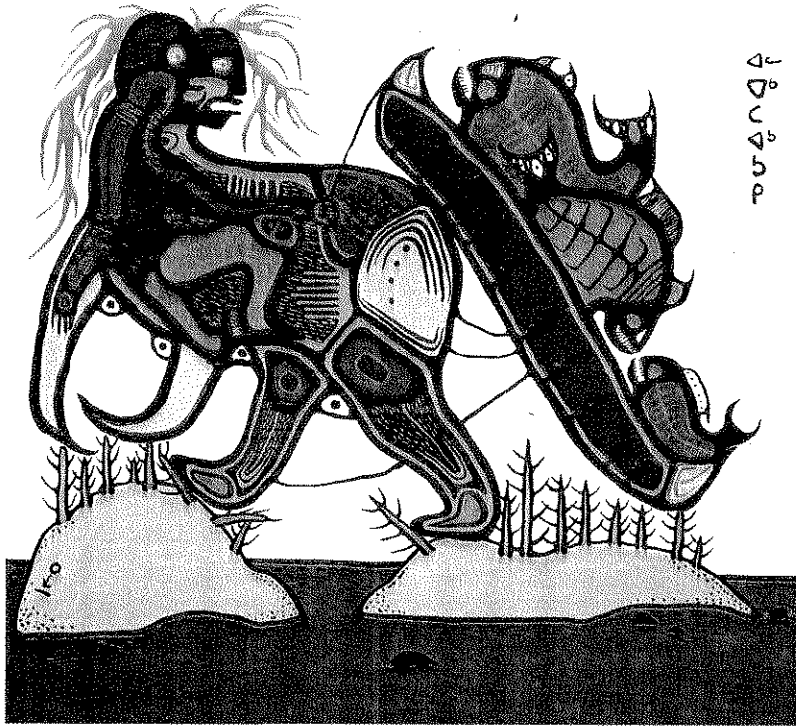


The Shivering Tree

John McLeod



The Great and Mischievous Nanabush, c. 1975, Blake Debassige

LEARNING FOCUS

- Analyze the form and style of an origin myth.
- Work in a group to discover and clarify ideas.
- Write an origin myth.

CONTEXT John McLeod, an Aboriginal Canadian from Northern Ontario, is a member of the Mississauga First Nation. His story “The Shivering Tree” is a modern retelling of a trickster tale, with a structure and style that reflect the oral tradition. The story’s hero is Nanabush,

the Trickster, a well-known figure in Ojibwa mythology. He is half spirit and half human, both creator and spoiler, hero and clown. In this story, Nanabush becomes interlocked in a suspenseful but amusing match of wits with the evil Juggler. The story offers an explanation of the origin of two natural phenomena, and a moral lesson for human beings. What are these natural phenomena? Based on this story, how would you describe the Trickster figure in Aboriginal mythology? What lesson could be drawn from the story? ■

Nanabush was walking; he’d been walking a long time. He’d been walking a long time and he was feeling very tired and thirsty.

“My, my, my,” Nanabush said to himself, “I’ve been walking a long time and boy oh boy am I tired and thirsty. It’s a good thing I’m such a smart fellow and decided to follow this river. This way, if I get lost, I’ll still know where I am even though I won’t.”

And he liked what he said to himself.

“Goodness me but I’m a bright fellow,” Nanabush said to himself. And he had to stop in his tracks and smile and just shake his head, he was just so proud of himself for what he’d just said just before telling himself how bright he was.

“Well, Nanabush, you bright fellow, let’s go down to the river and have a drink and rest our old bones for a year or two...heh, heh,” Nanabush said to himself. And he agreed.

Feeling very proud of himself, Nanabush strutted down to the river. It wasn’t far at all and when he got there Nanabush took a good long drink, threw some water in his face, and lay back on the sandy bank.

“It certainly is a big world,” he thought. “Somewhere to the west of here are the Tall Mountains that mark the approach of the Home of the West Wind. Someday I’ll go there, for I’ve a score to settle with that Old Fellow.”

That’s when his quick ears caught another sound above the voice of the river. It was another voice, a man’s voice.

Nanabush sat up, fast.

“A man?” Nanabush thought. “That just can’t be. No human being has come this far.”

But it was a man. At least it looked like one. But that meant nothing back in those times; after all, Nanabush looked like a man—most of the time. But Nanabush was far from being human. But just who or what was this fellow anyway?

Like I said, the stranger looked human at least. He was tall and thin, clad in buckskins with long fringe that fluttered and shivered in the breeze. He wore warm leggings and moccasins as it was autumn and the weather getting colder.

The stranger was juggling something. Now that was interesting.

He was juggling with his eyes closed. And that was mighty interesting.

Nanabush stood up, slowly, never taking his eyes off the juggling stranger.

"Hello, Nanabush," The Juggler said, still juggling, his eyes still shut firmly. "It is Nanabush, isn't it?"

Nanabush felt insulted.

"Of course I'm Nanabush," Nanabush said. "Who else could I be?"

The Juggler, eyes still firmly shut, still juggling what now appeared to be a pair of small crystals, just smiled.

"Well, let me see now," The Juggler said, still juggling, his eyes still shut firmly. "You could be Me, seeing as I'm the only person in these parts, but as you are you and not me and I'm here to see it, I guess I'm me and you're you and you must be Nanabush, because I've heard you've been spotted in these parts and I'm the only person here who would have heard about you besides you."

Nanabush glared at The Juggler.

"It's a fortunate thing for you that I'm such a clever fellow," Nanabush said, "because if I wasn't I might've been confused by what you just said and I'd've become very angry."

The Juggler just kept on juggling, eyes closed and all.

Nanabush felt himself getting impatient.

"Well?" Nanabush said. "Are you going to tell me who you are?"

With a big, wide grin, The Juggler stopped what he was doing, opened his eyes, and turned to Nanabush.

"Very well," The Juggler said, "I'm a juggler and conjuror and I am known as Restless As The Wind; but most people just call me The Juggler."

"I have never heard of you," Nanabush said. He didn't like this fellow at all. No sir, Nanabush didn't like him at all.

"I was just playing around with a couple of pieces of crystal," The Juggler said. "That was nothing at all. That was just ordinary juggling that a child can do, eyes closed or not. Just watch. I'll show you some real conjuring... Look, Nanabush, look."

Quick as lightning, The Juggler plucked out his own eyes and started to juggle them, rapidly from hand to hand. He started to dance,

leaping into the air, all the while juggling his eyes hand to hand, back and forth, back and forth, hand to hand.

Nanabush was stunned, couldn't move.

Now that in itself was something. It takes a great deal to shake up someone like Nanabush, and everyone knows that there just isn't anyone to compare with The Great Nanabush.

The Juggler kept it up. Juggling, hand to hand, back and forth, back and forth, hand to hand, dancing, leaping, juggling. Juggling his eyes.

"Stop," Nanabush said, shouting. "Stop, you're making me dizzy... stop it."

And, just as quickly as he had started, The Juggler stopped, came to a halt just like that, arms out wide, head back, just in time for his eyes to fall right straight into their sockets.

Nanabush's own eyes almost fell out, he stared so hard.

The Juggler grinned: boy did he grin.

Nanabush still couldn't stop staring.

I don't blame The Great Nanabush one bit, my friends. A sight like that can be enough to jar anyone's preserves.

"Now that is most certainly conjuring at its best," Nanabush said, "and you may take that as the word of the very one who invented conjuring."

The Juggler grinned.

"Well, Great Nanabush, Father of Conjuring. Perhaps I can show my gratitude, indeed the gratitude of all of us Conjurors," The Juggler said, smiling. "Allow me to show you how it's done. Allow me to show you how to juggle one's own eyes in one's own hands."

Now that got to Nanabush. For great and powerful as he can be, Nanabush can make the odd blunder now and then, and when he does, it's usually a bad one. This was going to be one of the worst.

"I'm flattered," Nanabush said, smiling like a proud father. "And I'm never too old to learn."

How true that was. Nanabush was about to learn a lesson that he and we are never going to forget.

"Will you allow me, then, to show you how it is done?" The Juggler said, smiling.

"The honour will be mine," Nanabush said, stepping forward.

"Show me how it's done, Nephew."

"Removing the eyes is the really dangerous part," The Juggler said. "You have to apply some pressure just below each eye, like this."

The Juggler demonstrated how it was supposed to be done. Using his thumbs, he applied some pressure underneath his eye-sockets, and...POP...out came the eyes. Very quickly, but carefully, he caught the eyes and, quickly and just as carefully, placed them back in his sockets.

"Did you see that?" The Juggler said. "Now, very carefully, 'cause it's just the first time, try it yourself and on yourself. Not too fast. This is only the First Lesson."

Nanabush placed his thumbs under his eye-sockets, carefully applied some pressure.

"Good, good...that's good," The Juggler said, directing and urging Nanabush. "Careful now...be very careful."

Then...POP...out came Nanabush's eyes...Then...WHOOSH out shot The Juggler's right hand and grabbed Nanabush's eyes in mid-air.

"I've got them...HA HA. I've got them," The Juggler cried, leaping into the air and spinning like a top. "I've got the most powerful charms of any conjuror in The North. I have the very eyes of Nanabush...HA HA I have them."

Then, as quick as lightning, The Juggler turned and ran, ran faster than he'd ever run in his life, for Nanabush is still Nanabush, blind or not.

But Nanabush was blind. Even before The Juggler turned and ran, Nanabush had made a lunge forward, instinctively knowing that something had gone wrong.

As The Juggler ran off, laughing and whooping, Nanabush landed, face down in the river. Almost immediately, he was on his feet. Almost immediately he was the real Nanabush. He stood still, turned his fear into caution.

"I've been a fool, a vain, yes...even a blind fool. With both my eyes in my head, I was blind," he said to himself. He stood still, silent. He listened. He began to take his bearings.

The river was in front of him. He turned his back to it.

"Until I regain my sight...and I will regain my sight, I must feel my way about. I also need a weapon which I can use easily and quickly

should one of my old enemies come upon me," Nanabush said to himself. "A staff, that's it. A big heavy staff, sharpened at one end; it'll act as a cane and a weapon. I must find my way to the bush."

So, stumbling over bits of driftwood and rocks, falling painfully but always getting right back up on his feet, Nanabush made his way toward the bush, feeling his way with his hands, carefully keeping his ears open for every sound.

"If a friend finds me, may he truly be a friend," Nanabush said. "If an enemy should come upon me, may he act with honour. If my enemy should save me, I will gladly be in his debt. If my enemy finds me and chooses to kill me, then fine, I will still owe him something, if only a good fight."

All around him was darkness. But he knew that to be a false darkness. The birds still sang and the warmth of the sun made itself felt on his body and he knew it to be daylight and he knew himself to be in full view of friend, foe, and stranger alike. But he stumbled on, into the bush. He knew he was in the bush, for he smelt pine needles and the odour of fallen leaves. He bent over and felt a pine cone beneath his hand.

"I must find a stout pole to carve into a pointed staff," he said, feeling about, moving more cautiously than before.

The forest was thick, for he continually bumped into trees and stumps.

"Trees, stumps, but no limbs of any good size," he thought. "At least one old enemy of mine has been at work here, Old Man Beaver and his clan."

Then his left hand touched on something, a young fallen tree. This was it. He ran his hands up and down the narrow trunk. This was exactly what he wanted. He pulled out his knife after using his great strength to break off an appropriate length of trunk. Carefully, he sat down and carefully, very carefully, he began to carve.

A staff alone won't be enough. Nanabush knew that. He'd have to find help from someone who knew the country, someone he could trust, someone who could be trusted as a guide.

But Nanabush had to concentrate on his carving. He had to be really, really careful or, in his blindness, he might cut a finger or two off.

So far, he hadn't given a thought to The Juggler.

He kept on moving, clumsily but carefully.

Then, suddenly, he stopped. Stopped everything. He had a strong feeling that he was being watched. He tightened his grip on the knife.

Though he had no eyes with which to see, he still instinctively moved his head back and forth as if scanning the area around him. He was certain that he was being watched. The feeling was even stronger.

Then he heard the voice, a deep clear voice, from somewhere above him.

"Well?" The Voice said. "Why have you stopped? You were doing well."

Knife in hand, Nanabush leaped to his feet.

"Who is there?" he snapped. "If you're an enemy, come out and fight."

"Fight?" The Voice said. "I thought you were busy working with that piece of wood."

Nanabush recognized the voice. It was indeed the voice of an enemy; a very old enemy, too.

"Owl, so it's you," Nanabush said, more on his guard than ever. "Well. What are you waiting for? Come and fight."

"I'm an old warrior, not an old fool," Owl said. "There's a thousand eyes in these woods. If I fought you and if I slew you in the condition which you are in the whole of Creation would hear of it. You'd be honoured. I'd be disgraced.

"No, Nanabush. I'm no coward. I may be your enemy, but I would like to think that I'm a worthy enemy.

"Lower your weapon. There is no danger from me, you have my word as a Warrior and as the head of my clan."

Nanabush, on hearing this solemn oath, placed his knife back into its sheath.

"I know that you're blind," said the Owl. "So will others and soon, Nanabush. Others who may not be so generous. Something must be done to restore your vision to you."

"I'll find a way myself," said Nanabush. "I'm already far too much in debt to you, Owl."

"Not if we decide to be friends," Owl said. "I am willing, for I

wish there to be peace for my children. If you agree, then it's done."

"Then it's done," Nanabush said.

Their friendship sealed, the two began to talk of Nanabush's trouble.

"There is a way to restore your vision," Owl said. "I will give you a pair of eyes. I will give you my eyes."

"But Owl, my friend. That will leave you with no eyes. You will be as blind as I now am," Nanabush said.

The Owl shook his head. If he could have smiled, he would have.

"Oh no, not me," Owl said. "You see, Nanabush, I have two sets of eyes. One set for daytime and another set for night. As most of my enemies are daylight hunters like the hawk, I'll do my hunting at night from now on. During the day, I'll rest and stay safely with my family. I'll need only one set of eyes then. The other set I give to you."

Owl told Nanabush to hold out his hands. Nanabush did so, and a pair of eyes dropped into Nanabush's hands. Then...POP...Nanabush dropped the eyes into his own sockets.

"They are perfect, Owl," Nanabush said, joyously but seriously, as befits a Warrior.

"From this day, Owl, the night is yours," Nanabush declared. "From this day and for all time, you will be the Bird of The Night. You will be my eyes at night. At night your vision will be sure and your flight safe and clear. You will be to night as the Eagle and the Falcon are to the daylight. You'll rule the night skies. And out of respect for the great favour you have done for me, all who hear you call at night shall show their respect. They must not mimic your call if they hear you; that is to say, they will not answer your call. For them to do so would be to mock you. Your call will be my message in the night that I, Nanabush, never sleep but with my ears open, that even at night I watch those whom I protect, and that I keep a watch out for those who would do harm to The Creation. So call out at night, Owl, my friend and my Emissary."

Their friendship sealed for all time, Owl and Nanabush bade each other good hunting and a long life. And so they parted, Owl with his new honours, Nanabush with his new eyes.

* * *

Springtime.

Springtime, and Nanabush was home. New eyes and everything. "The World is very beautiful this day," Nanabush said to himself as he walked along. "All is green and fragrant with new life and the birds are back. Yes, this is truly a beautiful day."

"Can't wait till the butterflies come out," Nanabush said. "My, but it's a wonderful day. Good thing that I have my eyes to see it all."

Then came that little voice that is sometimes to be heard in the back of Nanabush's mind. "Ah, Nanabush, but they weren't always your eyes, were they?" Nanabush remembered, of course. He remembered where his new eyes had come from and he remembered also what had happened to his old eyes. For the first time in months he thought of The Juggler. That ruined his day.

"The Juggler," Nanabush thought. "If I ever again meet up with that thieving rascal, he will regret the day his parents met. He will need more than an extra pair of eyes when I get through with him."

His day was ruined, he sat down and sulked. He couldn't help but think of The Juggler, couldn't think of anything else.

In the days which followed, Nanabush was obsessed with his strange enemy. He talked of little else. He began to worry his friends and his family.

His Grandmother advised him to stop thinking about The Juggler.

"You still have a great deal of work to do in this world," Grandmother said. "You've much to do. You are the teacher, the helper of all living things. Go about your work, Grandson. Don't seek out enemies. They will find you soon enough if they are not cowards."

So Nanabush carried on as always. Sometimes sure of himself, sometimes blundering, but always leaving his mark somewhere, somehow, on the world around him, making it more and more like the world we know today.

Then, one afternoon in late summer, he felt in need of a drink of water. He was deep in the woods at this time, but he knew where there was a clear, cold pool of water not far from where he stood. Picking up his kit, he made his way through the bush. He'd just about reached the pool when he saw, through the bushes around him, that another was at the pool.

A man.

A tall, thin man.

A tall thin man who was juggling a pair of crystals hand to hand, back and forth, hand to hand, back and forth.

Nanabush's eyes narrowed; he clenched his teeth.

"I must think this out," Nanabush said to himself. "I must think quickly, though. I may not get another chance at this rascal; besides, in addition to being my enemy, he's a Sorcerer and a dangerous one. Who is to tell how much damage he has done to others besides me? This fellow is very dangerous and I must do something about him."

Quickly and quietly, as only he can do it, Nanabush changed his appearance. He took on the appearance of an old man. Then he stepped out into the open.

The Juggler gave him a quick glance but kept right on juggling.

"Good day, Old One," The Juggler said. "I'd wish you long life but it seems a good number have already done so."

"So they have, Nephew," Nanabush said. "And they did so out of respect."

"Forgive me if I sound disrespectful," The Juggler said, continuing to juggle, "but I'm a very happy fellow these days and I sometimes don't give thought to what I'm saying. It could be that you've heard of me. I'm The Juggler. My name is Restless As The Wind."

"So," Nanabush said. "You are the fellow Nanabush is looking for, the one who stole Nanabush's eyes."

"That's me all right, Old One," The Juggler said. "Tell Nanabush if you like to. Maybe I'll take his ears this time."

"He'll find you without my telling him," Nanabush said, trying to hold back a smile. "He is no longer blind, by the way. A friend gave him a new pair of eyes."

The Juggler stopped his juggling.

Nanabush, still looking like an Old Man, stepped over to the pool and took a drink of water.

"So, he's got new eyes, has he?" The Juggler said, trying not to sound as scared as he was beginning to feel. "Well, good for him. If he comes to me, I just might take his new eyes, too. I did it before and I can do it again."

Nanabush stood up.

"So you're a mighty, powerful fellow?" Nanabush said. "You think that you can beat Nanabush?"

"I am a Great Sorcerer," The Juggler said. "I can defeat anything or anyone."

"Can you beat me?" Nanabush said.

"Anyone or anything," The Juggler said, trying very hard to sound brave.

"I've heard that you can juggle with your eyes out of your head. That you don't need eyes to see," Nanabush said.

The Juggler grinned, popped out his own eyes, and juggled them, hand to hand, back and forth, hand to hand, back and forth. Then he stopped, threw his head back. Then he tossed his eyes into the air. Up went his eyes, down they came and...plunk...landed safely in their sockets.

"Is that good enough for you, Old One?" The Juggler said, grinning at Nanabush.

But it wasn't Nanabush as an old man standing there. It was Nanabush as The Juggler remembered him.

"Well. If it isn't The Great Nanabush himself," The Juggler said, grinning and trying to sound (and feel) braver than he really was.

"I've already seen that trick," Nanabush said. And he was grinning, too.

"So, Nanabush, are you tired of your new pair of eyes already?" The Juggler said. "If you want to save us both time and work, you can just hand your eyes over to me right now."

"If you really want my eyes, you're going to have to work for them, Nephew," Nanabush said.

"Fine by me. Just tell me how," The Juggler said.

"Very good, Nephew. Nothing fancy—I'll toss my eyes to you and you catch them," Nanabush said. "If you catch them, you get to keep them. If you miss you won't owe me a thing. All or nothing. Fair enough."

"Too easy," The Juggler said. "No real challenge. Tell you what, Nanabush. I'll seal my eyes shut. How does that sound?"

"Fine by me, Nephew," Nanabush said. "But I warn you. I'm going to be throwing from quite a distance, from the very rim of the world itself."

"Ha. Go to the rim of the world. Even that wouldn't be enough. I'd know when it's coming. I'll just stand here and wait. You're the one who'll have all the work to do. If you want to walk all the way to the edge of Creation just to toss a couple of eyes, that's fine by me, I'll catch them. I never miss," The Juggler said proudly.

With a shrug of his shoulders, The Juggler obtained some sap from a nearby tree. This sap he used to seal his eyes shut. Then he stood calmly and with very great confidence.

"Well, Nanabush. I'm ready if you are. Be on your way. It's a long walk, but I'll wait. When victory is a sure thing, I can wait," The Juggler said. Then he folded his arms in front of his chest and said no more.

Nanabush walked away.

Nanabush walked away, but not to the rim of the world. He just plain walked away and didn't look back.

* * *

Nanabush went about his work of making the world what it was meant to be. He never gave The Juggler another thought. Why?

Because Nanabush knew that The Juggler, like all Sorcerers, was a vain fellow more than eager to show off his power no matter how long it took. The Juggler said he'd wait and so he did.

He's still waiting. And he will wait for all time, until The End of Time. Oh, it's not at all difficult to find him. He's very well known. He's easily recognizable.

His name, you recall, is Restless As The Wind. It's a very descriptive name. He's still to be seen standing, day in, day out, standing, rooted to the spot, his fringes and hair swaying and shivering constantly in the wind, at the slightest breeze or draught. Even when the air is perfectly still.

To pass the long hours away, you see, The Juggler, Restless As The Wind, has taken the form of a tree. A tree that never rests, whose leaves and branches still shake and shiver even when the air is still and quiet.

He's become the Shivering Tree.

The Poplar Tree.

And that's the way it is to this good day.

The Shivering Tree
John McLeod

1. *The Shivering Tree* is a modern retelling of a trickster tale that reflects the oral tradition of Aboriginal mythology. The story offers an explanation of two natural phenomena. What are these natural phenomena?
2. Based on this story, how would you describe the Trickster figure in Aboriginal mythology?
3. Compare and contrast the qualities of Nanabush and the Trickster.
4. What moral lesson can be drawn from the story? How is the story a cautionary tale?
5. From what point of view is the story told? How does this contribute to the effectiveness of an oral story?
6. Discuss the blending of the natural and supernatural world in this story. In Aboriginal Mythology what is the relationship between people and the environment? How is this different from the Christian point of view of people and the relationship to animals/the environment?