

Please Repeat That: Repetition as a Stylistic Device in Tony Hillerman's *Skinwalkers*

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## Abstract

“Please Repeat That: Repetition as a Stylistic Device in Tony Hillerman’s *Skinwalkers*,” by Stephen Brown, explores the use of repetition in a work of fiction, and focuses on Tony Hillerman’s use of two protagonists in *Skinwalkers*—his first book to gain national prominence. With two detectives investigating four murders, repetition is the literary glue holding this complex novel together.

## Please Repeat That: Repetition as a Stylistic Device in Tony Hillerman's *Skinwalkers*

The opening sentence of Tony Hillerman's novel *Skinwalkers* emphasizes a repeated sound: "*clack, clack.*" A cat—the spirit animal of the underworld—alerts protagonist Jim Chee to impending danger when it scurries inside the trailer. "What had chased it in? Something scary to a cat . . . Was it something threatening to Chee?" (9) The cat appears in the opening scene as a harbinger of danger, and its reappearance underscores how effectively Hillerman uses repetition to create tension. Much later in the novel, when Chee is afraid to approach his trailer late at night due to his fear of what danger awaits inside, he hears the "*clack-clack* of the cat door," and knows it's safe to enter (77). Repeating the distinctive sound introduced in the opening sentence is an effective structural tool, a Pavlovian response the reader associates with danger; specifically, attempted murder. Equally useful is Hillerman's repetitive use of character names, clues, plot lines, ethnographic information, and the appearance and reappearance of minor characters. Hillerman uses repetition to straddle two cultures, foreshadow important events, emphasize the metaphorical duality of Native American witchcraft, and by using two protagonists, to explore the enchanting ethos of the southwestern desert from differing points of view.

The effects of witchcraft serve as a major plot point in the novel. Dr. Yellowhorse, the antagonist, is a witch—"two-faced"—what the Navajos call a *skinwalker*, a person outwardly benevolent but inwardly evil. Dr. Yellowhorse conspires to keep his clinic open by submitting claims for patients long after they are dead. He uses witchcraft, or the appearance of witchcraft, to facilitate the murder of anyone who jeopardizes his fraudulent billing practices. The plot for *Skinwalkers* also follows two Navajo Police Detectives who investigate the murders, decipher the witchcraft incidents resulting from the cover-up of Dr. Yellowhorse's plot to overbill

insurance providers, and identify the killer—a *skinwalker*—the title character of the novel. Dr. Yellowhorse is a healer who is also a murderer, and since witchcraft is a metaphor for evil masquerading as good, this is a subtle, fundamental form of repetition.

In addition to being intrinsic and fundamental, Hillerman's use of repetition is also literal. "I'm getting into who tried to shoot Jim Chee," Jim Chee said" (34). Jim Chee's name is repeated, so this intentional marker underscores the personal nature of the investigation. Hillerman uses Jim Chee, a young protagonist with traditional views, to create dramatic tension with Joe Leaphorn, his second protagonist who is an older police detective with modern, worldly views. "Jim Chee's conditioning—traditional Navajo . . . All things in moderation. . . . But he was curious" (9–10). Jim Chee is training to be a *yataalii*, a healer in the traditional Navajo spiritual belief system, a person who performs Navajo healing ceremonies to bring a person back into *hozho*, the sense of being at peace and in harmony. He opposes the federal policy of locking a person away for committing a crime instead of rehabilitating them. "Jim Chee had been a Navajo Tribal Policeman for seven years now . . . most of the job he liked . . . [but] he'd never learn to like this part of the job, this dealing with sick minds in a way that would never bring them back to harmony" (11–12).

In an essay that gave birth to the *Skinwalkers* novel, Hillerman expounds on the Navajo belief that a "person becomes a *skinwalker*—a witch—by straying from the path of beauty and harmony through aberrant behavior such as incest, murder of a relative, improper handling of a corpse, or developing a penchant for excessive wealth" (Greenburg, 322–24). Insufficient wealth, the lack of money as being the root of all evil, is the form of "witch sickness" responsible for the ensuing attempt on Jim Chee's life and the inciting incident that expands the scope of his investigation into Dugai Endocheeney's murder. After the murder attempt at his trailer, Chee

takes an active, unassigned role in finding the person responsible for the murders of Irma Onesalt, Wilson Sam, and Dugai Endocheeney because they appear related to the attack on his own life.

Perhaps it is the nature of repetition to suggest that if one murder is good, then three are better. Although the murder of three people initially appears unrelated to the attempt on Jim Chee's life, the second protagonist, Joe Leaphorn, investigates a second set of clues and offers an additional perspective.

“Given quiet, and a little time, Leaphorn's mind was very, very good at this process of finding logical causes behind apparently illogical effects” (16). The repetition of “very” in the previously quoted sentence subtly alerts the reader that the following information will be critical. Leaphorn reads a memo about the attempted murder of Jim Chee and learns not one, but “Three shots fired into trailer of Officer Jim Chee about 2:15 A.M. this date” (16). Having introduced Leaphorn as being very, very logical, Hillerman further develops and emphasizes this trait with an insight into Leaphorn's thoughts arising from the attempted murder of Jim Chee. “Logically, no one shoots at a cop without motive. And logically, the cop shot at knows that motive very well indeed” (17).

But Jim Chee is an innocent man who everyone believes is guilty of being a witch, after Dr. Yellowhorse wrongfully accuses him of such. In particular, Yellowhorse has convinced a desperate mother that Chee is a witch, and that her terminally ill child will recover if she kills him. Leaphorn's suspicion of Chee's guilt adds emotional tension to their complex relationship.

Incorporating a map and the need for order into a character's persona is a useful narrative tool. Navajo Police Detective Joe Leaphorn's map is “a common ‘Indian Country’ map published by the Auto Club of Southern California and popular for its large scale and its accurate

details . . . It was decorated in a hundred places with colored pins, each color representing its own sort of crime” (20). In the opening scene featuring protagonist Joe Leaphorn, the map provides multiple opportunities to repeat the murder victims’ names. Assigning a specific color scheme, brown and white, to the pins denoting homicides further cements the importance in the reader’s consciousness. The pins are a useful marker, another chance to repeat the victims’ names, as well as an additional opportunity to provide the practice of witchcraft as a clue in solving their murders. “‘Just two kinds of pins on the Cañoncito,’ she [the council woman] said when Leaphorn had finished. . . . The pins were all in shades of red or were black, Leaphorn’s way of marking alcohol-related arrests and witchcraft complaints” (19).

The next character to comment on the pins is FBI Agent Dilly Streib, who repeats the names of murder victims one, Onesalt, and two, Endocheeney, for the benefit of the reader, and observes, “there was an obvious connection between pin one and pin two. ‘Onesalt didn’t have any friends, and Endocheeney didn’t have any enemies’ ” (21). Victim three, Wilson Sam, also known as pin number three, receives a similar repetitive, restated treatment: “Streib had argued that pin two should be pin three. And maybe he was right. Leaphorn had assigned the third pin to Wilson Sam, born to the One Walks Around Clan, and born for the Turning Mountain People” (22). Assigning Wilson Sam two additional names in the customary Navajo tradition further cements the impact of his introduction, but just in case there was any remaining doubt about the importance of murder victim number three, the name “Wilson Sam” is repeated three times in the remainder of the paragraph.

By following Navajo tradition and mentioning matriarchal lines—“born to”—and patriarchal lines—“born for”—the author repeats and reinforces the victims’ identities while adding an intriguing ethnographic component. The first victim is Irma Onesalt, “born to the

Bitter Water Clan, born for the Towering House People . . .” (21). Jim Chee knows her by an additional name, “Welfare Woman.” Pin number two represents Dugai Endocheeny, “born to the Mud People, born for the Streams Come Together Clan” (21). Murder victim number three, “Wilson Sam, born to the One Walks Around Clan, and born for the Turning Mountain People” (22), receives the same repetitive treatment. In the spirit of repetition, the pins also serve as a foreshadowing device much later in the novel. “Just then, Leaphorn saw how it all had worked. All the pins on his map came together into a single cluster at the Badwater Clinic. . . . If he didn’t reach the clinic before Dr. Yellowhorse, the four and a half homicides would become five” (179).

The repetition of a character’s name foreshadows important events. Jim Chee’s name is repeated three times in memo form, signaling the introduction of another clue to help solve the puzzling homicides. The following clues about Chee’s assailant—also an eventual murderer—are important, so they will also be repeated. “Tracks indicated worn tires. Drivage where vehicle had been parked indicated either a lengthy stay or a serious oil leak” (23). (It’s *both*: a lengthy stay *and* a serious oil leak). The importance of the oil leak during an indirect narrative passage offers an eerie glimpse into the murderer’s thoughts and predicament in chapter four. “More and more, the truck engine leaked oil. Where it stood in the yard beside the brush arbor, the earth was hard and black with the drippings. A quart, at least, every time they drove it” (35). The oil leak is a repetitive clue that also provides continuity throughout the novel. “Tires were worn and it leaked a lot of oil” (47). This distinctive pattern is repeated and it will save Chee’s life: “a slick blue-green sheen where rainwater had washed under the truck and picked up an oil emulsion. It stopped him. He felt all those odd, intense sensations caused when intense fear triggers the adrenaline glands” (166). Because the clue has been repeated and developed, the

reader is aware of the danger in real time with the protagonist, which heightens tension and generates anticipation.

“The duality of a plot devoted to two detectives doubles the efficiency of investigation” (Reilly, 135). *Skinwalkers* was Tony Hillerman’s seventh novel, but his first book to feature both Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee. Joe Leaphorn serves as protagonist in Hillerman’s first three novels, *The Blessing Way*, *Dance Hall of the Dead*, and *Listening Woman*. For book four, “Hillerman felt he could not make the ‘skeptical, sophisticated’ Leaphorn fit the concept he was developing for his next novel” (Roush, 470). Jim Chee serves as protagonist for the next three novels, *People of Darkness*, *The Dark Wind*, and *The Ghostway*. It’s no coincidence, it’s a repetitive pattern, that after three books featuring Joe Leaphorn and three books featuring Jim Chee, a fortuitous pairing of these two protagonists occurred in Hillerman’s seventh novel, *Skinwalkers*.

In the publishing trade, a breakthrough book is one that gets taken up by readers who might not be expected to be its normal purchasers . . . Synonymously, the publishing trade may call the phenomenon of a detective genre work landing on the bestseller lists a “crossover.” . . . Besides earning him a place on the bestseller lists for the first time, the book [*Skinwalkers*] also won the award called a Spur from the Western Writers of America, which, in its way, also demonstrates appeal beyond the detective genre. (Reilly, 125)

Two protagonists gave Hillerman the opportunity to employ two plot lines. This form of repetition was so successful in *Skinwalkers* that each of his subsequent novels employs two protagonists and two individual plot lines. “I also usually begin with two or three characters in mind. One of course, is the policeman-protagonist, Leaphorn if I want the older, more sophisticated fellow more comfortable with white ways, Chee if I need the younger, more

traditional cop who is still curious about the dominant American culture” (Hillerman and Bulow, 37–38). The incongruity of a younger protagonist following the traditional ways adds emotional complexity, and starting with his fourth novel, the introduction of Jim Chee parallels Hillerman’s increased use of Native American spiritual customs to provide unique clues. Jim Chee’s plotline immediately becomes personal—as opposed to merely doing his job—after the attempt is made on his life. His plot line is a race to survive.

Joe Leaphorn’s plot line is stymied and stalled by the bureaucratic responsibilities of his managerial position within the Navajo Police Agency. The two protagonists share a common goal of catching the murderer, however, and Hillerman’s use of third-person narrative voice enables the reader to follow the two plot lines which eventually meet, arriving at a mutually shared ending. Two detectives, two investigative approaches, and two sets of clues are a skillful use of repetition which entertains and enlightens the reader, and ultimately, elevates the genre.

*Skinwalkers* features multiple murder victims and different killers, separate crime scenes but related crimes, and a complex investigation undertaken by two dissimilar protagonists with unique styles, so although the plot lines ultimately converge, the differences outnumber the similarities and it is repetition of detail that holds this complex novel together.

Only through the detective’s patient unraveling of clues in “Indian Time” and his intimate knowledge of tribal traditions—in which he may fully believe, like young Jim Chee, or doubt, like world-wearier Joe Leaphorn—can the crime, generally the result of human greed, be solved. (Brunsdale, 392)

Two plot lines also function as creative alliteration—another form of repetition. With two detectives sharing evidence but collecting it independently and in differing fashions, Hillerman can vary the tempo and pacing of the plot, adding tension through complexity without confusing

his readership. Readers have access to both plot lines. Instead of misleading the audience with an unreliable narrator, Hillerman shows trust in his audience by sharing all of the information so protagonists and readers arrive simultaneously at an equally satisfying conclusion. It's more work for the author, perhaps, but it empowers the reader who is privy to the entire story as it unfolds.

“In confirming the idea that, despite their different approaches to their police work, Leaphorn and Chee share an identity through their mutual participation on the cases, Hillerman provides Chee an independent solution for the interconnected cases” (Reilly, 131). By default, if Chee has an independent solution for the interconnected cases, then so, too, must Joe Leaphorn.

“‘Officer Jim Chee,’ Streib said. ‘Know him?’ ‘I know him,’ said Leaphorn, wishing he knew him better” (39).

Jim Chee is a young, relatively inexperienced police detective who follows the traditional Navajo way of life. He has performed the Blessing Way and announced his availability as a *yataalii*, a shaman willing to perform Navajo spiritual ceremonies. “The ceremonies sustain *Dineh* [Navajo] culture by teaching about the universe and the Navajo’s place in it; healing returns the individual to communion with the Holy Ones and the Creator” (Brunsdale, 388). “Like a nonfundamentalist Christian, Chee believed in the poetic metaphor of the Navajo story of human genesis” (55). In an efficient comingling of point of view, we get a description of Chee’s appearance through Joe Leaphorn’s eyes: “A longish, narrow face fitting a longish, narrow body—all shoulders and no hips. . . . Pure Athapaskan genetics. Tall, long torso, narrow pelvis, destined to be a skinny old man” (41).

Hillerman takes advantage of Navajo cultural tradition to subtly repeat, thus reinforce his characters’ names in the reader’s consciousness. “The rule I force myself to follow is that any

ethnographic material I work in must be germane to the plot” (Hillerman and Bulow, 39). Jim Chee’s conditioning—traditional Navajo mandates that he introduce himself in the customary Navajo fashion—by naming his clans. “‘My clan is Slow Talking People,’ Chee said. . . . ‘Born for the Salt *Dinee*’ ” (59). “Diné or Dine is also used by Navajo people when referring to themselves—literally ‘The People’ ” (Iverson and Roessel, 1). Adding the additional information about Chee’s family is both a cultural tradition and a useful mnemonic device. When it suits him, however, Chee ad libs a bit, “‘I am born for Red Forehead People, the son of Tessie Chee, but now I work for all of the Dinee. For the Navajo Tribal Police’ ” (32). “Chee was patient” (149). “Chee’s conditioning was to endure” (168–169).

“Leaphorn appreciated those who endured” (141). Leaphorn, by his own admission, was the “‘Checkerboard type’ [of Navajo]. He represented—according to this authority—a blood/gene mix with the Pueblo peoples” (41). Although Leaphorn has moved away from the Native American way of life and embraced the Anglo world of seeking success by attaining managerial status within the police force, he retains much of the Navajo outlook he learned as a child. Leaphorn came from the *Taadii Dinee*, the Slow-Talking People Clan. “His mother had buried his umbilical cord at the roots of a piñon beside their Hogan—the traditional Navajo ritual for binding a child to his family and his people” (88). The contradictions between modern society and traditional Navajo customs add emotional complexity to Leaphorn.

Jim Chee faces the same inter-societal challenges but his perspective is influenced by the “old ways,” as evidenced by his desire to become a shaman and keep such ancient traditions alive. The born for, or paternal family of the Slow-Talking People Clan is shared by both protagonists, a deeply spiritual and personal bond and a form of repetition at the most basic

genetic level. The end result is a form of repetition that subtly elevates and enlightens the reader while remaining germane to the plot.

Hillerman also uses his knowledge of Native American beliefs and mannerisms to skillfully direct the reader's attention between characters engaged in a conversation.

If it's dialogue, I listen to it in my mind. Does it sound like this fat, short-winded, semiliterate fellow talking to a man for whom he has little respect? Right cadence? Suitably incoherent for the spoken word? And so forth. (Hillerman and Bulow, 36)

As an inexperienced actress doesn't know what to do with her hands while on stage, a neophyte writer uses "he said, she said" in long passages of dialogue, while a gifted writer creates characters with mannerisms that add depth to otherwise simple literary devices. A character alerts the reader to the Navajo belief that it is rude to point directly at a person when he, [Yellowhorse] "extracted the cigarette and came just close enough to pointing it at Leaphorn to imply the insult without delivering it. Navajos do not point at one another" (26).

In a scene with three people engaged in a conversation, "'This man'—Chee indicated Kennedy Navajo fashion, by shifting his lips in Kennedy's direction—'is an FBI officer' " (32). Characters jerk their chins instead of pointing. Two suspicious characters don't follow the traditional customs, which calls into question their motives. "Under the old rules of Navajo courtesy, they would have identified themselves first, since he [Chee] was a stranger in the old country" (59). Chee's instincts prove to be correct. The two suspicious characters are bootleggers. In a separate confrontational scene, "She [Janet Pete] pointed a thumb in Chee's direction, something one polite Navajo did not do to another" (80). By repeating Native American mannerisms and using unique cultural behaviors instead of dialogue tags, Hillerman

adds emotion, ethnic flair, and depth to the narrative, subtly exposing readers to the rich, inner workings of Native American culture.

The Native American reputation of being able to read tracks is used as an integral part of the plot without stereotyping, too, showcasing Hillerman's deft touch with cultural sensitivity and helps explain why he was named a "Friend of the Navajo Nation," the first and only non-Navajo (*belagana*) to be given that honor.

As Joe Leaphorn deduces after examining Wilson Sam's murder scene, so does Jim Chee deduce after careful examination of Dugai Endocheeney's murder site: both victims were killed by strangers. At Wilson Sam's murder scene, Jim Chee observes, "He [the killer] didn't step over the body. . . . when he walked down the arroyo, he took care not to walk where the water had run. And on the way back to the road, a snake had been across there, and when he crossed its path he shuffled his feet. . . . Or do white men do that too?" (49)

"I doubt it' . . . Leaphorn tried to remember. . . . His grandmother had told him that if you walk across a snake's trail without erasing it by shuffling your feet, the snake would follow you home" (49). The interplay between protagonists allows Hillerman to repeat this important clue while adding a unique and interesting ethnological observation. The clues are repeated at Dugai Endocheeney's murder site.

"'You know,' he [Chee] said slowly, 'I think the fellow who knifed Endocheeney was a stranger, too. Didn't know the country. . . . I spent some time looking around. There were two or three easier ways to get down to Endocheeney. Easier than the way he took. . . . Different tracks'" (102-03).

I never begin a chapter without a detailed and exact vision of the place it will happen, the nature of the actors in the scene, the mood of the protagonist, the

temperature, direction of the breeze, the aromas it carries, time of day, the way the light falls, the cloud formation. In other words, I need literally everything imaginable to be in place in my mind. (Hillerman and Bulow, 35)

Jim Chee is in a unique position to offer readers a detailed and exact vision of the unfamiliar attributes and challenging concepts of a vast, foreign countryside sparsely populated with people and vegetation. The southwestern desert landscape might appear bleak to someone accustomed to the forests of the Northwest or the verdant landscapes of the South, but since Jim Chee is a Native American with an emotional and spiritual connection to the land, “He could smell dust and the peculiar aroma of wilted, dying leaves—an odor familiar to Chee and all Navajos, and one that evoked unpleasant boyhood memories. Of thin horses, dying sheep, worried adults. Of not quite enough to eat” (13). After Chee survives the attempt on his life, he will take advantage of the drought conditions to allay his fears that he is being followed—that another attempt is imminent. He parks his car out of sight and notices that “the only dust on the Badwater road is wind dust. . . . no rain was falling” (54), meaning he isn’t being followed and it’s safe to proceed. Chee also pays close attention to the weather, which allows Hillerman to use a storm as both a transitional device, a time stamp, and as a place marker to track Chee’s progress over the vast distances in the Southwest. “Cumulous clouds climbing the sky over the Chuskas were tall enough to form the anvil tops that promised rain” (40). Chee drives toward Shiprock, where “The shadow of the thunderhead over the Chuskas had moved across the Shiprock landscape . . .” (44). Chee heads south after a meeting with Leaphorn. “The afternoon clouds had formed over Black Mesa, far to the south, producing lightning and air turbulence. . . . no rain was falling” (54).

Hillerman also repeats his descriptions of settings and physical surroundings to build suspense and maintain continuity. Repeating observed phenomena—such as dust—adds impact and establishes commonality between the two protagonists. Chee “could smell dust . . . how long had it been since it rained?” (13) “Leaphorn grunted. He was watching the dust storm moving down the valley with its outrider of whirlwinds” (86). Drought conditions preserve similar crime scenes so both protagonists, Chee and Leaphorn, can glean additional clues from areas undisturbed by rain. Rain would have washed away the footprints that identify the murderer as a Native American, since the footprints demonstrate a reluctance to step over the body, skirt the area where water is channeled, and reflect the shuffling of feet to erase the tracks a snake makes. These cultural traditions add depth and meaning to repeated clues while reinforcing the drought theme, building suspense, and enriching the reading experience with ethnological insights.

Another ethnological insight is introduced at the end of chapter one, a foreshadowing stratagem that warns Jim Chee of additional danger: “he could see lightning briefly illuminate the dying thunderhead . . . In Navajo mythology, lightning symbolized the wrath of the *yeyi*, the Holy People venting their malice against the earth” (14). The ethnological and mythological clue is repeated for Joe Leaphorn. “Through the rain-streaked window he [Leaphorn] saw a triple-flash lightning. . . . And he could think of nothing he could tell them—nothing specific—that would instill in them the terrible sense of urgency that he felt himself” (162–63). Later, the waning of the storm and the diminishing lightning flashes and thunder are used as a positive sign in chapter twenty-one. “‘I think he may be alive,’ Skeet said” (174). In the opening paragraph of the next chapter, we learn, “By midnight there was no more thunder” (175). Jim Chee will survive the gun shot, the angry *yeyi* gods introduced in the first chapter are alluded to, and the storm has come full circle: “the cloud formation had sagged into itself, flattening to a vast

general rain—the sort Navajos call female rain . . .” (175), thus thunder, and ultimately the storm as a repeated weather phenomenon, links early, middle, and late sections of the book. The dissolution of the storm that closes chapter twenty-one and opens chapter twenty-two is a useful metaphor and evocative transition to the status of Joe Leaphorn’s concern about his ailing wife: “the world outside the glass where Leaphorn stood was brilliant with sun—clean and calm” (175). Leaphorn has just learned that an operable brain tumor, not Alzheimer’s disease, is responsible for his wife’s declining health. The weather is an appropriate, repeated metaphor that reflects Leaphorn’s relief at a hopeful prognosis.

Repetition is used to build tension through foreshadowing when Jim Chee survives three shotgun blasts in chapter one. “Light and sound struck simultaneously . . . and a boom which slammed into his eardrums and repeated itself. Again. And again” (13). A shotgun holds three shells, so Hillerman, in customary repetitive form, takes advantage of this feature in both attacks on Jim Chee, first with the repetitive use of “again,” and then later in the book during the second attempt on his life—since an attempted murder naturally leads toward a repeated attempt if the killer is determined (or under the spell of witchcraft). “He [Chee] was not conscious of any separation between the boom of the shotgun and the impact that staggered him. . . . the feel of claws tearing against his upper back and neck muscles and the back of his head. . . . Three shots, he remembered” (167).

Both Jim Chee and Joe Leaphorn suffer minor gunshot wounds, Leaphorn in the arm and Chee in the upper back and head—although, technically, a minor gunshot wound is either an oxymoron or an incident that happens to someone else. Leaphorn only gets shot at once, but repeated attacks on both protagonists adds a sense of immediacy to their investigation.

Even in retrospect, Leaphorn didn't remember hearing the shot—being aware first of pain. Something that felt like a hammer struck his right forearm and the flashlight was suddenly gone. Leaphorn was sitting on the ground . . . aware that his forearm hurt so badly that something must have broken it.” (113)

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Repeating the name of a minor character, as Tony Hillerman does with Janet Pete, is another technique, one that firmly establishes the identity of the speaker and removes potential confusion. Hillerman uses the proper names of characters in most dialogue exchanges instead of “he said/she said.”

Although a minor character, Janet Pete shares the duality of Jim Chee and Joe Leaphorn's challenge to straddle the demands of the white professional world while following the Navajo path of beauty. Like Leaphorn and Chee, who both have Masters of Anthropology degrees, Janet Pete has also attained an advanced level of education as a lawyer. “DNA was the popular acronym for *Dinebeina Nahiilan be Agaditahe*, which translates roughly into ‘People Who Talk Fast and Help the People Out,’ and which was the Navajo Nation's version of [sic] Legal Aid Society/public defender organization” (79). Janet Pete will also emerge as a love interest, handled with the customary “G” rating that Tony Hillerman defends in an interview with Ernie Bulow: “my own feeling [is] that there is no place in the kind of book I write for graphic violence. It destroys the kind of mood I'm trying to build. I don't want to show the reader sadism, extreme suffering, because that would be damaging to the structure of the books. The same is true of a sex scene” (Hillerman and Bulow, 56). True to his expressed beliefs, and a literal translation of “love interest,” Janet Pete and Jim Chee don't progress to holding hands until the next book. The following quotes highlight the “interest” but not the consummation.

Janet Pete was wearing a pale blue blouse and a tweed skirt. The legs she swung out of the car were very nice legs. And Miss Pete noticed that Chee had noticed. (133) A Navajo complexion, Chee thought. Janet Pete studied her hands, which were small and narrow, with long slender fingers. . . . Nice feminine hands, Chee thought. (134) Perfect skin. Smooth, glossy. Janet Pete would never have a freckle. Janet Pete wouldn't have a wrinkle until she was old. (139)

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Typically, Hillerman will use a minor character's proper name at least twice in the opening paragraph and repeatedly in the opening dialogue exchange, as he does when introducing the minor character of Dr. Randall Jenks. Jenks' name is mentioned three times in the opening paragraph of chapter seven and used to start the first dialogue exchange immediately afterward. "'Have a seat,' Dr. Jenks said . . .'" (66). Hillerman's use of the character's name instead of the "he said/she said" method is a stylistic choice and calculated use of repetition. A version of Dr. Jenks' proper name is repeated forty-three times in the short, four-page chapter where he is introduced. Varying the forms of his address: "Dr. Randall Jenks," "Jenks," "Dr. Jenks," "Randall Jenks," lessens the overload of too much repetition while effectively defining a minor character and ensuring the reader knows who is speaking. Also repeated are the names of the murder victims—Irna Onesalt, Dugai Endocheeney, and Wilson Sam—when Leaphorn asks Dr. Jenks for a list of his patients' death dates. In addition to reminding the reader of the murder victims' identities, the repetitive nature of the list also serves as a transitional device between scenes and protagonists.

The murder victims' names are also on the list Joe Leaphorn gets from Dr. Jenks, in addition to being repeated when Jim Chee obtains a duplicate list from a clerk at Badwater

Clinic. Chee and Leaphorn's methods are different, but the results are the same, with the reader benefiting from having this particular set of clues repeated and reinforced, along with the names of the murder victims, Irma Onesalt, Dugai Endocheeney, and Wilson Sam. But just in case the reader hasn't been paying attention, Jim Chee repeats the names on the shared list in a phone message for Joe Leaphorn, subtly adding Dr. Yellowhorse's name to the list and providing another clue that will enable Leaphorn to solve an additional part of the mystery.

Hillerman avoids the temptation to use minor characters simply as a device to advance the plot, choosing instead to use repetition as a strength by reusing and developing minor characters. One of these, Officer Al Gorman, is introduced early in the novel and used to demonstrate Joe Leaphorn's powers of observation. "One was a jolly-looking, plump young man . . . The plump officer had not noticed Leaphorn's car parked under the olive tree" (41). "Plump Cop" is Officer Al Gorman, who accompanies Leaphorn to Wilson Sam's murder site in a different scene. Prior to this scene, murder victim number three—Wilson Sam—has been given little mention. Hillerman makes up for this atypical oversight by mentioning Wilson Sam's name sixteen times at the murder site. Al Gorman rates eighteen mentions, in addition to having his name used in a transitional sentence from the previous scene.

Repeating a character's name is an efficient transitional device when used to connect different scenes and guide the reader across a paginated scene break. "He [Leaphorn] asked for Officer Al Gorman. [Scene Break] Now it was early afternoon. Gorman had met him, as requested, at the Mexican Water Trading Post" (92).

Minor characters can provide comic relief, as well, and in predictable Hillerman repetitive fashion, offer the opportunity to reinforce a murder victim's name.

Welfare Woman. Welfare Woman and the Wrong Begay incident. Irma Onesalt was Welfare Woman's name, a worker in the tribal Social Services office, tough as saddle leather, mean as a snake. . . . It was said they'd never figure out who shot Welfare Woman because everybody who ever had to work with her would be a logical suspect with a sound motive. (12)

In a humorous and clever way of adding complexity, thus memorability to a minor character, Hillerman has Roosevelt Bistie admit to a murder he didn't commit, the murder of victim number two: Dugai Endocheeny. "'Weird one,' Streib had said. 'Kennedy picked up Roosevelt Bistie, and Roosevelt Bistie said he shot Endocheeny' " (38). The problem, and the humor, is that Endocheeny was stabbed to death. The result, however, is an opportunity to add memorability to the minor character of Roosevelt Bistie while reinforcing the problem of solving Dugai Endocheeny's murder. The unusual Navajo names add an element of uncommonness—also an effective mnemonic device. In addition to levity, the minor character of Roosevelt Bistie provides Jim Chee with an opportunity to observe a bone bead in Bistie's possession: a tangible link to all three murders, the attempt on his own life, and a tenuous connection to Badwater Clinic where the real murderer, Dr. Yellowhorse, is practicing witchcraft in addition to medicine.

The detail of bone beads offers insight into Navajo beliefs about witchcraft in addition to serving as a tangible link between the murderer and his victims. "Upfield had shown me—and a good many other mystery writers—how both ethnography and geography can be used in a plot and how they can enrich an old literary form" (Winks, 1031).

He [Chee] pulled out his wallet again and extracted from it something small and roundish and ivory-colored. He handed it to Leaphorn. It was a bead formed, apparently, from bone. . . . If you believed in witches, Leaphorn thought, as Chee

probably did, you would have to think of a bone bead as a way witches killed—the bone being human, and the fatal illness being corpse sickness. (51)

If a clue is introduced, it will be repeated, and bone beads are no exception. A bone bead of the type used in necklaces, in addition to acts of witchcraft, is found beneath the bed in Jim Chee's trailer after the murder attempt. "And if you loaded your own shotgun shells, or even if you didn't, you would know how simple it would be to remove the little plug from the end, and the wadding, and add a bone bead to the lead pellets" (51). Thus, the clue that unlocks the mystery of three homicides is introduced—a clue that will be repeated many, many times and ultimately connect all of the murders with the murderer.

Since the bone beads are such an important clue, Hillerman uses this item to highlight the difference between protagonists. Both Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee investigate the connection that bone beads have with the murder victims and the attempt on Chee's life, but from vastly different approaches, thus the repetition of this clue remains poignant without growing tiresome.

Joe Leaphorn stays in persona and uses a modern police-procedural approach when investigating the interconnected nature of the bone beads. He consults with pathologist Dr. Jenks and a fellow law enforcement professional, FBI Agent Dilly Streib:

They say a bone was found in Endocheeney's corpse. (123) Jim Chee found a little bone bead in his house trailer along with the lead pellets after somebody shot the shotgun through his wall. . . . Roosevelt Bistie was carrying a little bone bead in his wallet. The bits of bone seemed to link Jim Chee, and Roosevelt Bistie and Dugai Endocheeney. Dilly Streib's call had confirmed that. (142) The circle was thus complete. The bone beads linked Wilson Sam and Endocheeney and Jim Chee and Roosevelt Bistie. (147)

The bone bead found in Jim Chee's trailer gives Joe Leaphorn an opportunity to connect two of the three murder victims with Badwater Clinic and also gives the author an opportunity to repeat the name of murder victim number one, Irma Onesalt, eight times, and the name of murder victim number two, Dugai Endocheeney, three times. Wilson Sam, murder victim number three, is also mentioned, and in connection with the other two victims, thus repeating and strengthening the connection between all three murder victims and Badwater Clinic—where the witch is spreading corpse sickness.

Witchcraft is a major theme in the novel, thus used repeatedly, beginning with its introduction in the title: *Skinwalkers*. “The origin story of the Navajos explained witchcraft clearly enough, and it was a logical part of the philosophy on which the *Dinee* had founded their culture. If there was good, and harmony, and beauty on the east side of reality, then there must be evil, chaos, and ugliness to the west” (55).

To develop the equivalent reality of fiction, the writer must find convenient and effective images to help readers interpret the meaning of the written word.

Nothing is more convenient for the purpose than a metaphor, something that stands for itself and for something else at the same time. When the genre concerns good and evil, and the cultural setting includes belief in good and evil dramatized in the appearance of witchcraft, economical metaphor springs forth. (Reilly, 128)

“Everybody also knew Leaphorn had no tolerance for witchcraft or anything about it—for those who believed in witches, or for stories about *skinwalkers*, corpse sickness, the cures for same, and everything connected with Navajo Wolves.” *Skinwalkers*, corpse sickness, or Navajo Wolves: three synonyms for witches and a powerful use of repetition. In traditional Navajo beliefs, contact with a corpse leads to physical and mental illness, hence the term “corpse

sickness.” The practical and sanitary reasons for limiting exposure to dead bodies is reinforced through the formation of a spiritual belief.

In Hillerman’s novel *Dance Hall of the Dead*, Father Ingles asks Leaphorn if he believes in witches. Leaphorn replies. “That’s like me asking you if you believe in sin, father” (*Dance Hall of the Dead*, 141).

Chee believed in witchcraft in an abstract way. . . . But he knew witchcraft in its basic form stalked the *Dinee*. He saw it in people who had turned deliberately and with malice from the beauty of the Navajo Way and embraced the evil that was its opposite. He saw it every day he worked as a policeman—in those who sold whiskey to children, in those who bought videocassette recorders while their relatives were hungry, in the knife fights in a Gallup alley, in beaten wives and abandoned children. (170)

Witches serve as “scapegoats, blamed when people get sick, cattle die, or accidents happen” (Breen, 322–32). “And this was, in Leaphorn’s thinking, the very worst part of a sick tradition—this cruel business of killing a scapegoat when things went wrong. . . . It had converted Leaphorn’s contempt for witchcraft into hatred” (104). Because Jim Chee follows the traditional Navajo ways, he respects the Navajo aversion to discussing witchcraft. “Witches hated to be talked about—to even have their evil business discussed” (83). Although Leaphorn considers himself to have a modern viewpoint that discounts “witchcraft,” he uses the traditional name: “‘*Anti’ll*,’ he [Leaphorn] said sourly, using the Navajo word for witchcraft” (188). *Belagana* FBI Agent Streib shares Leaphorn’s distaste for witchcraft, repeats the important clue about bone beads, and adds an additional synonym. “‘Bone,’ he said. ‘As in *skinwalking*. As in witchcraft. As in corpse sickness’ ” (123).

In a repeated pattern which subtly foreshadows an impending confrontation, when a letter arrives for Jim Chee, the reference to a crystal gazer is repeated three times, twice in one sentence: “We took him to the Crystal Gazer over at the Badwater Clinic and the Crystal Gazer said he should let the *belagana* doctor there give him some medicine” (97). The repetition of “Crystal Gazer” in connection with Badwater Clinic is a clear indication this is an important clue. The letter is a ruse to lure Jim Chee into an ambush while reinforcing the mounting evidence that Dr. Yellowhorse is the villain. The connection between the bone beads and the crystal gazer, now that both clues have been repeated, is developed in the ensuing chapters.

Chee follows the traditional Navajo approach when he investigates the bone beads, thus this clue is both personalized and repeated when it is reused to link the recently murdered Roosevelt Bistie to Wilson Sam and Dugai Endocheeney. Chee, by virtue of his shamanic knowledge and in-depth familiarity with traditional healing ceremonies, correctly extrapolates the murderer’s identity in the following scene:

Chee’s flashlight now was focused above the bullet wounds at a place on Bistie’s left breast—a reddish mark, narrow, perhaps a half-inch long, where a cut was healing. . . . The hand trembler (or stargazer, or listener, or crystal gazer, or whatever sort of shaman Bistie had chosen to diagnose his sickness) explaining to Bistie that someone had witched him, telling Bistie that a *skinwalker* had blown the fatal bone fragment into him. And then the ritual cut of the skin, the sucking at the breast, the bone coming out of Bistie, appearing on the shaman’s tongue. And Bistie putting the bone in his billfold, and paying his fee, and setting out to save himself by killing the witch and reversing the dreaded corpse sickness. (117)

Whether inserting bone beads in patients, or pretending to extract bone beads from unsuspecting victims during a sham curing ceremony, Dr. Yellowhorse spreads corpse sickness and strays from the path of beauty. Dr. Yellowhorse is the *anti'll*, the witch. The use of “crystal gazer” in the above block quotation is subtly repeated through the use of synonyms, “stargazer” and “listener.” “Dr. Yellowhorse, charlatan and eventual villain of the piece, earns attention because his career presents the ethical theme of the novel” (Reilly, 134). “‘I’m a crystal gazer,’ Yellowhorse said. ‘Always had a gift for it. . . . Now, the American Medical Association hasn’t approved it, but it’s free. . . . the sick ones come in. Wouldn’t have come in otherwise’ ” (26–27). The lies facilitate medical treatment, so they are easily justifiable; even Joe Leaphorn, who represents law and order, agrees. The contagious nature of lying infects Yellowhorse’s efforts to raise money, however, and Irma Onesalt’s discovery of his fraudulent billing practices necessitates her murder. The lies are repeated and murder becomes viral as Yellowhorse strays further from the legal, ethical, traditional, and spiritual path to embrace witchcraft and become a *skinwalker*—the title character of the book.

The plot lines converge; both protagonists are present when the witch is exposed at Badwater Clinic. In an appropriate act of *hozro*—harmony—Dr. Yellowhorse suffers the same fate as those he has witched: murder. The ending foretold in chapter four is repeated, because repetition, as demonstrated, is an effective stylistic device: “The skinwalker had caused it, for some reason lost in the dark heart of malicious evil. Thus the skinwalker must die” (36). In chapter twenty, Jim Chee meets the young, impressionable mother responsible for the attack that opens the novel. “‘I am going to tell you who the witch is,’ Jim Chee said. . . . I am not a witch who harmed your child. And I will tell you who the witch is that put his curse on you” (170). Dr. Yellowhorse is the witch, a person who has infected others with the illness that turns them into

murderers. “She [the mother] was killing him [Dr. Yellowhorse] to reverse the witchcraft . . .” (179), and so the woman responsible for the attack on Jim Chee that is the inciting event in the first chapter, closes the novel by killing Dr. Yellowhorse, thus reversing the witch sickness and stopping the *skinwalker*.

If it’s important, it’s repeated. *Skinwalkers* was Tony Hillerman’s breakout book and his first novel to repeat plot lines in order to facilitate the use of two protagonists. Repetition proved to be such a flexible narrative device that he used two protagonists with repeated plot lines in every novel afterward. Whether repetition is used to establish memorable events, introduce clues, add ethnological and anthropological information, as a foreshadowing device, to maintain continuity between dual protagonists, or develop minor characters, Hillerman subtly employs repetition to further immerse his readers in the story, ultimately broadening and elevating the detective mystery genre.

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