

# **The role of animals in the Tale of the Nativity: A textual and visual analysis**

Cynthia Korpan

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# The Role of Animals In *The Tale of the Nativity*: A Textual and Visual Analysis

Cynthia Korpan, University of Victoria

## Abstract

*This article applies textual and visual analysis to a play about the birth of Christ, called The Tale of the Nativity. It was written in the 1930s by a group of Okanagan children at a day school on a reserve in the Okanagan Valley of British Columbia. I specifically look at how the children incorporated cultural elements associated with animals into their version of the birth of Christ.*

In the late 1930s at a small day school on a reserve in the Okanagan Valley in British Columbia a teacher asked the attentive pupils this question: "If the Nativity had taken place in the lower Okanagan Valley, what would have been the setting?" The students answered, "There would be no stable, but there would be calves in the hills of our reserve...There would be no ass or ox, but there would be deer, coyotes and rabbits."<sup>1</sup> Thus began a long artistic engagement between the children of the Inkameep Day School and the story of the Nativity, the birth of Christ. This relationship commenced with the production of a Christmas card and continued to encompass artwork, the children's own version of the story entitled *The Tale of the Nativity*, a play version called *An Okanagan Indian Nativity Play*, a radio version titled *An Indian Nativity Play* that had numerous retellings on the radio<sup>2</sup>, and requests for permission to work with the story by interested schools in Canada and the United States.

Throughout the world people tell stories to express their feelings about the virtues, norms, and rules that are important to them, revealing much about their culture's worldview. The incorporation of stories from one resource to another, which involves a retelling and reworking of the story to

fit into the beliefs of the culture, has been termed a composite narrative.<sup>3</sup> This reworking of a story may alter it in a variety of ways while still maintaining the structure of the original story. *The Tale of the Nativity* could be classified as such since it was in this way that the children created a vibrant story that drew upon their cultural resources and the story about the birth of Christ, which, combined with their contemporary situation, provided the basis for the creation of *The Tale of the Nativity*.

There are many aspects of this particular version of the birth of Christ that are of interest, but this article will be limited to an examination of how the First Nations children of the Inkameep Day School on the Nk'Mip<sup>4</sup> reserve represented their culture, textually and visually, through the inclusion of animals in their creation of *The Tale of the Nativity*. Towards this end I will look at which animals the children included, how the children incorporated these animals into their story, and what this says about the relationship that the children had with these animals. Characteristics of each of the animals will be identified with discussion about how these traits are represented by the animals. Some of the animals may be associated with spirituality, some with living in close proximity to the children, and some with practicality and sustenance. The analysis will conclude with a look at where the animals are inserted into the story and what associations are formed by their position of placement.

## The Inkameep Day School

The Inkameep Day School was situated near Oliver, B.C. in the Okanagan Valley of Canada. Due to various reasons particular to Canada at that time, Catholic and Protestant denominations were assigned

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony Walsh, "The Inkameep Indian School," in *Okanagan Historical Society* 38 (1974), 14–19.

<sup>2</sup> One such example is that a radio play of *Tale of the Nativity* was broadcast over the University of Alberta's station CKUA in 1941. For a full timeline of activities associated with this story, see the "Drawing on Identity" website at <http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/Exhibitions/Inkameep/english/index.php>.

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<sup>3</sup> See James M. Taggart, "'Hansel and Gretel' in Spain and Mexico," in *The Journal of American Folklore* 99 (1986), 436.

<sup>4</sup> Nk'Mip is the historical name, meaning "end of lake," whereas Inkameep is the contemporary, phonetic spelling of Nk'Mip. For this document, I will be using the historical name when referencing the reserve and the contemporary name when referencing the Inkameep Day School Project.

to different reserves, with the Inkameep reserve being under Catholic auspices. The day school went through a series of teachers due to the identified harsh conditions of the living quarters and the remoteness of the school. However, during the 1930s an Irish immigrant teacher named Anthony Walsh, a devout Catholic, decided to initiate a transfer (he was at a school in Vernon) to the Inkameep Day School in 1931 that ended up lasting eleven years. Walsh believed, contrary to the educational philosophy of the day<sup>5</sup> (this is the time of cultural prohibition in British Columbia), that if these Okanagan children understood and performed their culture in a positive manner, they would be stronger people living in the developing nation-state of Canada.<sup>6</sup> Walsh had the children actively engage during and after school hours in artistic expression that referenced and celebrated their culture. As well, Walsh subjected their artistic cultural productions to various competitions within Canada's borders and abroad, leading to some of the children receiving prestigious international awards.<sup>7</sup> Through the success and interest provoked by the Nativity Christmas card, the children went on to create artwork that was based on the story of the Nativity, which led to the complete story being written by the children. Walsh explains:

...as to what their views would be of [the] Nativity—Shepherds and wise men etc., caused a great deal of interest... You

<sup>5</sup> However, Walsh was not the only person in Canada and the United States who was thinking this way. See Gerard R. McMaster, "Tenuous Lines of Descent: Indian Arts and Crafts of the Reservation Period," in *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies* IX:2 (1989), pp. 205–236 for discussion of other Canadian organizations and individuals working along these lines. As well, see Molly H. Mullin, "The Patronage of Difference: Making Indian Art, 'Art, Not Ethnology,'" in *Cultural Anthropology* 7:4 (November 1992), 395–424 for a discussion about similar endeavours in the United States.

<sup>6</sup> See Andrea N. Walsh, "No Small Work: Anthropology, Art, and Children." Paper read at the *Canadian Anthropology Society Meetings*, Halifax, Nova Scotia, 9 May 2003. Available at <http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/~inkameep/english/research/index.php>.

<sup>7</sup> For example, Sis-hu-lk (Francis Baptiste) won a Bronze Star in 1936 at the Royal Drawing Society's Exhibition (in England) for his painting on buckskin, *Canadian Nativity*, and in 1937 at this same exhibition a Silver Star for his painting, *St. Francis and the Birds*.

would throw questions and they would answer, and I would gradually take it down. But it was trying to get an Indian child's point of view as to these happenings, in the way that they would sense it.<sup>8</sup>

The first printing of this story was in the fall of 1940, which was encouraged by "a small Committee anxious to arouse more interest in the preservation, revival, and encouragement of the artistic and dramatic abilities innate in our Indian fellow Canadians...."<sup>9</sup> The frontispiece consisted of artwork (Fig. 1) provided by one of the students, Sis-hu-lk,<sup>10</sup> with the words, "The Tale of the Nativity as told by the Indian Children of Inkameep British Columbia Price 25 Cents." By 1942, 2000 copies had been printed, with the third printing of the story taking place as recently as 1981.<sup>11</sup>

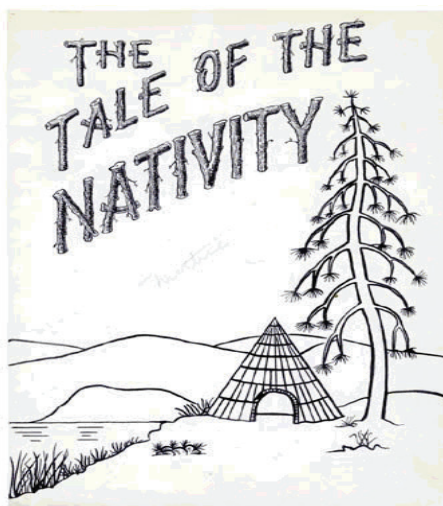


Fig 1: *Tale of the Nativity* booklet cover. Ink on paper, 9" x12"<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Anthony Walsh, Summary of interviews of Tony Walsh for the radio documentary "Children of the Inkameep," a sixty-minute program produced for CBC Radio's "Saturday Evening" (referenced in *CBC Times*, April 1966).

<sup>9</sup> Foreword, *The Tale of the Nativity*. The committee was the Committee for the Revival and Furtherance of B.C. Indian Arts, Victoria, B.C.

<sup>10</sup> Sis-hu-lk is Francis Baptiste's Okanagan name. Sis-hu-lk produced all of the artwork for *The Tale of the Nativity*.

<sup>11</sup> The illustrations in this article are reprinted with permission of the Osoyoos Indian Band and the Osoyoos Museum Society.

<sup>12</sup> See <http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/Exhibitions/Inkameep/english/catalogue/pages/1967-028-019.php>.

## The First Christmas

As a starting point for this analysis I am positioning a European version of the birth of Christ as a comparative piece. It is entitled *The First Christmas*<sup>13</sup> and is included simply to amplify the differences of how the children augmented their version of the story with Okanagan cultural elements. To facilitate this process I include a short synopsis of each of the stories, identifying key elements.

*The First Christmas* introduces Mary and Joseph as the main characters and begins with the appearance of an angel to Mary, announcing her impending pregnancy with the son of God, whose name was to be Jesus. Joseph and Mary are married and soon forced to travel to Bethlehem to pay a tax, with Mary traveling on a donkey. Upon their arrival they discover that there are no rooms available at any of the inns, forcing Mary and Joseph to take comfort in a stable. With the animals as witness, Mary gives birth to Jesus. Shepherds nearby, who are tending their flock of sheep, are visited by an angel who tells them about the birth of Jesus, encouraging the shepherds to go and find him. As well, three Wise men notice the star and decide to follow it, since they knew it meant that a great ruler had been born. Mistakenly the Wise men visit the King's palace, thinking that the new ruler had been born there. The King, afraid of being overthrown, asks the Wise men to find the new ruler and to inform the King of his whereabouts, so that he could also go and worship this new ruler. However the Wise men have a dream informing them not to tell the King, so they journey home instead of going back to King Herod. Joseph has a similar dream about King Herod's decree to have Jesus killed and is told in the dream to take Mary and Jesus away to Egypt, which he promptly does. King Herod in turn has the entire population of baby boys in Bethlehem killed, hoping to eradicate this threat to his throne.

## The Tale of the Nativity

*The Tale of the Nativity* begins with Mary being visited by a Man with Wings announcing that she had been chosen by God to be the mother of his son. Mary's parents request their friend Joseph to

come and marry their daughter. Shortly thereafter, Mary decides to visit her cousin Elizabeth on the other side of the valley. Mary travels by horseback with her dog and pet chipmunk accompanying her. Elizabeth is pregnant as well, so the two engage in weeks of preparation of articles for the birth of their baby boys. Mary returns home to Joseph who has news that the Great Chief has summoned all of his people together so as to know how many exist. It was winter and not easy to travel, so Joseph and Mary leave a bit early and take their pets with them. Upon arrival they find that all of the lodges and shelters are already full, leaving a cave the only place to rest. Animals from the surrounding woods come to the cave and keep Mary and Joseph entertained, as well as witnessing the birth of the Baby. Soon hill-men come to visit because they had been told by Men of the Air that a Great Chief had been born in a cave. People from the coast and other regions send gifts to the new Great Chief. A Great Star informed the people of the south that a Great Chief had been born, so they send three of their wisest men with gifts. Upon their arrival, the Head Chief inquires as to who they are and when he hears about the birth of a new Great Chief, he becomes jealous and asks the three wise men to inform him of the child's whereabouts. The men find the cave and have a wonderful visit, but then in their sleep they receive a dream telling them to return to their home, without informing the Head Chief. Mary and Joseph prepare the Baby to meet the Priest in the large lodge. The Priest bestows the name Jesus on the Baby. Very shortly thereafter, Joseph has a dream from a Man with Wings that tells him that he must take Mary and the Baby away because a war party is on their way to harm the Baby. They move far away and live very happily for many years until Joseph has another dream telling him the bad Head Chief had died and it was safe for them to return to their own country. Mary requests they settle somewhere else where the people are kind and it is not as cold, which Joseph gladly agrees to because of his love for the Boy and Mary.

## Significations

The methodology that I am employing in this analysis is semiotics. From the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the definition of semiotics is "the science of communication studied through the interpretation of signs and symbols as they operate in various fields."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Florida Glover, *The First Christmas* (New York: Dutton, 1943).

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<sup>14</sup> J. B. Sykes, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, Seventh Edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983).

Barthes defines these terms for us as follows: “[t]he sign is therefore a compound of a signifier and a signified. The plane of the signifiers constitutes the plane of expression and that of the signifieds the plane of content...the signified is not ‘a thing’ but a mental representation of the ‘thing’.”<sup>15</sup> Semiotics involves two steps to discovering the layers of meaning of the signified, which will be applied to both the textual and visual material. The first layer is referred to as denotation, which is the act of identifying what is being depicted and the words used—the what and who. Denotation is concerned with just capturing what we recognize. The denotative method will be used to identify the animals used in the story and the images, as well as how the animals are grouped or on their own, how much attention is given to each individual animal, what the animal is doing, and how the surrounding text is used to provide information that pertains to the animal. The second layer of meaning is connotation, which addresses the concepts, ideas, and values that are expressed through the “what and who,” as well as addressing the “how.” The connotative level of meaning can “come about either through the cultural associations which cling to the represented people, places and things, or through specific “connotators,” specific aspects of the way in which they are represented.”<sup>16</sup> Barthes identifies two elements that are common carriers of connotation, poses and objects. Van Leeuwen<sup>17</sup> goes on to explain how Barthes identifies certain objects to be inducers of ideas and gives the example of a bookcase as an object which signifies intellectual. It is through the combination of these object-signs and style that the connotative meanings are created.

It can first be identified that the story follows a standard prose format with a beginning, middle, and end, presented in a book form with illustrations of the story. The title chosen probably references the genre and category of stories that would have been familiar to Walsh and the intended audience. I will begin the application of the semiotic method with a taxonomic approach to the words and artwork of *The Tale of the Nativity* as compared to *The First Christmas* to identify the

<sup>15</sup> Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967), 42.

<sup>16</sup> Theo Van Leeuwen, *Handbook of Visual Analysis* (Sage Publications Ltd., 2001), 97.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

denotative level of the content that relates to the animals. Table 1 shows the range of animals that are included in *The First Christmas* while Table 2 shows the animals from *The Tale of the Nativity* in both the text and in the illustrations, with their corresponding frequencies.

**Table 1: Listing of animals in *The First Christmas***

	Text	Visual	Total
Donkey	3	2	5
Cows	1	3	4
Sheep	2	39	41
Wolves	1	0	1
Cats	0	1	1
Dog	0	1	1
Camels	1	3	4
Horse	0	1	1
Animals collectively	2	0	2

**Table 2: Listing of animals in *The Tale of the Nativity***

	Text	Visual	Total
Horses	4	2	6
Dogs	2	1	3
Chipmunk	4	2	6
Birds	4	1	5
Porcupine	1		1
Coyote	4	3	7
Jack-rabbits	2	1	3
Chick-a-dees	1		1
Deer and fawn	2	1	3
Owl	1		1
Mountain sheep	1	2	3
Black bear cubs	1		1
Grey squirrels	1		1
Mouse	1	2	3
Mountain lamb	1	2	3
She-camel	1	2	3
Mourning doves	1		1
Quails	2	2	4
Trout	1	1	2
Butterflies	1	1	2
Silver fish	1		1
Creatures/animals	6		6
Pets	3		3

Upon this initial taxonomic exercise, it becomes

immediately evident that the children included a lot more animals than exist in the European version. In fact they included almost three times as many animals with the diversity indicative of the environment in which the children lived. The roles that the various animals play in the story include sustenance, provisional, seasonal indicators, modes of transportation, messengers, and sources of comfort and amusement. In *The First Christmas*, the animals consist of subsistence and labour varieties, as well as providing a stable for comfort. They are limited to a donkey, a horse, cows, sheep, wolves, a cat, a dog, and camels. Their part in the story is rendered as very passive, with their roles described as staring and looking, or as utilitarian modes of transportation. The one animal that is posed as a threat is the wolf. This potential, imagined threat is directed towards the flock of sheep, which the shepherds need to protect. Overall, the animals in *The First Christmas* version play a very inferior role with no active interaction with any other characters in the story.

Kellert<sup>18</sup> has identified the following human behavioural expressions and attitude types towards animals. These include: naturalistic—where the animals are classified for hunting; humanistic—where the animals are classified as pets for companionship and affection; moralistic—where expressions of kindness are directed towards animals for ethical reasons; utilitarian—where the animals are utilized for consumption and/or as providing a service to humans; and lastly, negativistic—where the animal provokes fear behaviour. If we take the animals in *The Tale of the Nativity* and apply Kellert’s behavioural classification, the children portrayed the majority of the animals in the categories shown in Tables 3 and 4.

This classification system allows us to see a syncretism between the roles that the animals played in the lives of the children and in the story. From an initial analysis we can deduce that the dog is used for protection; the horse and camels for transportation; the birds to indicate time; and the deer and fish as sustenance. I will now, in turn, describe in detail these functions and the attributes

<sup>18</sup> Stephen R. Kellert, “Human-Animal Interactions: A Review of American Attitudes to Wild and Domestic Animals in the Twentieth Century,” in *Animals and People Sharing the World*. Andrew N. Rowan, ed. (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1988), 142.

assigned to the various animals in their respective categories.

**Table 3: Animals that can be classified as utilitarian**

Utilitarian	Total
Horses	6
Dogs	3
Porcupine	1
Owl	1
She-camel	3
Mourning doves	1
Quails	4
Trout	2
Deer	3
Birds	5
Total	29

**Table 4: Animals that can be classified as humanistic**

Humanistic	Total
Chipmunk	6
Coyote	7
Jack-rabbits	3
Chick-a-dees	1
Deer and fawn	3
Black bear cubs	1
Grey squirrels	1
Mouse	3
Butterflies	2
Young mountain sheep	3
Total	28

“Watchie” is Mary’s dog who accompanies her on her journey “to look after you,” when she goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth. The dog’s name appropriately signifies his role and demonstrates how a child would sense this role. When Mary arrives at Elizabeth’s camp, the dogs begin barking, to warn Elizabeth of the arrival of a visitor. In Figure 4 we see Watchie positioned slightly ahead of Mary on her horse, sniffing the ground. Watchie is performing the role assigned in a careful and attentive manner. These are the only references to Watchie or dogs in the story and the artwork.

The horses and she-camel are referred to and used simply as modes of transportation. In Figure 4 we see Mary riding her horse to see her cousin Elizabeth. The

horse is drawn to suggest pride in its task. Its head is positioned high in the air and its feet are as if in a position of trotting or prancing.

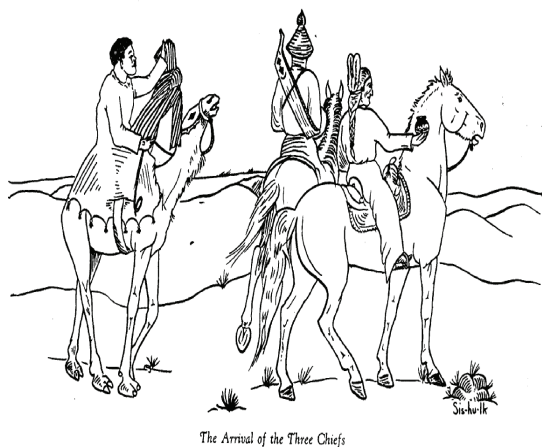


Fig. 2: The Arrival of the Three Chiefs

Upon Mary's arrival at her cousin's, Elizabeth asks Mary to tie the horse to the tree and informs her that once her husband Zachary returns, "he will take him down to the creek for a drink." This inclusion shows care on the part of Mary and Elizabeth for the horse, but may also address gender roles. When the hill-men arrive, the horses are described as beautiful whereas the she-camel provokes conversation amongst the men and fear amongst the women, children, and all of the animals. The reason for this reaction is explained because it is a "strange looking animal." This positions the she-camel as the only animal portrayed in a negativistic way. It is interesting that the children kept the camel in their story, since it would not have been an indigenous animal to the area but its presence is explained by the fact that the visitor has travelled far from the south. It also provides an example of how all of the animals protect themselves in the face of danger. The passage is as follows:

...while even the animals in the cave crouched down behind the rocks and scarcely breathed and the birds all flew to the tallest trees and did not let even a tiny chirrup betray where they were.

We see in Figure 2 the she-camel with its teeth bared, indicating the fear that this animal invoked. The she-camel is positioned behind the two horses, which again are depicted in alert poses.

Birds are used as indicators of seasonal change several times in the story, as in this passage, "the birds all come back from the south and the trees looked nice and green." Owl has the role of announcing the arrival of the Baby by hooting twelve times. This message is not just an indication to the reader, but also to all in the cave, as explained by, "and all of the inhabitants of the cave bent their heads to the ground." One other time that birds are mentioned as time keepers is in this passage, "as all the morning doves had gone to the countries in the south..." The quails have a dual significance. First they indicate seasons and time, since it is mentioned that mourning doves would have been the preferred gift for the Priest, but all of them had gone to countries south. The caption attributed to the image of the quails (Fig. 3), describes the importance of their contribution, "The Quails Prepare for this Great Honour." Here the quails knowingly offer themselves as gifts of sustenance to the Priest. The quail in the foreground is giving the impression of standing tall with its chest projected out, signifying confidence. Its wings are spread out and the tuft of feather on its head is sitting upright. Both of the quails have pleasant facial expressions that show contentment and happiness.



Fig. 3: The Quails Prepare for this Great Honour

The passage about the quails reads as follows:

Joseph took a pair of quails as an offering. When the pair of quails knew that they were to be honoured they washed themselves in the new fallen snow and preened their feathers so that they shone like velvet, and Quail Wife breathed on Quail's head feathers and polished them so highly that she was able to see if she herself was all spick and span...

This passage is followed by a drawing rendering the visit of Mary and Joseph to the Priest, showing the

quails in their cage in Joseph's hand.

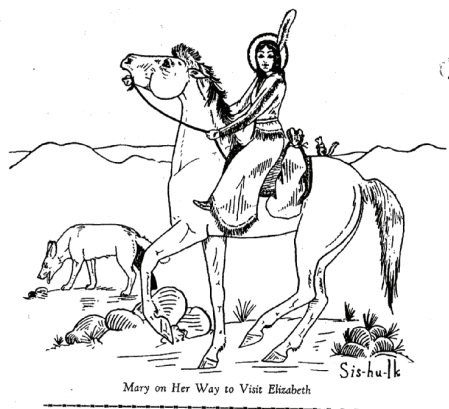


Fig. 4: Mary on Her Way to Visit Elizabeth

The following animals provide roles of maintenance, sustenance, and aesthetic pursuits. Porcupine was bestowed with a special honour, by being the provider of quills to help decorate the Baby Boards. These quills were dyed by Mary and Elizabeth, who “spend hours and hours working, because they wanted them to be the prettiest baby boards that had ever been seen in the valley.” Trout and deer fall within both the utilitarian and the naturalistic categories, since they are sustenance for Mary and Joseph, with both mentioned a few times in the story; however, trout is the only one that is actually hunted. As this sentence reads, “He caught some young trout and he nearly cried when he saw his lovely young wife come riding into the camp because he was so happy.” The “young trout” coincides in the sentence with “young wife,” as well as tears of happiness, indicating a great deal of joy associated with the return of Mary from her long visit with Elizabeth. Figure 7 is the only depiction of fish but their inclusion in this drawing shows the importance of fish with the children's culture.

This image is when we are shown how happy the Child is with his foster father, as they are fishing and interacting with the other animals. Dried fish is mentioned twice in the story as food that is packed when there is a journey involved.

The many varieties of animals in the humanistic category provide insight into the breadth of companionship associated with all of these animals. The deer and fawn, the jack-rabbits, and the chick-a-dees create a trio of species that provide comfort and enjoyment to Mary and

Joseph. While Mary is in the cave waiting for Joseph to return with sage brush and fir boughs for their bed, the deer and her fawn, we are told, come down from the hills and breathe on Mary to keep her warm. The jack-rabbits come from their home and sit at Mary's feet to keep her cozy. The chick-a-dees fly in and sing cheerful songs to comfort Mary. Upon Joseph's return, he notices how kind the creatures have been and what good friends they are. Shortly thereafter, these same animals decide to do some tricks to make Mary and Joseph feel happier since the animals noticed how tired both of them looked. The following passage describes their activities:

The rabbits pretended that they were clowns as they jumped about and danced on their hind legs and then on their front ones, at the same time wagging their long ears. The mother deer and her little fawn had a butting match with their heads while the birds swooped and soared, as they sang their sweetest way that they could. When the hour of midnight drew near all of them formed a wall between the man Joseph and the maid Mary.

In this image there is a sense of contentment on the faces of the inhabitants of the cave, which could be suggestive of the importance of all who are gathered. Mary and Joseph have their heads tilted slightly up with smiles that display their confidence and pleasure. The animals are assigned agency and cognitive abilities of being able to understand how Mary and Joseph are feeling, and with the power of being able to do something that affects how these two humans feel. This trio of species is comparable to the stable animals in *The First Christmas*, in that they are the witnesses to the birth of the Baby. The trio of species in *The Tale of the Nativity* however, is given the role of comfort and to provide help and assistance to Mary and Joseph at this very important moment. The story explains:

When the hour of midnight drew near all of them formed a wall between the man Joseph and the maid Mary. Just at the hour the owl hooted twelve times and the cry of a baby was heard; and all the inhabitants of the cave bent their heads to the ground.

This passage provides the example of a bird being a time keeper, but also of the service of the animals of providing either privacy or sheltering Mary as she gives birth. There is also the significance of the owl and the Baby possibly conversing right at the moment of birth; the owl hoots and the Baby cries. Right after

this passage, Joseph and Mary wash the Baby and immediately put him in his cradleboard for all to see: “When they stood Him up for all to see, all the creatures, both feathered and furred, made their own special noise of happiness.” The passage goes on to explain how the Baby smiled at all of them so that all knew how happy he was, again providing an example of communication and understanding between all species. These last few examples fit into the Kellert’s moralistic category associated with animal behaviour, with both animals and humans exhibiting morally-based actions.



Fig.5: The Animals and Birds Try to Console Mary and Joseph

The next grouping of animals in the humanistic category is connected to the hill-men. In *The First Christmas* the counterpart of the hill-men are the shepherds who have their flock of sheep. It could be for this reason that the children adapted the hill-men to be associated with a coterie of pets. In the story the hill-men relate to Joseph the story of how they came to know about the Baby. Within this telling, there is mention of the hill-men having “to look after their children’s pets and to see that no harm came to them. There was a young mountain sheep, black bear cubs, grey squirrels and some sick birds...” There seems to be a similarity entwined in this passage to the role of the shepherds in *The First Christmas*. While the hill-men visit the Baby, the Men with Wings who told them about the Baby’s arrival are looking after the pets. The Inkameep children have one of the hill-men bring his own pet brown mouse, which he puts on the corner of the cradle and “it stood up on its hind legs, tucked its front feet under its chin and bowed to the Baby. Then it crawled into the lacing near the feet of the Baby, curled up and went to sleep.” Another of the hill-men brings a young mountain lamb and lays it at Mary’s feet. And finally, two humanistic animals are assigned

special significance, Coyote and Chipmunk, are prominent figures in the story. They are referred to as pets and are important characters in Okanagan legends. Chipmunk is identified at the beginning of the story as one of Mary’s pets: “her little pet chipmunk rode with her [Mary].” On the next page Chipmunk is again referred to as her “pet” and “little,” and his name is given as “Kot-se-we-ah”<sup>19</sup>. This takes place when Mary and Joseph need to go to the meeting place of all of the Head Chief’s people and they take with them “her two pets, Top-kan, a young coyote puppy and Kot-se-we-ah, her little chipmunk.” On page 12 it is mentioned that Kot-se-we-ah is “...used to menfolk so they [Kot-se-we-ah and Top-kan] just sat down, one on each side of the Baby, and waited for the visitors.” This passage is referring to the hill-men who have come to visit the Baby. Later, on page 16, as Mary prepares, with tears in her eyes, to leave their home to go far away from the bad Chief, she picks up the Baby and Kot-se-we-ah to embark on a journey, showing the importance of her pet Chipmunk.

Barthes<sup>20</sup> points out that in the type of text that is involved in this analysis, the visual component and its meaning is often duplicated in the linguistic message. This therefore can make the images redundant. Such is the case with the visuals in *The Tale of the Nativity*, which were produced to illustrate, highlight, and amplify the story. But we could also look upon their redundancy in the images as adding significance to these cultural elements. If we look at the images to identify the denotative level of analysis regarding chipmunk, we first see Kot-se-we-ah perched on the back of Mary’s horse on his journey with Mary to see Elizabeth (Fig.4). Kot-se-we-ah is attentive, demonstrated by his sitting up, and positioned right beside Mary. In Figure 6, Kot-se-we-ah is right behind Mary, still close to the Baby which he was beside when the hill-men arrived. Connotatively we could surmise that Kot-se-we-ah’s proximity to Mary signifies his importance and role. In Figure 4 we see a parallel between Mary’s stance and Kot-se-we-ahs. They are both facing the same way; with Mary’s feather in her hat the same as Kot-se-we-ah’s tail.

<sup>19</sup> Charles Hill-Tout, “Report on the Ethnology of the Okanak-en of British Columbia, an Interior Division of the Salish Stock,” in *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 41 (1911), 148, explains that Chipmunk is Kokotsaweya in the Okanagan language.

<sup>20</sup> Barthes, 10.

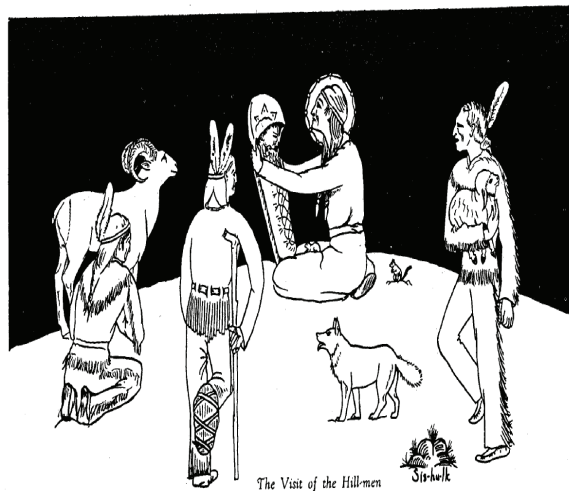


Fig. 6: The Visit of the Hill-men

Landsberg<sup>21</sup> notices that some words, “wee” and “little,” have a diminutive force, while others, such as “large” and “vast,” have an augmentative force. In the text surrounding chipmunk the descriptive term “little” is repeatedly used, which contrasts with Kot-se-we-ah’s significance. Looking at the connotative level Kot-se-we-ah is always associated with safety as is Top-kan (the coyote puppy), as we shall see. Kot-se-we-ah and Top-kan create a pair; a pairing that is associated with Mary and gets passed on to the Baby. Kot-se-we-ah is rendered diminutive also, but is clearly discernible making his presence significant. There is an Okanagan legend entitled, *The Chipmunk and The Owlwoman*, which explains how Chipmunk received his stripes. In the legend Chipmunk’s heart is taken by Owlwoman. In grief, Chipmunk’s grandmother asks that her only grandchild be brought back to life. Through the intervention of Meadowlark Chipmunk receives a new heart made of berries. Coyote, at the end of the legend states that Chipmunk will always retain his striped coat as a reminder to people that there is wickedness in this world. Kot-se-we-ah could be a reminder of this important lesson to the children and also to Mary and the Baby. When the hill-men arrive, Kot-se-we-ah and Top-kan go on either side of the Baby, with their positioning being one of protection.

Here we see Top-kan in the foreground,

<sup>21</sup> Marge E. Landsberg, “The Icon in Semiotic Theory,” in *Current Anthropology* 21:1 (1980), 94.

standing between the hill-men and the Baby and Joseph. He has a slightly angry look upon his face and is watching the hill-men with his ears perked up and his tongue hanging out. As mentioned above in this sequence Top-kan and Kot-se-we-ah are in a protective position regarding the Baby. Kot-se-we-ah is right behind Joseph and looks attentive as well. Coyote is introduced on page nine when Mary and Joseph are beginning their journey to the “Head Meeting Place,” which is the counterpart to Bethlehem in the European version. Coyote is a puppy, referred to as one of Mary’s two pets, and is named Top-kan. In *Coyote Devours His Own Children*, Top-kan is identified in the legend as Coyote’s youngest and favourite son.<sup>22</sup> The next time that Top-kan is mentioned is on page 12 when the hill-men arrive and Top-kan and Kot-se-we-ah move beside the Baby “because they are used to menfolk,” and not afraid. On page 17, Top-kan takes prominence in the story, due to his association with the Child. The text reads:

He was always accompanied by Top-kan, who took it on himself to care for the Child, and when He got tired he would either take up the Baby in his mouth or else coax him to climb on his back and then he would walk very slowly back to camp.



Fig.7: The Child's Happy Boyhood with His Foster-Father

A few lines after this passage there is fear attributed to the young Boy who has become so fast on his legs that even Top-kan may not be able to catch him. This is where the Butterflies intervene and provide colour and stimulation to the Boy who loves to chase them. Visually, we first see Top-kan in Figure 5, sitting

<sup>22</sup> Donald M. Hines, “Coyote Devours His Own Children,” in *Tales of the Okanogans* (Washington: YE Galleon Press, 1976), 86.

beside Joseph and Mary in a relaxed, attentive position. In Figure 7, Top-kan looks full grown and the Child has both his arms hanging over Top-kan's back. Top-kan is close to Joseph who is fishing. Top-kan's role is textually and visually associated with protection, safety, and companionship. Top-kan is right beside the Child from the day that he was born and we are shown the Child's affection for Top-kan as displayed in Figure 7.

Even though Top-kan has been identified as Coyote's son, I suggest that Top-kan represents Coyote's traditional role in Okanagan stories. Mourning Dove explains that "Coyote was the most important because, after he was put to work by the Spirit Chief, he did more than any of the others to make the world a good place in which to live."<sup>23</sup> *The Tale of the Nativity* relates how, after many years of exile, Mary, Joseph, the Child, Top-kan, and Kot-se-we-ah move to the place where they will live in comfort. In the passage just previous to this, Top-kan dominates the story with his companionship and protection of the Child. The proximity of Top-kan's role in the story to the pronunciation that the family will be able to settle where they want mimics Coyote's role in most of the Okanagan stories. Coyote often appears at the end of an Okanagan legend to deliver the words of the Great Spirit. In *The Tale of the Nativity*, the children have positioned Top-kan's important role at this ending point of the story. Ramsey explains that the Thompson people, a group very close to the Okanagan, recognized functional similarities between "Coyote the Transformer and Jesus the Redeemer."<sup>24</sup> Peers confirms that "Jesus has been identified with traditional beings, particularly male culture heroes, tricksters, and creator figures."<sup>25</sup> The use of human-animal doubling, in this case of Jesus and Coyote, is a feature that occurs in art and literature. Burt<sup>26</sup> explains that often in art it occurs

<sup>23</sup> Mourning Dove, *Coyote Stories*, Heister Dean Guie with notes by L.V. McWhorter (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 7.

<sup>24</sup> Jarold Ramsey, "The Bible in Western Indian Mythology," in *The Journal of American Folklore* 90:358 (1977), 442-454

<sup>25</sup> Laura Peers, "'The Guardian of All': Jesuit Missionary and Salish Perceptions of the Virgin Mary," in *Reading Beyond Words: Contexts for Native History*, Jennifer S. H. Brown and Elizabeth Vibert, eds. (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1996), 291.

<sup>26</sup> Marianna R. Burt, "The Animal as Alter Ego:

in what is referred to as situational doubles with the subjects usually representing types with their roles providing a narrative. In literature this doubling is often used as the alter ego, where a similar but separate character is like a "second self." It is through this alter ego that the central character can reinforce the implications of his or her acts. If we consider Jesus and Coyote (Child and Top-kan) in this context, we can see how the children situated the two as close companions.

The multiplicity of readings that are possible from this text depends greatly on the context. One of the problems involved in Barthian semiotics is that we can only recognize what we already know, which is why obtaining as much information about the context as possible is important. It is assumed that the data within the text is approached with the understanding that the cultural meanings are shared by all. Another problem involves the categorization of words and images. This could be through the stereotyping of object-signs and symbols, like the particular animals, and/or through our understanding of the surrounding text and captions. It is not possible for us to understand exactly what the construction of *The Tale of the Nativity* meant to the children at that particular point in time, but by the discussion so far, and by an investigation into the context of the time, it is possible for us to try and understand.

Blundell suggests that most anthropologists would agree that the meanings signified by the production of a form of art arises within "the context of specific, and variable, social conditions, conditions which are themselves the legacy of prior historical practices and conditions."<sup>27</sup> Blundell continues:

That is to say, artists/authors always produce their works under conditions that are particular to a society at a given historical moment (Wolff 1981:62-63)...Such conditions affect not only the nature of the works that artists produce, but also the ways in which they can do so. As Wolff points out, the "conditions of literary and artistic production are themselves part of, and related to, wider conditions of production in society" (1981:63).<sup>28</sup>

Cruelty, Altruism, and the Work of Art," in *Animals and People Sharing the World*, Andrew N. Rowan, ed. (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1988), 121.

<sup>27</sup> Valda Blundell, *Changing Perspectives in the Anthropology of Art* (Ottawa: The Golden Dog Press, 2000), 58.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

Blundell also cites Wolff as explaining that the production of artistic endeavours is mediated by rules and conventions that govern the shape that cultural productions take. “This kind of mediation takes us back to the argument that art signifies meanings in ways that are similar to, though not identical with, signification in language.”<sup>29</sup>

The temporal context in which *The Tale of the Nativity* was produced was one that is referred to historically as the “interwar period,” the years between the First and Second World Wars. Prior to the First World War, Ashworth informs us of the strategy of the Canadian government to eradicate all indigenous languages within the school system so as to “control” some of their “subjects.”<sup>30</sup> This attitude continued after the war, with the “young nation state”—Canada—trying to maintain its identity. Helleiner explains what this meant to First Nations children:

Canada, like many other industrializing states, saw a consolidation of a hegemonic construct of childhood as a distinct phase of the life course characterized primarily by economic and political dependency...an increasing identification of such “children” as being “assets” for “the nation” and as such, appropriate targets for state intervention.<sup>31</sup>

Within this dimension, Anthony Walsh was committed socially to the communities in which he existed. Walsh placed a lot of value on the children’s voices and was able to demonstrate to a wide audience just how valuable those voices were, and still are. Through the children’s recontextualization of *The Tale of the Nativity* to include many elements that expressed their culture, they created a text that spoke to other issues that existed at the time. The children at the Inkameep Day School were situated within a very political and historical dialogue, with their role in the production of *The Tale of the Nativity* seen as an important exchange between disparate cultures. The composite narrative that they produced

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>30</sup> Ashworth, 26.

<sup>31</sup> Jane Helleiner, “Constructing Racialized Childhoods in Canadian Political Discourse,” in *Children and Anthropology: Perspectives for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Helen B. Schwartzman, ed. (London: Bergin & Garvey, 2001), 189.

incorporated their love of animals, the environment that they were so familiar with, demonstration of social relationships existent in their culture, and the significance of children.

## Conclusion

Ramsey notes that anthropology has been neglectful in paying attention to the value of these texts, and that the emphasis has been in the past on transcribing classic aboriginal literature.<sup>32</sup> Ramsey states that “...assimilated Bible stories, Indianized European folktales, and so on—[were all relegated] to the status of impure curiosities.”<sup>33</sup>

Anthony Walsh comments that “[t]he children had a great love of their own legends, and the characters of these tales were birds and animals who spoke and behaved like human beings.”<sup>34</sup> Collins writes about the research that has been done about ascribing human behaviour to animals among the Salish speaking people, which is the language-based category to which the Okanagan people belong.<sup>35</sup> This is based on origin stories which relate the fact that animals originally possessed a more human form, as Collins explains, “The close relationship between man and animal is demonstrated not only by the similarity in their way of life but by the ability of men to change into animals and of animals to change into men in mythological times and even in the present.”<sup>36</sup> These are the stories about the Animal People, who were the first ancestors and were part human and part animal. Once humans were created, animals took their present form. This is the basis for the importance given to animals within the cultures of the Salish speakers, who believed that “because of their humanlike sensitivity, animals must be treated with respect,”<sup>37</sup> leading the culture to train children “not to take animals wantonly for this reason.”<sup>38</sup> Collins states that “similarities rather than differences between man and animal are stressed, and these views have a sound support in folklore and mythology.”<sup>39</sup> Schorcht continues the discussion with a

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<sup>32</sup> Ramsey, 443.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Anthony Walsh, “Ten Little Indian Actors,” in *The Playshop* IX(3) n.d., 4.

<sup>35</sup> June McCormick Collins, “The Mythological Basis for Attitudes toward Animals among Salish-Speaking Indians,” in *The Journal of American Folklore* 65:258 (1952), 354.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 355.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 356.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 357.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 359.

comparison to the European attitude towards animals: "Human responsibility for animals in traditional European tellings of [a] story is connected to the idea of human dominion over the creatures of the earth."<sup>40</sup> This was seen in the analysis of the animals in *The First Christmas* where the animals consisted primarily of subsistence varieties. Webber notes that the role of folktales in the Okanagan culture, as in most cultures, is to convey messages about the importance of proper conduct towards the natural world and humans.<sup>41</sup> Ashworth also speaks about how the spiritual and moral values expressed in stories illustrate to the children which actions would bring honour.<sup>42</sup> This is illustrated in the work of Wendy Wickwire, who has recorded the stories of Okanagan storyteller Harry Robinson over several years. Ashworth writes:

When Robinson tells Wickwire his version of a European folktale, the story emphasizes the interconnectedness of animal and human realms in typical Okanagan fashion. In "Puss in Boots," for instance, rather than stressing the cat's transformation into human form he stresses the importance of treating cats and dogs "right" because they share the world with humans... In Robinson's version, however, the cat can simultaneously expect to be treated like a prince and remain a cat. And Robinson's story reflects, as he says, 'The way it's supposed to be.'<sup>43</sup>

Since animals dominate Okanagan stories about the time before humans, and are prominent figures in the children's daily lives, the inclusion and focus of animals in *The Tale of the Nativity* illustrates the importance of animals to the children. The children of the Inkameep Day School had animals as active participants in many facets

of their lives: as important subjects in their oral tradition; as sustenance; as pets and spiritual guides; as species who shared the habitat they all lived in; as equals; and as companions in their daily lives. The children produced artwork that depicted animals in their environment from contemporary rodeos, to the Animal People engaged in various activities, to a card showing the "Holy Child with Animal Friends."<sup>44</sup> As well, the children were actively engaged in the process of working on the production of plays based on their legends about The Animal People. The plays included *The Chipmunk and the Owlwoman*, *The Crickets Must Sing*, and *Why the Ant's Waist is Small*. These plays were performed in various communities in the Okanagan Valley and were part of the opening ceremonies of Thunderbird Park in Victoria, BC.<sup>45</sup> Besides the plays, the children were actively engaged in recording songs that were often based on animals, and creating dances, such as the "dance of the eagle" or the "dance of the bear." The assignment of agency and the anthropomorphosis of the animals in the story, through the attributes of understanding, caring, and friendship, signify a strong bond between the children and the animals in their world as demonstrated by the animals' inclusion in *The Tale of the Nativity*.

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<sup>40</sup> Blanca Schorcht, "The Storied World of Harry Robinson: Emerging Dialogues," in *BC Studies* 135 (2002), 157.

<sup>41</sup> Jean Webber, *Okanagan Sources*, Jean Webber and the En'owkin Centre, eds. (Penticton, B.C.: Theytus Books, 1990), 80.

<sup>42</sup> Mary Ashworth, *The Forces Which Shaped Them: A History of the Education of Minority Group Children in British Columbia* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1979), 6.

<sup>43</sup> Schorcht, 157.

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<sup>44</sup> See <http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/Exhibitions/Inkameep/english/catalogue/pages/1967-028-054.php>

<sup>45</sup> See forthcoming master's thesis by Cynthia Korpan, University of Victoria, which looks at these plays and their production through the methodologies of textual and visual analysis.