MYTHS

Coyote Fights Some Monsters

Okanogan

Coyote, like other powerful people among Native Americans, is able to draw on his personal mystic power, often referred to as medicine. Throughout North America traditional Native Americans use smoke, usually from tobacco, as one way to commune with the higher spirits, which is why Coyote keeps asking the monsters to allow him to smoke his pipe. In this story Coyote is a culture hero rather than a selfish trickster.

For the full introduction to this story and for other stories, see The Allyn & Bacon Anthology of Traditional Literature edited by Judith V. Lechner. Allyn & Bacon/Longman, 2003


Coyote was far from his home by the Swah-nekt'-qhu. For many suns he had been traveling toward the sunrise. He had crossed the Rocky Mountains and was in the great plains country. Sin-za-caw-ha—Horse—lived there. Horse was a dangerous monster, and he was much bigger than is any horse today.

As soon as he saw Coyote, Horse took after him. They ran and ran over the bare plains. Every time that Coyote looked back, Horse was closer. Coyote became scared. "Squas-tenk'!" he cried. "Do something for me!"

His power heard. It made three trees. They grew out of the ground straight ahead of him. And just in time, for Horse was about to catch him.

Into the first tree jumped Coyote. He laughed, for he thought he was safe. But his laugh was short; Horse began to cut down the tree with his strong teeth and great hoofs. Horse made the splinters fly. Soon the tree creaked, and then it cracked and groaned, and then—shee-wha-a-am!—it crashed to the plain, and Coyote went sailing through the air. He hit the ground hard, and Horse thought he had him, but Coyote staggered to his feet and got into the second tree.

Then Horse cut down that tree, and Coyote had another bad fall. Horse almost caught him. But Coyote skipped and dodged and finally got into the third tree. "Now what can I do?" he wondered. He was in a bad fix. Horse began to chop this last tree out from under him.

"Oh, Sin-za-caw-ha, wait!" Coyote shouted. "I am not ready to die. Before you kill me, let me smoke my pipe—my pipe I like so well."

"You may have one smoke, Sin-ka-lip'. That is all. After that I shall kill you."

Puffing on his pipe, Coyote spoke to his medicine. It gave him a whip. Coyote jumped on his enemy’s broad back, and struck fiercely with the whip. Horse was taken by surprise. He bawled and bucked; he whirled around and around; he stood on his hind feet and on his front feet; he threw himself; he rolled—tried all his tricks.

Coyote stayed with him, and he kept smacking Horse with the medicine-whip. He
whipped Horse until the monster’s head was battered and his eyes were swollen shut. After awhile Horse could not buck and fight any more. He was tired out. He begged for mercy. Coyote hopped off his back and looked at him. Horse was changed. He was not big and dangerous now. He was smaller, much smaller. Coyote had beaten him down.

“From this sun forth, you are for people to ride,” Coyote said. “Only when first ridden will you buck and be mean. Even old men will be able to sit on you. And old women will use you for carrying their camp things. On you they will put their heavy packs of roots and berries and meat.”

He left the horse standing there, and went on. His way led past a cave. It was the home of Kika-waupa—Dog—who was a big and ferocious monster. Dog rushed out of the cave. Coyote ran. Coyote stumbled, falling into a mole hole, and that made him think of his faithful wife, Mole. Making himself small, he crawled into the hole, and there was Mole herself.

“Make your underground trails,” Coyote said. “Make many of your tunnels. Hurry!” Mole set to work. She dug fast, for Dog was digging to get at her husband. She dug many tunnels, as Coyote had ordered.

Dog soon uncovered Coyote, who then resumed his usual form, and said:

“Wait, Kika-waupa! Do not kill me yet. Let me smoke my pipe first.”

Dog did not object to that, and Coyote smoked. As he sucked on his pipe, Coyote spoke to his squas-tenk’. It gave him an armful of stones. Hitting Dog with a stone, he ran. Dog howled with pain and rage, and set out after him. Dog stumbled over one of Mole’s mounded tunnels and fell, and Coyote hit him with another stone. Dog did not know that Mole had been busy changing the ground there, and every time he came to a tunnel he stumbled and fell, and each time he came he went down Coyote hit him with a stone. That was the way it went, and in a little while Dog was so tired and bruised that he could not take another step. Then Coyote finished him, and out of the monster’s body ran a small dog, its tail between its legs.

“You shall be the most faithful animal the New People will have,” said Coyote to the little dog. “Even old men and old women will own you. You will both fear and like your owners. Never must you attack a stranger unless the stranger treats you badly.”

Coyote left the little dog. Presently he came to a big che-yeep’ (tree), which he started to pass around. The tree bent and caught him with its branches. He wriggled and squirmed, but he could not get loose, so he whispered to his medicine. At once a great strength came to Coyote. With a mighty wrench, he tore the tree apart; tore it into two forks, like unfinished canoes, and he was free. Looking around, he noticed on the ground the bleached bones of travelers whom Tree Monster had eaten, and he said:

“After this sun you cannot hurt anyone. No one will fear you. You will provide wood for the New People. Because your limbs are pitchy and so easy to burn, all trees that are forked will be the kind that the old women will go to for firewood. That wood will be easy for them to gather.”

From that place Coyote’s trail took him into a deep insis-k-chin (canyon). As he walked deeper and deeper into it, he felt himself being swallowed. Scared, he tried to turn back. He could not move. He begged not to be eaten. The sound of his voice made Canyon Monster hesitate, and Coyote spoke to his squas-tenk’. It placed a long tree on his shoulders. Coyote swung the tree across the mouth of Canyon Monster. Then he laughed—the monster could not
hurt him now.

“You no longer are a person-eating monster,” Coyote said. “The New People will not be afraid of you. When they are too lazy to walk down your throat, they will walk on trees thrown across your mouth.”

Coyote walked away from there and came to a coulee [ravine]. He started into it. Something bumped and pricked his back. He could not see anything behind him and he ran. But the strange jabbing and bumping did not stop, so he stood still and spoke his power. It gave him a flint knife. He slashed back over his shoulder. The knife struck something solid, and there was a loud groan and a heavy thud. Then Coyote saw what had been bothering him. On the ground was Ste-eel’-tza—Elk. That monster was dead. Its power to stay invisible was gone. Coyote made a small elk from Elk Monster’s body.

“No more shall you abuse people on the trails,” he said. “You will fear the New People, and they will use your flesh for food and your skin for robes.”

Coyote went on. He saw a cradle board propped against a tree. Fastened in the cradle was a baby. No one else was in sight, and Coyote wondered where the mother had gone. Hoping he might be paid for showing attention to the little one, Coyote rocked it and sang. He wanted the mother to hear and come. Louder and louder he sang, but nobody came, and the baby began to cry. Thinking it must be hungry, Coyote poked one of his fingers into its mouth. “Do not cry,” he said. “Here is tah-tat!”

Then Coyote had a surprise. The baby was swallowing his hand! He jerked his hand away; the flesh was stripped off clean. Coyote realized that he was holding, not a baby, but a person-eating monster.

“I will find your mother, little skwas-qu-see (baby). I will look for her,” he said, and he put the baby down and walked away. He slipped into a thicket. There he called softly to his squas-tenk’. It handed him a flint knife that was shaped like a finger. The blade was sharp. Coyote returned to Baby Monster and picked it up. Talking nice words, he put the knife-finger in the monster’s mouth. He held the knife-finger in his own fingers, and Baby Monster swallowed his whole arm. That was what Coyote wanted. He pulled his arm back, pulled it back quickly, and the sharp knife-finger ripped open the monster’s insides. Out tumbled a lot of bones, bones of people the false baby had eaten.

“You cannot do this way any more,” said Coyote. “A New People soon will be here. You are not to eat them as you have these others. From now on, babies, when born, will be the most helpless of all creatures. That must be, so you cannot cheat by taking their form.

Weary of fighting monsters, Coyote started for home. “Even babies are monsters in this strange land,” he remarked. “I will go back to my own country by the Swah-netk’-quhu and rest.”