

California State University, San Bernardino

**CSUSB ScholarWorks**

---

Theses Digitization Project

John M. Pfau Library

---

1993

## **Contemporary American Indian storyteller, N. Scott Momaday: Rhetorical tradition and renewal**

Cheryl Laverne Elsmore

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/etd-project>



Part of the [Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons](#)

---

### **Recommended Citation**

Elsmore, Cheryl Laverne, "Contemporary American Indian storyteller, N. Scott Momaday: Rhetorical tradition and renewal" (1993). *Theses Digitization Project*. 629.

<https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/etd-project/629>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the John M. Pfau Library at CSUSB ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses Digitization Project by an authorized administrator of CSUSB ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@csusb.edu](mailto:scholarworks@csusb.edu).

**CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN INDIAN STORYTELLER**

**N. SCOTT MOMADAY:**

**RHETORICAL TRADITION AND RENEWAL**

---

**A Thesis**

**Presented to the**

**Faculty of**

**California State University,**

**San Bernardino**

---

**In Partial Fulfillment**

**of the Requirements for the Degree**

**Master of Arts**

**in**

**English Compositon**

---

**by**

**Cheryl Laverne Elsmore**

**September 1993**

**CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN INDIAN STORYTELLER**

**N. SCOTT MOMADAY:**

**RHETORICAL TRADITION AND RENEWAL**

---

**A Thesis**

**Presented to the**

**Faculty of**

**California State University,**

**San Bernardino**

---

**by**

**Cheryl Laverne Elsmore**

**September, 1993**

**Approved by:**

[Redacted Signature]

**Rodney, Simard, Chair, English**

*28 July 1993*  
**Date**

[Redacted Signature]  
**Sandra Kamusikiri**

[Redacted Signature]  
**Jennifer Randisi**

## ABSTRACT

Oral traditions, which can be defined as rhetorical methods of verbal communication intended to transmit essential cultural values to the next generation, are as vital a part of the lives of many Native Americans today as they have been for centuries. Some critics feel that one essential ingredient of these traditions is the performance dimension; the rhetorical dichotomy of storyteller/audience cannot be replicated by the author/reader relationship. However, a new generation of Native American storytellers has evolved in the recent past who seek to modify this storytelling experience and present it in a European literary form. N. Scott Momaday is one of this new generation, and has been considered by some to be a bridge between the oral and written traditions.

This study proposes that there are essential elements of oral traditions that can survive and even thrive in a literary form. The performance dimension is only one part of the whole, and oral traditions exist beyond the storytelling event. Indian authors, and N. Scott Momaday in particular, incorporate elements of these traditions in their works by using rhetorical techniques in a uniquely Native American way. Thus they use the medium of print to transmit oral values to the next generation of Native Americans and other readers who spend the time to seek to understand cultures that are different from their own.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT. . . . .	iii
INTRODUCTION. . . . .	1
CHAPTER ONE . . . . .	3
Orality Versus Literacy. . . . .	3
Event or Artifact? . . . . .	7
CHAPTER TWO . . . . .	16
Characteristics of Oral Traditions . . . . .	16
Promote Harmony . . . . .	17
Show Appropriate Behavior . . . . .	20
Foster Understanding Between Generations Now Living .	21
Form a Bridge Between Ancient Cultures and Living Generations . . . . .	23
Give a Feeling of Self-Worth. . . . .	25
Help to Understand the Human Experience . . . . .	28
Demonstrate the Importance of Nature. . . . .	29
Illustrate the Sacred Nature of Storytelling. . . . .	35
Instruct in Social Mores. . . . .	39
Create Reality through the Use of Words . . . . .	43
CHAPTER THREE. . . . .	49
Rhetorical Devices Used in Oral Traditions. . . . .	49
Symbols . . . . .	49
Repetition. . . . .	53
Ambiguity . . . . .	58
Circularity . . . . .	62
Silence. . . . .	65

<b>Sacred Time.</b> . . . . .	<b>67</b>
<b>CONCLUSION</b> . . . . .	<b>70</b>
<b>WORKS CITED.</b> . . . . .	<b>72</b>

## INTRODUCTION

Imagine with me:

It is night. The fire is burning brightly. The shadows from its burning dance on the walls of the ceremonial lodge as the door opens and the participants file in. They have undergone a ceremonial cleansing and have fasted to prepare themselves for this important occasion. The storyteller enters. After a long silence, the storyteller opens the session with a formal word, such as "Dypaloh," and begins to tell her story. As she narrates, her voice changes for every character and for every occasion. Sometimes it is harsh; sometimes it is gentle and caressing; sometimes it is mocking and sarcastic. She repeats herself often; her story goes around in circles and has many symbols. But as she speaks, the audience is not confused, nor are they quiet; the listeners respond to the storyteller's every mood swing, to her every voice change. One responds even moreso than the others: the special respondent who makes sure that everything is going according to the way it should and that every response is appropriate. The audience laughs together; they feel strong emotions together; they SEE the story together. When it is finished and the storyteller closes with another formal word, such as "Qtsedaba," the

audience has been entertained and taught. They feel a unity within themselves as a tribe and a renewed appreciation for the culture and heritage that is theirs.



## CHAPTER ONE

The foregoing scene is representative of a storytelling event in American Indian oral traditions. Many variations of the occasion could exist because oral traditions are living entities and their stories change and grow with each telling. However, stories told in the Native American oral traditions have several common characteristics, and one of the two major purposes of this study is to examine the idea of storytelling in Native American oral traditions to find these common characteristics. The other main purpose is to examine the prose of one major Native American author, N. Scott Momaday, to see if his works contain these essential elements.

### ORALITY VERSUS LITERACY

Native American stories usually fall into two categories: myth and tale. The scene described above would probably occasion the telling of a myth, which is a sacred story that might deal with the creation of the people or other sacrosanct events. Tales usually deal with more common events and seldom require the ceremonial trappings that are associated with the telling of myths. With a telling of either, however, two ingredients are essential: a storyteller and an audience. The oral tradition can be defined as a rhetorical method of verbal communication intended to transmit didactically essential cultural values

to the next generation within a cultural group. Even though Western society springs from a rich oral tradition, centuries of literacy, or communication through written means, have changed and modified the thinking of members of this populace. Therefore, as members of a literate society examine this definition, they perhaps feel uncomfortable with the word verbal. A member of a society that has relied extensively on written words for centuries has difficulty understanding how a person from a primary oral society--one with no written words (Ong 11)--transmits knowledge from one generation to another without writing anything down. As Eric Havelock says, "We lack a model for it in our own consciousness" (66). Literate societies have sometimes looked down upon those societies without written language as being inferior. However, although this phenomenon of a primary oral culture is an alien concept to the literate world, literate peoples must not forget that language itself is primarily oral. According to Walter Ong, thousands--perhaps tens of thousands--of languages exist, and most of them have not been written down. Of those that have been transcribed, only a fraction have produced a literature (7). Oral traditions serve to perpetuate and enlarge the rich and varied cultures of those societies without written literatures. Because of the primacy of the spoken word, the importance of the role oral tradition plays in many societies today must be examined, especially

in those societies native to the Americas. For the purpose of this paper, the terms "Native American" and "American Indian" will be used interchangeably, even though the term "American Indian" usually refers ethnically to those cultures indigenous to the contiguous United States and the term "Native American" usually refers politically to those groups residing in both hemispheres of the Americas. The oral traditions that are present in these societies are so strong that they inform, or imbue with special qualities, the lives of those members of society who are touched by them. Even if those individuals become literate and come to rely somewhat on the written word in many areas of their lives, the influence of the oral traditions is still alive and is an important link to promoting ancient cultural values. Because of the scarcity or absence of written material to promote cultural unity, the spoken word is much more important and fills a more essential and functional role in a society that has its roots in the oral tradition. Therefore, Havelock points out, stories told in the oral tradition are often artistic creations, but their main function is to preserve the tradition of the group (81). This idea of communal purpose lies at the heart of the oral tradition. Any other idea is subordinate.

Even though oral traditions exist in all societies, they are a vital tool used to preserve the culture of a non-literate people (a society with no written language).

Paula Gunn Allen feels it serves as a binding force to hold tribes together: "the oral tradition has prevented the complete destruction of the web, the ultimate disruption of tribal ways" (The Sacred Hoop 45). Simon Ortiz also expresses this feeling:

what it means to me and to other people who have grown up in that tradition is that whole process, that whole process which involves a lifestyle. . . . The importance really of the oral tradition is the importance of what your philosophy is, in terms of your identity. . . . (Coltelli 104)

The history of oral traditions cannot be accurately traced because the spoken word is evanescent and becomes non-existent even as it occurs, so some of the history of oral traditions has been lost in prehistory. However, ever since people began to write, they have attempted to use this method of communication as one way to preserve stories from their oral traditions. Because of these attempts, we have the Iliad and the Odyssey by Homer. Literate anthropologists, from missionaries to academically trained professionals, have also attempted to preserve the stories of non-literate storytellers. These anthropologists have been invaluable throughout the world because they recorded stories that could have been lost forever. As they documented the oral traditions of the Native Americans, however, they encountered cultures that were not as endangered as they assumed.

The essential oral traditions of the American Indian

have been around for millennia. As N. Scott Momaday writes in "The Native Voice:"

The tradition has evolved over a very long and unrecorded period of time in numerous remote and complex languages, and it reflects a social and cultural diversity that is redoubtable. . . . It extends from prehistoric times to the present, and it is the very integrity of American literature. . . . (6, 15).

As historians and anthropologists recorded as many stories as they could from oral traditions so that they would not be lost, older members of the tribe, who knew the resiliency of these stories, looked on in amazement. Elizabeth Cook notes, "Amidst the flurry of activity to 'preserve the dying culture,' old tribesmen smile and say, 'The white man is trying to save something which cannot be destroyed'" ("Propulsives in Native American Literature" 272). The oral traditions of American Indians are "achronological and ahistorical" (Allen, *The Sacred Hoop* 100) and transcend the bounds of time.

#### EVENT OR ARTIFACT?

A new generation of storytellers has evolved in the very recent past (especially considering that American Indian oral traditions are probably more than 30,000 years old) who seek to modify this storytelling experience and present it in a literary form. They attempt to adapt the storyteller/audience relationship into a writer/reader

dialectic. Many critics feel that the integrity of the oral tradition cannot survive such a metamorphosis. They feel that the performance dimension is an essential ingredient, while those who seek to modify the tradition feel it is a very important, but non-essential ingredient that can be modified by the occasion.

N. Scott Momaday is one of this new generation of storytellers. He considers himself a storyteller in an American Indian oral tradition and has said so many times. One of the most pointed references occurs when an interviewer, Dagmar Weiler, asks him if he is a storyteller and Momaday answers, "Yes, absolutely. You've got it. You have defined me" (126). Momaday is making no idle claim here because one of the definitions he, himself, has given of a storyteller is "the living bridge between the human and the divine" ("To Save a Great Vision" 32). So, an examination into the issue of the possibility of American Indian oral traditions even surviving a change into literary forms requires a survey into Momaday's works to see if his assertion of being a storyteller in the oral tradition is valid.

Several ethnologists and translators have produced texts of oral performances, and some have tried by ingenious methods to recreate the feeling of event by various printing procedures and by noting the audience's response to the storyteller's narrative (Bierhorst, The Red

Swan; Tedlock, Finding the Center). Others argue that any attempt to recreate the oral performance is unsatisfactory because the event must be viewed holistically with no one element (including the text of the story) dominating the others (Georges 316-17). Any attempt to reprint the text alone is futile because "every fullness . . . entails its inevitable emptiness, presence its inevitable absence (Krupat, The Voice in the Margin 26). Supporting this, Barre Toelken notes that Yellowman, a Navajo storyteller, feels that stories (especially Coyote stories) are "not narratives (in our sense of the term) but [are] dramatic presentations performed within certain cultural contexts for moral and philosophical reasons" (83).

Another reason why many feel that oral traditions are events, not texts, is the vital need for an audience to complete the experiential performance event. Toelken notes that an audience adds a special aspect to the stories that is not evident when the storyteller is speaking for a tape recording. Tales told without an audience are "lacking in the special intonations, changes in speed, pacing and dramatic pauses" (80) that are found when a performance is given before an audience. Also, several critics have noted the importance of a special respondent who corrects the storyteller if needed, fills in any gaps that are created, and at times even speaks more than the actual storyteller (Sherzer 152; Tedlock, "Toward an Oral Poetics" 516). The

role of the rest of the audience is essential also. Sometimes they share in the event in more participatory ways such as undergoing a ritual cleansing as part of the occasion (Ruoff, "The Survival of Tradition" 276). In fact, if the audience does not respond, the story does not continue (Krupat, "The Dialogic of Silko's Storyteller" 62).

The storyteller does not give an extraordinary amount of detail because it is vital that the audience, as participants in the event, use their imaginations to visualize the particulars of the story (Lincoln 49). The audience's imaginations are part of the active force that creates the storytelling event. Dennis Tedlock tells of an experience that illustrates the storyteller's concern that the listener be involved in the creative process. Tedlock was making a recording of a Zuni storyteller and, in the middle of the narrative, the man turned to Tedlock and asked, "When I tell a story, do you see it, or do you just write it down?" ("Toward an Oral Poetics" 515). The storyteller did not want to tell the story to someone who was not involved imaginatively in the whole process.

Within oral traditions, fluidity and change are very much in evidence and are two of the most common characteristics of oral traditions. Telling a story is a unique act and never happens the same way twice (Woodard 72; Georges 319). In fact, one ethnologist notes that he heard a storyteller tell the same story six times and each version



was unique. Narratives improve and change over time (Roemer, "Native American Oral Narratives: Context and Continuity" 48). John Bierhorst relates a conversation with a storyteller in which the storyteller asserts, "they don't all tell the same story. Here's one way I heard it" (The Red Swan 42). This characteristic fluidity is one of the major reasons why the oral tradition can be carried on in many different forms and can adjust to the situation in which it finds itself: "it [is] possible for oral traditions to change and thrive, while maintaining continuity with the old ways--often amidst outside threats of cultural genocide and assimilation" (Scarberry-Garcia, Landmarks of Healing 110). This ability to adapt to any situation includes adapting from oral to written modes of communication. Or, as Andrew Wiget asserts, "Change is a part of the dynamic of oral tradition . . . the advent of writing supplemented, but did not supplant, the oral culture" (Native American Literature 43). After describing how Pueblo Indians recycle their old pots into new ones, Susan Scarberry-Garcia observes that:

contemporary Native American storytellers . . . incorporate the beauty, design and vitality of old stories into new work. This is one cultural adaptation that helps ensure that surviving stories from oral tradition remain viable for generations to come. . . . (Landmarks of Healing 71)

Even though it may seem hierarchial, some critics speculate that written literature is "the final product of

an evolutionary process" (Trout 36), and an oral tradition is the foundation of this process. Literature "carr[ies] on the oral tradition at many levels, furthering and nourishing it and being furthered and nourished by it" (Allen, The Sacred Hoop 79). Evidence of this is given by Ortiz, a noted Acoma writer. He says that he is not concerned with printed symbols on a page when he writes, but, instead, is "aware of . . . the basic elements of language" ("The Story Never Ends" 216). In this manner, he feels that the printed word is a continuation of the spoken word. But Ortiz also feels that such changes--not only in the literary realm of Native American life, but in many other areas as well--represent not a benevolent and inevitable chain of events but instead are a protest by Native Americans against rule by invading cultures. Native Americans have "taken the languages [both written and spoken] of the colonialists and used them for their own purposes" ("Towards a National Indian Literature" 10). They have resisted forced colonization by maintaining their own lifestyles while incorporating the languages of their colonizers.

In protest, adaptation, or the result of an inevitable process, modern Native American novelists form a unique group because they "interpolat[e] and translate their communities for another culture" (Dorris 154). By doing this, the Native American author "stands with one foot in each of the two literary traditions" (Buller 174).

Some critics wonder if oral traditions can survive this translation. How can a genre that relies so much on performance and the use of oral rather than written expression be translated into literary form? Elaine Jahner suggests that the idea of the story is the essential element, and the form the story takes is secondary to this basic concept. In fact, she suggests that new forms are necessary to the preservation of oral traditions. The new forms that perpetuate oral traditions in written form "fashion structures that relate as intimately to the life of the modern American Indian community as the oral forms have related to the continuing life of the community" ("A Critical Approach to American Indian Literature" 218).

Another reason why oral traditions can adapt to written form is a combination of reader-response literary theory and the manner in which Native Americans compose literatures. In reader-response criticism, "The convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence" (Iser 50). This allows the reader to become the audience, as it were, and creates a quasi-performance in which the reader becomes part of the event that is created by the author (Bauman 113). Diane Niatum, a Native American poet, says, "I've tried to create these stories in such a way that the reader has a lot of space to work . . . using [his or her] imagination on an equal basis. . . . The artist . . . sets the groundwork. The piece is finished by the reader"

("Closing the Circle" 200). The reader uses his or her imagination to finish the story and thus becomes a participant in the event (Ramsey 187). According to Momaday, this use of the imagination can "bridge the gap. . . . Literature, art, is a bridge to essence" (Woodard 106).

Momaday, himself, has been called a bridge and a great force between oral and written traditions (Brumble, American Indian Autobiography 177). Jahner says Momaday's literary journey "exists in some intermediate position between the oral and the written traditions. Its epistemological foundations (its idea) are firmly within . . . the oral traditions. Its particular realization is in the written mode" ("Metalanguages" 166). Momaday has done this by involving the reader in the text. In his novel The Way To Rainy Mountain (even though some would argue that this work is not a novel, it has been labeled so by some, including Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, who argues that it is the most Indian of his novels ("As a Dakota Woman" 66). He leaves gaps for the reader to fill in. For example, the number four, symbolic of the four directions among other things, is very important to most Native Americans and holds mythical and special significance in various cultures. The Way to Rainy Mountain is divided into three sections: "The Setting Out," "The Going On," and "The Closing In." Three types of narration occur on every double-page spread: legendary, historical, and personal. Even though this seems

incongruous with the idea of four being a sacred number for American Indians, Kimberly Blaeser suggests that the reader is actually the fourth part of the work and thus becomes a participant in creating the actual literary event. She suggests that Momaday wants the reader to complete the work by "breaking through the boxed-in categories, imagining discourse, uncovering connections and contradictions, and finally, perhaps creating meaning" (41). This idea can be substantiated by examining most readers' copies of The Way to Rainy Mountain. Most books are heavily annotated and are a silent testimonial of the involvement of the reader. Perhaps these annotations can be considered the fourth part of the work. Other critics have suggested that the elusive fourth part is actually the Kiowa oral tradition because the "tribal experience . . . is the foundation of the book" (Oandasan 66). Still others have posited the idea that the blank spaces form a visual fourth part, suggesting silence as a part of the oral tradition (Jaskoski 70). And still others suggest the illustrations by N. Scott Momaday's father, Al, form the fourth part, a visual dimension.

## CHAPTER TWO

### CHARACTERISTICS OF ORAL TRADITIONS

As we examine the question of how oral traditions can be preserved in written form, we must remember that oral traditions as a whole are different from a storytelling event in an oral tradition. Performance is just one element in the whole body of oral traditions because they exist beyond performance. A storytelling event cannot be translated completely into print form because it is holistic and many essential elements cannot possibly survive transmittal. However, other elements of oral traditions (examined in detail later in this study) can survive and even thrive in the printed form. Some critics do not agree with this assessment, believing oral traditions themselves cannot be effectively transmitted in printed form because the traditions do not fit into an "Anglo-European" model (Kroeber, "Technology and Tribal Narrative" 20). However, I disagree. Many elements of oral traditions can be written and used to preserve their essence. Many characteristics of oral traditions can survive the metamorphoses into print form: the attempts of oral traditions to promote harmony in the world, the belief of most Native Americans that words create reality, the usefulness of tradition as a teaching tool, the special sense of place inherent in Native American writing, the sacred nature of most of the writing, the

attempt to preserve unity in the tribe as it exists today as well as to preserve the traditions that form part of its heritage, and the attempt to create self-awareness, partially by attempting to understand human experience. These characteristics exist in oral traditions, independent of performance, and the storyteller can transmit these values by using Native American rhetorical techniques of repetition, circularity, ambiguity, silence, symbolism, and a unique concept of time. These rhetorical methods involve the reader in the text and create a quasi-performance from the literary experience. This study will examine each of these characteristics and rhetorical devices in Native American literatures and will demonstrate that Momaday's works contain these essential elements of oral traditions.

#### PROMOTE HARMONY

The storyteller, whether Momaday or an other modern Native American writer, provides the connective link between oral traditions and the written page because he or she fills an important position in both the Native American world and the Western world. (By Western world, I mean the dominant culture that has as its base the literary traditions of Europe and the United States). The Native American storyteller forms this link by embodying the ancient values of oral traditions in a printed form. By doing this, the storyteller performs a unique role as both a teacher and

conveyor of ancient values and myths (Cousineau 206). In fact, the storyteller brings an element into the life of the tribe that the Navajo call hozho, "the intellectual notion of order, the emotional state of happiness, the physical state of health, the moral condition of good, and the aesthetic dimension of harmony" (Witherspoon 8). The storyteller brings harmony, one of the essential elements in oral traditions, to the tribe or nation.

Harmony with the world and within oneself is a central goal of oral traditions (Jahner, "A Critical Approach to American Indian Literature"; Ruoff, "The Survival of Tradition: American Indian Oral and Written Narratives") because, as Momaday says, "The whole worldview of the Indian is predicted upon the principle of harmony in the universe" ("The Magic of Words" 180). As Allen asserts in "The Sacred Hoop: A Contemporary Perspective," "The tribes seek--through song, ceremony, legend, sacred stories (myths), and tales . . . to bring the isolated private self into harmony and balance with . . . reality" (4). Instead of giving a list of behaviors that are appropriate (such as a book of etiquette in the Western world), the sacred story tells of a hero who acts appropriately. The child identifies with the hero both empathetically and metaphorically and learns what is accepted and expected.

This sense of harmony counts all things of equal value and blends them to form an integral whole (Allen, "The



Sacred Hoop" 5). "One exists cooperatively and coequally with all created things" (Woodard 190). Perhaps this is the idea Momaday is expressing in House Made of Dawn with the race of the dead. Early in the novel, Abel tries to eradicate evil in the person of the albino, but, as he more clearly understands the purpose of the race of the dead, he realizes that "Evil was" (96). Francisco comes to this knowledge earlier. When he is working in the fields, he knows evil is there, but he accepts it and only feels "a dull, intrinsic sadness" (64).

Momaday's works contain a movement from disharmony to harmony; some critics consider it to be one of his main themes (Zachau 43). Both Momaday novels A House Made of Dawn and The Way to Rainy Mountain can be seen as a an individual's movement from fragmentation to unity of identity, thus creating harmony from disharmony. In The Way to Rainy Mountain, Momaday journeys to wholeness and harmony as he accepts and understands the role of his personal history and his people's past in the workings of his present life. As he understands this influence, the clear boundaries between the legendary, historical, and personal sections of his book become translucent and finally merge into an integrated whole. In the beginning of the novel, old Kiowa legends form the first portion of the triad, but by the time the novel ends the legendary portion consists of stories, such as the buried Indian woman, that come from

Momaday's own life. In House Made of Dawn, Abel finds peace and purpose by embracing the harmony that is offered in the traditional way of life. Both works present oral traditions and all that they entail as bringing harmony and holistic health to life.

#### SHOW APPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR

Another essential element of oral traditions that is connected to this idea of harmony is the idea of appropriateness. Things should be done with decorum, in the correct manner. The words used should fit the need that exists (Jahner, "Introduction: American Indian Writers and the Tyranny of Expectations" 343). Not only should words be appropriate, but deeds should also be in harmony with the situation. Momaday demonstrates the idea of appropriateness in a parable about a Navajo who loses his job and has a hard time feeding his family of several children. His wife is even expecting another child. A friend notices his plight and asks him why he does not hunt the deer that are in the nearby hills to provide meat for his loved ones. The answer the man gives illustrates this idea of appropriateness: "No, it is inappropriate that I should take life just now when I am expecting the gift of life" ("Native American Attitudes to the Environment" 82). The man feels he needs to do what is proper and correct.

**FOSTER UNDERSTANDING AND RESPECT BETWEEN GENERATIONS NOW  
LIVING**

Another essential element of oral traditions is the duty of the storyteller to seek to bring harmony to a tribe by fostering understanding and respect between the generations that are now living. Walter Ong tells us that an oral society respects those "wise old men and women who specialize in preserving knowledge" (41). The Native American storyteller is an integral part of the community and receives due respect as the "keeper of the sacred word bundle" (Lincoln 44) and as such provides a bond between the old and the young that is sometimes lacking in societies that do not have the same veneration for elderly wisdom.

Joseph Epes Brown observes in Seeing With a Native Eye:

in tribal societies the elders of experience serve as repositories for the oral lore of the people. Living oral traditions give the elders of the society a position of respect and importance among their people. Further, since oral tradition also speaks even to the youngest in the group, it creates bridges of understanding between the generations. . . . (34)

This sense of community is heightened in a storytelling event when the ceremonial act brings people together and oral traditions bring unity (Lincoln 223; Woodard 43) through the "ultimate act of sharing" (Coltelli 2).

Some critics have expressed the opinion that Momaday's House Made of Dawn does not demonstrate this sense of unity because Abel's problems stem from a lack of communal sense. Lawrence Evers suggests that Abel kills the albino and goes

after Martinez in isolation but later realizes that the true way to deal with evil lies in the communal race of the dead ("Words and Place" 309). Kroeber asserts that Abel never possesses this sense of community because "neither Abel nor Momaday possesses access to a communal existence that would permit efficacious cultural imposition of a symbolic order" ("Technology and Tribal Narrative" 21). I believe that Abel does have loss of community sense earlier in his life, but he achieves integration as he grows to accept his place in the communal scheme of things. Evidence of this lack of community can be seen when he kills the eagle. In his community, the eagle is caught and kept in semi-domesticated captivity by a secret society of medicine men and is connected with rainmaking. Even though we are not told exactly why Abel kills the eagle or the exact symbolic meaning of the bird, we feel that Abel should have known the meaning and preserved the eagle's life for the good of the tribe. Later, in Los Angeles, Abel is reminded of this sense of community when Ben Benally remembers: "you were little, where you were and had to be" (143). As Ben shares his remembrances of his Navajo past with Abel, these memories help prepare Abel to return to his own reservation. As the novel ends, not only is Abel participating in ritual events, but he is also running in a communal race, evidence of his acceptance of community life and his place in it.

## FORM A BRIDGE BETWEEN ANCIENT CUSTOMS AND LIVING GENERATIONS

Another characteristic of oral traditions that is exemplified in Momaday's writings is the ability of the storyteller to form a bridge between the ancient customs and the living generations. Through the storyteller, the tribe learns of ancient customs that are in practice now and will be when the listeners' children are grown. The storyteller expresses the "communal soul" (Ong 46). This continuity and feeling of community give the members of the tribe a great feeling of security and acceptance as they feel a "sense of belonging to a chain connecting them with their tribal past and future" (Schubnell 51).

Being a storyteller is a great privilege in the eyes of most Native American peoples. Storytellers often see themselves as "keepers of the sacred word bundle" (Lincoln 8) and feel that they reflect stories that have already been told, thus becoming the conveyors or conduits of the "words which have already created a story" (Buller 167). The storyteller does not feel reduced because he or she is a "transmitter rather than an originator" (Woodard 206). Instead, each storyteller has the honor of helping to convey the culture of the group to the next generation, and that privilege "is what ennobles him" (Woodard 206).

Vine Deloria, Jr., says that contemporary Native American novels, especially when they narrate the past, "invoke the feeling of former days of communal integrity and

common fate" (53), and the feeling that the novel creates helps to sustain Native Americans through times of suppression by the dominant culture (Scholer 138; Zachrau 49). "When all else is taken or given away, tribal peoples still remember and imagine" (Lincoln 115). Oral traditions provide a resistance to assimilation (Ortiz, "Toward a National Indian Literature" 10). "Through story culture is made possible" (Kroeber, "Deconstructionist Criticism and American Indian Literature" 87).

Momaday calls this sense of the past a "racial memory" ("Man Made of Words" 166) and considers it one of the major themes of his works. In fact, when asked if he imagines speaking as his ancestors did, he replies, "I sometimes imagine that I am my ancestors" (Woodard 112). For that reason, stories that happened hundreds of years ago to ancestors long dead can live in racial memory. In his autobiography, The Names, Momaday uses the present tense to speak of scenes that his ancestor, Charles Scott, could have seen as he commanded his troops as a general in the Revolutionary War. In The Way to Rainy Mountain, Ko-Sahn remembers the stars falling even though she was not born yet, and Momaday remembers vividly the time his grandfather Mammedaty was given a beautiful black horse at a giveaway, even though Mammedaty died before Momaday was born. He

defines this racial memory as "respect for the understanding of one's heritage. . . . It reaches back to the dawn of time" ("Native American Attitudes to the Environment" 83).

In The Ancient Child, Momaday expresses the idea that racial memory is a powerful force. Locke Setman, the protagonist of the novel, has been raised away from his people, and the only recollection he retains is "a sediment in his memory, the memory of words his father had spoken long ago--the stories his father had told him" (51). This memory is enough to sustain him until he is able to return to tribal ways and fulfill his destiny. In The Way to Rainy Mountain, Momaday's desire is to see the landscape that his grandmother, Aho, saw "more perfectly in the mind's eye" (7) that starts him on his journey, and tradition or legend is one of the three voices that guide him to his journey's end. In House Made of Dawn, Abel's return to traditional ways is exemplified by Benally's singing of "The Night Chant," and the inclusion of phrases from that sacred song and ceremony as Abel later runs in the race of the dead eventually brings him to a realization of who he is.

#### GIVE A FEELING OF SELF-WORTH

As one participates as a storyteller in an oral tradition and helps perpetuate the culture of the tribe, he or she receives an added benefit from this essential characteristic--a feeling of his or her own self-worth and

self-identity (Zachrau 43; Schubnell 61). Because the stories told in any oral tradition provide a chain to antiquity through racial memory, "One can circle back imaginatively to one's origins. One can actualize those origins through storytelling" (Woodard 48). A responsive reader can actually see this happening in Momaday's journey in The Way to Rainy Mountain. The focus of the work is not nostalgia, as Kenneth Fields suggests ("More Than Language Means" 5), but rather a creation of a sense of self by use of oral traditions. As the journey progresses, the personal voice "undergoes a gradual shift away from an essentially separate sense of self and landscape to an integrated historical awareness of the traditional reciprocity between humanity and environment" (Papovich, "Journey into the Wilderness: American Literature and The Way to Rainy Mountain" 121). Momaday's imagination is changing, and because "an Indian is an idea a man has of himself" ("Man Made of Words" 162), Momaday uses oral traditions to enlarge his imagination, find a self-identity, and create harmony within himself. This journey is his "search for individual identity in ancestral tradition and the natural world" (Papovich, "Landscape, Tradition, and Identity in The Way to Rainy Mountain" 13).

In House Made of Dawn, some displaced Native Americans do not have this sense of self. Because one of Tosamah's sermons in House Made of Dawn is almost identical to the



Introduction of The Way to Rainy Mountain, the preacher has been called Momaday's voice in the novel, but, on closer examination, only a caricature of the visionary narrator of The Way to Rainy Mountain emerges. Tosamah speaks lofty words in the sermon, but a contrary sentiment is expressed when his flock prepares to leave, and he admonishes them, "Good night, and get yours" (91). According to Vernon E. Lattin, Tosamah is a religious trickster because he both criticizes and supports the ways of the dominant culture; he befriends dislocated Native Americans and at the same time is their enemy. He is "perhaps Momaday without the experience of Rainy Mountain" (128). Another displaced Native American, Ben Benally, sings the song that starts Abel on the way to recovery, but Ben does not allow his own experiences with oral traditions to provide a healing potion for his soul. He lies to himself about being able to be happy in Los Angeles and being able to "find some place with a private bathroom . . . easy" (162), when, actually, the memories of home keep intruding into his life. Abel is the only one of the three who seems to approach a sense of self and wholeness by returning to traditional values (Hirsch 320).

This added benefit of oral traditions, the finding of oneself, is also shown in The Ancient Child as Set gains a final acceptance of who he is. He struggles with the connections he feels to his heritage and especially to the

legend of the boy who becomes a bear. Only when he realizes he is that boy does he achieve peace and harmony in his life.

#### HELP TO UNDERSTAND THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Another essential characteristic of oral traditions, and an extension of self-awareness for the storyteller, is a quest for an understanding of the human experience. A storyteller in Native American oral traditions attempts to achieve harmony by trying to understand why things happen in the world. In oral traditions, stories "stay close to the human lifeworld" (Ong 42), or, as Gerald Vizenor says, "You can't understand the world without telling a story" (Coltelli 156). Things happen in the world that cannot be easily understood; the storyteller tells about these events, and his or her "principal aim is to give a human meaning to [those] events" (Kroeber, "Technology and Tribal Narrative" 31). Or, as Momaday says, "All things can be accepted, if not understood, if you put them into a story" (Woodard 15). For example, Anna Lee Walters tells a story of a young boy named Natanii whose father is killed by soldiers while he is trying to protect his family. Natanii's grandfather "gave Natanii much in the endless stories he told" (86), and eventually Natanii is able to accept that his father dies to protect his family. Without stories, such acceptance would have been harder because the stories show the boy that his

father loves him enough to give his life for him, just as the heroes in Navajo legend love their people enough to die for them. His father becomes a hero in his eyes and is placed on a par with the ancient heroes of old. Even though the boy is lonely, he understands that his father's death is right, proper, and part of the Navajo way.

One critic proposes that Momaday does not follow the oral tradition in *House Made of Dawn* because the novel does not seek to understand the human experience; Roger Dickinson-Brown asserts that Momaday sets forth the problem of the displaced Native American but does not provide clues for the reader to understand or cope with the situation (32). However, Francisco's deathbed stories provide traditional means for solving life's problems, and Abel's dawn run symbolizes his applying at least one of the practices of the ancient ways to try to cope with his own life.

#### DEMONSTRATE THE IMPORTANCE OF NATURE

Another very important element of oral traditions is the way storytellers can help audiences understand the world and find harmony within themselves by achieving a harmony with nature. In fact, Allen has called this reverence for the land "the hallmark of American Indian consciousness and of tribal literature" (*The Sacred Hoop* 89), and Galen Buller suggests that Indian Literatures "cannot be defined apart

from the land" (169). This reverence, or "a sense of place," as it is sometimes called, is often found in authors who are not Native American (Tuan 11). However, Jarold Ramsey explains in Reading the Fire: Essays in the Traditional Indian Literatures of the Far West, the sense of place found in Native American Cultures is different from the ideas the Western world inherited from Romanticism: "It is altogether sterner, more pragmatic as to ecological necessities, and more caught up in narrative" (188). He suggests that actual geography is so important to Native American narrative that we should consult a map if we are ignorant of the physical landscape mentioned in a story. Robert Nelson proposes that the physical landscape and the protagonist's relationship to it provide an "antidote to alienation and its consequences" (5). As the hero begins to relate to the landscape, he or she experiences an "intrinsically healing relationship" (5) between the self and the land.

However, even though the actual physical landscape is very important, the landscape written and spoken of by Native American storytellers is not entirely physical--it is also cultural and spiritual. Culturally, Evers reminds us that, generally, when American Indians view the landscape, they do not see desert or a region peopled only by animals; instead, the world they view is "created by the imaginative interaction of societies of men and particular geographies"

("Words and Place: a Reading of House Made of Dawn" 298). Or, as Allen asserts, "We are the land . . . the land and the people are the same" (The Sacred Hoop 113). When Momaday journeys into the landscape to find his roots in The Way to Rainy Mountain, he does not go to escape the pressures of civilization like Thoreau does in Walden; he goes seeking his people, and he finds them (Papovich, "Landscape, Tradition, and Identity in The Way to Rainy Mountain" 14). One way he does this is by relating the story of Devil's Tower. The landmark is there, but the significance is rooted in the legend of the boy turning into a bear--a myth filled with people who give meaning to landscape.

The spiritual reverence that many Native Americans have for their land encompasses the physical and cultural aspects and makes Native American Literatures--whether oral or written--most distinctive. Abel's "separation from the land leads to disease--spiritual illness, alienation, and uncertainty" in House Made of Dawn (Nelson 35). When Abel returns to the land, it has the power to heal him. Other instances demonstrate that spiritual reverence for nature can be seen as a therapeutic device to heal the spirit of the individual. As we read The Delicacy and Strength of Lace, a collection of letters written by Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna) and James Wright, we see Silko's emotional turmoil as she recovers from a divorce and child-custody battle

change to a more calm and peaceful feeling as she describes various natural occurrences such as sunsets or rattlesnakes or owls perched on cacti. For example, in the letter dated August 21, 1979, she begins by mentioning how alone she feels, but, by the end of the letter, she is talking about the crazy antics of a roadrunner (76). The reader feels that writing about these elements of her physical landscape serves as a healing potion to Silko's soul. Stories from oral traditions, especially those that deal with nature, also have that same healing effect. Says Scarberry-Garcia in Landmarks of Healing: A Study of House Made of Dawn, "Sacred stories . . . have a healing dimension because they symbolically internalize images of the land within the listeners" (7). The actual physical landscape does not even have to exist in exactly the form presented by the storyteller in order to be revered. For example, Vizenor, in an interview with Joseph Bruchac in Survival This Way: Interviews with Native American Poets, talks of place as an "oral traditional place" (290). Because this spiritual idea of place cannot be transformed by seasonal flux or human alterations, it is more permanent than an actual geographical entity.

Well known and well-documented is that N. Scott Momaday's works show a special reverence for the land. One oft-quoted and almost spiritual statement from The Way to Rainy Mountain serves as an illustrative example:

Once in his life a man ought to concentrate his mind upon the remembered earth, I believe. He ought to give himself up to a particular landscape in his experience, to look at it from as many angles as he can, to wonder about it, to dwell upon it. . . .

(83)

Momaday places superlative importance on landscape. Nature is not something that exists apart from a person, but it is "an element in which he exists" ("Native American Attitudes to the Environment" 84). A human being does not have a true identity apart from the land. In fact, the land is alive and actually has an origin and destiny that are intertwined with an individual's own. Momaday speaks of a storyteller whom he heard and asserts that "her voice proceeded from the land itself" ("A First American Views His Land" 17). That is the voice Momaday attempts to convey in his own works.

A reader cannot study his works without a noticing Momaday's reverence for the land. House Made of Dawn, for example, has been classified as "not a short novel about Abel, but a long prose poem about the earth" (Oleson 60). This statement is true for many reasons. When Abel returns from the war, his grandfather goes to meet him. As Francisco travels, he sees many things from nature: a snare to catch birds, the river, the fields. Abel sees nothing. Later, when Abel begins to see the land, he starts to be healed. For instance, when Abel lies in pain in Los Angeles after he has been beaten by Martinez, the images he calls forth--such as the angle of geese (also a subject of a poem

by Momaday)--are of the land and of the animals in the land. These images give him power to endure and go on. Contrasted to Abel's rich images of the land is Benally's statement, "There's nothing there, you know, just the land, and the land is empty and dead" (164). Benally has lost the feeling for the land that Abel seeks. One reason Abel has a strong feeling for the land is because Francisco teaches Abel and Vidal a reverence for the land in their younger years. As soon as the two boys are old enough, he takes them into the land and teaches them its secrets, but even as he teaches, the boys already know "not the names or the strict position of the sun . . . but the larger motion and meaning of the great organic calendar itself" (178). Their love for the land is in their bones. When the time comes, Abel can return home because he has this inbred "land vision" (Lattin, "The Quest for Mythic Vision" 638).

The love for the land is also in Set's consciousness in The Ancient Child but is buried deeper than in Abel's. However, as Set walks by the river close to his ancestral home, he feels an awareness that will grow to a more reverent feeling for the land as the novel progresses, "There in the wild growth and the soft glowing of the earth, in the muddy water at his feet, was something profoundly original. He could not put his finger on it, but it was there" (64). Grey helps Set awaken himself to a sense of place. She tells him to feel the earth, become a part of



it, "Sing to the earth; it does you good" (275). A graphic passage in the book describes a vision that an old man, Worcester Meat, has just before his death. His vivid view of nature helps him be "serene and refreshed in his soul" (301). These instances and many others demonstrate Momaday's characters' deep and abiding reverence for the land.

#### ILLUSTRATE THE SACRED NATURE OF STORYTELLING

Another characteristic of oral traditions is the sacred nature of storytelling or the storyteller's role. The storyteller brings harmony into the lives of her or his listeners by unlocking the sacred aspect of the land along with providing them a link with other supernatural powers that inform every aspect of their lives. This spiritual aspect is important to most Native Americans because their religions are practical and "permeate even [their] most casual and personal attitudes" (Momaday, "I Am Alive" 23). Traditional oral literatures are not even considered to exist apart from religion. In fact, some consider the storyteller also to be a seer or prophet who "reveals what is hidden through divine inspiration and communication with the spirits" (Finnegan 207). This intervention is needed because even though spirituality is very much a part of the lifestyles of many Native Americans, some actual ritual practices are more removed from everyday life and

experience, so the more accessible stories provided by the storyteller form "a basis of entry into the more obscure ritual tradition" (Allen, "Whose Dream is This, Anyway" 120). These more sacred stories and myths, oftentimes dealing with creation, "put people in touch with powers beyond themselves" (Lincoln 222). A sacred story can also help people relate to "something happening in [their] own live[s] . . . [since it] gives perspective on what's happening to [them]" (Campbell, The Power of Myth 2) It consists of a "special language . . . that is beautifully old fashioned" (Toelken 79) and is used in these creation myths to "set a frame around a [story] . . . to remove it from ordinary life and language" (Finnegan 110). When language is used this way, Momaday points out that "the oral tradition achieves a remarkable stability, an authority not unlike that of Scripture ("The Native Voice" 8). These myths serve as the "recreation and reestablishment of an individual's sense of harmony with his or her society and culture" (Jahner, "A Critical Approach to American Indian Literature" 214).

In his fiction, Momaday "retells portions of his people's sacred stories and finds his place in them" (Scarberry-Garcia, "Beneath the Stars" 97). In The Way to Rainy Mountain Momaday uses myth as one of the three major components of his book. His identity as a Kiowa is defined by the content of these sacred stories: Kiowas are a small

tribe because a pregnant woman got stuck in the log when they were emerging from the underworld; dogs are a vital part of Kiowa life and choose to help the people; the Sun is a distant relative; spiders are wise and revered as grandmothers. These and many other sacred myths inform Momaday's work and help him define himself by use of sacred stories. He is Kiowa and these sacred stories help him understand what being Kiowa entails. One of Momaday's own personal memories shows his reverence for the sacred aspects of life. He visits the Tai-me bundle as a boy and remembers that he felt "a great holiness all about in the room" (37). The sacred stories about the Tai-me became a part of his own life, and the myths about the Tai-Me bundle are validated in his own eyes by this experience.

In House Made of Dawn, Momaday's theme is one of alienation and despair when Abel is cut off from his people and almost killed in Los Angeles, but he finds salvation in the sacred songs and ceremonies of his people (Cederstrom 298) and returns to the reservation. According to Blaine Kerr, Abel is "seeking to make the modern Anglo novel a vehicle for a sacred text" (172), and he succeeds (179). Abel finds both the technology of the Western world and Christian beliefs unsatisfactory and turns to his Native beliefs to find salvation (McAllister's ideas of Abel finding Christian salvation in his article "Incarnate Grace and the Paths of Salvation in House Made of Dawn" to the

contrary). In fact, Abel could be considered a medicine man who is realizing and understanding his gift incrementally throughout the novel. First, he sees the vision of the eagle and the snake, identifying him as set apart; because he has seen this vision, he is asked to go on the eagle hunt but has too much compassion for the eagle to bear seeing the eagle live her life in captivity. He is sidetracked from his pursuit of the holy ways in the war but returns to perform his first duty as a medicine man: the healing of Angela Grace St. John. He further realizes his calling when he kills the albino; he is holy and must eradicate evil. He deviates from his path towards becoming a medicine man somewhat when he is in Los Angeles but is reminded of who he is by Benally's singing of the Night Chant, and so he returns home and possibly takes up his grandfather's duties as a healer and medicine man. This is one reading of the novel that fits with the idea of salvation coming from understanding and embracing the sacred aspects of life.

In The Ancient Child, Grey, the medicine woman, uses sacred means inherited from her great-grandmother to call Set to her and to his destiny. Like Abel in *House Made of Dawn*, Grey does not grow to her full stature all at once. She must act out her childhood by imagining a relationship with Billy the Kid and acting erratically--like riding naked (except for a turtle mask) through the town. When the time comes, she, like Abel, realizes she is a medicine woman and

assumes her holy duties. Without her, Set would not be able to effect the transformation that occurs at the end of the novel. It is she who calls over the miles to Set's spirit when he is sick and unable to cope with the growing awareness that is his when he opens the medicine bundle and finds "the whole skin of a bear cub, including the head and feet" (242) along with other bear-related items; she gives Set strength when he returns to his ancient home to be healed; her love helps him decide to fulfill his destiny and become a bear. Her affinity with the sanctity of life helps mold him into a person who can accept his final destiny.

#### INSTRUCT IN SOCIAL MORES

Myths, or sacred stories, are only one of the two divisions of Native American Literatures. Some stories, known as tales, are more secular and are told primarily to instruct in social mores. Stories can teach also Native Americans their actual history. Bierhorst observes in his introduction to In the Trail of the Wind that American Indian history comes mainly from the writings of historians and anthropologists, "But it can also be traced to a surprising degree in the so-called oral literature--the songs, chants, and speeches--of the people themselves" (11). One instance that illustrates this point involved Joseph Bruchac when he was asked to testify in a court trial dealing with the question of the residency of the Abenakis

Indians in the state of Vermont. Speaking as a storyteller in the oral tradition, he told the story of the creation of Lake Champlain to illustrate the historical fact of the presence of the Abenakis in the state for generations (Bruchac, *Storytelling and Native American Writing* 1).

Even though stories are often told that seem to deal with etiological or historical matters, oftentimes Indians will not see this aspect. For many Native Americans, Bruchac's story would not be about how Lake Champlain was created but instead about what lessons were to be learned from the experiences of the hero. A storyteller functions in this case not as an historian, as the story would seem to dictate, but instead as a teacher or instructor, and members of the audience are "entertained while learning their culture's crafts, skills, and means of survival" (Lincoln 223). Many stories are such as why it snows or how Lake Champlain came to be are seemingly etiological, but the actual purpose of the story is to teach a moral lesson. For example, one time Barre Toelkin had the opportunity to hear a storyteller weave an elaborate story about why it snows in Montezuma Canyon. A young member of a visiting family who went to an Western-run boarding school listened respectfully and then offered the observation that it also snowed in Banning. The storyteller felt that the boy missed the point (sarcastically, the storyteller attributes this answer to the bad influence of his outside schooling). The story was

not about the origin of snow at all but was rather about how the hero of the story showed a "properly reciprocal relationship between himself and nature" (72). How the hero acted was more important than what actually happened. Sometimes in Native American stories, the hero acts in a socially inappropriate manner--this happens very often in the Trickster tales (usually in every story). Even then a moral lesson is realized because the audience laughs and comments, "I'd never do a thing like that!" (Toelken 80). Socially appropriate behavior is learned through an inverted and comic role-model. The primacy of the moral lesson over the structural aspects of the story is also illustrated when Toelken observes a Navajo audience listening to a Coyote tale. The audience does not react strongly when the structural climax occurs--instead everyone reacts strongly when a moral point is made. When Toelken asked a storyteller why he told stories, he answered, "If my children hear the stories, they will grow up to be good people; if they don't hear them, they will turn out to be bad" (80).

Momaday comments that "when the imagination is superimposed upon the historical event . . . it becomes a story" ("Man Made of Words" 169). An example of this is given by Fred Eggan in "From History to Myth: A Hopi Example." Ten Hopis go to a Calvary fort and are given supplies. On the way home they are ambushed by Navajos;

four are killed and five wounded. Later, the scene of the battle becomes the boundary line between the two Nations. The same set of circumstances is told about thirty years later, but it has become a story rather than a telling of an event. Superimposed in the story are didactic messages to the next generation. In the new story, instead of ten Hopi men who go to the fort unaware of the danger of Navajo ambush, two men plan the journey as a means of sacrificing their lives to impress women and gain immortality by having their skulls mark the boundary between the two tribes. The two men are surprised because others decide to go with them, but they still determine to continue with their plan. A young boy decides to go on the trip even though his father warns him not to and the boy sees a vision of an eagle that turns into a buzzard. The boy does place his arrows by his feet in the true Hopi manner, so he is not killed in the ambush but instead receives many wounds. He is brave and continues on even though he is in great pain. He is hungry and wants to kill a rabbit for food, but he is reminded that he is of the Rabbit Clan and cannot kill rabbits. Later on, that rabbit saves his life and the lives of his companions by running back and forth over their tracks so the Navajos cannot find them. The boy is miraculously healed and becomes a great hero. Thus an historical event becomes a story, teaching lessons of propriety and tribal custom.

We see an example of this when Francisco tells the story



of his bear hunt in House Made of Dawn. In the story, he does all things in the tradition of his people, and his telling teaches the proper way to hunt a bear: you visit the Ancient Ones first; you do not disturb the sacred quiet of night; you treat the bear-flesh correctly after the kill; you rub flesh into the nostrils of an untried horse to make him unafraid; you sit motionless when you enter the village and the women beat the bear with rods. By doing all these things, you gain stature because you have done all things correctly.

#### CREATE REALITY THROUGH THE USE OF WORDS

Most Native Americans feel that words create reality, and the manifestation of that belief is a major characteristic of American Indian oral traditions. When Toelken asks a Navajo storyteller why he tells stories to adults, the answer is, "Through the stories everything is made possible" (80). Perhaps the idea of words creating rather than reflecting reality is one of the hardest concepts for the Western mind to grasp, but to Native Americans, "A word has power in and of itself. It comes from nothing into sound and meaning; it gives origin to all things" (Way 33). Or, as Momaday says of someone who utters a formulaic chant, "Because he believes in it and because words are what they are, it is true. It is true" (Woodard 86). "To use language is literally to create" (Coltelli 2). Ortiz suggests that

without the Indian belief in the efficacy and potency of the word, they would not even exist as a people ("Towards" 11). Perhaps the closest thing that the Western world has to this concept is the Christian belief that prayer can change things, but, even then, the Christian puts her or his belief in God as the agent of change, not in the spoken word.

Most Native Americans tend to use words reverently because, if they are used without considered thought, they create chaos (Buller 167). American Indians are more concerned with "what utterances may do. We [those of a Western mind-set], to the contrary, focus on what utterances may mean" (Kroeber, "Deconstructionist Criticism and American Indian Literature" 81). For that reason Native Americans tend not to use words thoughtlessly. We can observe this reverence for the spoken word in Momaday's works. For example, in House Made of Dawn, Tosamah says of his grandmother's words, "They came from nothing into sound and being. . . . And she never threw words away" (89). He reiterates the idea that words should be used sparingly when he speaks of the Gospel of John. In this sermon, Tosamah asserts that John said "In the beginning was the Word" and should have stopped there. By adding words to an already adequate phrase, the Western man "adds and divides and multiplies the Word. And in all of this he subtracts the Truth" (87).

Words also have the power to destroy as well as to heal.

Again in House Made of Dawn, at his trial, Abel feels that White men are destroying him with words, and he doesn't even understand what the words mean (95). He does not mean here that they are taking away his freedom or changing his life as he knows it; he means they are literally destroying him. But even as words destroy him, they also heal him. When Benally sings the Night Chant:

No longer sore, may I walk  
.....  
Happily may I walk  
.....  
In beauty it is finished, (134)

these words are not wishes that Ben has for Abel; they are evocations of the actual events. Because Ben says them, they are happening. The words that are spoken at Abel's trial are logical but are fixed and do not go beyond themselves. The words of the Night Chant hold power "to confront the truth, to create, and to heal" (Waniek 28).

A part of the idea of words having power is the importance Native Americans put on names. A person can keep his or her name or give it away if she or he wishes. Until recently, the names of the dead were not even mentioned among the Kiowa because the dead took their names with them (The Way to Rainy Mountain 33). Momaday tells of a story of a boy who came into camp one night and charmed everyone there, but he did not speak their language. He had no name.

The next morning he was gone, and the elders of the village decided that he must have been a bear or a dog because he had no name. "When you bestow a name upon someone or something you at the same time invest it with being" (Coltelli 92). The boy had not been named, so he did not exist. One of the most beautiful passages in Momaday's autobiography The Names is his account of Pohd-lohk giving Momaday the name Tsoai-talee, or "Rock-tree Boy." The account is filled with the feeling of sacredness and wonder. With this name, Momaday is articulated within his culture.

The power of language is illustrated in The Way to Rainy Mountain by the story that is told of the twins of the sun. They are kidnaped and taken to a cave where giants try to kill them by lighting a fire and causing the smoke to asphyxiate them. The grandmother outsmarts the giants because she teaches the twins the word "thain-mom" (32), which keeps the smoke above their eyes. When the giants see that the twins have the power of the word, they are afraid something bad will happen to them so they let them go.

The most graphic example of the power of language to be found in Momaday's works is Abel's inarticulation at the beginning of House Made of Dawn. He cannot speak; perhaps he is not created yet. At the end of the novel, he still does not speak: "he had no voice" (191), but hope exists because he at least has "the words of a song. And he went

running on the rise of the song" (191). Because that song is rising and it has a voice, we have hope that Abel will obtain a voice also.

This belief in the power of words explains why storytellers are held in such high regard among many Native Americans. The symbolic landscape that is so very important to Native American rituals and religion is only created through the shared words of the storyteller. "Without them there would be no community" (Evers, "Words and Place" 300). Because words create reality, when storytellers perform a story, they are not telling about an event that happened in the past or merely speaking of reality; they are actually creating an event or creating reality at the time of the performance. Linda Hogan says that a capable storyteller/singer, "is able to intensify and channel this energy which derives from words. Sound, rhythm, imagery, and symbolic action all combine so that the language . . . create[s] stability and equilibrium" (104).

Because a storyteller creates an event, some say the storyteller in Native American oral traditions is truly an artist, "worthy of critical attention as such" (Bauman 9), but others say that even though some creativity is achieved, "the individual signature is always getting rubbed out in the process of generative transmission" (Goody 27). Because of this controversy, much speculation exists about how the storyteller actually remembers and recreates the stories he

or she tells. Some say extensive memorization is used (Finnegan 36), but others say storytellers remember the basic ideas of the stories and then tell them in their own style (Tedlock, "Toward an Oral Poetics" 507). Some believe that interchangeable formulas are learned that are used in appropriate places (Ong 34, 35), while others argue that the storyteller is "not [a] talking digital computer, programmed to retrieve stored formulas in the right order" (Tedlock, "Toward an Oral Poetics 507). Those critics who assert that the storyteller is more creative describe the storytelling processes as "imaginative and creative in nature. It is an act by which man strives to realize his capacity for wonder, meaning and delight" (Momaday, "Man Made of Words" 168). One way to find a common ground between these two schools of thought is to acknowledge that storytelling in oral traditions has some universal characteristics that make it a specific medium, just as storytelling in the short story tradition has some general characteristics. What an individual storyteller does within the medium can lead to mediocrity or genius depending on the skill and imagination of the artist.

## CHAPTER THREE

### RHETORICAL DEVICES USED IN ORAL TRADITIONS

When a storyteller creates an event, he or she uses rhetorical devices to unite the story, the teller, and the audience. Some of these devices have a counterpart in the Western tradition but are used in a uniquely Indian way, and some are exclusive to Native American oral storytelling experiences. Some familiar devices that are used differently in the oral tradition are symbols, repetition, and ambiguity, while some concepts that are more unfamiliar to Western readers are the use of silence, circularity, and sacred time. Modern Native American textual storytellers often use these devices to attempt to make the reader a part of their storytelling audience and to dispel the isolation caused by the physical separation of the reader from the writer, a natural result of the physical solitude that occurs when an individual reader picks up a book and starts to read in isolation.

### SYMBOLS

The storyteller makes extensive use of symbols to try to invade the isolation of the reader, but these symbols are not used in the same way as they are in Western cultures. Many Westerners consider the use of symbols as only a rhetorical device because that is the way they have been taught to view the world, but symbols tend to "make up man's

reality" (Feldman 20) in the cultures of many Native Americans. Allen says "symbols are reality, not 'psychological' or imagined reality . . . but that reality where . . . sound and sense are one" ("The Sacred Hoop: A Contemporary Perspective" 17). Symbols are intrinsic to most Native Americans' lives. Kenneth Lincoln quotes Lame Deer, the Lakota medicine man and Trickster, as saying, "We Indians live in a world of symbols and images where the spiritual and the commonplace are one. To you symbols are just words . . . to us they are part of ourselves" (52). From these observations, a reader can be led to believe that many Native Americans collectively understand the symbols that are inherent to their cultures. Westerners, on the other hand, do not have the same unified cultural base, and, to most of them, symbols have a multiplicity of meanings. This can, however, be a positive aspect because the multiplicity of choices for a symbol can involve the reader more intimately in the text. For example, if a reader has only one cultural root for the sun, then he or she automatically knows what is meant when the sun is mentioned symbolically in a story. This can lead to cultural unity but does not involve much searching for meaning. On the other hand, if the sun has many meanings in a culture, the reader is forced to search for the exact meaning the author intends in this specific case. In either instance, symbols actively involve the reader in the text. As Rodney Simard



observes, if a symbol refers to something the reader understands, the reader uses his or her imagination to make the connection and thus becomes actively involved in the text. No longer is the author asking readers to believe the text, but instead the author is "counting on them to believe their own imaginations" (49).

Howard Meridith is one critic who believes Momaday involves the reader in a symbolic text. He says that Momaday's work is highly symbolic and "provoke[s] the readers' reflections and thus renew[s] their own freedom" (407). Kroeber also believes Momaday uses symbols, but he considers that use of symbols "bothersome" ("Technology" 18). He cites the symbol of the Albino as an example of this annoyance because he says that the Albino is "symbolically overdetermined" (19). He considers the idea that the Albino represents the White man in Abel a foregone conclusion. Because Kroeber rejects any other explanation, his ideas become too rigid and lead to oversimplification of Abel's problem. It is not a "given" that the Albino represents the White man; considering the high number of Albinos at the Jiminez pueblo (Watkins), Fragua's physical condition could just be a natural occurrence; he could also represent evil or many other things. The idea of the albino representing evil has substantiation in the novel itself. Fragua seems to be the personification of evil in the field when Francisco acknowledges that "evil had long since found

him out and knew who he was" (64); Abel also feels that he is killing a snake, the representation of evil, when he kills Fragua (94). If this interpretation is adopted, the novel receives an entirely different slant. This symbol is ambiguous rather than "overly determined" and is open to many interpretations. The reader is actively involved as he or she determines the exact meaning the author encodes.

An example of the multiple meanings of symbols is found in the various meanings different critics and scholars find in House Made of Dawn: to Berner in "Trying to Be Round: Three American Indian Novels," House Made of Dawn is trying to conform to the sacred number of four by use of quadripartite symbolism (341); to Allen, Abel is trying to understand his role as a "medicine person" ("Tradition and Continuity in the Imagination" 571). Whatever the interpretation of the symbol, one has to agree that trying to interpret symbols involves the reader in the narration and helps to create the audience involvement that is needed to make the reader a part of the storyteller's audience. This is possible because symbols help the reader visualize what is being discussed by connecting the subject to an experience familiar to the reader. Then the reader can "imagine a sensory image, involving him or her in the world of the prose" (Simard 84).

## REPETITION

Both Western and Native American storytellers use forms of repetition to emphasize key ideas and themes in their narratives. However, exact repetition of key words is so very common to oral traditions that it is considered the "yardstick by which oral can definitively be distinguished from written literature" (Finnegan 128). And, while some critics also consider redundancy, or excessive wordiness, to be a characteristic of oral tradition (Ong 39-40), other critics of Native American Literatures differentiate between repetition and redundancy, calling the former a central characteristic of Indian Literatures and the latter a central Western technique (Ramsey 187). Storytellers use repetition in Native myths and tales for many purposes, such as to "emphasize important information, to build suspense, to give the listeners the feeling that they know more than the characters . . . to create a trance effect, to add multiple meaning to a story, and to achieve a structural sense of harmony and balance" (Roemer, "Native American Oral Narratives" 48). One noted Native American author and critic considers repetition as serving the same function in Native American Literatures as the chorus does in Greek drama. Both are used "to reinforce the theme and to focus the participant's attention on central concerns, while intensifying their involvement with the enactment" (Allen, "The Sacred Hoop: A Contemporary Perspective" 11). In the

same article, Allen also points out that repetition is not used to help storytellers remember the story because the preliterate mind is adept at memorization, but rather:

Repetition has an entrancing effect. . . . It is hypnotic, and a hypnotic state of consciousness is the aim of the ceremony. . . . The distractions of ordinary life must be put to rest and emotions redirected and integrated into a ceremonial context, so that the greater awareness can come into full consciousness and functioning. . . . (11)

Repetition also intensifies the power of language to create reality. As Momaday expresses it, "if something is repeated, its power is more greatly realized. And language is powerful" (Woodard 143).

In House Made of Dawn, the last paragraph serves as an example of repetition. Derivatives of "run" appear more than a dozen times, "giving the sense of an endless drum beat" (Oleson 77). This repetition produces a sense of eternity and ritual rather than a feeling of isolated experience. Repetition is also found in Benally's Night Chant. The first eight lines start with the words "House made of dawn"; lines fifteen through nineteen have "Restore my" as the initial text; of the last sixteen lines, nine begin with the word "Happily" (134). These incantory and ritualistic expressions give the chant a hypnotic feeling and set it apart from normal discourse. Readers feel these words are sacred and powerful.

In chapter seventeen of The Ancient Child, Momaday makes use of the interesting phrases "Never had she to quest after

visions" (76), and "there had been a shot" (80). The first phrase, or derivatives of it, is used three times, and, the last time, it occurs just after the first time "there was a shot" is used. The coupling of the two phrases gives the reader the feeling that Momaday is "handing off" the repetition sequence to a new drummer. The second phrase is then used six times. Perhaps the only reason Momaday repeats the first phrase so many times is that he wants to be sure the reader knows that Grey is a visionary woman. This in itself is an integral component of the story, but the repetition also heightens the suspense of the reader. He or she asks, "Why is it so important that we know that Grey is a visionary woman?" The second phrase, "there was a shot," heightens the suspense even more. We know there is a shot, but the drama of the occasion is made more intense by the repetition. The suspense heightens as the reader asks, "When will that person be shot and get it over with?" The repetition in this chapter heightens the suspense and engages the interest of the reader.

Momaday uses repetition in still another way in his works. He repeats the same story many times. He has said, "Because I'm writing basically one story, I carry it on from book to book" (Woodard 133). An example of this is his story of the boy who becomes a bear. It is found in all four of his major works and is also a short story in the summer 1980 volume of Four Winds. The account in The Names

comes as his grandmother is visited by Pohd-lohk as the ancient man is on his way to give Momaday a name. Pohd-lohk does not tell her of his errand, but she remembers the story and knows why he is going to see the boy. She is glad that her son took the baby to the mountain because "by means of the child the memory of Tsoai should be remembered in the blood of the coming-out people" (55). In his other works, Momaday strives to do just this.

The next two accounts are found in The Way to Rainy Mountain as part of the introduction and in House Made of Dawn as part of Tosamah's sermon. One word is added in Way that is not found in the other two versions. Before the boy turns into a bear, "Directly" is added. Because one of the meanings of directly is "instantly; right away," this word gives a feeling of immediacy to the narrative. Even though the wording is similar in both versions, when one takes the bear story in the context of the whole work, the introduction to The Way to Rainy Mountain seems more honest and sincere. The persona of the narrator in the work seems to be engaged in an earnest personal search for personal identity and worth by examining his relationship to oral traditions. Tosamah, on the other hand, narrates essentially the same story, but it does not have the same impact on the reader because the narrator seems to lack integrity. The

story does not seem to carry the same weight when the reader remembers that Tosamah is also the same person who ends his sermons with "Good night . . . and get yours" (91).

The next two versions have many more actual wording variations. The first one was printed in Four Winds as "Tsoai and the Shield Maker" (34-43). The story is an amplified version of the more abbreviated form found in the previous three versions. Momaday attempts to make the reader actually see the Kiowa people as they were when the myth occurred: "We are a handsome people, they said, and they laughed" (35). We are also told more of the feelings of the sisters: "their faces were drawn and terrible with fright. In their eyes was a certain disbelief" (35). After the boy turns into a bear, he is seen by the people. Sometimes hunters tell of bears who walk on two legs or are more friendly and less afraid than other bears. A boy comes into the village without language and the people wonder if it is the bear-boy. A new character is mentioned in this rendition: Koi-ehm-toya, an old woman who sees the children leave and cuts off her fingers in grief for them. The story is made to seem more truthful by the mention of Koi-ehm-toya's grandson, who becomes a maker of shields that bear the images of claws and other powerful images. In his old age, he dreams of the children skipping and playing as they enter the woods.

The story grows in The Ancient Child. In it the myth is

brought to the modern day as Set, an artist who was brought up in the Western world, realizes his destiny and becomes the boy who turns into a bear. By juxtaposing the telling of the myth with everyday events in the lives of the characters, Momaday sends the message that the myths are not dead; extraordinary things also happen today. Myth and the power of the word still exist and can transform lives now as easily as they did hundreds of years ago. Grey is Koi-ehm-toya, the old woman of the Kiowa myth. In ancient times, the Kiowa needed kin in the sky as they passed Devil's Tower, and when this was given to them Koi-ehm-toya was there; many Native Americans need to believe in the power of the word, and if they believe Set's story they will obtain that belief from this new rendition of the myth, and Koi-ehm-toya is there still.

#### AMBIGUITY

Other readings of the bear myth contained in The Ancient Child could be considered valid; like many other stories in Native American Literatures, it is ambiguous. Now, ambiguity, like repetition and symbolism, is not a concept that is alien to the Western mind. It is the writer's duty, no matter what his or her culture, to "extend the beauty and mystery of life into the imaginations of his readers" (Scarberry-Garcia, Landmarks of Healing 114), and Walter Benjamin says that a good storyteller keeps a story free



from interpretation as he or she tells it so that it is left up to the reader to "interpret things the way he understands them" (89). This concept is greatly expanded in Native American Literatures, partially because of the general Indian belief that inherent mystery is found in all creation. Momaday says that he enjoys stories from the oral tradition precisely because all the answers are not known: "The more I understand about storytelling, the more I realize that there is always a part of the story which leaves us wondering about this or that" (Weiler 118). He says that he has looked at the story of the arrowmaker who confounds his enemy by the power of language many times and still he "doesn't understand [the] story in all its dimensions" (Woodard 115). In this story, a man and his wife are sitting alone in their tipi and the man is making arrows by the light of the fire. He sees someone through a small opening in the tipi where two hides are stitched together. He speaks to his wife in the Kiowa language and tells her not to be afraid. As the Kiowa artisan straightens an arrow in his teeth, he speaks calmly as if he were speaking to his wife. He says, "I know that you are there on the outside, for I can feel your eyes upon me. If you are a Kiowa, you will understand what I am saying, and you will speak your name" (The Way to Rainy Mountain 46). The man outside does not speak, so, after the arrowmaker points his arrow all around as if he is checking its

construction, he shoots the arrow right into his enemy's heart. If readers see the arrow as a metaphor for language, this story vividly illustrates the idea of language being penetrating and potent for both creation and destruction. As well as the ambiguity of the story because Momaday admits that he still spends time wondering what the enemy was doing outside the tent. This question and others like it engage the reader's imagination. If Momaday can still wonder about details of a story, readers can also use their imaginations and thus "become participants . . . giving the experience a far greater impact" (Simard 84).

When you look at the stories that oral storytellers tell, you find many unanswered questions. For example, a Nez Perce story reported by Karl Kroeber in Traditional Literatures of the American Indians tells of a maiden who goes into the woods on a vision quest and ends up being killed by her fiancée. He hides the arrow in a willow and now the willow is red because of her blood. This story has unanswered questions. One could try to answer these questions by studying the anthropological evidence or by speculating on various unique customs, but the answer could also be found in the simple fact that the story was meant to be puzzling. Ambiguity may have been the point of the story, just as the "presentation of mysterious motive has long been recognized as a legitimate prerogative for artists in our own literary tradition" (Kroeber, Traditional

Literatures of the American Indian 17). Perhaps the intended effect of the story is to "compel the . . . audience to confront dark mysteries of the human heart" (Kroeber, "The Art of Traditional American Indian Narration" 17).

Momaday's ambiguity is purposeful in his literary works. When Kope'mah, the old medicine woman in The Ancient Child, is about to die, she speaks of death as a riddle and says, "It was appropriate that there should remain a riddle at the center. It was her due; in the turning of a hundred years she had earned a riddle" (21). The implication here is that the old woman knows that ambiguity is beneficial to the human soul and is perhaps an essential element of the human condition. She is pleased that she, who knows so many things with certainty, is allowed to have a mystery as life draws to a close.

Momaday's House Made of Dawn must be considered an ambiguous novel. It has been spoken of as a Christian morality play (McAllister, "Incarnate Grace and the Paths of Salvation in House Made of Dawn), a commentary on futility (Velie, Four American Literary Masters), and a cultural expose of Native Americans (Watkins, In Time and Place). Maybe Abel dies, and maybe he doesn't; maybe the Albino is evil, and maybe he is the White man in Abel; maybe Father Olguin really sees (what?), and maybe he doesn't; maybe the ambiguity is a symptom of Momaday's "own dilemma of being an

educated Indian in modern America" (Larson 93), and maybe it is a cry for the continuation of the oral tradition. Such questions involve the reader in the text because, as the reader tries satisfactorily to answer these questions on an individual basis, the stories come alive as her or his imagination becomes actively involved. Storytellers in Native American oral traditions have been using the same techniques of imaginatively involving their audiences for millennia because they create a bond between the artist and the audience.

#### CIRCULARITY

One rhetorical device that is not as common to Western literature is circularity. Western narrative is often linear--it takes a storyline and follows it through the rising action to the climax, falling action, and resolution. Apparently, this has not always been the case, because, if we date Western literature from the epic poems of Homer, we find that the Iliad follows a pattern that is more picaresque--as fits the oral tradition from whence it came. Even though the epic poem is not required to follow the plot line of a novel, many similarities emerge between the "roots" of Western literature and oral traditions. The Iliad is arranged in boxes within boxes, according to theme. In fact, Ong observes, "If we take the climactic linear plot as the paradigm of plot, the epic has no plot" (144). This

ancient pattern is similar to the circularity of Indian Literatures today. As Allen asserts in "Whose Dream is This, Anyway," "Traditional tribal narratives possess a circular structure. They incorporate event within event, piling meaning upon meaning in an accretive form that finally results in a story" (99). This accretion of events is likened by Charles Woodard to a journey that must be circular to be complete: "No version of the essential journey is complete until the return is made. Often the return is physical . . . but the return is as importantly spiritually, and can be accomplished through the oral tradition" (48). Niantum also mentions that many Native Americans believe in the closing of a circle. He feels that Indian stories leave some room for the imagination, but only enough that the imagination can fill. He says that the artist (the writer) "sets the groundwork. The art piece is finished by the reader. The circle is closed with the imagination of the reader. It has to be both of them working on the art object for it to become a whole" ("Closing the Circle" 200). Niantum believes that contemporary art, as opposed to Native American art, is too fragmented; the areas left for the imagination are too big to be filled in by the observer. Only when the artist and the audience work together are the aims of the oral tradition met. Completion and closure are found in the "closing of the circle" ("Closing the Circle" 201).

The circularity of Momaday's House Made of Dawn has been noted by several critics, but they interpret the circularity in different ways. Charles Larson sees this circularity as "a trap because there is no way out" (92), and Thekla Zachrau agrees by presenting the circularity as a "circular entrapment excluding the dimension of the future" (55). Others see the circularity as being a property of Native American thought that is made evident in the novel. Barbara Strelke asserts, "The four part structure of the novel forms a circular unit. The image of the circle . . . is recurrent in Indian thought and art" (349). R. S. Sharma perceives Momaday's use of circularity as an positive sign: "there is no termination, each ending is a new kind of beginning" (71). One thing is certain: the novel ends where it begins--with Abel running the race of the dead into the dawn. Critics such as Larson and Zachrau, who see this as a negative occurrence, evidently have their thoughts rooted in the Western way of seeing things: since Abel has not progressed from where he started, he is in a trap with no outlet; or, in literary terms, the conflict has no resolution in the novel. However, critics such as Strelke and Sharma recognize that this novel cannot be evaluated in strictly Western ways of thinking. The positive aspects of circularity that are inherent in Indian worldviews must be considered. According to Allen, Native American novels are not located on specific time lines, but instead are "tied to

a particular point of view--that of the tribe's tradition, and to a specific idea--that of the ritual tradition" ("The Sacred Hoop: A Contemporary Perspective" 7). Native American thought is most often cyclical and in a state of transformation, and "that process entails the ritual cycle" ("Whose Dream is This, Anyway" 99). If readers can comprehend this idea, they can perhaps use their imaginations to make the connection between the cyclical nature of ritual and the idea that Sharma expresses: the novel "does not offer us a plot but only fragments of a vision" (72). If the reader can entertain the thought that this novel is a record of a vision and not a conventional Western novel containing the traditional elements, then the end of House Made of Dawn can be seen as the beginning of a new cycle of Abel's life rather than the ending of a story. Because the circularity is complete, balance and harmony are achieved.

#### SILENCE

In addition to being comfortable with circularity, most Native Americans are also comfortable with the idea of silence in their narratives. Westerners tend to fill in the silence (or the non-text space) with words. Once when Momaday was teaching, he told his students that he was going to tell them a story and then said nothing for two minutes. The students were very uncomfortable with this. Momaday

says that the students "wanted sounds. They wanted me to talk, shout, sing. . . . Anything to break the silence" (Woodard 109). Momaday felt this was sad because the students were not able to appreciate the restorative and creative properties of silence. On the other hand, as Charles Eastman, a Native American novelist, says, to Native Americans, silence is "the absolute pose or balance of body, mind, and spirit" (qtd. in Murray 359). Momaday has said that "Silence is powerful. In the Indian world a word is spoken . . . not against, but within the silence" ("The Native Voice" 7).

The irritation that Westerners feel when confronted with the Indian idea of silence is illustrated in House Made of Dawn in the exchange between Angela and Abel after he finishes chopping wood for her. She wants to bargain with him about the wages owed him, so she asks questions; Abel stands mute. "She was full of irritation. She knew only how to persist, but she had already begun to sense that it was of no use; and that made her seethe" (35). When Abel is inarticulate, the problem is not in the silence, for that "was the older and better part of custom" (57), but rather in the fact that he has no voice. Silence is an integral part of oral traditions. Through his characters, Momaday expresses the belief that "The silence between words is as full of meaning--and as sacred--as the words themselves are" (Buller 168).



In both The Way To Rainy Mountain and The Ancient Child, Momaday incorporates silence into the printed texts by use of large portions of blank space, much as Dennis Tedlock attempts in his artistic and sympathetic translation of Zuni texts. Both recognize silence as a major rhetorical device of Native American storytellers and try to convey the pauses of the storyteller through typography and printing techniques. Tedlock, however, uses design more extensively than Momaday. Along with other innovative techniques, Tedlock uses capital letters to indicate stress and crescendo, dashes to indicate vowels that are held longer than normal, and line breaks to indicate silence (Finding the Center, xxi-xxiv). Both recognize the importance of using print to attempt to give the reader the feeling of silence in the traditions of storytellers.

#### SACRED TIME

Besides silence and circularity, one other concept inherent in Native American storytelling is a unique concept of time. For many Native American storytellers, time is not a straight line, as it usually is to the Western mind. Instead, as one of Joseph Bruchac's elders told him, "Think of yourself . . . as riding backwards on a horse. What you see is the past . . . [which is] always part of the present" ("Storytelling and Native American Writing" 40). Some Native American languages do not even have a past or a

future tense, but only have present tense verbs (Ruppert 211). Time is cyclical and always exists rather than being sequential with a past and future. Bruchac expresses this idea: "Time in the western sense was not a major factor in Native American lives 500 years ago" ("Storytelling and Native American Writing" 39), then he shares a poem telling of how Mink stole Time but found out that Time really owned him. Now Mink sits,

with three big keys  
around his neck. Each day he uses them  
to wind up Time  
which owns us all now  
the way we once owned the Sun. . . . (38-39).

Storytellers try to steal back a Native American notion of time by telling of the "processes which are of eternal happening" (Brown 28). Through participating in storytelling experience, the participants can "project [them]selves out of the confinement of time" (Woodard 197).

In The Names, Momaday tells us, "Notions of the past and future are essentially notions of the present" (97), and this projection out of the confinement of time is evident in The Ancient Child. For one thing, the Billy the Kid stories happen for Grey in the present, even though Billy the Kid has been dead for over a hundred years according to a linear and progressive reckoning of the time continuum.

Also, Koi-ehm-toya (Grey) lives still as she did when the sisters were taken into the sky by the tree. The past and future are embodied in the present.

Even though the actual dates given in House Made of Dawn range from July 20, 1945, until February 28, 1952, the time frame of the book is much larger. Events happen from Abel's boyhood (and actually much earlier than that) until the present. Ironically, when Father Olguin exclaims after Abel brings Francisco's body to him, "Do you know what time it is?" (190), Abel knows. It is February 28 and he leaves the Priest to participate in a run that happens in November and early spring. He has learned about sacred time.

## CONCLUSION

The oral tradition is a complicated and fascinating subject, and Momaday's stories fit perfectly into the tradition. Is this a conscious effort on Momaday's part? Perhaps the answer to this question lies in a statement made by David Brumble after he had made an extensive study of Native American autobiography to better understand Momaday's autobiographical works. Brumble states, "I was right in assuming that reading Indian autobiographies had prepared me to understand Momaday. I was wrong in assuming that Momaday had read them" (American Indian Autobiography 17). Momaday is a storyteller in the oral tradition, not because he consciously tries to be one, but because the oral tradition is in his blood and in his heart. His works contain vital elements of the oral tradition: they seek to achieve harmony and balance; they express the belief that words create reality; they are used to teach essential values to the next generation; they extol the importance of a sense of place; they express the importance of the sacred nature of things; they attempt to promote unity in cultures as they exists today as well as to preserve traditions that form a vital link to tribal heritages; they create a sense of self-awareness by understanding human experience. These elements of oral tradition are transmitted through the use of rhetorical devices that are either singular to Native American thought or used in ways that are uniquely American

Indian: repetition, circularity, ambiguity, silence, sacred time, and symbolism. N. Scott Momaday is a storyteller in the Native American oral tradition because his works contain the essential elements of stories told in Native American oral traditions.

## WORKS CITED

- Allen, Paula Gunn. "The Sacred Hoop: A Contemporary Perspective." Studies in American Indian Literature: Critical Essays and Course Designs. Ed. Paula Gunn Allen. New York: MLA, 1983. 3-21.
- . The Sacred Hoop: A Contemporary Perspective. Boston: Beacon, 1986.
- . "Tradition and Continuity in the Imagination." Recovering the Word: Essays on Native American Literature. Ed. Brian Swann and Arnold Krupat. Berkeley: U of California P, 1985. 563-579.
- . "Whose Dream is This Anyway?: Remythologizing and Self-Redefinition of Contemporary American Indian Fiction." Literature and the Visual Arts in Contemporary Society. Ed. Suzanne Surguson and Martha Groseclose. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1985. 95-122.
- Bauman, Richard. Story, Performance, and Event: Contextual Studies of Oral Narrative. Cambridge UP, 1986.
- Benjamin, Walter. Illuminations. New York: Harcourt, 1955.
- Berner, Robert L. "Trying To Be Round: Three American Indian Novels." World Literature Today. 58.3 (1984): 341-44.
- Bierhorst, John. Introduction. In The Trail of the Wind. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. 1971. 1-7.
- . Introduction. The Red Swan: Myths and Tales of the American Indians. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1976. 3-12.
- Blaeser, Kimberly. "The Way to Rainy Mountain: Momaday's Work in Motion." Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American Indian Literatures. Ed. Gerald Vizenor. Albuquerque: U New Mexico P, 1989. 39-54.
- Brown, Joseph Epes. "The Roots of Renewal." Seeing with a Native Eye: Essays on Native American Religion. New York: Harper, 1976. 23-34.
- Bruchac, Joseph. "Storytelling and Native American Writing." Halcyon: A Journal of the Humanities. U Nevada P, 1990. 35-41.

- . Survival This Way: Interviews with American Indian Poets. Tucson: U Arizona P, 1987.
- Brumble, H. David III. American Indian Autobiography. Berkeley: U California P, 1988.
- Buller, Galen. "New Interpretations of Native American Literature: A Survival Technique." American Indian Culture and Research Journal. 4.1 (1980): 165-77.
- Campbell, Joseph. The Power of Myth. New York: Doubleday, 1988.
- Cederstrom, Lorelei. "Myth and Ceremony in Contemporary North American Native Fiction." Contemporary Native Fiction. 286-301.
- Coltelli, Laura. Winged Words: American Indian Writers Speak. Lincoln: U Nebraska P, 1990.
- Cook, Elizabeth. "Propulsives in Native American Literature." College Composition and Communication 24.3 (1973): 271-74.
- Cook-Lynn, Elizabeth. "As a Dakota Woman." Survival This Way: Interviews with American Indian Poets. Ed. Joseph Bruchac. Tucson: U Arizona P, 1987. 57-72.
- Cousineau, Phil, ed. The Hero's Journey: Joseph Campbell on his Life and Works. San Francisco: Harper, 1990.
- Dickinson-Brown, Roger. "The Art and Importance of N. Scott Momaday." The Southern Review. 14 (1978): 30-45.
- Deloria, Vine, Jr. God Is Red. New York: Dell, 1973.
- Dorris, Michael. "Native American Literature in an Ethnohistorical Context." College English. 41.2 (1979): 147-62.
- Eggan, Fred. "From History to Myth: A Hopi Example." Studies in Southwestern Ethnolinguistics. Ed. Dell Hymes. The Hague: Mouton, 1967. 33-52.
- Evers, Lawrence J. "Words and Place: A Reading of House Made of Dawn." Western American Literature. 11.4 (1977): 297-320.
- Feldman, Susan, ed. The Storytelling Stone: Myths and Tales of the American Indians. New York: Dell, 1965.

- Fields, Kenneth. "More Than language Means." The Southern Review 6.1 (1970): 196-204.
- Finnegan, Ruth. Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance and Social Context. London: Cambridge UP, 1977.
- Georges, Robert A. "Toward an Understanding of Storytelling Events." Journal of American Folklore. 82 (1969): 313-29.
- Goody, Jack. The Domestication of the Savage Mind. London: Cambridge UP, 1977.
- Havelock, Eric. The Muse Learns to Write. New Haven: Yale UP, 1986.
- Hirsch, Bernard. "Self-Hatred and Spiritual Corruption in House Made of Dawn." Western American Literature. 27.4 (1983): 307-21.
- Hogan, Linda. "Who Puts Together." Denver Quarterly. 14.4: 103-12.
- Iser, Wolfgang. "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach." Reader Response Criticism. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1981. 50-99.
- Jahner, Elaine. "Introduction: American Indian Writers and the Tyranny of Expectations." Book Forum 5.3 (1981): 343-48.
- . "A Critical Approach to American Indian Literature." Studies in American Indian Literature. Ed. Paula Gunn Allen. New York: MLA, 1983. 211-24.
- . "Metalanguages." Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American Indian Literatures. Ed. Gerald Vizenor. Albuquerque: U New Mexico P, 1989. 155-85.
- Jaskoski, Helen. "Image and Silence." Approaches to Teaching Momaday's The Way to Rainy Mountain. New York: MLA, 1988. 69-77.
- Kerr, Blaine. "The Novel as Sacred Text: N. Scott Momaday's Myth-Making Ethic." Southwest Review (Spring 1978): 173-79.



- Kroeber, Karl. "Deconstructionist Criticism and American Indian Literature." Coyote Was Here: Essays on Contemporary Native American Literary and Political Mobilization. Aarhus, Denmark: Sekvos, 1989. 73-89.
- . Traditional Literatures of the American Indian. Lincoln: U Nebraska P, 1981.
- . "Technology and Tribal Narrative." Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American Literatures. Ed. Gerald Vizenor. Albuquerque: U New Mexico P, 1989. 17-37.
- Krupat, Arnold. "The Dialogic of Silko's Storyteller." Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American Literatures. Ed. Gerald Vizenor. Albuquerque: U New Mexico P, 1989. 55-68.
- . The Voice in the Margin: Native American Literature and the Cannon. Berkeley: U California P, 1989.
- Lattin, Vernon E. "Momaday's Pastoral Vision in the Context of Modern Ethnic and Mainstream American Fiction." Approaches to Teaching Momaday's The Way to Rainy Mountain. New York: MLA, 1988. 124-31.
- . "The Quest for Mythic Vision in Contemporary Native American and Chicano Fiction." American Literature 50.4: 625-40.
- Lincoln, Kenneth. Native American Renaissance. Berkeley: U California P, 1983.
- McAllister, Mick. "Incarnate Grace and the Paths of Salvation in House Made of Dawn." South Dakota Review 12.4 (1974-75): 115-25.
- Meredith, Howard. "N. Scott Momaday: A Man of Words." World Literature Today 64.3 Summer (1990): 405-407.
- Momaday, N. Scott. "I Am Alive..." The World of the American Indian. Ed. Jules Billard. Washington: National Geographic Society, 1979. 11-28.
- . The Ancient Child. New York: Harper Collins, 1989.
- . "A First American Views His Land." National Geographic. 150.1 (1976): 13-8.
- . House Made of Dawn. New York: Harper, 1968.

- . "The Magic of Words." Survival This Way: Interviews with American Indian Poets. Ed. Joseph Bruchac. Tucson: U Arizona P, 1989. 173-91.
- . "A Man Made of Words," The Remembered Earth: An Anthology of Contemporary Native American Literature. Ed. Geary Hobson. Albuquerque: U New Mexico P, 1979. 162-76.
- . The Names. New York: Harper, 1976.
- . "Native American Attitudes to the Environment." Seeing with a Native Eye: Essays on Native American Religion. Ed. Walter Holden Capps. New York: Harper & Row, 1976. 79-85.
- . "The Native Voice." Columbia Literary History of the United States. Ed. Emory Elliott. New York: Columbia UP, 1988. 5-15.
- . "To Save a Great Vision." A Sender of Words: Essays in Memory of John G. Neihardt. Ed. Vine Deloria, Jr. Salt Lake City: Howe Brothers, 1984. 30-39.
- . "Tsoai and the Shield Maker." Four Winds. (Summer 1980): 34-43.
- . The Way to Rainy Mountain. Albuquerque: U New Mexico P, 1969.
- Murry, David. Forked Tongues: Speech, Writing and Representation in North American Indian Texts. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991.
- Nelson, Robert. Place and Vision: The Function of Landscape in Native American Fiction. American Indian Studies Series No. 2. Forthcoming from Lang, 1993.
- Niatum, Duane. "Closing the Circle." Survival This Way: Interviews with American Indian Poets. Ed. Joseph Bruchac. Tucson: U Arizona P, 1989. 193-210.
- Oandasan, William. "The Way to Rainy Mountain: Internal and External Structures." Approaches to Teaching Momaday's The Way to Rainy Mountain. New York: MLA, 1988. 61-68.
- Oleson, Carole. "The Remembered Earth: Momaday's House Made of Dawn." South Dakota Review. 11.1 (1973): 59-77.
- Ong, Walter. Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word. London: Methuen, 1982.

- Ortiz, Simon J. "Towards a National Indian Literature: Cultural Authenticity in Nationalism." Melus. 8.2 (1981): 7-12.
- . "The Story Never Ends." Survival This Way: Interviews with American Indian Poets. Ed. Joseph Bruchac. Tucson: U Arizona P, 1989. 211-30.
- Papovich, J. Frank. "Journey into the Wilderness: American Literature and The Way to Rainy Mountain." Approaches to Teaching Momaday's The Way to Rainy Mountain. New York: MLA, 1988. 116-23.
- . "Landscape, Tradition, and Identity in The Way to Rainy Mountain." Perspectives on Contemporary Literature. 12 (1986): 13-18.
- Ramsey, Jarold. Reading the Fire: Essays in the Traditional Indian Literatures of the Far West. Lincoln: U Nebraska P, 1983.
- Roemer, Kenneth. "Native American Oral Narratives: Context and Continuity." Smoothing the Ground: Essays on Native American Oral Literature. Ed. Brian Swann. Berkeley, U California P, 1983. 39-54.
- Ruoff, A. LaVonne Brown. "The Survival of Tradition: American Indian Oral and Written Narrative." The Massachusetts Review 27 (1986): 275-93.
- Ruppert, James. "Mediation and Multiple Narrative in Contemporary Native American Fiction." Texas Studies in Literature and Language. 28.2 (1986): 209-24.
- Scarberry-Garcia, Susan. Landmarks of Healing: A Study of House Made of Dawn. Albuquerque: U New Mexico P, 1990.
- . "Beneath the Stars: Images of the Sacred." Approaches to Teaching Momaday's The Way to Rainy Mountain. New York: MLA, 1988. 89-97.
- Scholer, Bo. "Trickster and Storyteller. The Sacred Memories and True Tales of Gerald Vizenor." Coyote Was Here: Essays on Contemporary Native American Literary and Political Mobilization. Ed. Bo Scholer. Aarhus, Denmark: Sekvos, 1989. 134-46.
- Schubnell, Mattias. N. Scott Momaday: The Cultural and Literary Background. Norman: U Oklahoma P, 1985.

- Sharma, R.S. "Vision and Form in N. Scott Momaday's House Made of Dawn." Indian Journal of American Studies. 12.1 (1982): 69-80.
- Sherzer, Joel. "Strategies in Text and Context: The Hot Pepper Story." Recovering the Word: Essays on Native American Literature. Ed. Briann Swann and Arnold Krupat. Berkeley: U California P, 1987. 151-96.
- Silko, Leslie Marmon, and James Wright. The Delicacy and Strength of Lace. Ed. Anne Wright. Saint Paul: Graywolf, 1986.
- Simard, Rodney, and Susan Stone. The Whole Writer's Catalog: An Introduction to Advanced Composition. San Francisco: EMT, 1992.
- Strelke, Barbara. "N. Scott Momaday: Racial Memory and Individual Imagination." Literature of the American Indians: Views and Interpretations: A Gathering of Indian Memories, Symbolic Contexts, and Literary Criticism. Ed. Abraham Chapman. New York: NAL, 1975. 348-57.
- Tedlock, Dennis. Finding the Center: Narrative Poetry of the Zuni Indians. Lincoln: U Nebraska P, 1978.
- . "Toward an Oral Poetics." New Literary History: A Journal of Theory and Interpretation. 8.3 (1977): 507-19.
- Toelken, Barre, and Tacheeni Scott. "Poetic Retranslation and the 'Pretty Languages' of Yellowman." Traditional Literatures of the American Indian. Ed. Karl Kroeber. Lincoln: U Nebraska P, 1981. 65-95.
- Trout, Lawana, "The Way to Rainy Mountain: Arrow of History, Spiral of Myth." Approaches to Teaching Momaday's The Way to Rainy Mountain. New York: MLA, 1988. 32-40.
- Tuan, Yi-Fu. "Geopietry: A Theme in Man's Attachment to Nature and to Place." Geographies of the Mind. New York: Oxford UP, 1976. 11-39.
- Velie, Alan R. Four American Indian Literary Masters: N. Scott Momaday, James Welch, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Gerald Vizenor. Norman: U Oklahoma P, 1982.
- Vizenor, Gerald. "Follow the Trickroutes." Survival This Way: Interviews with American Indian Poets. Tucson: U Arizona P, 1987. 287-310.

- Walters, Anna Lee. "Chapter One." The Man To Send Rain Clouds. Comp. Kenneth Rosen. New York: Vintage, 1975. 82-93.
- Waniek, Marilyn Nelson. "The Power of Language in N. Scott Momaday's House Made of Dawn." Minority Voices 4 (1980): 23-28.
- Watkins, Floyd C. In Time and Place: Some Origins of American Fiction. Athens: U Georgia P, 1977.
- Weiler, Dagmar. "M. [sic] Scott Momaday: Story Teller." The Journal of Ethnic Studies 16.1 (1988): 118-27.
- Wiget, Andrew. Native American Literature. Boston: Twayne, 1985.
- Witherspoon, Gary and Glen Peterson. Holistic Symmetry in Navajo Art and Culture. American Indian Studies Series No. 4. Forthcoming from Lang, 1993.
- Woodard, Charles L. Ancestral Voice: Conversations with N. Scott Momaday. Lincoln: U Nebraska P, 1989.
- Zachrau, Thelka. "N. Scott Momaday: Towards an Indian Identity." American Indian Culture and Research Journal 3 (1979): 29-56.