

Hennig Mankell's Use of Trickster-Loki Characters

by Rosie Cutting

Kurt Wallander as Fool and Trickster

Throughout the series of crime novels in which he plays the central role, Kurt Wallander functions as a bungling, awkward character—a fool in spite of the fact that he is also a hard worker, brilliant reasoner and intuitive genius who solves crimes. In his personal life, Wallander sees himself as a buffoon, constantly lamenting his inability to control his weight, drinking, depressive moods or impulsive actions. When he's working a case, he continually finds he doesn't have a pen or paper to take notes and discovers his car is out of gas or can't start when he needs it. In the first novel in which he appears, he gets drunk and embarrasses himself by trying to seduce the female prosecutor who keeps urging him to leave her home (*Faceless*, 214-16). In another book, Wallander is photographed apparently hitting a young girl; actually, he is trying to stop the girl from attacking her mother. But the awkwardness of the situation and the subsequent investigation is typical of Wallander's clumsiness (*Firewall* 49). In the latest novel in which he appears, Wallander's daughter tells him "All those extra pounds scream out how lonely you are—you might as well hang a sign around your neck saying 'I need to get laid'" (*Before the Frost* 228). In a total of nine crime novels, Wallander plays the "fool," struggling with his own body, behavior, and the difficulties of modern society.

Another dominant element of the trickster figure—perpetrating tricks and deception—is noticeably absent from Wallander's general behavior, with one outstanding exception. Swedish policemen are not supposed to lie, but even the most ethical sometimes do. In *The Man Who Smiled*, Wallander deliberately conceals information in order to escape interference from an official (256). In the same book, he agrees to forge a document to get information, but is saved from fulfilling the bargain because the informant is killed (281-86, 304).

The second book of the Wallander series, *The Dogs of Riga*, provides him with the opportunity to play a trickster role that departs greatly from his code of behavior as a Swedish policeman. He is persuaded to assume a false identity in order to conduct an investigation in a Soviet Bloc country—Latvia. There he hopes to find documents hidden by Major Liepa, a Latvian official who came to Sweden to help solve a crime. Wallander is smuggled into Latvia using a false name and passport, complaining internally through out the entire adventure. Needless to say, there is a woman in Latvia who is the chief enticement.

Criminal investigation often involves deception in many cultures and even occasionally in Sweden. In *The Man Who Smiled* Wallander must investigate and catch a powerful and wealthy man who runs international business networks which are deliberately set up to hide their true nature and complexity. Wallander must find a way "to talk to eleven secretaries" without the villain noticing he is looking for serious criminal behavior. Throughout the investigation, he has to appear to be doing "the opposite" of what he is actually doing (172). But this sort of trickery and deception deviates from Wallander's normally transparent pursuit of criminals.

Criminals as Deceiver/ Tricksters

Given the desire of criminals to successfully steal, cheat, and kill, the majority of the Wallander crime novels present criminals who use trickery to achieve success, to escape punishment, or simply to enjoy the game of deceiving the police. In *The Dogs of Riga* we don't know until the conclusion which Latvian official (Muniers or Putnis) is the good guy and which is the evil murderer and betrayer. In *The White Lioness* a conspirator planning an assassination creates a false diary to mislead investigators in Africa. False trails are laid through postcards in both *The Man Who Smiled* and *One Step Behind* (Man 51, One, 31). In *Sidetracked*, a former Minister of Justice is proud of his skill at deception; when interviewed by a journalist, "he hadn't said a single thing that was true during the entire interview" (14).

The Fifth Woman contains three victims of crime whose own hidden crimes are belied by their innocent-looking public lives: an elderly bird watcher and poet; a florist who studies and writes about orchids; a university researcher who works on milk and food allergies.

Avenging Shapeshifters

The most powerful trickster figures in Mankell's novels believe in their own powers of transformation; they create rituals and disguises that they believe produce actual new identities. In their own eyes, they are literal shapeshifters. In *Sidetracked* and *The Fifth Woman*, the trickster characters believe that they have the right to kill because they are avenging crimes against innocent females.

The murderer in *Sidetracked*, a fourteen-year old boy whose real name is Stefan Fredman, believes he transforms himself into a combination of Geronimo and J. Edgar Hoover. He changes the mould for making miniature soldiers, creating a new figure that "was both a policeman and an Indian." In a ceremony of transformation, "he created his own new identity...a feared policeman with the courage of an American Indian warrior" (102-3). Once transformed, Hoover/Geronimo knows that "he would be indestructible. Nothing would prevent him from seeking vengeance" (103).

The boy paints his face and plays drum music in ritual ceremonies, creating his transformation into Hoover/Geronimo:

The first strokes on his forehead had to be black. It was as if he were slicing two deep cuts, opening his brain and emptying the memories and thought that had haunted him all his life, tormenting and humiliating him. Then the red and white stripes, the circles, the squares, and at last the snake-like design on his cheeks. None of his white skin should be visible. Then the transformation would be complete. What was inside him would be gone. He would be born again in the guise of an animal, and he would never speak as a human being again. He would cut out his tongue if he had to. (12)

Hoover pursues a "mission" of vengeance because of the sexual abuse his sister suffered, abuse which led to her breakdown and confinement in a mental hospital. After killing his victims with an axe, he scalps them and buries the scalps outside near her hospital room. His goal is to bring

his sister back from “the darkness.” The men he kills are “monsters.” At their death, the spirits speak inside him and exult in the murders (102)

In the form of Hoover/ Geronimo, Stefan knocks his father unconscious, ties him to a wooden dock with arms and legs spread out and waits for his father to revive so he will know he is being killed by his own son: Stefan “no longer saw a human being before him. His father had undergone the transformation he had planned for him. He was an animal...a beast thrashing back and forth in his death throes” (192).

After blinding his father with hydrochloric acid, Stefan/Hoover/ Geronimo scalps him. Raising the scalp to the night sky, he cuts off the top of “the animal’s head” and then smashes the skull so forcefully the blade of the axe sticks into the wood of the dock. Stefan believes this murder will bring his sister out of the darkness and “back to life” (193). Of course, the latter mission is never accomplished.

In the novel published after *Sidetracked*, the murderer also tortures as well as kills victims. Mankell follows tradition by making most of his Trickster murderers male. *The Fifth Woman* introduces Yvonne Ander--the only female. Like Stefan, her purpose is to right the injustice done to women by male abuse. Yvonne Ander creates painful forms of execution that are appropriate to the crimes the men have committed against women (282) : a bungee pit with sharpened stakes; imprisonment and starvation to the point of madness and then strangling; drowning in a sack while conscious.

In her deceased grandmother’s home, Yvonne has created “a room of sacrifice” which contains only the enormous baking oven where she keeps her second victim imprisoned until he is pretty well out of his mind and so weak she can kill him with her bare hands. Similarly, Stefan creates a sacred space for his rituals in the basement of his parents’ home. Yvonne uses her deceased grandmother’s house as her “church,” her “sanctuary,” her “cathedral” (42). There she leads a female support group, hoping to inspire abused women to fight back. She is a priestess dedicated to “proclaiming the sacred task that justice was holy” (45). Like Hoover/Geronimo she believes that her victims are monsters and should be wiped out without a chance for redemption.

Wallander decides that Yvonne was “that rare type of person who couldn’t lie” (426). At first this seems contradicted by her frequent use of disguise. But Yvonne believes in her ability to shed one identity for another. Like Stefan, she performs a ritual that transforms her externally and, in her belief system, internally. As she takes off and puts on clothing for the meeting of women, she accompanies each article of clothing with a prayer. She images the process like a priest preparing for mass, a “cleansing procedure...for a holy ritual.” She directs her prayers not to God but to the child she had been: “She prayed herself back to her childhood.” When she takes off her work clothes and puts on soft fabrics, “something happened inside her. It was as if her skin altered, as if it too was shifting back to its infant state.” She adds a wig and glasses and as the final prayer ends, “She was ready, she was somebody else” (44-45).

Time Shifter-Gender Shifter

Yvonne Ander and Stefan Fredman are passionate about their pursuit of justice through the act of slaying the men they consider “monsters.” The next novel written by Mankell, *One Step*

Behind, introduces a chillingly calm murderer. Three young friends gather for a midsummer celebration, wearing costumes, wigs, playing music from the 18th century. They think they are doing more than playing “a game”; they believe that they can leave their own historical age for another time (1-5). The desire to “control time and move back and forth through the ages” is inspired by new age literature about time travel and its usefulness for “self-actualization” (194). In some countries, spiritual sects have been created centering around the belief that practicing moving through time will enable time travelers to be reborn into the age they choose at the time of their death (284-5).

The murderer, Ake Larstam, watches the celebration, shoots the three friends, puts on one of their wigs, sits with the dead bodies and nibbles on their food, as though he is part of the celebration (4-6). Then he buries the bodies, only to dig them up a month later and reassemble the scene. Surely this is one of the most bewildering tricks that Wallander and his colleagues have to try to explain. The murderer also sets up other murder scenes as he would stage a theatrical production or arrange a painting (71, 162). He seems to be “teasing” the police with his tricks (386).

“A feeling of unlimited power” and the “knowledge that only he who had the upper hand would escape” (4) inspires the murder of the young people. Ake likewise creates a carefully engineered murder of a young couple wearing “costumes”—the wedding clothes of a newly married bride and groom. (306) When caught, Ake appears to be a mild and unemotional man who apparently doesn’t even know why he kills. Wallander sees him as a “monster” who wants to kill people at the point when they seem to be most happy (435).

Having lost his own place in society, his engineering job, and the social acceptance that this role gave him, Ake believes he is living outside of time:

The enormous change he’d undergone had made him imperious to time. He realized there was no such thing as past or future. There was no time that could be lost or won. The only thing that counted was action. (271)

The act of murder preserves but also destroys his victims at the moment that he chooses to act.

Ake Larstam belongs to the gender bending tradition of Trickster Loki legends. The Loki of Scandanavian myth, like many Native American Trickster figures, assumes a female as well as male identity. Some of the time, Ake lives as the transvestite and homosexual “Louise” (340). Wallander thinks of Louise as “an act” (340). But Ake/Louise believes in his own creations. When he doesn’t need Louise any more, he hopes to transfer her wig and facial make-up to another victim. In this way, he can let Louise “die” and “make” himself “into another woman” (437). Like Stefan Fredman and Yvonne Alder, Ake Larstam believes that he is a shapeshifter, not simply a man who wears disguises.

The Trickster/ Loki as Destroyer of Social Systems

Students of the Trickster and Loki stories in myth, legend, and the spiritual heritage of Native American or Scandinavian cultures often point out the fact that these figures, while known for

tricks and deception, are useful for disrupting and destroying social systems that have become outmoded or corrupt.

Mankell's last two Wallander novels focus on criminals who strive to create chaos and destroy the social systems dominant in western culture. The actions of these criminals are shown as in no way benevolent or likely to lead to improved civilizations. *Firewall* presents a villain who started out as an idealist working to promote justice and economic equality. Coming disillusioned with efforts to help developing countries, Carter concluded that "if the world's financial systems remain as they were, there could be no true reform (*Firewall* 275). He and a small group of like-minded associates hatch a plot to create a "New World Order."

Carter and a computer genius name Tynnes Falk plot to destroy the current "order" by connecting the computer systems that run the essential functions of contemporary society. When the right program is triggered, nothing will work in the banking system and then in the basic services offered by industrial society: "After their intended crippling of the world financial markets, they'd had plans to strangle important utilities worldwide" (397).

Like other criminals, they cannot resist playing tricks to mislead the police and to show how clever they are. Some of the tricks seem to have no logical or rational meaning. As Trickster/Loki characters, they fall in love with their own ability to bewilder the police. Thus they steal a body, cut off its fingers, and make the body reappear in the location where it was found dead. They further mystify the police by leaving a heavy relay from an electrical station they have sabotaged in the first location (397).

Like other Trickster/Loki characters Carter and his associates develop a sense of pride at being set apart; they are "the chosen" (4). Becoming intoxicated with their own sense of power, they view themselves as "not only overseers but as deities" of the New World Order which is supposed to somehow grow out of the chaos they create (397).

The last crime novel to include Wallander features Linda Wallander, Kurt's daughter, who joins the police at his station in Ystad. The central villain in *Before the Frost* starts out as a sincere follower of Jim Jones. He escapes the general slaughter and goes mad in imitation of Jones. Returning to Sweden, he gathers a congregation of meek followers and hatches a plot to dismantle the Christian "establishment," which he views as corrupt. The steps to this goal include animal and human sacrifice. He tricks some swans by feeding them and then burns them alive. His deputy sets fire to a pet store with the animals inside and burns a calf. A woman who had an abortion is strangled in a church ritual (102). These acts, which bewilder the police, have a purpose beyond mystifying the police. They are ultimately supposed to awaken people to a "Christian paradigm shift"—a return to a religion as harsh as the old Testament (336-37).

Erik Westin believes he is the new prophet who has taken the place of Christ; the latter failed God by being imperfect and weak (312). Erik has studied the methods of radical Muslims, who will not be admitted to the New Kingdom, but who have taught him the necessity of violence and destruction. He believes his followers can be used to destroy present forms of Christianity and reinstate his version:

The time had come at last...He had re-instituted the ritual sacrifices with their origins in the earliest days of Christianity... Killing in order to sustain life was an important practice to combat the emptiness that existed inside man. (247)

The climax of the narrative reveals the climax of Erik's destructive plan. The followers of his cult are prepared to blow themselves up along with the physical churches that represent the degraded Christianity of the West. Erik's followers plant dynamite in "the foremost symbols of the false prophets...thirteen cathedrals" (348).

Firewall clearly was influenced by fears about the possible disruptions that might be caused by the Y2K transition at the year 2000. *Before the Frost* is evidently written in response to the growth of religious fundamentalism, Christian and Islamic. Erik Westin's plans come to the same conclusion as do those of Falk and Carter. The Wallanders—father and daughter—prevent Erik and his followers from destroying the physical symbols of institutional stability—the thirteen Swedish cathedrals.

Before the Frost ends on an upbeat note when Linda saves a young girl from committing suicide (371-75). But this brief positive "Epilogue" is prefaced by a scene in which Linda and the others in the police station are waiting for a special news report from the United States on September 11 (366-67). The last sentence of the "Epilogue" is "Winter had arrived in Skane" (375)—an ominous metaphoric announcement of storms to come.

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