist of the novel, around forty, returns to Medicine River for his mother's funeral and his physical travel becomes a life-changing self-exploration too. As Stratton (2005: 17) describes, "Will is on a voyage of discovery, his journey through physical space from Toronto to Medicine River serving as a metaphor for a journey into personal history".

As aptly pointed out by Anderson (2008: 181), both of the protagonist's parents are now gone, with all their unresolved issues left behind in Will's life. I agree with Anderson (2008: 183) who argues how "transformation doesn't occur in a vacuum — it needs a catalyst" and in *Medicine River*, Thomas King has introduced the modern-day Trickster figure as Will's guide during his quest for identity, to rescue him from this complex state of mind. When he has temporarily returned to Medicine River after his mother's death, the protagonist finds himself "at the crossroads between cultures" (Siemerling 2005: 68). Just as discussed in an analysis, Will is in a complex state indeed:

Disownment by the father, consequently followed by the out-casting by the mother's community, left Will alienated and full of dejection. /.../ alienation followed by isolation became a part of life for Will and throughout the novel one finds him to be totally indifferent towards his Native surroundings. He has no passion to be identified with the Native community /.../. (Vahia 2002: 74)

Upon his return to Medicine River for his mother's funeral, the protagonist finds himself sitting in a diner one day with a local Indian man called Harlen who hands him the pack of photographs and letters that Will remembers still so clearly from his childhood. The Indian comments — “[your father] wrote a good letter. Bertha said they made her cry” (King 2005: 9). Here, Thomas King introduces a Native normality that is unfamiliar to Will — and, perhaps also to the non-Native readers of *Medicine River*. As I briefly mentioned before when introducing the protagonist, then Will was not allowed to read his father's letters when he was young. Now, as the Trickster has entered his life to help him “reclaim /.../ his sense of identity within his cultural framework” (Peters 1999: 68), we can witness his first lesson — that “even the most intimate matters are often shared in the Blackfoot community” (Zichy 2009: 30). As Peters (1999: 68) puts it, “Harlen steps into Will's life and educates him”, adding how similarly to the Trickster figure in old Native Canadian tales and myths, “Harlen's job is to keep things ordered, focused, and centered” (Peters 1999: 69). The narrator surrenders to the modern-day Trickster's subtle yet pervasive presence and follows the direction that Harlen nudges him into. It must be noted, however, that Harlen's meddling is not exclusive to Will — on the contrary, as the Trickster is everywhere, forcing everyone in the Native community “to (re)consider their situations and make decisions that lead to a reaffirmation of cultural identity” (Peters 1999: 68). It has been noted that King's style is to create “a comic strategy to deal with often tragic subjects” (Andrews 2003: 203), and an example of this literary approach can be witnessed in a humorous description by the protagonist about Harlen's role:

Helping was Harlen's specialty. He was like a spider on a web. Every so often, someone would come along and tear off a piece of the web or poke a hole in it, and Harlen would come scuttling around and throw out filament after filament until the damage was repaired. (King 2005: 29)

Thomas King's Trickster knows his business well. Elegantly, Harlen engages Will increasingly more in the Native community. The first assignment of the Trickster is to convince Will that he does not have to leave Medicine River for Toronto. Instead, he could establish his own photo studio at home. The protagonist is reluctant as he has a job back in Toronto, and Medicine River already has several photo studios, but Harlen's arguments increase in weight: "[The town has] no Indian photographers, Will. Real embarrassing for us to have to go to a white for something intimate like a picture" (King 2005: 91). Taking a step back, we can see how Thomas King delightfully provokes the readers, requiring them to keep attention while reading. Earlier, the Trickster insisted how the pack of photographs and letters were a shared thing in the community, not something private. Now, when the topic has shifted to something seemingly simple like having a picture taken, this is described as '*intimate*'. Harlen had his way in the long run as after returning to Toronto, Will had to admit that he arrived "just in time to become unemployed. /.../ I looked around /.../ for a few months, took the occasional free-lance job, but nothing seemed to settle /.../ So that's the way it happened, coming home" (King 2005: 92-93). The Trickster did arrange things well as Will himself concludes that "by the end of the first year, I was making money" (King 2005: 96).

However, it is not only Harlen who pushes the protagonist closer to the Indian community of Medicine River — other members count him in too, as one of their own. Slowly, King lets the protagonist open up and become increasingly involved. "I drove January Pretty Weasel out to the reserve for the funeral. /.../ I didn't want to go, but January was kin, and it was her husband's funeral" (King 2005: 41). My reading of this short statement is that by now, Will has realized the great value of belonging and has taken the first bold steps on the path of his search for identity as "in order to overcome this passivity, Will has to commit himself and become actively involved" (Zichy 2009: 30).

Indeed, King's protagonist suddenly finds himself attending weddings and funerals, partaking in hand, bone and bingo games, socializing at evenings out, and playing center in the local basketball team, "although until returning to Medicine River he had been an outsider" (Zichy 2009: 40).

One of the challenges in *Medicine River* is to discreetly arrange Will a personal life without this topic casting too much shadow on the search of identity, and Thomas King has solved this problem too, with the help of the Trickster. The reader can almost hear the protagonist's sigh as he declares: "I really hate it when Harlen decides to help somebody with a problem. Generally, the first thing he does is to come see me" (King 2005: 54). In Medicine River there lives an accountant Louise - a Native, too. She has had her share of disappointments in life, and her last acquaintance left her, pregnant. This is where Harlen steps in and influences the narrator to take her out to lunch. It takes one persistent Trickster to arrange things and "as Harlen begins to behave as though Will and Louise are dating, the next thing Will knows, they *are* dating" (Anderson 2008: 184). After Harlen has deployed his matchmaking tricks and pushed Will and Louise in the same direction, it is soon time for Louise to give birth. Will is sitting in the hospital, reflecting: "I began thinking about Louise, and for the first time since I had come back to Medicine River, I felt good. Clean and strong" (King 2005: 37). Soon, the local Indian community also thinks of them as a family, and one day Harlen told Will that "Bertha says it's time you and Louise got married" (King 2005: 179). Despite King's "trickster discourse" (Andrews 2003: 35) that raises the readers' hopes with Louise buying a big house, "a gesture that Harlen perceives as an invitation for Will to act" (Andrews 2003: 43), the three — Will, Louise, and 'South Wing' as Will calls the child after the hospital ward she was born in — never move in together, but do remain close. Family-like close.

This may raise a question why the author did not allow the protagonist to start a family with Louise. What explains it is that the narrator has enough issues to solve as is, and that the focus of this Native Canadian book is not on individual happiness in the same sense as a non-Native reader would expect. In fact, the book does provide a happy ending in the aspect that really matters as Will succeeds to regenerate “his sense of identity within his cultural framework” (Peters 1999: 68). For the Natives, family is more than the relationship between two people — the community is family. King does not fail the readers of *Medicine River* and introduces this key principle marvellously — both to the protagonist, who does not have a personal experience of living within a close-knit Indian community, and the non-Native readers.

Peters (1999: 69) has argued that “by the end of the book, Will has taken his role within his community, illustrated through the metaphor of a group photograph”. With a new photo studio established in Medicine River, the protagonist found the local Trickster’s idea of having a family portrait special to advertise the place a rather good one, and people started coming in. Harlen does warn him that when “Joyce Blue Horn said *family*, she wasn’t just talking about her and Elvis and the kids, you know” (King 2005: 195), but Will is still amazed when Joyce’s closest crowd his studio as “there were in the vicinity of fifty-four people” (King 2005: 197). The group photograph that Peters referred to is finally arranged at the riverbank because the family simply did not fit into Will’s studio, and a family photo without everyone on it would not be a family photo. The protagonist himself is welcomed into the photo — and the family — as Lionel James, one of the tribal elders, says “Best you be in the picture, too” (King 2005: 205), inviting him in, and everyone agrees. Another elder has given Will a chair in the middle of the scene, as he “runs back and forth from the self-timed camera” (Peters 1999: 69). Until that day, Will had carefully defined the extent of his engagement with the Indian community, and, when possible,

preferred to stay behind the camera (Zichy 2009: 38). The family photograph clearly has a center — as Peters (1999: 69) puts it, all have gathered around the grandparents at the heart of the scene, indicating how “the elders provide a cultural anchor to which Will, the lost “non-status” Indian, is at last tied”. This scene eloquently captures how the Trickster figure Harlen has assisted Will during his search for identity, by convincing the protagonist to stay in Medicine River and establish a photo studio, which ultimately resulted in Will finding his cultural roots and a sense of belonging to the close-knit local Indian community.

Even though the author does not write a classic marriage plot to the relationship of Will and Louise, King does give the readers another happy ending, perhaps an even more significant one. On Will’s path of search for identity, King has barely introduced the protagonist’s closest living blood relative — his younger brother James. The author mentions him in the narrator’s childhood scenes, but leaves the impression that there is little closeness between the two. It looks like the author has concentrated on Will in this novel and has not discussed all the protagonists’ relations, but King reassures the reader with the inclusion of an occasional postcard that the brothers do have at least some contact. At the end of the novel, however, the author suddenly reminds the readers of this relationship too, as the protagonist is nearing the end of his quest. During a Christmas-time phone call, the brothers “talked for a long time” (King 2005: 249) when Will suddenly apologizes to James for something he has done in their childhood, if not for their entire relationship. With this scene, King’s wordplay tempts the reader to imagine how a simple apology for throwing his brother’s favorite ball to the river when they were still children is also an apology for so much more — for Will not knowing that their mother was ill, that he had left his younger brother and mother over Toronto for years, and possibly even, that Will’s absence reminded him that of their father’s and made him utterly dislike himself.

The reconciliation scene on the last but one page of *Medicine River* illustrates how the protagonist has found himself, thought about his life, and realized what is truly important. This is the Native family with its close relationships.

The Finale

In the introduction to *All My Relations*, his anthology of Native Canadian fiction, Thomas King (1990b: xiii) stresses how the “most important relationship in Native cultures is the relationship which humans share with each other, a relationship that is embodied within the idea of community”. The same notion is strongly emphasised in *Medicine River* where the lost protagonist has found his identity by the end of the novel. Will who started out as a passive onlooker has become a member involved in the Medicine River community. It is important to stress, as King himself notes:

This idea of community and family is not an idea that is often pursued by non-Native writers who prefer to imagine their Indians as solitary figures poised on the brink of extinction. For Native writers, community - a continuous community - is one of the primary ideas from which our literature proceeds. (King 1990b: xiv-xv)

For the protagonist, a home in the Native community is “better than urban, white, dominant, etc. culture” (Peters 1999: 69). Even though they do not move in together, by creating a family-like arrangement with Louise and her daughter, Will has found himself a way to feel useful and a place to belong. Although the author has not united Will and Louise with the ties of a classical family, Thomas King has stated in an interview how “at the end of the novel if you want them married you can marry them” (Andrews 1999: 166). If the reader were to choose the classic marriage plot, it would officially complete an old Native family format. Anderson (2008: 184) reveals that the flexibility of the Indian family structures has enabled the Natives to survive all difficult times, adding that Will probably does not recognize how “he is resurrecting notions of marriage and kinship that belong(ed)

to many Aboriginal societies (pre-contact and contemporary), in which babies often precede marriage, no child can be considered “illegitimate” — not in the western sense — and biological paternity does not always define “fatherhood”.

While reading *Medicine River*, one can discover that all across the novel, King is subtly hinting how far along the healing path the protagonist is, and does so through the narrator’s descriptions of the surroundings. It is possible to see a person’s mindset and how satisfied one is with their current life in their descriptions of the surroundings. Akiwenzie-Damm (1998: 84) has argued how the “relationship with the land” is of crucial importance to the Indians, and this idea can be extended to conclude that when one is content, they will notice the good in the land around them. In the beginning of the book, when Will has recently arrived to Medicine River and before meeting up with Harlen who is about to hand him the pack of letters from his father, the protagonist shares a revealing description that in Medicine River, the winter was cold and harsh, and the summer hot with mosquitoes everywhere, and then remarks that “autumn was the best season. It wasn’t good, just better than the other three” (King 2005: 1). As the story unfolds, the author introduces another description as Will asserts: “Spring was the worst season in Medicine River. The snow would melt. The days would warm. And just as you started thinking about all the things you could do outside, the wind would arrive. It blew every day. It blew every night” (King 2005: 138). As the novel progresses, the reader meets another attestation on how the “wind ruins everything” (King 2005: 156). There would not be anything strange about such descriptions, and one might overlook it altogether, but when Will is setting up the big Indian family photoshoot by the river, the narrator suddenly declares the opposite - how “spring and early summer were the prettiest seasons” (King 2005: 198). This description clearly indicates a significant change in the protagonist’s narrative - for the positive, brighter, and more content with himself.

Medicine River ends with a telling scene: “The day had started out overcast, but standing at the kitchen window, I could see that the winter sun was out now and lying low on Medicine River. Later that afternoon, I went for a long walk in the snow.” (King 2005: 249). The indecisive, indeterminate and open ending leaves everything up to the reader to decide. After all those years of his displacement and self-searching as depicted in the novel, the non-Native reader might prefer to choose the classic marriage plot and give Will’s story a happy ending. Chances are good that Thomas King also inclined to a positive outcome for his protagonist and pictured that Will’s character will live a happy life in Medicine River until the reader meets him again in another story because “in *Green Grass, Running Water*, for example, Will Horse Capture, the protagonist of *Medicine River*, King’s previous novel, makes a brief but significant appearance in his capacity as the local Native photographer” (Davidson 2003: 198).

But that is a new story.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis was to analyze the fictional story shared in *Medicine River* - a novel by Thomas King on the challenging lives of Native Canadians in the contemporary world - in order to find out why would someone have lost their identity and explore which external factors could help a person find one's true identity and establish a sense of belonging.

First, the thesis examined the novel's protagonist in an effort to explain his loss of identity. An overview of the key events of the narrator's life to date was provided, with the goal to understand the childhood and previous life experiences that had shaped the protagonist into who he is by the time the reader first meets him in *Medicine River*. In the beginning of the novel, the mixed-blood protagonist Will is living alone in Toronto, but then has to return for his mother's funeral to the small town of Medicine River, situated across the river from the Standoff Reserve where his family was not allowed to live when he was a child. The protagonist is unsure of where he belongs and is unhappy inside, which the thesis found as illustrated by Will's descriptions of his surroundings. Will has lost his identity.

The thesis argued that each quest needs a trigger and in *Medicine River*, the protagonist's search for identity begins when Will returns for his mother's funeral and meets the local Native community where his roots are from. The thesis discovered that Thomas King has introduced a strong security network to assist the protagonist on his search for identity. With the help of the contemporary Trickster figure, originating from the Native folklore, the protagonist is slowly getting involved in the local Native community and discovering his roots.

The thesis examined how happiness can originate from all relationships and found that the strength, peace, and joy of a Native person lies in the surrounding community - in the sense of belonging that the surrounding people create. The thesis showed how, by the end of the novel, Will has developed from a passive visitor into an engaged member of the local community. This is demonstrated by the new role of the protagonist as the photographer in the community, and his changed perception of his surroundings. The found sense of identity also helped the protagonist to reconcile with his only close blood relative, his younger brother. The thesis also showed how the lack of a classic marriage plot in Will's life is irrelevant in the Native interpretation of the world and how sometimes children precede marriage.

To conclude, it can be said that for a Native, identity is something which originates from a person's roots. When displaced from home and community, one becomes unaware of their true self, but in a close Native community, it is possible to find one's identity again.

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RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL

ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

Maarja Merioja

Search for Identity in Thomas King's *Medicine River*

Eneseotsing Thomas Kingi romaanis "Medicine River"

Bakalaureusetöö

2020

Lehekülgede arv: 32

Annotatsioon:

Käesoleva bakalaureusetöö peamine eesmärk on uurida Thomas Kingi romaani "Medicine River" peategelase eneseotsingut. Romaani peategelase teeb huvitavaks tema päritolu, sest tegemist on segaverelise indiaanlasega, kellel oli Kanadas kehtinud seaduste tõttu keelatud elada koos oma indiaani suguvõsaga.

Bakalaureusetöö sissejuhatus määratleb töö uurimisküsimuse. Sellele järgnev kirjandusülevaate peatükk on jagatud kolme ossa. Esmalt annab töö ülevaate Kanada indiaanlaste kirjalikust kirjandusest ning tutvustab Thomas Kingi loomingut selles žanris. Seejärel uurib töö, mida on kirjanduskriitikud varasemalt "Medicine River" romaani puhul analüüsinud. Kirjandusülevaate peatüki viimane osa tutvustab mõningaid aspekte Kanada indiaanlaste folkloorist ja tõekspidamistest ning Kanada seadusandlusest, mis on olulised "Medicine River" mõistmiseks ja tõlgendamiseks.

Bakalaureusetöö empiiriline osa jaguneb samuti kolmeks. Alguses tutvustab töö romaani peategelast Willi ning vaatleb, millised on olnud kõige olulisemad asjaolud ja sündmused tema elus, mis on peategelase just selliseks kujundanud nagu ta romaani alguses on. Seejärel analüüsib bakalaureusetöö peategelase eneseotsingut, mille ajendiks on tema ema surm ning matusteks Torontost noorpõlvekoju naasmine. Empiiriline osa lõpeb ülevaatega peategelase arengu tulemustest.

Bakalaureusetööst selgus, et peategelase identiteet on tugevalt seotud tema juurtega ning naasmine anonüümsest suurlinnast väikelinna, kokkuhoidva indiaani kogukonna rüppe, ning seal tänapäevase triksteri toel oma koha leidmine aitasid peategelasel iseendaga rahu sõlmida.

Märksõnad: Thomas King, kanada kirjandus, põlisrahvastik, trikster, identiteet, arenguromaan

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Maarja Merioja

26.05.2020

Lõputöö on lubatud kaitsmisele.

Eva Rein

26.05.2020