

The Girl and the Grizzly: Bringing Traditional Narratives into Yukon Classrooms

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In anthropology, there is a growing interest in how oral tradition can contribute to our understanding of history, social organization and belief systems. Anthropologists suggest that narratives provide windows on the way people think about and live in the world (Ridington 1988: 70; Cruikshank 1983: 5). As a First Nations person hearing and reading First Nations stories, I interpret such stories using both my personal experience and my academic training.

Mrs. Angela Sidney spent many years of her life working with anthropologists to record both her stories and an account of her life (Sidney *et al.* 1977; Cruikshank 1977, 1979, 1983, 1990; McClellan 1975, 1987). Through her work, Mrs. Sidney has passed her wealth on to us. Yukoners mourn her passing, but we appreciate what she has left us—her legacy in print. This paper is dedicated to the memory of Mrs. Angela Sidney.

Because my studies at university have included literature as well as anthropology, I will combine both perspectives to discuss how Mrs. Sidney's story "The Girl and the Grizzly" helps us understand social customs surrounding the training of young women. This story fits all the classical criteria of a myth, when we use that term to mean narratives that convey fundamental *truths* about life. It has a sacred quality. Messages are conveyed in symbolic form—at least some of the events that take place occur only in a mythological world and the narrative dramatizes origins and transformations (Cohen 1969: 337). My reason for choosing this narrative is that, in its telling, Mrs. Sidney appears to be using oral literature as a way of explaining the importance of a girl's puberty rites in Tagish and Inland Tlingit society. While this story is told elsewhere in the Yukon, it includes a sub-plot reflecting Coastal Tlingit influences, emphasizing the importance of frogs. Here, then, is Mrs. Sidney's version of the story, recorded at her home in Tagish, Yukon (see Sidney *et al.* 1977: 62-66; Cruikshank 1979: 118-22.)

This is another story about a girl who married Bear. It's not the same one that Kitty wrote about, though.²

A girl and her sisters went to pick berries.
She takes the lead.
Her berry string broke and those berries spilled.
"Help me pick them up."
"Pick them up yourself," they say.
They go ahead—one by one they pass her.
None help her.

As she worked, a nice young man came to her.
"There's a nice bunch up here. . . Let's pick that one."
She's single, so she went with him.
They went a little higher.
There's a bog tree log fallen over there.
They went under it. "Let's camp here," he said.
Before they go to bed, he hit her on the head.
That's to fix her mind so she'll never think of home.
He's really grizzly bear. Looks like a person to her, though.
He tells her, "If you wake up in the morning, don't look at me."
They camp.
Next day, they pick berries all day long.
That evening, they walk under a log again.
That's really a year, every time they walk under a log.
When they camp, that's their winter camp in a den.
It seems just like a day to her.
When they camp, he says to her,
"You stay here. I'll hunt gophers.
If you wake up before me, don't look at me."
Next day, same again.
She never sees what he does with berries, but she knows he's not saving them.
"Save for winter!" she says.
"Just eat them.
Don't worry about winter," he tells her.
Third day is the same.
They walk under a log, camp.
He hunts gophers—brings back lots of gophers.
They eat.
"Why don't you save for winter?"
"Don't worry. Winter will take care of itself," he says.
Fourth day is the same.
They go under a tree and camp.
It's four years now since she left.
Next, he says, "This place down here, my mother and father put up fish.

Let's see what those people are doing.
I'll go down, see if people are there."
He leaves her there.
He walks down to notify them.
It's Grizzly camp.
"I've got a wife coming," he tells them.
They all turn to human for her—really they're grizzly.
The people there, they feed her, that mother and father.
They tell her not to look at them if she wakes up first thing in the morning.
Two, three times, they tell her.
One morning, she wakes up, opens here eyes.
She sees big grizzly hands on her.
She's scared!
She looks around sees all bears, all grizzly.
He woke up.
"Why did you look at me? Didn't I tell you?"
He turned into human for her, but her mind is still fixed from that slap.
Every day, they fish there.
One day he said,
"See that smoke over there? Don't go into that camp!"
She gets curious.
She sneaks over.
She sees a human being sitting down there.
Here it was her aunt on her father's side.
She was lost a long time ago.
No wonder Grizzly didn't want her to see here, because she's human!
That lady looked up:
"My niece, my niece—you're here too?
Long ago, it happened to me too. Grizzly saved me.
Don't stay here—you go back home.
I can't. I have two kids.
You might as well go home.
"In the morning, bring a little balsam tree top.
Bring buttercups too.
Bring a whetstone.
Bring me a little grease.
And bring me a fish bladder from *Tl'o*—that little fish with a big head,
little thin body.
Fill that bladder full of water.
You bring all that next time you come."
It takes time to get those things.
Next time she sneaked over, she gave all that.
That's the third day since she saw her aunt.
"Okay, I'm going to fix them," her aunt told her.
"Tomorrow, you're going to try.

When you hear someone coming, take off.
If they catch you, they will kill you.
You've got to get home.
When they come, put this buttercup stem in your hair—then throw it back.
Buttercup stems will grow so thick behind you, you can't get through.
Next, take jackpine tree-top comb, the same—put through your hair, then
throw behind you.
The spruce tree-top, the same.
Then the balsam tree-top.
It will make thick trees, slow them down—they can't travel (through that).
Then put grease on your mouth, so you won't be hungry," her aunt told
her.
"Then throw that stomach of water, and with it throw the whetstone.
That will make a lake with a bluff across it.
Then you'll come to a lake and a man will be there.
He'll save you."
That girl took off.
Half way up the mountain, she heard people—they're close.
She did all those things—buttercup stem comb, then jackpine tree top,
then spruce top, then balsam.
Then she put grease on her mouth.
When she threw the bladder and whetstone, she made a big lake with a
bluff across.

She ran, ran. . . she came out on a lake.
She saw that man in the middle.
"Help me, help me," she hollered. "Save me."
That man came to shore.
"Grizzly is chasing me," she told him.
"Save me, and I'll marry you."
"I've got a wife," he told her.
"I'll be your slave, then."
He took her just a little way out.
"Go farther, farther."
"Nope," he doesn't.
Three grizzly bears came running up.
The rest gave up, I guess.
One was her husband.
That man hit the boat with sticks—boat took off.
Those bears swam in.
When they're close, that man hit them with a stick again.
That boat took off.
Finally, he gets tired of that.
Finally, he spit on his spear and then threw it in the water.
He hit all three bears.
One by one they floated up, dead.

He took that spear, washed it off, put it in the boat.
"You hungry?" he asked.
In the bow of the boat is Tlingit style cedar box.
"Good meat in there. Eat."
She ate dry meat, grease. She'd never eaten for so many days.
He's fishing for Frog—that's for his wife.
Then he went home.
Just before he gets home, he tells her,
"I've got a wife already.
When she's eating, don't look at her.
She killed lots of women.
I'll take a chance with you.
Don't look when she is eating.
Don't get out of bed if I am out."
He tells his wife to save that girl.
He made her a camp across the fire.
Next morning, he hunts.
"Don't look at her," he says.
Quite a while, she stayed with them.
He sleeps with her instead of with his wife.
Finally, one morning she wonders, "why not look at his wife?"
He's out.
She looks through that gopher skin robe and watches that woman eat
frogs.
"Ach!" that woman feels it.
That frog gets stuck.
Right then, both those girl's eyes come out.
That wife's power does that.
It dug both that girl's eyes out.
He comes back, sees those eyes of blood.
He pretends not to notice.
His wife says, "You brought back a nice wife!
All she does is sleep."
He knows that young girl is killed.
He brought back what he killed—frogs—for her.
That's his wife's food.
He pretends to fix his spear.
"Hey, what if you hit me?" that wife says.
Right then he killed that Frog lady.
He burned her up so she'd never come back.

He looked for that young girl's eyes.
He has power, too.
He put those eyes back, so she gets up again.
He brings good meat to her—seal.
"Let's move camp.

I don't want to stay where I killed Frog woman.
I'm human too.
That frog turned into a woman, and I had to marry her.
I don't feel right for a long time now.
If we move camp, I'll lose that funny feeling."
She's gone for four and a half years by then.
Four years with Grizzly and half a year with this man.
She thinks about her home.
That man asks her, "Are you lonesome?"
"Kind of," she says.
"Well, I'll take you home."
Then they go in his boat—that boat can go anywhere.
They land where her mother and father are.
"Go up and see your father and mother.
If you want to, you can come back.
I'll wait, but if you don't come back, I'll leave."
She goes to them.
She tells them, "I want you people to welcome him."
So they did—and they lived happily ever after!
Those people accepted him.
Five years later, she's back.

Context, Text and Interpretation

One of the real problems facing students of oral tradition is how to convey, on the written page, the context in which narratives are told. Increasingly, linguists are trying to do this by recording stories in the teller's original language (Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer 1987; Nyman and Leer 1993). Even then, the person who actually transcribes or interprets the text will inevitably bring his or her values to the interpretation. Understanding the social context in which stories are told is critical to understanding the text. In Mrs. Sidney's story, understanding context helps to explain how women's puberty rites affirm women's position in Tagish and Inland Tlingit society.

Narrative Structure

Three central components of Mrs. Sidney's story include time, place and action. The story moves through chronological time and occurs in six different locations. In the animal world, time is marked differently from the human world, and one day in that world is equivalent to one year in human terms. Consequently, the woman seems to be absent for four and a half days, when those days are actually years. The six locations represent six developmental stages in a young woman's life in her transformation from childhood to adult status. During this time, she

learns about human weaknesses and strengths as well as about the spirit world. The thrust of the action involves her journey into another dimension of time, much like what McClellan calls "old time stories" (1975: 67) and emphasizes her successful return to the human world.

The first location is inhabited by human beings; the second, by her bear husband; the third by her bear husband's family. The fourth is inhabited by her aunt from her father's side (who has also been stolen); the fifth, by a man who rescues her from the grizzlies; and the sixth by her human family. By moving her narrative through this time sequence, from setting to setting, Mrs. Sidney traces the woman's development from puberty to adulthood.

Plot

Mrs. Sidney's story has a double plot: parallel events occur in two distinct worlds, and the story has two parts, one with the bear husband and one with the frog woman. In literature, this is a device described as one that sets the listener's or reader's judgment free, because it makes it unnecessary to identify with any one of the characters. Instead, a situation is repeated for different characters, putting the main interest in the situation, rather than in the characters (Empson 1966: 50). As Mrs. Sidney juxtaposes the two worlds, she dramatizes the difficulties this young woman encounters in her relationships. By allowing the reader to understand the complexities of life, she makes it clear that there are alternative sets of rules that can be used to respond to any given problem. Decisions arise like mountains or logs that men and women must overcome or pass under. The young woman in the story moves beyond the limits of the physical world to discover herself, no longer a child but a young woman.

The plot begins with a young girl picking berries. She spills her berries and a young man helps her pick them up. He suggests that they pick berries a little further away, "up here," and she goes with him. As she leaves with him, she moves into a marital relationship with the grizzly who maintains his disguise as a man. He "hits her on the head" to make her forget her past and she begins to live in animal time. She receives a number of instructions (both from this husband and from her male rescuer) but curiosity forces her to question such regulations. In doing so, she discovers a different side of the people she encounters, and this discovery, in turn, forces her to make decisions about her own life.

She encounters her aunt, now an inhabitant of the animal world, and the aunt gives her strict instructions to follow if she wishes to return to the human world. A man rescues her from the grizzlies, but

he is already married. He instructs her not look at his wife, Frog Woman, when she eats. By disobeying this instruction, the young woman dies. The man, though, possesses special powers and revives her after killing his Frog Wife. He returns her to her family and informs her that she can choose to come back to him if she wants. The story ends with the young woman making a decision so that people can welcome her rescuer. The final sentence returns us to human time: "five years later, she's back."

Character

In mythological narratives like Mrs. Sidney's, the major character can be described as someone who passes from the secular, material, world of ordinary reality to a parallel dimension of reality that I would call spiritual. Once there, he or she undergoes a unique experience. Ideally, the protagonist will eventually return to the human world transformed by the event and able to bring new knowledge back to the human community (Cruikshank *et al.* 1990: 340-44). In this story, the young woman travels to another dimension of time, experiences temporary amnesia, encounters difficulties, and makes decisions that will ultimately have a long-term effect on her life. While she allows her curiosity to overwhelm her, she nevertheless discovers a new side to her husband, to his family, to Frog Woman and to herself. Despite repeated warnings, she risks her life by breaking the rules, but by so doing she develops her character and she also acquires new and powerful skills.

One example of this occurs when she decides to go to the camp where she sees "smoke," and she discovers that "her aunt on her father's side" lives there. This aunt provides the young woman with the special knowledge she needs to discourage the pursuing grizzlies when she makes her escape from the animal world. In the course of escaping, then, the young woman acquires new knowledge that she may be able to use when she returns to the human world. Throughout the young woman's journey from girlhood to womanhood, she "develops and focuses her mental energies on actively escaping back to the human community" (Cruikshank 1988: 203). Through this process, she learns that her adult decisions affect not only herself, but also those around her. She also learns that her immediate decisions affect her future and could have dire consequences.

Themes

Mrs. Sidney's account deals with human values, specifically with the concerns of young women. A woman's transition from girl to adult is never an easy process, but the development and learning that take

place during this period are necessary for growth and make experiences more meaningful and lasting.

Because the story takes place in two distinct worlds—one human and the other superhuman—it is significant that a young woman isolated in the “animal world” seeks help from other humans whom she meets while she is cut off from familiar people.³ A persistent theme in Mrs. Sidney’s story is the human need to rely on one’s kin network for support. A second theme is the young woman’s isolation, and Mrs. Sidney’s story suggests that relationships based on family choice prove more satisfying and lasting than those resulting from being “stolen” or abducted. A third theme emerges in the way she overcomes obstacles put in her way: the obstacles simultaneously expose her weaknesses and demonstrate how she strengthens her abilities. The story, then, reveals how different factors contribute to proper development and maturation.

“Stolen Women” in Narrative

In Mrs. Sidney’s narrative, a stolen woman succeeds in returning to the human world despite obstacles and complications that arise. She uses her mental and physical abilities to retrace her journey to the world of humans. Mrs. Sidney identifies the necessary skills a young woman needs to acquire if she is to survive in an environment that can often be harsh and cruel. Narratives based on the theme of the “stolen woman” confirm that, while life comes with its own set of difficulties, there are many strategies a woman can employ to overcome them. Her confidence and independence develop from the personal skills she acquires and from the choices she makes. The stolen woman takes risks that test her ability to survive, and this emboldens her to confront the obstacles that she will continually encounter throughout her own life.

Symbolism and Imagery

This story combines both symbolism and imagery to depict the difficulties arising from personal decisions and their consequences. In this narrative we encounter symbols familiar in English literature. The mountain, for instance, seems to symbolize the major decisions she must make about what is best for her (see also Pallis 1988: 74). Movement under fallen trees may symbolize a transition to a different dimension of time, or it may suggest the stripping away of inessentials and the appearance of that which has formerly been hidden (Applebaum 1989: 11). The water imagery used by Shakespeare was often a symbol for passions and emotions, yet the lake in this story is calm. Perhaps the young woman’s decision to leave her grizzly bear husband

and family was the right one and thus did not disturb the natural environment around her. The journey metaphor weaves the disparate images together and speeds up both the action of the story and the young woman's transition to womanhood.

Connecting Narrative to Social Life

As I examine Mrs. Sidney's story, I agree with the thesis that it provides a "window" onto cultures of First Nations people. It seems to speak to a number of issues—geographical location or place, family and kinship, social beliefs, division of labour, subsistence activities, and religious ideology—all important components of social organization. I will touch briefly on these below.

Social Organization

Inland Tlingit oral tradition connects to a time when human ancestors had significant encounters with animals (McClellan 1975: 71). Women in the southern Yukon could always count on a measure of support provided by membership in both her immediate and her more extended kin groups (*Ibid.*: 401). In Mrs. Sidney's story, though, a young woman is stolen from her close kin and is forced to live among strangers. This presents her with a conflict between her loyalties to her own people and her husband's people and eventually she is forced to make a choice. Thus, in McClellan's words, ". . . just as their knowledge of rivers, lakes, mountains, animals and plants guided Yukon Indians as they moved about the country, so their rules of social behaviour guided them in different social situations" (McClellan 1987: 175).

People in the southern Yukon traced descent through the maternal line. Everyone was born into one of two kinship groups (anthropologists call them *moieties*) *Crow* or *Wolf*. Because descent is *matrilineal*, children automatically become members of their mother's clan. In the past, it was a fundamental law that everyone must marry someone of the opposite moiety; in other words, marriages were *exogamous*. By custom, a man moved to live with his wife's kin group. This was important, because it meant that adults formed alliances outside their immediate kin groups while still maintaining strong connections within their own kinship groups. To marry within one's own moiety would create social problems for determining kin obligations, responsibilities, loyalties and undermine the cohesion of the lineage group.

Customarily, then, a woman remained within her community for protection, but, in the story Mrs. Sidney tells, the young woman found herself alone. Remaining in her home community after marriage meant that kinship ties would continue to link members of a matrilineal kin

group. If she moved outside her community, this would separate her from those very people on whom she should depend. If a woman remained within her own maternal kin group after marriage, her husband would be able to carry out his responsibilities to her parents, such as providing labour. None of these links could be maintained in the story we have read here. The young woman decides that her responsibilities to her family override her husband's decision to remain with his family, and she makes her choice with that in mind.

Often potential marriage partners were determined at birth, because marriage was an alliance between two kin groups rather than simply between two individuals. Mrs. Sidney's story reveals the difficulties with a different kind of relationship, one based on abduction rather than one involving the family in a choice.

Puberty

In the past, women were isolated at puberty, sometimes for many months. At this time, they learned the skills necessary for marriage and for survival and also how to live in a culturally appropriate manner. At the onset of puberty, a young woman was secluded, away from her brothers. Her isolation signified her transition from childhood to womanhood. At this time, she learned from older women appropriate behaviours and activities for women. Mrs. Sidney recalls this herself:

"They put me outside, away from camp. You have to wear a bonnet—mine was a fancy flannel blanket. . . . [Mother] put me under a tree and left me. It takes time to get things ready. All that day I didn't eat anything" (Cruikshank *et al.* 1990: 98).

Young women were expected to observe dietary restrictions—a young woman should not eat fresh berries or she might suffer menstrual cramps later and her head would shake when she became old (*Ibid.*: 99, 100). She should not eat fresh meat or fish, lest she become 'soft' but instead should consume dry meat. Taking crow feathers and passing them lightly across the eyelids makes a woman get up before the crows. Goose feathers blown into the air allow women not to get tired or heavy when they get older. A young girl had to wear a necklace with two sticks and a bone so that when her head itched, she could scratch it with the bone rather than with her hand, thus ensuring that she would not become grey later (*Ibid.*: 214). Storyteller Louise Profeit-Leblanc points out that during isolation a young woman might drop a rock down the front of her dress to ensure quick childbirth (personal communication).

Once the young woman had completed all the necessary activities,

she was brought back to the community. She was then allowed to marry the man her parents chose to be her husband. Seclusion allowed the young woman to validate her rights and to strengthen her social ties. This is critical because succeeding generations depended on her for the continuation of their social system and for validation of their identity as a people. The story shows what happens when convention is interrupted.

Conclusion

We all bring biases to our interpretations when we hear an unfamiliar narrative. The most important goal is to try to understand what these stories ultimately tell us about culture. As a member of a First Nations community in the Yukon, I inevitably interpret these stories from my personal experience. Studying these narratives and interpreting them reawakens and renews my sense of my place in our society and clarifies, for me, my roles and responsibilities. Stories like the "Girl and the Grizzly" have a role to play in Yukon classrooms and can be used to teach a great deal about the complexity of Yukon First Nations cultures. As a classroom teacher, one of my goals is to bring the teaching of oral narrative into my classroom so that the lessons in the stories can be passed on to younger people, making the links from past to present to future clearer in their lives.

Notes

1. The version of the story appearing here appears in Mrs. Sidney's book, *My Stories Are My Wealth* (1977) and also in the *Athapaskan Women, Lives and Legends* (Cruikshank 1979). The present version has been retranscribed by Cruikshank, following current conventions for transcription established by Hymes (1977), Tedlock (1971), and Toelken and Scott (1981).
2. Here Mrs. Sidney is referring to Catharine McClellan's *The Girl Who Married the Bear*, 1970.
3. Elsewhere, Cruikshank (1990: 340-44) discusses how the behaviour of male and female protagonists differs in stories. Conventionally, male heroes seem to escape with the assistance of animal helpers while young women are assisted by human rescuers.

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