

HUMA 1825: Law and Morality
Essay assignment

Module five: Indigenous law.

This module explores the violence that occurs when Canada's legal tradition is coercively imposed on Indigenous communities whose legal practices have very different modes of judgment and social organization. We will learn about how Indigenous law resists this violence and provides a basis for justice, ethics and healing.

The Senate Policy on Academic Honesty can be accessed here: <https://secretariat-policies.info.yorku.ca/policies/academic-honesty-senate-policy-on/>

ESSAY QUESTION

Write an essay on the the “two-headed serpent” in Lee Maracle’s *Celia’s Song* and how this figure sheds light on the struggle against colonialism in Canada.

Your focus should be on doing justice to Maracle’s novel. You may *briefly* mention the TRC report for context, but do not use or rely on any other source. Remember, essays in this course are not research papers, they are exercises in close reading. You are asked to interpret and generate meaning from a specific text, relying *exclusively* on that text. Essays should be 6-8 double-spaced pages (2000-2400 words) in length.

Resistance: The Song of Healing

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The expansion of colonial capitalism underpins not only the initial contact of Europeans with Indigenous peoples, but also the sociopolitical relations that followed. This entailed quashing Indigenous resistance and weakening the social cohesion of Indigenous communities in a process that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada identified as “cultural genocide” (1). Lee Maracle’s *Celia’s Song* follows an Indigenous family as they grapple with the generational trauma of the settler colonial context. Maracle evokes the imagery of a double-headed serpent to depict the community’s relation to itself as they confront the violent ethos of colonialism. While the “Restless” head of the serpent represents a capitulation to the self-destructive ideology of white supremacy, the “Loyal” head of the serpent represents the community’s resistance to colonialism through song, ceremony, memory, and agency. To demonstrate the role of the serpent as a reflection of the community’s relation to itself in the settler colonial context, this essay will analyze Jimmy, Celia, Stella, Jacob, and Amos’s confrontations with the serpent.

Jimmy’s story had ended before novel had begun. But his spirit, the cautionary tale of his demise, and the melancholy song of the life he never lived, linger in the family. Chapter VII recounts how the women gather around all winter long to tell the story of Jimmy’s suicide. Although directed at Jacob, Jimmy’s younger cousin, the storytelling is a ritual for the entire family. They hope to learn, heal, and recover by piecing together their abstract and confused memories of Jimmy into a coherent story. Despite their staunch devotion to uncovering this story, his tale remained incomplete.

Mink, the witness and narrator in *Celia’s Song*, tells readers that Jimmy’s suicide followed his encounter with the serpent. The Loyal head of the serpent had breathed into Jimmy, hoping to inspire him to restore the honour of the serpent and the community. The serpent reinvigorated Jimmy’s “fire” (1, 11-12, 153) and his yearning for community and belonging. However, since

this yearning was disconnected from the traditions of his people, it destroyed him. Without care and connection from his community, his fire—his will to live—was suppressed and inverted.

“Jimmy proved too fragile for the mission” as he surrendered to the generational trauma of colonization (46). Indeed, this is the tale of the serpent who turned to cannibalizing itself and the villagers because his hunger for community and ceremony were not nurtured.

Jimmy’s interaction with the serpent was influenced by his discovery that Melvin is not his biological father (222ff). This confrontation with his ancestry and mistaken memory called on him to make himself anew. It urged him to resist the erasure of himself and his people. He had to find his sense of self and his relation to his community once again. But “restlessness” consumed Jimmy as his unrequited and unfulfilled yearning for belonging stamped out his will to live. When he strangled himself, his neglected hunger for life and community escaped his body and entered the souls of the family members he left behind. Much like his presence, Jimmy’s absence lingers in the family, disconnected from a story or song that could breathe meaning into all the chaos. It is now up to those he left behind to tend to this yearning and recover from the all-encompassing trauma of his restlessness.

When the novel begins, Celia is “plagued with remembering” Jimmy (42ff). She is a seer who cannot fathom her own turbulent memory. Having been removed from her traditional knowledge and community, Celia longs for some semblance of ritual and ceremony. She finds temporary solace in the mundane business of sorting through her mail (7ff). However, her memory interrupts this artificial ritual; her visions and memories demand to be acknowledged ceremoniously (46). Her restlessness keeps her from claiming these memories and anchoring them to her will. When the women finish telling Jimmy’s story, Momma sings a song to help the family heal from this tragedy (49). But Celia is not ready to confront the carnage of colonialism

and remember her song. Detached from the healing power of the song and the story, Celia almost loses herself in “shadowland” (12).

The Restless head of the serpent senses Celia’s disquiet and becomes obsessed with conquering her soul (44). Despite Celia’s mindless dance with her muddled memory, Restless cannot feast on her spirit. Indeed, it is the very persistence of her memories that allows her to guide herself and her community back from the brink of ruin. Somewhere between the cluttered shelves of her memory lies the knowledge that she and her community have survived this chaos in the past (104-105). She is ready to transcend the suffering of her ancestors and the confusion of her mind “because she has mastered the unknown before” (104). As Celia’s story progresses, her memories anchor themselves to reality as she faces the fallout of colonialism by reclaiming her birthright of agency and belonging.

Celia finally reunites with Loyal when she redeems the traditions of her ancestors and revives the power of ceremony within her community. In chapter XX, she arranges a ceremony for Alex, Jimmy’s absent father, to confront him with the pain of Jimmy’s suicide. For healing to begin, truth and history must be acknowledged and remedied. When the family first hears about Celia’s plan, they are concerned as they assume that she has surrendered to the restless and retributive mentality of the settlers. But they gradually remember that “this is not about anger, vengeance, or retaliation. . . . It is about ritual, about ceremony, and about restoring [their] original direction” (213).

Stella’s fate is more grim than Celia’s. She desperately looks for community and care within the arms of vicious strangers (153ff). The more she yearns for connection, the more she is abused and abandoned. She reaches rock bottom when she is raped by a client shortly after witnessing her lover’s suicide (154). Unfulfilled and forsaken, her hunger for community and connection

turn into a lust for pain and destruction. “Whatever caring she had in her flipped from one head of the serpent and was swallowed by the terrible hunger of the other” (155). Restless feasts on her soul as Stella becomes completely detached from the ways of her ancestors. Her will to life and her fire for connection have been ignored for far too long. Now the only time she feels the flame of life is when she surrenders to the forest fire of death.

In chapter XV, we read that sometime in her self-destructive spiral, Stella becomes pregnant with Shelly. Stella pulls Shelly into the “shadowland” that has become her home because she cannot remember ever belonging to anywhere else. Although she is spiraling towards her undoing, something within her dares to resist. Her mind cannot yet remember, but her body recalls another home. This urge for remembrance pulls her out of shadowland and toward her old reservation. “Sometimes to move ahead, you have to go back to the beginning” (242). She meets Amos along the way. Amos brings her and Shelly to an old shack and holds them hostage for his perverse pleasure. Amos abuses Shelly to the verge of death and leaves her and Stella to rot in the old shack.

Stella’s recovery from the mounting trauma of her past begins in chapter XV with Ned, Jim, and Jacob visiting her and nursing her back to sobriety. Ned has trouble extending sympathy to Stella. But he realizes that recognizing her humanity in the depth of ruin is the only way the family can move through their collective pain. Jim is more inclined to understand and sympathize with Stella (165). He has the patience and benevolence to allow Stella to recognize and restore her agency. Jim understands that humans are always moving along a certain trail. Stella lost herself as she traveled in the direction of self-destruction, pain, and misery. But she can remember her song by rejecting the self-cannibalizing path of Restless and finding her roots in the embrace of Loyal. Jim’s humane comfort and Ned’s solemn judgement provide a mirror

for Stella to see both the darkness of her past and the light of her future. As Stella regains her sobriety and her memory, she begins to traverse the difficult path towards her redemption.

Jacob's first encounter with the Restless head of the serpent happens at the old shack (112ff). He witnesses Amos torturing Shelly but he does not intervene. He runs away while the sound of Shelly's whimpers echoes in his mind (113). He begins to drown in the trauma of his lineage as he cannot understand the songs and stories of his community. Like Jimmy, Jacob has begun dancing with the flame of resignation. The witnessing of Shelly's torture compels him to choose his path. He can no longer drift through the malaise of his existence. He must decide between restlessly consenting to his own annihilation or fearlessly restoring the traditions of his community.

Jacob rejects Restless's illusive invitation to depravity and chooses to find his direction by climbing his community's mountains (166, 176ff). Climbing their mountains restores a sense of agency and belonging within him but the journey has just begun. Up in the mountains, he begins to remember the significance of ritual and ceremony to the human condition. "Humans love ritual. . . . Love is a ritual. Hate too" (179). With every breath, humans inevitably feed the serpent; but they can -- they must -- choose which head to feed.

Jacob chooses to nurture the Loyal head of the serpent by honouring the traditions of his ancestors and embracing the rule of ceremony. When he returns from the mountains, he can truly hear and swallow his family's songs and stories. He rebuilds the longhouse and holds a ceremony for Amos to "dance him into his comeuppance" (251). Jacob's resistance to the Siren of suicide and slaughter through the perilous journey of memory and ceremony restores balance to the village. By returning to his origins, Jacob has found a way to build a future while honouring the past.

Amos's struggle with the serpent constructs the crisis at the heart of the novel. He is no stranger to the wreckage of colonialism. Having been abused by the residential school system and abandoned by his community, he offers his soul to the Restless head of the serpent to escape his dreadful memories (254-255). Amos cannot bring himself to face the reality of his own subjugation. His restlessness moves him to inflict harm onto others as if to throw off his own victimhood. In trying to escape the terror of his memories, he relived and expanded their devastation. "Memory has its own journey. It possesses a strange insistence. It will not be ignored" (159). As Jacob realizes on the mountaintop, history must be acknowledged for the future to begin. Amos must answer for his "perverse sense of morality" (40) and his inhumane abuse of Shelly.

Amos's redemption arrives at the moment of his death (254-256). As Jacob dances him in the longhouse, toxic memories evaporate from his body and stare into his soul. The cure for his restlessness lies in the departure of his spirit from the land of the living. Although he could not embrace his community in life, he ceremoniously reunites with them in death.

In conclusion, *Celia's Song* provides a window into the labyrinth of intergenerational trauma as readers witness an Indigenous family's resistance to the havoc of cultural genocide. Maracle poetically intertwines the metaphor of the serpent into this tale to portray the community's dance with restlessness and their recovery from it. The family refuses Restless's call to succumb to the suffering of colonization as they reclaim their collective strength by honouring their tradition of ceremony and song.

Works Cited

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Maracle, Lee. *Celia's Song*. Cormorant Books, 2014.