

## **Journey and Initiation in Native American Children's Fiction: A Study of Tim Tingle**

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### **Abstract**

*Tim Tingle's Walking the Choctaw Road, is a collection of short stories with children as protagonists. The stories trace many historical events relating to the Choctaw tribe, fantastical and mythical elements in their culture, the racism and discrimination they have faced, through the lens of children. And in many stories, these elements become thresholds that the children must cross to complete their initiation into the community. The initiation ends with gaining of new knowledge and understanding of morality, tradition, nature-human bonds, Choctaw laws, and even death. Thus, the paper attempts to analyse Tim Tingle's short stories using the anthropological paradigm of initiation. And it also tries to understand the importance of Tim Tingle and his short stories in the wide expanse of American literature.*

**Keywords:** Initiation, journey, threshold, liminal space, representation.

The archetype of journey appears in literatures of all time and place. Most cultures view life itself as a journey. Sometimes, death too does not end life's journey. Rather, varying cultural ideas represent death as a threshold to cross, with the journey continuing in the afterlife. American literature too abounds with the theme of journey. Starting with the arrival of the Pilgrim Fathers in the ship Mayflower, the African Americans who were brought as slaves through multiple voyages, and the journeys forced upon the Native Americans to keep them relegated to the 'reservations'; all of them add to the plethora of sweet and sad journeys of the American history. Janis P. Stout says "from its beginnings, American literary tradition has been characterised ... by narratives and images of journeys" (qtd. in Freese "The "Journey of Life" in American Fiction").

A journey has several important junctions, hurdles and points to cross. Life too as a journey has several such thresholds. Children's Literature focusses on a period marked by thresholds, as from birth to adolescence, youth, etc. It may or may not engage with crossing the threshold. But thresholds mark the genre. And the theme of crossing the threshold is a trope of the initiation stories. This paper analyses select works of Tim Tingle, a Choctaw (a Native American tribe) writer and storyteller, using the paradigm of the initiation story. It also attempts to understand the importance of Native American children's fiction writers like Tim Tingle in American literature.

The concept of initiation is derived from anthropology. Many communities practice the rite of initiation as a step of introduction into the community. Circumcision in Judaism, baptism in Christianity are all examples of initiation rites. Initiation has three distinct phases; separation, transition and incorporation. First, the child is separated from the fold of society, after which he/she undergoes some tests, the passing of which produces in him/her a transformation whereby the person is incorporated completely into the society. Initiation is associated with change and knowledge. Leslie Fielder says that “An initiation is a fall through knowledge to maturity...” (qtd. in Marcus “What is an Initiation Story?”). And the knowledge is a result of the experience of the hurdle. And it is this knowledge that effects a change, a change that renders the person fit for the select community.

During the transition, the person is said to be in a liminal space. Structurally he/she is invisible. “The structural “invisibility” of liminal personae has a twofold character. They are at once no longer classified and not yet classified” (Turner 6). Thus, they are outside the rules and rankings of the society. “Quite often, the literary hero will receive some outside help from either a supernatural force or one who has already completed the cycle” ( Ramsay and Thomson “The Initiation theme in Adolescent Literature”). Thus, with respect to children who are in most cases the initiates, it is the adult community who conducts the tests and acts as the guides.

Tingle’s fiction is essentially stories that he has collected from his tribe that is scattered across Mississippi, Oklahoma, Alabama, etc. They capture the Choctaw community’s nuances, traditions and its collective ‘tears’. The Choctaw tribe was forcefully removed from Mississippi to Oklahoma as part of a treaty signed at Dancing Rabbit Creek, Mississippi, on September 27, 1830. Their journey from Mississippi to Oklahoma was called the ‘Trail of Tears’. And Tingle’s fiction emerges from the community’s displacement, discrimination, survival and their unique traditions. Thus, the thresholds that his young initiates must cross vary from tests inside the tribe to the ones imposed by the White Anglo Saxons. The ‘Trail of Tears’ becomes the greatest test for the community. For a young child alive at the time, it is this journey that has become his initiation.

Tingle’s short story “Trail of Tears” traces the forced journey of a Choctaw family to Oklahoma as narrated through the eyes of a child. The journey becomes the child’s rite of initiation. But the initiation is multiple, for, each stage in the journey marks an important point in the child’s understanding of his family and tribe. George Weckman says “in many religious traditions a person can have more than one initiation...” Some initiations, he says, demands a previous one, others replace the earlier ones while in some other cases the initiations are conflated (“Understanding Initiation”). For the child in the story, all his previous initiations and experiences lead to his final transition to death. His mother’s ‘shilombish’(spirit) and his father’s words, “Son, you cannot keep your eyes on the bloody footprints you have left behind you... You must keep your eyes on where you are going”, become his guidance (Tingle 44). And death becomes the final threshold he crosses.

Multiple initiations are also found in Tingle's "Crossing Bok Chitto", where both the children Martha Tom and Little Mo undergo initiation. Tingle writes that "Bok Chitto was a boundary" (15). And it is at this border between slave plantations and Choctaw nation, between slavery and freedom that the two children's initiations take place. Martha Tom's initial venture into the slave side of the river and the similar journey of Little Mo into the Choctaw nation can be read as initiations into a different culture for both of them. It is with this knowledge that both the children are able to participate in the final escape of Little Mo and his family from slavery. For Little Mo, his father becomes his guide. His father says "Son, son, its time you learned... You move not too fast, not too slow, eyes to the ground, away you go!" (18). And his father's final encouragement to Little Mo, "Your name is Moses. Now, Moses, get us across that water!" becomes a strong push for the boy to cross the threshold (Tingle 23). Through the act of christening, which draws inspiration from a Biblical character who liberated his people from slavery, the father helps Little Mo's initiation into the community as Moses. Similarly, Martha Tom's mother's interventions too help Martha in assisting the escapade. The initiation in this story is a communal act. So is the case in "Trail of Tears". The boundary is for all to cross, but it becomes an initiation (transition) for the young ones into self-knowledge.

"The Beating of Wings" follows the structure of a typical initiation story. Jimmy Ben's life depends on defeating the man owl. Unlike the previous stories, the ordeal is not a communal one. "This was something for Jimmy to face alone" (34). But he draws his guidance from the indigenous knowledge of the healing lady Miss Tubby, and his grandfather. Miss Tubby tells him "You must help yourself now. Keep working to the good and have faith that good will come of it" (31). And his grandfather furnishes him with a blow gun and advises him "Go with your faith" (34). Jimmy crosses the threshold of his house, which was marked by the man owl, to follow him two times. The first journey provides him with knowledge about who he must defeat. While the second one, a journey with his father, is the one where his initiation becomes complete with the death of the man owl. And his father becomes a witness of Jimmy's transition. Apart from the help he receives from the adults of his community, Jimmy's dreams act as premonitions. They give him a grasp of what the owl's intentions are. He sees in his dreams "the owl ... pecking out his eyes" (Tingle 29). Thus, Jimmy's liminal space of initiation is backed by his dreams, which in itself occupy the liminal space of sleep and wakefulness.

Dreams assisting in initiation are also present in the story "Caleb". The boy, Caleb, constantly dreams of an awakening animal sensibility in him. The multiple initiations in his life starting when he sees a squirrel charmed by a snake, a squirrel charmed and caught by his father like the snake, the death of his sister, Robbie, and the White boy Jonathan's insensitivity to his sister, Ruth; all lead towards his transformation into a panther. Caleb's initiation can be paralleled with the journey his family undertakes to Memphis. Crossing of his home's threshold, initiates Caleb's transition into a panther. "He had left the little boy on

the back porch of the house by the hide-and- seek tree” (Tingle 67). Throughout the journey Caleb exists in the liminal space where he is neither the panther nor a human. His complete transformation into a panther occurs when Ruth is attacked by Jonathan. But his initiation is not complete yet. It is “in learning to live with his knowledge the protagonist begins to achieve self-understanding” (Marcus “What is an Initiation Story?”). Thus, he is fully incorporated into the adult world after he achieves peace with his animal existence.

Ambrose Bierce’s frontier literature, “The Eyes of the Panther”, talks about a similar transition of Irene into a panther. But Irene’s initiation is left incomplete. For, her father, the pioneer elder is unable to direct her in controlling the animal in her. She exists in the liminal space, without being able to transform back into the human form, ending in her death. But in the Choctaw tale, Caleb’s mother becomes his guide. As in many traditional initiations, her song is able to initiate him back to the human form. A harmony is achieved between the animal and the human. Such a co-existence becomes possible only due to the tribe’s close relation with the nature and its animals. Animals guide them, test them and teach them. In both “The Beating of the Wings” and “Caleb”, animals become the tests that initiate the young ones.

Another story “The Choctaw way” is an attempt by Willie Frazer to initiate his adopted son Tobias to the Choctaw tradition. Knowing that his time was up, Willie uses his death as Tobias’ initiation. Throughout the days leading to his death, Willie teaches Tobias life lessons. Thus, Willie with his death becomes the preserver of the tradition. As Turner says “the authority of the elders [in this case Willie]...is, in a sense, the personification of the self-evident authority of tradition” (9). Tobias’ initiation is complete when he casts his ‘Amen’ for Willie’s death, as Willie had told him; “Amen... means I’m for it... Son, don’t ever cast your Amen! Vote unless you’re willing to pay for it” (Tingle 77).

In “Brothers”, Billy’s initiation into the community occurs at the threshold of Joseph’s forgiveness. Till that point, Billy existed in a liminal space, neither in the house nor in the forest. Joseph’s words change everything; “Your people need you. You are Choctaw. Take this hatchet and begin to build” (Tingle 97). And with Joseph’s forgiveness, Billy is incorporated into the community.

The School becomes the site of initiation in “Tony Byars”. Tony is not allowed to go home for the funeral of his brother’s death. And this injustice, from the institution propels the boy to cross the threshold into adulthood. The song of his childhood assists him in his transformation. Tony says “My brother was gone, but when I stepped out of the water that day, I stepped out a man” (Tingle 117).

Journeys and thresholds are dominant motifs in American literature. The crossing of the threshold is geographical in frontier literature, while it is metaphorical in the works of Hawthorne, (“Young Goodman Brown”), etc. The escape motif is ubiquitous. Sam Bluefarb writes “for whatever reason... escape seems to be as much an ‘inalienable right’ as those guaranteed rights Americans have virtually taken for granted.” (qtd. in Freese “The "Journey

of Life" in American Fiction"). Escape as a right must be contrasted with escape as a choice of life-death in the Choctaw tales. If escape offers the scope of self-discovery, away from the rigidity of conventions, for the Whites, the motif of journey in Choctaw tales are filled with exploitation, attempted massacres via fires and small pox. Alice Walker's poem "First, They Said", can be extrapolated to the Native American lives to understand why they were forcefully displaced:

... It is not your savagery  
or your immorality or your racial inferiority or  
your people's backwardness or your obstructing of  
Progress or your appetite or your infestation of the land  
this is at fault. No. What is at fault  
is your existence itself.

In 1965, Nancy Larrick published an analysis of children's literature with respect to non-White representation esp. Black representation. She writes "Across the country, 6340000 non-White children are learning to read and to understand the American way of life which either omit them entirely or scarcely mention them" ("The All-White World of Children's Narratives"). Rudine Sims did a follow-up in 1983, again with respect to Black representation in Children's books. She notes a change but still 85 % of the books are predominantly white. Things have improved but to what extent must be studied. Dawn Quigley in 2018, writes, how teachers still use non-indigenous writers' fiction which characterises the Native Americans in unflattering light, when asked to include indigenous literature in their ELA curriculum. The former American President Donald Trump's attack on Elizabeth Warren calling her "Pocahontas" is again an index of racism using a misrepresented children's fictional character. It calls for a revision of the very idea of American Children's literature and even the adult fiction that excludes an authentic representation of Native Americans and other ethnicities in America. A revision must start from the roots, thus it must start with children. Katharine Smith writes "authors infuse texts with hopes that through childhood, that potent period in an individual's development, sensibilities can be transformed" ("Introduction: The Landscape of Ethnic American Children's Literature"). Thus, it is high time for the American Children's Literature to cross the threshold to embrace diverse ethnicities of America in its entirety.

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