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# Postindian imagery in House made of dawn

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POSTINDIAN IMAGERY IN *HOUSE MADE OF DAWN*

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Michael Thomas Gaworecki

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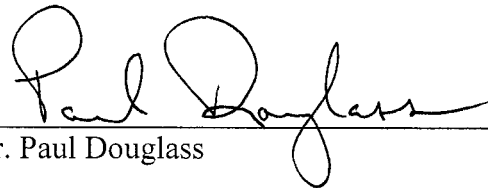
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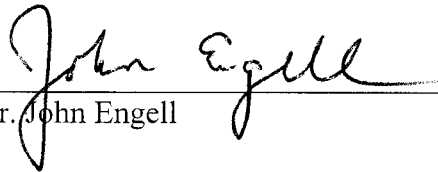
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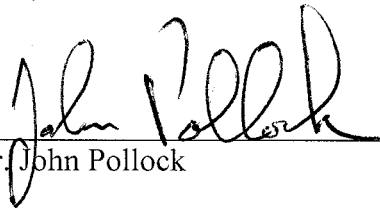
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## ABSTRACT

### POSTINDIAN IMAGERY IN *HOUSE MADE OF DAWN*

by Michael Thomas Gaworecki

N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* is a novel self-consciously situated on the cusp between oral and literary traditions. It not only injects oral traditions into a literary generic form, but also experiments with the capabilities of that generic form. The novel deflates and subverts stereotypical images of "Indians" in a manner consistent with Gerald Vizenor's concept of the "Postindian," thereby clearing the way for Momaday's Native American protagonist to embrace traditional Native culture while living in the modern world.

The complex nature of the reconciliation Momaday's protagonist makes with his fractured life-experiences is best observed by examining the web of imagery woven throughout the text. Ultimately, the symbolism and imagery in the novel serve to illustrate the harmony that exists amongst all aspects of the universe. Oral traditions preserve a tribe's sense of connectedness to their own past and the entire cosmos; as a novel derived equally of oral and literary traditions, *House Made of Dawn* carries the wisdom and worldview of tribal cultures into the future. Thus *House Made of Dawn*'s grandest Postindian achievement is in demonstrating the viability of Native tribal culture in the modern era.

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### Postindian Imagery in *House Made of Dawn*

In the years immediately following the publication of *House Made of Dawn* in 1968, many critics endeavored to study the aspects of the novel that derive from Western literary traditions. But any theoretical approach that reads the novel predominately as a work of Western literature cannot make much use of the incessant stream of images that compose *House Made of Dawn*, or the sparse, poetic prose style in which it is written—not to mention the tribal concepts, rituals, and poetry that Momaday incorporates into the narrative. Since Carol Oleson wrote, in 1973, that “an entire level of the book ... remains unseen by those of us who do not know the languages and legends of the people depicted” (75), many Native scholars, as well as scholars informed by tribal traditions, have undertaken to illuminate those facets of the novel that are not readily available to a non-Native audience. More importantly, Native scholars have since created theories for interpreting Native American literature, which are capable of opening up even more as-yet-unexplored avenues of inquiry into the novel. What has made *House Made of Dawn* such a continually fertile text for critical inquiry is how seamlessly it blends the oral traditions of various Native American tribes into a Euro-American literary tradition.

The purpose of this essay is to participate in the next phase of the critical dialogue centered on *House Made of Dawn* by studying its literary and oral influences as parts of a whole rather than as independent of each other. No critical inquiry into the text can ignore either the oral or the literary traditions upon which it is based, though many critics, Native and non-Native alike, seem to treat the two sets of influences as separate but equal. Yet Western literary traditions themselves grew out of tribal oral traditions; using



this idea as a premise for critical inquiry provides new ways of viewing literary traditions.

Momaday consciously situates himself as a traditional Native storyteller working in a modern medium, and this situation is problematic. Jana Sequoya Magdaleno, for instance, argues that “modern literary forms of cultural revitalization are paradoxical forms in that they are necessarily not constituted in the cultural terms of the traditions which they would vitalize” (288), and this argument must be considered. But just as it seems prudent to learn what we can from oral traditions that might enlighten our readings of literary texts, it also seems worthwhile for Native Americans to explore the possibilities opened up for oral traditions by literature. Susan Scarberry-García makes this point most eloquently:

The Pueblos recycle broken pottery or potsherds into the matrix that they mix with fresh clay to make a new creation, a new pot. Ground down and refined into powder, the ancient clay is mixed with the new. So, too, in this analogy from material to literary culture, do contemporary Native American writer-storytellers like Momaday 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. (71)

Magdaleno is right in noting that a written text does not and cannot function the way oral storytelling does within the tribal context—reading a book tends to isolate the reader while “the social role of traditional tribal story is to gather together the members of the society in communal place” (288). But she overlooks the fact that there are communal aspects to contemporary Native American literature. One of those communal aspects is the scholarly debate novels like *House Made of Dawn* have engendered, in which Magdaleno herself participates.

Scarberry-García finds that *House Made of Dawn* is actually a “communally composed story.” Not only does Momaday employ multiple narrative voices, but there is also a discernible presence of his sources for the oral components of the novel: “echoes of older traditional storytellers—Sandoval, Sam Ahkeah, and Hatáli Natlóí—who ancestrally in the storytelling chain of transmission helped to create a portion of *House Made of Dawn*” (73). The men named by Scarberry-García were all Indian men who recorded their tribe’s myths and folktales, and whose texts Momaday uses as sources for his novel. In this way he is taking tribal stories and reworking them—not into an oral presentation, as a traditional storyteller would do, perhaps, but Momaday is still participating in the transmission of these stories to future generations.

Momaday uses several other strategies to infuse his novel with the power of traditional tribal storytelling, and those strategies are the subject of this essay. Specifically, *House Made of Dawn* weaves a web of successive and repeated images throughout the novel in a manner consistent with tribal healing ceremonies, which promote well-being by providing an afflicted person with mental images designed to reintegrate them into the natural order of the universe. Some scholars view the idea of a “healing” novel with skepticism, but Momaday’s novel cleverly draws its readers into a deep engagement with the work by constantly setting up and subverting stereotypes of Native Americans. Unless readers are in some way conversant with the text, they risk missing the significance of the subtly subverted stereotypical images; hence they participate in the text in a way unnecessary with a work containing more straightforward symbolism. Many critics have misread *House Made of Dawn* because they read it too

superficially, or because they aren't capable of shedding their own preconceived notions about Native Americans and Native American literature. *House Made of Dawn* is not, in fact, a novel that easily fits into any preconceived notion of what constitutes that Euro-American generic form. It is not only an experiment in transliterating oral traditions; it also experiments with the capabilities of the modern novel.

Some critics essentially agree with Magdaleno's assessment that *House Made of Dawn* is a novel founded on paradox, but find the circumstances of its composition to be its greatest strength. Karl Kroeber points out that "Momaday uses a non-native language and generic form to evoke and articulate possibilities of being Indian. The culture which alienated Momaday from his people authorizes the language and form of his art" (17). Momaday's main character, Abel, is rendered "inarticulate" by his contradictory experiences with his tribal heritage and the modern world. For Kroeber, this parallels the fact that Momaday is not fluent in any Native language.

Without language there can be no imposition of a culture's symbolic order on physical surroundings. Abel's inarticulateness reflects Momaday's generic deprivation. The very form of his work testifies to his impotence to impose a symbolic order other than one structured by the culture he would resist, or pass through, to recover a different order, an order that would not use language novelistically. (21)

Kroeber finds that there is a deliberate "agonistic nature" to *House Made of Dawn*, which he argues Momaday employed to point up the impossibility of rendering the Native worldview in a European art form and language. He calls it a "contradictory novel," but ultimately determines that it was this intentional contradictoriness that celebrated "a native culture's resistance to the overwhelming Euro-American culture" and thus served to inspire a future generation of Indian writers.

Momaday has in fact found a way to inject the Native tribal worldview into his novel even without the exclusive use of the language or art form of a tribal people (though the novel, of course, is informed in many ways by both tribal language and art form). He has said in different interviews that the oral tradition “should be preserved” and that he is doing “something about it” (Schubnell 4), and that he is “not concerned to preserve relics and artifacts” (103). Both statements are remarkably consistent with the novel; Momaday is preserving the oral traditions by recasting them in a new art form, and thereby not simply preserving relics or artifacts but instead taking his place in the line of tribal storytellers who keep these stories alive and growing. The rehabilitation of Momaday’s main character is left incomplete at the end of the novel, but rather than reflecting the frustration of some endeavor to “preserve” an ancient tradition, this is merely the oral technique of leaving stories open-ended, a technique Momaday is now using in a novel. The fact that Momaday has succeeded, to any extent, in “preserving” the oral tradition through the novel is itself a kind of resistance, because in reality he has not preserved anything—not in the strict denotative sense of the word. What Momaday has done is demonstrate the viability of the Native worldview by crafting a novel informed by oral as much as literary tradition. He has shown that the oral tradition can survive even translation into an alien language and art form. Survival in and of itself is a form of resistance against an American federal government and mainstream culture that tries to efface, or at least ignore, Native culture altogether, as Gerald Vizenor has pointed out in his groundbreaking work, *Manifest Manners*. “Survivance,” as Vizenor calls it (conflating survival and resistance), is implicit in the fact that Momaday has managed to

impose a distinctly Native American symbolic order onto a novel.

Momaday has said that “the whole worldview of the Indian is predicated upon the principle of harmony in the universe. You can’t tinker much with that; it has the look of an absolute” (Schubnell 100). But this is the only absolute he deals with. He carefully arranges his succession of images so that they are constantly modifying and reshaping each other. Often his imagery is entirely ambiguous, reflecting a lack of absolute moral judgments like “good” and “evil” even while there are characters who are good and characters who are evil. The majority of the characters in *House Made of Dawn* are a little bit of both; there are also generally multiple levels to each image he employs. The cumulative effect is to illustrate how a delicate balance between the opposing elements of the world—especially life and death, good and evil—is always maintained. Though the novel is arranged as a type of journey that starts with wholeness or health, traverses the terrain of alienation and sickness, and then returns to that image of wholeness, the healing of Abel is not at all complete or without complications. Momaday incites his readers to a deep imaginative involvement with the text if they are to get the kind of closure readers typically expect from a narrative.

The structure of *House Made of Dawn* allows that every juxtaposition be regarded as deeply significant. Momaday has said,

*House Made of Dawn* is very symmetrical. I see it as a circle. It ends where it begins and it’s informed with a kind of thread that runs through it and holds everything together. The book itself is a race. It focuses upon the race, that’s the thing that does hold it all together. But it’s constantly a repetition of things, too. (Schubnell 31)

The race is an obvious and important image in the novel. Yet Momaday’s insistence that

“. . . it's constantly a repetition of things, too," is most illuminating. The narrative begins and ends with the same image of Abel running a ritual race at dawn, and the image of a runner or runners reappears at key moments in the novel. But we are taken through an endless litany of other images before we see Abel running the second time. Thus, juxtaposition is an especially important device in *House Made of Dawn*; every step in Abel's figurative journey is part of the whole. No matter what terrain the narrative may traverse, it must lead us back to where we started. Each image and its successor are carefully chosen, not only to guarantee this return, but also to guarantee we—Abel and the reader—have gained something along the way. Each image in the constant “repetition of things” relates to what participation in the race represents for Abel: a sense of the order of the universe and his place in it. The interconnectedness of all life is reproduced by the interrelatedness of the many and varied images employed in the novel.

This is a “text” that fits Derrida's definition: it “hides from the first comer, from the first glance,” in many ways (1830). While *House Made of Dawn* certainly demands multiple readings for its nuances to unveil themselves, Derrida's phrase is also a good metaphor for the critical reception of the novel. The first comers were predominantly non-Native scholars, and their first glances included little knowledge of the oral tales that are included in the narrative and inform all its other parts. Without any understanding of the significance certain portions of the novel have for the tribes whose oral traditions those passages come from, no non-Native can begin to envision how all the pieces of the narrative fit together. Any competent reader can sense that the race is important, but only someone who knows that “the winter race Abel runs in the prologue and at the end of the

novel is the first race in the Jemez ceremonial season,” or that “the race itself may be seen as a journey, a re-emergence journey analogous to that mentioned in connection with Navajo and Kiowa oral tradition” (Evers 116), can accurately perceive what use Momaday is actually making of the race.

There are many other images that are repeated and achieve as much significance as the race. The novel’s imagery fits into two categories: the first is instances which serve to illustrate the natural order of the world and the universe and/or Abel’s failed attempts to cope with and find some place in that order; the second category is instances in which Momaday is deliberately being “postindian,” though he could not have been aware Gerald Vizenor would coin that term twenty-five years *after* he wrote *House Made of Dawn*. I use the term “postindian” just as Vizenor intended: “The postindian warriors of postmodern simulations would undermine and surmount, with imagination and the performance of new stories, the manifest manners of scriptural simulations and ‘authentic’ representations of the tribes in the literature of dominance” (17). “Postindian warriors” subvert the stereotypical images purveyed by the mass media that portray Native Americans as some kind of endangered species by supplementing them with images of a vibrant culture. The two streams of images I’m examining in the novel correspond to two vital projects Momaday is attempting: adapting the ancient way of life that has enabled tribal cultures to survive and grow for thousands of years to a modern art form (the novel); and deconstructing the stereotypes, what Vizenor would call “the simulations of manifest manners,” that oppress Native peoples.

Kroeber’s mistake, perhaps, was to view the tribal “symbolic order”

synchronously. In addition to preserving their traditional way of life, retaining the right of self-determination is a large part of whatever symbolic order Native Americans could want to access, as the federal government and mainstream culture of the United States has repeatedly sought to cast Native Americans as “the timeless negative of the nation’s own self-evident becoming,” to use Magdaleno’s phrase (281). Kroeber assumes that a Native American symbolic order and the Western novel are mutually exclusive; Momaday shows that that is not necessarily the case. Not only does *House Made of Dawn* consciously resist stereotypes of Native Americans, but it also manages to convey Momaday’s sense of the Indian worldview as predicated on harmony, which necessitates growth and change.

This harmony is manifest in the web-like way each image is symbolically linked to the entire body of imagery in *House Made of Dawn*. Because the race is the thread that “holds everything together” and is also the image that opens the novel, it merits special attention here at the outset. The prologue presents the first image of Abel running; it is repeated at the end of the novel, making the narrative circular. Linda Hogan writes, in her excellent article “Who Puts Together,” that this circularity represents the journey motif that “derives from oral tradition where the journey is used as a symbolic act that takes the hearer out of his body” and then returns the patient to himself “restored” (138). But the prologue serves as more than just a structural device: the prologue is timeless, both in the sense that it is the only section of the novel without a specific date and in that it depicts a scene occurring outside of time. This is one of the most crucial ways in which Momaday uses the novel to an effect similar to oral traditions. There is a



hint of ritual to Abel's running in the prologue: "his arms and shoulders had been marked with burnt wood and ashes" (7). Those marks are characteristic of all the other runners Momaday includes, for participation in communal rituals comes to be identified with health and wholeness in the novel. But the image presented in the prologue concludes with Abel running "against the winter sky and the long, light landscape of the valley at dawn," and he seems "to be standing still, very little and alone" (7). This one-man ritual could actually be a dream or vision Abel is having, even while it is also a deliberate foreshadowing of his running in the fourth and final chapter, "The Dawn Runner."

If it is a dream or vision of Abel's, it's not one that seems to bring him any peace or wellbeing for the majority of the novel, though it does set the precedent of him holding his own rituals. This habit poses problems for him at crucial points in the novel, but ultimately his journey toward redemption will necessitate the construction of a very specific private ritual: telling himself his own personal origin story. Origin stories become perhaps the most crucial of rituals not only for tribes but also for individuals. "I think each of us, each individual, has a private oral tradition in which he deals in his daily life," Momaday has said (Schubnell 37). Though Abel is alone as he runs at dawn in the prologue, he is surrounded by beauty, and Momaday intends for this image to be especially significant for the reader. He chose not to affix a date to its occurrence; yet the very next page announces the date, July 20, 1945, as part of the chapter heading. When the novel closes with Abel and the other Pueblo men racing in "The Dawn Runner," it takes place on February 28, 1952. The reader is forced to linger on the prologue, at least to consider what is actually being presented. Given how much the rest of the novel

ranges freely back into Abel's past, if the prologue were merely a matter of foreshadowing, it could easily have been managed somewhere in the first chapter.

Opening the novel with a timeless image allows it to serve as a vision that governs all the rest. Specifically, it is a vision of wholeness—given lines like “The land was still and strong. *It was beautiful all around*” (emphasis added, 7). This scene is, on a deeper level, a device for suffusing the entire narrative with the sense of wholeness, of having a place in the universe, which oral traditions imparted to tribal peoples. Being surrounded by beauty is an image from the Navajo Night chant, by which, through a process of visualization, a person out of touch with the harmony of the universe re-aligns their mental state with the natural order of the world. Feeling one's place in the natural world is to be attuned to Momaday's universal harmony, and being in touch with the forces of the universe is what is meant by wholeness (Scarberry-García 15). As more images of runners occur—all of them bearing markings like those on Abel's arms and shoulders in the prologue—wholeness comes to be associated with tribal ritual. Abel runs alone in the prologue, though, symbolizing that he is isolated from that sense of wholeness available through the rituals of the tribe. Still, the overall effect of the scene that opens *House Made of Dawn* is to give the impression of enduring beauty in the order of the universe. As the events of the novel unfold, this sense of timeless beauty remains intact and is continually recalled to the attention of the reader by repetitions of the image of a runner at dawn. The prologue therefore bears a much deeper structural significance than just providing circularity. A Navajo medicine man restores to an unbalanced individual a sense of wholeness and attachment to all of creation. The Navajo Night

Chant, from which the line “house made of dawn” is taken, is said on the fourth and final day of chants the medicine man says over a mentally ill patient. “During an actual sing or healing ceremony, the one-sung-over repeats this prayer after the medicine man or singer,” as this repetition helps in the visualization process, Susan Scarberry-García explains (10). The rendition of the Night Chant that Momaday includes in *House Made of Dawn* concludes with the lines “May it be beautiful before me,/ May it be beautiful behind me,/ May it be beautiful below me,/ May it be beautiful above me,/ May it be beautiful all around me./ In beauty it is finished” (135). By reciting and internalizing these words, a sense of being surrounded by the beauty of the universe is restored to the mentally ill person. At the end of the novel, Abel is singing words to the Night Chant as he runs and is no longer alone. Though he can’t keep up with the other men, Abel is obviously much less alienated from the wholeness available through tribal ritual. He still has a ways to go before he is entirely healed of his existential crisis, but the novel begins and ends with an image of wholeness to create an overarching sense of the inviolable order of things, which is just what the oral traditions provided tribal societies.

A patient having the Night Chant sung over him or her would already have been led on a journey through the tribe’s origin myths and is now praying that wholeness be returned to them. Scarberry-García writes, “Momaday has shaped his narrative as a modern expression of oral tradition by drawing on the conventions and content of old sacred stories”:

Sacred stories from oral tradition, especially origin and creation myths, have a healing dimension because they symbolically internalize images of the land within the listeners. Through participating in the story, the listeners learn about their own relationship to the cultural/geographic history of their homeland. And it

is this knowledge of one's place in relationship to all else in the natural world that reintegrates an individual and fosters survival. (7)

The four chapters of *House Made of Dawn* reflect the four days of the Chantway rituals a Navajo medicine man would sing over a patient. The structure of *House Made of Dawn* reflects oral traditions and, as Scarberry-García argues, “infuses the written tradition with ritual power” (15). The myths sung over the unbalanced patient impart “positive, transformative energy,” and this seems to be what Momaday was aiming to do with the prologue. He sets up the image of the runner, even if isolated, as running in a world where it is “beautiful all around.” Thus, every time the image gets repeated, no matter what else may be happening in the narrative, it reminds the reader of timeless beauty.

On yet another level, the timelessness of the prologue is an interesting way of experimenting with the sense of time in a novel. In an attempt to infuse *House Made of Dawn* with “ritual power,” Momaday devised a prologue that serves more as a ritualistic “recreation of prototypical events in sacred time” (Scarberry-García 15), something akin to the mythical stories sung over a patient. The prologue creates an immutable sense of harmony that endures even the more discordant passages detailing the grimmer periods in Abel's life because it is represented as happening outside of time. A shaman or singer of oral traditions is likewise dealing with material that is timeless, in that it existed long before he or she came along to sing it and it will be around still when he or she is dead and can no longer sing. Paradoxically, “sound exists only when it is going out of existence,” as Walter J. Ong puts it; which is to say, oral traditions only exist, in one sense, as they are being spoken by someone. The spoken word is ephemeral, but the oral traditions are not. This is the mystery and power that singers of oral traditions invoked,

and it is what Momaday is trying to invoke by juxtaposing the timeless prologue with the four chapters that are specifically dated. Whereas an oral tradition grows over time, as each new singer will modify and adapt the received traditions to their own style and audience, a book only grows in the sense that its readers' points of view change. Writing is fixed in time in a way oral traditions are not: a written work will forever remain more or less the way it was conceived at the moment of its creation. The prologue is a means of acknowledging that the themes of *House Made of Dawn* are timeless because they are informed by oral traditions, even if it is a written work and therefore fixed in time. The dated chapters point up this paradox by their juxtaposition with the prologue. Though neither Momaday nor anyone else is ever likely to retell *House Made of Dawn* the way any specific oral tradition gets retold and adapted by a succession of singers, it grows in the imaginations of its readers, who keep considering how the prologue operates on the rest of the novel. This technique works because it is as paradoxical as the juxtaposition of the oral and written traditions from which it was created. There are so many levels to the web of symbolism held together by the thread of the runner-at-dawn image that *House Made of Dawn* will be adaptable to the needs of many future audiences.

The constant repetition of images

"The Longhair," the first of the four chapters comprising the rest of the novel after the prologue, immediately presents a description of the town of Walatowa (a fictionalized name for Jemez Pueblo, New Mexico, where Momaday lived a large portion of his

childhood) and the fields that surround it. "The townsmen work all summer in the fields," Momaday writes, and their connection to the land is so intimate that "when the moon is full, they work at night with ancient, handmade plows and hoes, and if the weather is good and the water plentiful they take a good harvest from the fields" (10). The immediate introduction of an image of communal living tied to a specific landscape imparts a sense of an order inherent in the world. In order to survive, men must do their part, and nature must reciprocate; only "if the weather is good and the water plentiful" do men get their harvest. Interestingly, the harvest these men reap, "like the deer in the mountains, is the gift of God" (10). This brief instance of Momaday's conflating the tribal reverence for nature with Christian nomenclature establishes a relationship he maintains throughout the novel. Though he portrays the cultural practices of the people of Walatowa as being almost entirely based on tribal rituals, there is always a Christian icon masking the proceedings. Momaday establishes Francisco, Abel's grandfather, as the novel's chief representative of the town and its way of life both symbolically and by juxtaposing his initial description of Francisco right after his description of Walatowa. On the symbolic level, Francisco is both a sacristan at the church and a member of the tribe's kiva society. The novel opens on July 20, 1945 as Francisco is going to pick up his grandson, who is returning from World War II. Francisco rides on the ancient wagon road that parallels the highway and remembers when "he had rubbed himself with soot" and run at dawn down that same road in "the race for good hunting and harvests" (11). Francisco won that race, and we are told that "that year he killed seven bucks and seven does" (12), providing another instance of successful participation in communal rituals

leading to harmony with the universe.

But Francisco is now old. He ran his race in 1889; 56 years later he is "no longer young" and his leg has been "stiffened by disease" (12). Clearly his time has passed, and his excitement about the return of his grandson—his only living relative, we discover—is evident. But Abel stumbles off the bus drunk, and lies "ill in the bed of the wagon," not even speaking to Francisco as he drives his grandson back to town. On the way, a "yellow dog [comes] out to challenge them" (13) as if it can sense a malign presence. This is the first time Abel is grounded in a specific point in time and he no longer possesses the sense of wholeness he seemed to exhibit in the prologue. The next day Abel awakes at dawn and walks to the top of the mesa to look down on the town. As he walks, Momaday relates domestic scenes from Abel's childhood. Presumably, Abel is remembering times when his brother, Vidal, and his mother were still alive. These scenes from the past are the only times Abel easily fits into communal life. He has always been somewhat ostracized, even in the town of Walatowa, because "[h]e did not know who his father was. His father was a Navajo, they said, or a Sia, or an Isleta, an outsider anyway" (15). (Momaday later introduces evidence that Abel's father was Navajo.) The juxtaposition of the only point in Abel's life where he actually had a family to help integrate him into the tribal society with the information about his father is not accidental. Abel does not seem overwhelmed with relief to be back, probably because even in Walatowa he'd never really been fully integrated, since his father was an outsider and his mother died when he was little.

Francisco has to raise Abel by himself, and so the circumstances of Abel's life fit

the stereotype of the Vanishing Indian: "Francisco was the man of the family, but even then he was old and going lame," Momaday writes. Even when he was young, Abel "could sense his grandfather's age, just as he knew somehow that his mother was soon going to die of her illness. It was nothing he was told, but he knew it anyway and without understanding, as he knew already the motion of the sun and the seasons" (15). Abel's only connection to the old ways of his people—that is, his grandfather—is old and partially lame and soon to be gone. Losing his mother, the only parent he knew, at such a young age has deprived Abel of a necessary part of his identity and hence his place in the world—evidenced by the images that serve to illustrate the natural order of the world and the universe and/or Abel's failed attempts to cope with and find some place in that order. The central motifs of these images are procreation and the cycle of life and death, as symbolized by Abel's (absent) parents and aging grandfather.

Momaday's word choice in the passage quoted above is particularly important; he writes that Abel understands his only parent is dying of illness in the same way that he understands that his grandfather is dying of old age: both bits of knowledge are "nothing he was told, but he knew it anyway and without understanding." Abel knows *of* things without necessarily knowing *about* them. This lack of understanding is centered on the loss of his parents and the fact that he was raised by an aged man. What he specifically doesn't comprehend is death: neither why his mother is dead nor why his grandfather is dying. He knows of these things, but can't fit them into a perception of the larger design of the universe because he has been prevented from seeing that order by the circumstances of his upbringing. Death eventually becomes associated with evil and the



unknown; and ultimately the universe, which is alluded to when Momaday compares Abel's knowledge "without understanding" of death to how Abel knows "the motion of the sun and the seasons." Abel's lack of understanding *is* his illness. He does not see the order of the universe because he has not internalized the tribe's origin story and other rituals that keep that tribe in touch with the world around them.

After Momaday alludes to the roots of Abel's existential crisis, he then introduces the first of Abel's several confrontations with evil—all of which Abel fails in some way. The witch Nicolás *teah-whau* screams "some unintelligible curse" at Abel when he is a child herding sheep. His response is to "run away, hard" and wait for the "snake-killer dog to close the flock" (15-16). Snakes become an important and complex symbol in the novel, so it's significant that even though the snake-killer dog eventually comes round, it does not seem to offer any protection to Abel, echoing one of the novel's initial images: the yellow dog that came out and barked at him when he first got back from the war. As if it too could sense something was wrong with Abel, the snake-killer dog backs off and listens to the moaning of the wind. It "is a stranger sound than any he had ever heard" and fills Abel with so much dread that "for the rest of his life it would be for him the particular sound of anguish" (16). This traumatic confrontation with evil, personified by the old witch and symbolized, to Abel, by the moaning of the wind, is juxtaposed with "the low sound" of mourners crying for his brother, suggesting Abel conflates evil or witchcraft with death. When Vidal has passed away and Francisco brings Abel into the house to leave him alone with his brother one last time, "under his breath and because he was alone" (16), Abel speaks his brother's name. This is a taboo act in most tribal

cultures, a fact that Abel clearly understands since he only says the name aloud because he is alone. Abel is disconnected from the tribal way of dealing with death. We can't blame a child for running from an adult that he sees as a witch, but this failed confrontation with a manifestation of evil sets up a precedent Abel will follow well into adulthood. He'll continue to deal with death and all it gets conflated with in a completely inappropriate manner until he learns to see the order of the universe, which is harmony between all aspects of creation. Evil and death have a place in that order. Because he's not integrated into a communal way of ordering the world, Abel first tries to run from evil and later tries to destroy it. Neither response proves effective for him.

Many of the juxtapositions serve a principle of "accumulation and release" which

Linda Hogan also discusses in "Who Puts Together";

Language perceived as creation and as a unity of word and being is language that has the power to heal. Combining the oral elements of word energy created by accumulation and release, imaginative journey, and visualization, Momaday restores Abel to his place within the equilibrium of the universe. (141)

As Hogan argues, there is a distinct pattern of accumulation and release in the imagery of *House Made of Dawn* and the way Momaday constructs the narrative. The novel starts with an image of Abel whole and running at dawn, but the next time he appears he is not well. This is only one of many juxtapositions that highlight contrasting or contradictory experiences. By giving us fragments of Abel's life—past and present—as well as portrayals of the functional tribal culture around him and, later, the somewhat functional but mostly dysfunctional urban community of L.A, Momaday builds up positive energy and balances it with negative. For instance, so far he's given the reader glimpses of Abel at a point in his past when his mother and brother are alive and he's not unwell, then

Delete

shown the first time Abel lets his fear of evil so overcome him that he either runs away or lashes out violently.

The next section of the book, dated July 21 (as the heading tells us), is the second day since Abel's return to Walatowa. In this section we're given perhaps the clearest representation of this accumulation and release to be found in *House Made of Dawn*. On his first dawn back in Walatowa, Abel walks to the top of the mesa surrounding the valley and recalls scenes from his life before the war. Once, "[h]e had seen a strange thing, an eagle overhead with its talons closed upon a snake. It was an awful, holy sight, full of magic and meaning" (18). Receiving such a vision is a high point of Abel's life, one that could easily have shown him that there is an order to the universe. But as the consequences of his vision play out, the rupture in his life caused by not having a stable family prevents him from internalizing the images of wholeness he himself witnesses. Not until a much later vision will he finally come to understand how evil and death are dealt with, and only then will he acknowledge his fear and begin to see the beauty all around him.

Abel in fact saw two eagles when he had his "awful, holy" vision. "They were golden eagles, a male and a female, in their mating flight" (20). This is one of the most captivating portions of the novel, especially the description of the female in flight:

The female was full-grown, and the span of her broad wings was greater than any man's height. There was a fine flourish to her motion; she was deceptively, incredibly fast, and her pivots and wheels were wide and full-blown. But her great weight was streamlined and perfectly controlled. She carried a rattlesnake; it hung shining from her feet, limp and curving out in the trail of her flight. (20)

The two eagles in their mating ritual contrast sharply with Abel's own parents, as they

replicate the natural order of the world and Abel's parents do not. The female eagle especially is a being totally in its own element, existing within the natural order of things, not only because she is part of a flawlessly executed procreative process but also because of her perfect symmetry, the graceful way she incorporates both mass and agility. She is suited for survival in a way Abel's mother evidently was not. Within the symbolic order of the novel, this symmetry, this integration, is manifest in the snake she carries. Abel comes to identify snakes with evil and sees them as an enemy, mimicking the image of the serpent in Christian theology. We learn that the tribes have no such aversion to snakes, ironically, through Fray Nicolás, the old consumptive priest who used to live in Walatowa. Momaday includes portions of Fray Nicolás's diary as it is read by Father Olguin, the current missionary residing in the town. Nicolás writes, in a letter dated 17<sup>th</sup> October, 1888, and found in his diary, that Francisco is evil because he is "unashamed to make one of my sacristans" even though he "goes often in the kiva & puts on their horns & hides & does worship that Serpent which even is the One our most ancient enemy" (50). For the reader, even if snakes do symbolize evil it's clear, despite the old missionary's ranting, that they needn't be feared or opposed as an enemy. In the process of their mating *ritual*, both eagles have mastery over the snake, allowing it to fall and forcing the other to dive and retrieve it. When Abel engages in rituals that involve snakes, he won't display any such mastery, grace, or agility, which shows that even though he witnessed this vision that symbolizes procreation—life—and death being in harmony with each other, he is unable to internalize it.

The immediate effects of Abel's vision are positive: he relates what he saw to the

old chief of the Eagle Watchers Society, an important religious society among the Walatowan tribe, and the elder man agrees that Abel should accompany the society on its annual eagle hunt. Abel and the rest of the hunters head toward the mountains; they are “gone for days, holding up here and there at the holy places where they must pray and make their offerings” (21). After observing these rituals with the other hunters, Abel catches a healthy, young female eagle, echoing Francisco’s successful hunting season of long ago, which also came after successful participation in traditional rituals; in Francisco’s case, winning the race for good hunting and harvests. Only one other hunter in Abel’s party manages to capture an eagle—but it is “an aged male and poor by comparison” (24). Here is another male/female pair, one that represents Abel’s mother and grandfather, the real male/female pair that dominates Abel’s life. This contrasts sharply with the ideal set up by the mating eagles, which has no correlation in Abel’s actual experience.

Abel’s companion releases the aged male eagle, and even after it has flown out of sight, Abel “could see it still in the mind’s eye and hear in his memory the awful whisper of its flight on the wind. It filled him with longing” (24). What Abel longs for is unstated, probably because he has no idea yet what it is he’s lacking. But since this aged male eagle represents Francisco, we can assume that he’s longing for the sense of belonging in the world that having a mother and father would provide. Through this ritual, Abel might perhaps find the acceptance for which he longs. But he has clearly not internalized the image of the natural order of life and death that the mating eagles represented, and the way he violates the communal ritual in which he was involved

actually entails an exteriorization of Abel's skewed experiences.

He stole away to look at the great [female] bird. He drew the sack open; the bird shivered, he thought, and drew itself up. Bound and helpless, his eagle seemed drab and shapeless in the moonlight, too large and ungainly for flight. The sight of it filled him with shame and disgust. He took hold of its throat in the darkness and cut off its breath. (24-25)

Abel's failure to participate in this ritual successfully is linked to his inability to see the order of the world as symbolized by the mating eagles and the snake. Had he internalized that vision he would have still been able to imagine the female eagle controlling her great weight. But then he's not actually shamed or disgusted by the female eagle so much as the fact that it must remind him of the mother he does not have and all the repercussions that that loss has had on his life. The female dies while the aged male lives: it's as if Abel is consciously repeating the pattern of his own life. Abel is constrained by having been ostracized from the tribe as much as the sack restrains the eagle. Above all, this scene sets up a dangerous new precedent for Abel: lashing out murderously at what he can't comprehend or control.

Abel recalls all this at dawn on July 21, while he is walking up to the mesa and then looking down on the village. He can't recall anything about the war, with the exception of one scene involving an enemy tank. Later, at his trial for killing the albino Juan Reyes Fragua, this tank scene proves to constitute another confrontation with evil. As he is building up the murder scene, Momaday, at this point, intentionally includes only the awful image of the tank, "the machine . . . black and massive, looming there in front of the sun" (26). The confrontation with the tank is one that actually went well for Abel, but for now Momaday simply sets up this dark image as a kind of monolithically

overhanging representation of modern, mechanized war. It is no accident that after Abel recalls the tank image, Momaday relates that, as he stands atop the mesa, it is not the landscape that holds Abel's attention. He stands there as if he is still frozen with shock and terror at the approach of an implacable machine of war: "He stood without thinking, nor did he move; only his eyes roved after something ... something" (28). He is bewildered by the chaos he witnessed in the war because it reaffirmed the lack of order he has experienced his whole life. He's completely incapable of diagnosing his own condition, symbolized by his eyes roving after something, but nothing in particular. And when Abel tries to find some kind of order by participating in another Walatowan ritual, it ends disastrously for him.

Abel's murderous impulse repeats itself after yet another ritual in which he fails to successfully participate. But whereas he followed the eagle hunt ritual just fine, only to violate it by killing the eagle, this time Abel has been so removed from the life of the tribe—due to his experiences in the war—that he is almost completely incapable of participation. He is too clumsy and ungainly, as if he has internalized his perception of the captive eagle. His ability to identify with the captive bird, but not the birds in flight, points to the fact that he does not understand how death—symbolized by the snake the mating eagles had hunted and caught—fits into procreation and life. Without this understanding, he misses the point of the next ritual in which he participates altogether. It is a reenactment of a Pueblo legend in which Santiago, a Pueblo man with the name of a Christian saint, embarks on a journey and returns with a gift for the community that symbolizes the symbiosis between life and death:

At the end of the journey Santiago had no longer any need of his horse, and the horse spoke to him and said: "Now you must sacrifice me for the good of the people." Accordingly, Santiago stabbed the horse to death, and from its blood there issued a great herd of horses, enough for all the Pueblo people. After that, the rooster spoke to Santiago and said: "Now you must sacrifice me for the good of the people." And accordingly Santiago tore the bird apart with his bare hands and scattered the remains all about on the ground. The blood and feathers of the bird became cultivated plants and domestic animals, enough for all the Pueblo people. (40)

Just as the mating ritual of the eagles in Abel's vision is centered on a hunt, tribal wisdom recognizes that life and death are part of a cycle, each feeding off of the other. This seems to be the sense of this myth: Santiago slaughters his horse and the rooster, and from these deaths spring the staples of life for the Pueblo tribes.

The ritual in which Abel participates in an attempt to integrate into the tribe consists of a rooster being buried to the neck while the participants take turns trotting by on horseback and trying to pull the rooster out of the ground. In the novel, Abel rides "one of his grandfather's roan black-maned mares" but "sits too rigid in the saddle" (41) and makes "a poor showing, full of caution and gesture" when he attempts to grab the rooster (43). Though we have some hope for Abel, since he is wearing his own clothes instead of his army uniform for the first time since his return, he is unequipped to triumph in this ritual game. He is obviously making a conscious effort to leave the war behind him and participate in the rituals of the tribe, but in some way he is just not prepared for participation. Because the rooster pull links back to the theme of symbiosis between life and death, and because Abel is decidedly clumsy in his attempt to pull the rooster out of the ground, it's clear that he sees himself as being like the bird in the sack—incapable of flight, metaphorically speaking; in other words, unequipped for survival through



participation in the tribe's rituals, which, in this instance, symbolize the cycle of life and death.

The winner of the game is Juan Reyes Fragua, an albino Indian whom Momaday never actually refers to by name, instead consistently calling him "the white man." It's no coincidence that as he tries to leave the white man's war behind him, Abel is beaten by "the white man" and prevented from integrating into the ritual life of the tribe. Though Fragua's name can be gleaned from the diary of Fray Nicolás, Momaday's decision to define Fragua only by his skin color creates the impression, at least on one level, that he wants the reader to see that Abel's problem is at least partly due to the intrusion of white people into the ritual lives of the tribe. Recalling the tank, Fragua is almost mechanically precise even as he represents a sort of chaos: when Fragua rides his horse, it is "as if the white man were its will and all its shivering force were drawn to his bow. A perfect commotion, full of symmetry and sound" (43). Lest the reader be misled and coaxed into believing this white Indian man embodies the wholeness Abel is lacking, Momaday quickly adds, "yet there was something out of place, some flaw in proportion or design, some unnatural thing," about the albino (43). Momaday reveals a few pages later that Fragua is 70 years old at the time he performs with such command and agility in the rooster pull (49). This is unnatural in and of itself, contrasting as it does with Francisco, the other image of old age in the novel. Fragua performs with the grace and agility that Abel, a young man, cannot. Fragua's perfect performance seems associated with some kind of witchcraft, since it is described as both "full of symmetry" and as "something out of place." Clearly we are not meant to suppose that Fragua has come by

his abilities naturally.

We see the ritual from the viewpoint of Angela St. John, a white woman who has just arrived for treatment at the town's mineral baths and is a spectator at the festivities. As Fragua takes his victory lap around the town center where the rooster pull has taken place, "The albino was directly above her for one instant, huge and hideous at the extremity of the terrified bird. It was then her eyes were drawn to the heavy, bloodless hand at the throat of the bird" (44). The image of the albino "directly above her" recalls the tank that loomed "in front of the sun." Both are ominous presences that seem to well up in the onlooker's vision. While the reader doesn't yet have all the information on Fragua that will link him to witchcraft and hence evil, the image of his "bloodless hand at the throat of the bird" recalls Abel choking the eagle he'd captured, by which we can infer that the albino is yet another figure meant to represent Abel's inability to comprehend evil, death, and the unknown. As part of the rooster pull game, the winner gets to choose any other competitor and beat them with the rooster until the bird's blood has been spilled as it was in the legend of Santiago. Fragua, seemingly without motive, picks Abel.

Again and again the white man struck him, heavily, brutally, upon the chest and shoulders and head, and Abel threw up his hands, but the great bird fell upon them and beat them down. Abel was not used to the game, and the white man was too strong and quick for him. (44)

Abel has failed in yet another ritual, and this humiliation sets the stage for Abel's next ineffectual confrontation with evil. Here, also, "the white man" is meant to represent the white invaders who have violently imposed themselves on Native Americans and their culture. This is perhaps one of the more superficial levels of meaning that the albino

bears, but it will shed light on the later discussion of Momaday as a postindian warrior. The deeper significance is, of course, that Fragua represents evil. It is not uncommon for an initiate into a kiva to be beaten by the members of the kiva society. Momaday conceded in an interview in 1977 that Fragua's beating of Abel "is an initiation of some kind" (Schubnell 62). But an initiation into what? When Abel confronts evil in the person of Fragua, it is something of a mock ritual, and this perhaps is what Fragua wanted: he was initiating—though it's more like provoking—Abel into participation in a ritual whose purpose is not readily discernible. Fragua's motives are unclear; Abel is clearly attempting to destroy evil when he murders the white man.

Before the confrontation between Abel and Fragua, however, Momaday orchestrates another accumulation of positive energy to be released by Abel's misguided attempt to deal with Fragua on his own. He embarks on another description of the valley in which the town of Walatowa lies, paying special attention to its animal inhabitants. This passage illustrates the natural order of the world and underscores the fact that humans are as connected to these animals as they are to each other. Momaday conveys this by continually personifying the animals he describes: hunting hawks who "dance upon the warm carnage of their kills;" rattlesnakes who "go at sundown into the earth, hopelessly, as if to some unimaginable reckoning in the underworld;" coyotes and dogs who "parley at the river," forming "an old council of clowns;" and wolves who, "it is said," come down to the town's fires and hang around "like old men wanting to smoke" (55). Not only does Momaday anthropomorphize these animals, in many cases they also seem to be in a cozy relationship with the town itself, highlighting how the town lives in

harmony with the natural world around it.

Most significant about this description of the town's harmony with nature is the eagle—"a huge female . . . kept alive in a cage in the town. Even so, deprived of the sky, the eagle soars in man's imagination" (55). As he unfolds this image of the natural order of the world, Momaday tacitly excludes his protagonist, since this is a deliberate reversal of Abel's captive eagle—he specifically could *not* imagine the eagle he killed in flight. But the pervading sense of this passage is of order and interconnectedness; the significance of the eagle in the novel is restated: "The eagle ranges far and wide over the land, farther than any other creature, and all things there are related simply by having existence in the perfect vision of a bird" (55). "*All things are related*" simply by being within the vision of an eagle, which has already served as a symbol of procreation and harmony with the universe. The language connected to the snakes is also significant, as Momaday writes that they go underground "as if to some unimaginable reckoning." Reckoning with evil, obviously, is a major motif of the novel; the language specifically is repeated later when Abel finally learns how to reckon with evil, which is a necessary step for him to take before he can learn to relate to all things.

"A long outwaiting"

Momaday juxtaposes this description of native animals with what is perhaps the clearest statement of the central premise of the novel, a premise that draws a connection between animals and man to show that mankind has a place in the natural order as well.

All these creatures he has mentioned have “tenure in the land,” unlike the “latecoming things,” the domestic animals that “have an alien and inferior aspect, a poverty of vision and instinct, by which they are estranged from the wild land” (56). Man also has tenure in the land, and this connection has not been severed despite the intrusion of an alien culture onto the tribe’s ancestral lands. Momaday shows this through a description of the abandoned cliff dwellings near Walatowa that once belonged to the Pueblos’ ancestors.

The prehistoric civilization had gone out among the hills for a little while and would return; and everything would be restored to an older age, and time would have returned upon itself and a bad dream of invasion and change would have been dissolved in an hour before dawn. (56)

Just as the race runs through the entire novel and maintains the sense of overarching beauty and wholeness, Momaday demonstrates that by keeping their own traditions and rituals alive, the Pueblos of Walatowa are able to maintain their tribal identity even while the invaders have imposed their own cultural traditions onto the tribes. As descendants of the “prehistoric civilization” mentioned above, the Pueblos “have never changed their essential way of life”:

Their invaders were a long time in conquering them; and now, after four centuries of Christianity, they still pray in Tanoan to the old deities of the earth and sky and make their living from the things that are and have always been within their reach; while in discrimination of pride they acquire from their conquerors only the luxury of example. They have assumed the names and gestures of their enemies, but have held on to their own, secret souls; and in this there is a resistance and an overcoming, a long outwaiting. (56)

This passage functions in the novel as an origin story for the modern Pueblo people, a tale that gives them a sense of where they come from, who they are, and where they belong in the world. The white invaders may have disrupted things to a degree by intruding on the ritual life of the tribe, but always there is an overarching sense that the

invaders could never entirely defeat tribes like the Pueblos of Walatowa, that even if the tribes have suffered some setbacks they will survive and someday flourish because of their intimate relationship with the earth that sustains them. The “conquerors,” the white invaders, can be likened to the domesticated animals. Later, when Abel lives in Los Angeles, he encounters Native Americans trying to live with the human “latecoming things,” which helps him see how he can regain his tenure in the land and a place in the universe.

Above all, it is through their rituals that the Pueblo people have managed to maintain their identity and survive centuries of oppression. No matter what befalls these tribal people, there is something durable, perhaps nearly indestructible, about the core of their beliefs and the rituals that express those beliefs. Their continued existence is like the timeless sense of wholeness Momaday sets up at the beginning of the novel: Abel, like his people, is undergoing trials, but they will be “dissolved in an hour before dawn.”

As evidenced by his inability to internalize the vision he had of the mating eagles, Abel’s major problem is his lack of imagination, which manifested in his violence toward the captive female eagle. He could have perceived the wholeness of the world based on his vision of the mating eagles, but fails to do so as a result of his fundamentally skewed understanding of the natural order; he could have imagined the bird in the sack actually taking flight, since he’d witnessed a deceptively large eagle in flight and commanding her bulk with ease and agility. But because he has been prevented from seeing the underlying order inherent in all creation, he lacks the imaginative faculty to transfer the memory of the eagle in flight to the eagle in the sack. A lack of words that parallels this

lack of imagination is introduced by Momaday to symbolize Abel's affliction. Just after Momaday relates the origin story of the Walatowan people, showing how it relates to their resistance and "long outwaiting" of their oppressors, Abel realizes that "his return to the town had been a failure." Aside from his failure at participating in the rooster pull ritual, he has also failed to find the proper words to articulate his problem. "He had tried in the days that followed to speak to his grandfather, but he could not say the things he wanted; he had tried to pray, to sing, to enter into the old rhythm of the tongue, but he was no longer attuned to it" (57). It's not that he hasn't retained the memory of the language; he can no longer access it or make use of it in any way.

Momaday's attention to the spoken word is evident in his description of the manner in which Abel has retained the tribe's language: "It was there still, like memory, in the reach of his hearing, as if Francisco or his mother or Vidal had spoken out of the past and the words had taken hold of the moment and made it eternal" (57). There is a tangible connection between Abel and his grandfather, mother, and brother, a connection through words. If Abel could speak "anything of his own language," anything "which had no being beyond sound, no visible substance," this "would once again have shown him whole to himself" (57). The act of creating sound out of silence would, presumably, serve as a bridge between Abel and these memories, would allow him to make sense of his life. These memories almost seem to exist in primordial time, as do the myths of the tribe, and just as the prologue exists in a timeless manner. Abel is alienated from the order of the world because he does not have the words he needs to articulate how he relates to his own past, his own origin.

Momaday relates all of this as Abel walks up to the mesa at dawn for the second time. As he looks down on the valley, musing on his lack of words, he is experiencing a rare moment of insight and peace because of nearly sensing the presence of his lost family. It's almost as if he were somehow aware of the preceding description of the valley's teeming life. But of course, if he had been privy to Momaday's prose, he would probably not have been able to transfer this knowledge to his own experience of the world. He still lacks the imagination, as symbolized through his lack of words. He wants to make a song out of the valley below him, "but he had not got the right words together. It would have been a creation song; he would have sung lowly of the first world, of fire and flood, and of the emergence of dawn from the hills" (57). While he realizes that what he needs is an origin story, he doesn't have the words to sing it. At the very least, he now realizes what it is he needs instead of vaguely longing for "something ... something."

We're never told if Abel was sent to government schools or if he even had any formal education at all, not to mention many other general details of his childhood. Most conspicuously, Momaday does not say if anyone ever told Abel the creation myths of the Walatowan tribe, so we don't know for sure if he simply doesn't know them or if they weren't especially useful to him. It's probably safe to assume he hasn't ever heard a majority of the stories, because the Walatowan culture is depicted as alive and vibrant, and even amenable to outsiders in need of help—the story of the Bahkyush immigrants, another tribe who had almost been wiped out by disease and were taken in by the Walatowans, demonstrates that (18). And of course it is with Walatowan men that Abel



runs at the end of the novel. So it seems there is a place in the Walatowan culture for Abel, and it is Abel's own shortcomings that have prevented him from finding it. There is a scene towards the end of the book in which we see Francisco teaching Abel and Vidal about some of the tribe's ways, so there's little evidence to suggest Francisco is to be faulted for not teaching the creation stories to his grandson. Since the words Abel is singing in "The Dawn Runner" are Navajo, it can be inferred that he needed to take the other half of his ancestry into account before he could be truly healed. On some level, he simply needed to come to terms with who he was—to understand who he was—before the rest of the world could make any sense to him. Never is it suggested that Abel will seek out his father or his father's people; it was more of a spiritual crisis. Once he has some of the songs of his father's people—symbolically, a healing song based on mythical origin stories from his father's people—that's enough to open up the entire ritual life to him. He runs with the men of Walatowa in "The Dawn Runner" because he understands, at last, the need for such rituals after having his crucial revelation about evil, which leads to an understanding of death. Momaday renders Abel's revelation about death in language that suggests Abel is also beginning to order his past into a ritualized story for himself, underscoring the need for people to organize the past into a story in order to survive. Momaday directly links this story Abel tells himself to the fact Abel lives long enough to sing the words of the Navajo Night Chant in the Walatowan race.

But Abel will have more than one disastrous confrontation with evil before he comes to understand the need to balance such a thing through tribal ritual. His next confrontation with evil—in the person of Juan Reyes Fragua, the albino—is his most

disastrous by far.

## Snakes and Fish

In order to highlight just how inappropriate Abel's handling of Fragua is, Momaday sets up Francisco as an ironic foil. Francisco represents the proper way for a member of a tribal society to regard and deal with death, the unknown, and evil. At one point, Fragua is secretly watching Francisco at work in the fields and Abel's grandfather senses the "alien presence close at hand" (63). But Francisco is not afraid: "His acknowledgement of the unknown was nothing more than a dull, intrinsic sadness, a vague desire to weep, for evil had long since found him out and knew who he was" (64). Francisco says a blessing over the corn crops and goes about his business. Immediately before the scene in which Abel murders Fragua, Francisco goes to the town's kiva to participate in a ritual re-enactment of the invasion and the proper way to deal with this evil. On the way, he sees several young Navajo children (it is no coincidence that they are Navajo and not Pueblo children, since Abel's father was probably Navajo), whom he regards as "a harvest, in some intractable sense the regeneration of his own bone and blood" (72). So, in addition to the proper regard for evil, Francisco exhibits an understanding of how his own death (the Navajo children are "afraid of his age and affliction") is part of a continuous cycle of life. It's all of a piece: the Pueblo conception of the universe and life and death. The ritual involves clowns who represent the invaders and two totemic animals: a horse who is presided over by medicine men "with prayers

and plumes, pollen and meal;” and a bull, who is not attended by any of these ritual accoutrements and is a “sad and unlikely thing” that has “the look of evil” (75). The horse seems to represent an upright Pueblo man, and the bull a person who, like Abel, succumbs to the temptation to lash out violently—the bull gores the invaders—and thereby become a participant, however unwittingly, in evil.

If Abel had gone with his grandfather to this ritual, he might have been saved from the folly he is about to commit. When he kills Fragua he seems to have played right into Fragua’s scheme. Abel and Fragua are sitting in a bar drinking together just before Abel murders the albino man. The only other patrons are three or four young Navajos (76). This, when considered alongside the speculation of Abel’s father’s tribal descent and the fact that Francisco sees Navajo children as the “regeneration of his own bone and blood,” points to the likelihood of the other half of Abel’s ancestry being Navajo. The most conclusive evidence comes later, when Ben Benally narrates “The Night Chanter,” the novel’s third chapter. Benally is a Navajo who sings the Night Chant and other traditional Navajo songs for Abel and provides the words that Abel will sing when he is at last on the path toward enlightenment. The implication made by the scenes portraying both the ritual re-enactment of the invasion and the other patrons of the bar Abel and Fragua are in seems to be that Abel has always been surrounded by the beauty of the world; there were ample opportunities for him to have learned the need for tribal ritual or the words he needed from his father’s people, but because of his fundamental misapprehension of the order of the universe he is prevented from accessing those opportunities. This is the first of two times he misses a ceremony from which he really

could have benefited because he is attempting to destroy the evil he perceives in the world.

Momaday describes the conversation between Abel and “the white man” in deliberately vague terms, never telling us what they were speaking of but telling us they spoke “as if the meaning of what they said was strange and infallible” (77). By not revealing what the two were speaking of, or otherwise ever letting Fragua speak for himself, Momaday keeps his readers totally in the dark as to the motives of the white man—much as the tribes found the motives of the white invaders incomprehensible. This forces the reader to dwell on the white man Abel kills, to wonder what Momaday is trying to do with the character. His lack of agency in the narrative makes Fragua completely symbolic, but he’s a symbol of both the white man and an Indian man at once. In killing an evil that is both Indian and white, it’s almost as if Abel is attempting to repel the invasion and dispense with evil all in a stroke, but Fragua’s motives remain as inscrutable as ever. During the bar scene, Fragua laughs with a “strange, inhuman cry” that “issued only from the tongue and teeth of the great evil mouth” (77).

Abel is planning to murder Fragua—he’s brought a knife for the purpose. So it’s safe to say he isn’t telling the albino any jokes. What could Fragua possibly be laughing at? What has he initiated Abel into? Momaday doesn’t say, though he does go to great lengths to show that there are communal ways to deal with evil and that Abel’s decision to handle Fragua on his own is not sanctioned by the tribe. The Walatowan people have their own ritual way of dealing with evil, as Francisco’s participation in the invasion reenactment has evidenced, and it almost seems as if Fragua senses Abel’s weakness and

lack of comprehension of the way evil and death fit into the world, and he's attempting to exploit that. Their discussion concludes when "they were ready, the two of them" (77), as if they've made some plans together or are performing a ritual together. But what we witness is a mock-ritual. There is no fight that breaks out between them, no immediately discernible provocation to murder. Fragua simply turns, once they reach the middle of nowhere, moves as if he is going to embrace Abel, then Abel pulls the knife and stabs.

Once he is stabbed, instead of reacting hysterically or violently or even defensively, Fragua is quite composed: "There was no expression on his face, neither rage nor pain." Indeed, being murdered seems fulfilling for him in some way: "He seemed to look not at Abel but beyond, off into the darkness and the rain, the black infinity of sound and silence" (77). It's as if this is some sacrament whereby Fragua gains access to the mysteries of the universe, much as, earlier in the novel, Angela St. John recalls corn dancers she once saw who held their eyes "upon some vision out of range, something away in the end of distance, some reality that she did not know, or even suspect" (37-38). Twice more, before Fragua slumps to the ground dead, Momaday describes the way the white man's eyes are fixed on some vision in the distance. Whatever has happened, Abel has played right into the hands of the white man. Momaday could have been trying to make the point about how, from the point of view of the tribes, the machinations of the white invaders are as inscrutable as the ways of evil. But on another level, the figure of Fragua is one of the clearest examples of the way Momaday sets up stereotypes in the novel that he subverts—and forces the attentive reader to engage with the novel in order to contemplate exactly how or why that is done.

More on this later.

There is no indication that, whatever Fragua's plan entailed, it involved anyone but himself and Abel. The medicine of the Walatowan tribe, for instance, has not been affected. So it seems that Fragua was either seeking his own evil apotheosis (as if Darth Vader had allowed himself to be stricken down by Obi-Wan, instead of the opposite, to draw a pop-cultural analogy), or to ruin Abel—and indeed, Abel is convicted of the crime and sent to prison. In the murder scene, the language that Momaday employs to describe Fragua, an incarnation of evil and hence a snake-like figure, points to Abel's eventual redemption, which comes to be symbolized by fish. Scales are found on fish and snakes alike, but a pointed tongue is found only in a serpent; Abel can feel the “scales of the lips and the hot slippery point of the tongue” when he is up close to deliver the death blow to Fragua. The evidence that Momaday is intentionally conflating the image of a snake and a fish in the character of Fragua comes when Abel looks down at Fragua's corpse and observes a “white, hairless arm [that] shone like the underside of a fish” (79).

There is ample precedent for the conflation of snake and fish imagery, as both have been used as potent symbols in human cultures for thousands of years. Carl Jung has written at length about serpent and fish symbolism, finding that “[t]he serpent is an equivalent of the fish,” and that both are often used as “symbols for describing psychic happenings or experiences that suddenly dart out of the unconscious and have a frightening or redeeming effect” (186). Momaday uses both snake and fish imagery to portray Fragua, a character around whom a lot of Abel's psychic energy is centered at this point in the novel. Abel is obviously attempting some sort of reckoning; what he is

attempting to reckon with is not so easily worked out. On one level, he could be seen as simply getting revenge for the beating Fragua gave him at the Feast of Santiago. On another level, he could be lashing out at the white man that has imposed himself and his evil ways on tribal culture. But, on a still deeper level, Abel is also confronting the very embodiment of evil. While this is certainly a frightening episode in Abel's life, Fragua embodies Abel's eventual redemption, as well, since he is also a fish-like figure. This ambivalence, it turns out, is nothing new to snake and fish symbolism. As Jung writes, ". . . the snake is the commonest symbol for the dark, chthonic world of instinct. It may—as frequently happens—be replaced by an equivalent cold-blooded animal, such as a dragon, crocodile, or fish. But the snake is not just a nefarious, chthonic being; it is also . . . a symbol of wisdom, and hence of light, goodness, and healing. Even in the New Testament it is simultaneously an allegory of Christ and of the devil, just as . . . the fish was" (244-45). As a means of subverting the Christian tradition of viewing evil (the devil) as the snake and good (Christ) as the fish—a viewpoint represented by Fray Nicolás in the novel—Momaday is using these symbols in all of their historically ambivalent richness to show that, like a snake shedding its skin, Abel's confrontations with evil and the white world will eventually lead him to a sort of rebirth.

Abel has attempted his own ceremony for dealing with evil, as represented by "the white man," to no avail. He has lashed out violently because he fears what he does not understand, just as he did to the captive eagle. The next time Abel confronts evil he will not be able to destroy its manifestation, and in fact will nearly be destroyed himself. Momaday uses a type of fish, grunions, as a device to represent the means by which Abel

pulls himself back from the brink of annihilation. Momaday cleverly manages to weave the image of fish, the symbol of Abel's redemption, into the narrative at this point where he's committed murder and is at a nadir in his life. The second chapter, "The Priest of the Sun," begins on January 26, 1952, and opens with a description of the grunions, calling them "among the most helpless creatures on the face of the earth" because they "hurl themselves upon the land," in order to spawn, and then must lie there. "Fishermen, lovers, passers-by catch them up in their bare hands," we're told (83). After Fragua has duped him, Abel too finds himself stranded and helpless, at the mercy of the white judicial system. "The Right Reverend John Big Bluff Tosamah" is the chapter's titular priest, and Abel is likewise at Tosamah's mercy, as the Right Reverend is a skilled orator and finds it easy to skewer inarticulate Abel with his withering wit.

"Why should Abel think of the fishes?"

Tosamah becomes the second character to treat Abel as a stereotype and therefore fits better in to the second part of my analysis. Angela St. John, who becomes Abel's lover in the first chapter, is the first. In treating him as a stereotype, both Tosamah and Angela do some kind of harm to Abel, but ultimately both hold keys to Abel's redemption, just as Fragua at once represented the snake and the fish. Before Momaday returns to the fish and discloses how they relate to Abel, Tosamah delivers the first of his sermons. He states the main theme of this sermon on "The Gospel According to John:"

"In the beginning was the word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." It was the truth, all right, but it was more than the Truth. The Truth was



overgrown with fat, and the fat was God. The fat was *John's* God, and God stood between John and the Truth. . . . [John] tried to make [the Truth] bigger and better than it was, but instead he only demeaned and encumbered it. He made it soft and big with fat. . . . He imposed his idea of God upon the everlasting Truth. "In the beginning was the Word. . . ." And that is all there was, and it was enough. (86-87)

Tosamah makes much of the fact that before there was the Word "there was nothing," darkness, a void. He has a special reverence for words and language because "they came from nothing into sound and meaning" (89).

Momaday himself is careful not to dilute language the way white men do. For most Plains Indian cultures, Kenneth Lincoln writes in "Words and Place: A Reading of *House Made of Dawn*," "Wakan Tanka, or the 'Mysterious Great,' could not be translated into spoken words or logical concepts. Talked, sung, or written language evokes this unnameable Reality, as a shadow calls on a distant object or an echo trails an original sound" (85). Tosamah goes even a step further, however, in ascribing mystical powers to language. He does not see silence as primary and language as subsidiary: "The Word did not come into being, but *it was*. It did not break upon the silence, but *it was older than the silence and the silence was made of it*" (91). In interviews, Momaday has affirmed that language must be treated "with great reverence, as words are sacred" (Schubnell 137). If language is sacred, then Abel's inability to express himself represents a kind of perdition or at least limbo. Until he finds whatever words he's seeking, he'll continue to be at the mercy of people like Tosamah or Fragua.

*House Made of Dawn* asks the rhetorical question, "Why should Abel think of the fishes?" (91), immediately after Tosamah's sermon, making the answer obvious. Abel is thinking about the fish because he is lost in the white man's world, drowning in the white

man's endless ocean of words, thereby making him as helpless as the grunion on the shore. Had he been present for Tosamah's sermon he might have found some comfort, some direction, for Tosamah discusses a Kiowa origin story in his sermon. But, alas, he is absent, lying broken and bloody on the beach after once again attempting to deal with evil on his own, this time in the person of Martinez, a crooked cop who preys upon the community of disenfranchised Indians living in L.A. (where Abel is relocated after being released from prison). The importance of the fishes, it turns out, resides in the fact that Abel "could not understand the sea," because

[I]t was not of his world. It was an enchanted thing, too, for it lay under the spell of the moon. It bent to the moon, and the moon made a bright, shimmering course upon it, a broad track breaking apart and yet forever whole and infinite, undulating, melting away into furtive islands of light in the great gray, black, and silver sea. "Beautyway," "Bright Path," "Path of Pollen"—his friend Benally talked of these things. But Ben could not have been thinking of the moonlit sea. No, not the sea, not this. The sea ... and small silversided fishes spawned mindlessly in correlation to the phase of the moon and the rise and fall of the tides. The thought of it made him sad, filled him with sad, unnamable longing and wonder. (91)

The sea becomes a representation of the silence or void or nothingness—in short, the unknown that Abel cannot comprehend. He feels that he has nothing in common with the fish that live in that ocean of the unknown, which he sees as enchanted, answering to a higher order—represented by the moon.

The moon, in many respects, represents the natural order of the world from which Abel is excluded, since the men of Walatowa, we're pointedly told, can work their fields by the light of the moon, and in this instance Abel feels he cannot understand the sea on which the moon makes "a broad track breaking apart and yet forever whole and infinite." Abel's life has been broken apart; he cannot assemble his experiences into a whole

picture of the world, but rather sees them as random occurrences in a state of chaos since he cannot perceive the underlying order governing the universe. In throwing themselves on the mercy of the shore in order to spawn, these fish are participating in the natural process of procreation—another image, as the mating eagles, of the procreative process being linked to death. It is Abel's perception of their helplessness that leads him to contemplate them, and will ultimately lead to his revelation about how to deal with evil, which in turn leads to his understanding of death. Completing the circle, when Abel has his revelation about death it will involve the moon.

“Beautyway,” “Bright Path,” and “Path of Pollen” are all parts of the Navajo Chantway myths, series of songs to be sung over a person in need of healing. It is no wonder that Ben Benally, Abel's friend in L.A., sings these songs to him. Abel is certain that when Ben sings those songs he “could not have been thinking of the moonlit sea,” which on a literal level may be true, but within the symbolic order of the novel is patently untrue. These myths serve to restore a person's sense of place in the universe, which the moon—especially, in this scene, the moonlit sea—represents. At this point Abel is still filled with that nameless “longing and wonder” that he felt while watching the aged male eagle fly off into the distance, only now he longs to understand the sea and the procreative fish. After musing on the fish and the sea Abel begins to examine his pain, which he does by considering his body—not just the pain it is in at the present due to his beating by Martinez, but how it has deteriorated as he has grown older and suffered various injuries and the sickness of alcoholism. Abel is at last starting to realize that death is a natural process. Not until he has had his crucial revelation about evil and death

will Abel get up and seek help—in other words, ensure his survival. Thus the deterioration of his body is a natural enough subject for him to turn to after contemplating the abyssal sea and its relation to the moon. Things are starting to fit into place for him, so he is also thinking about the words Benally has sung over him. They are words powerful enough to combat what has been done to him by the white world and its words.

Abel remembers, at this point, the murder trial, the white men who sat in judgment of him for the purpose of “disposing of him in language, *their* language” (95). The white men employ many stereotypes in the process of “disposing” of Abel, who regards the trial as a farcical ceremony—perhaps a mockery of ritual, which he himself has been guilty of orchestrating. Abel seems chiefly to regard the trial, as it is happening, as farcical because there is no question of his guilt. Abel remembers thinking, as the trial proceeded, that “he would kill the white man again, if he had the chance. . . . For he would know what the white man was, and he would kill him if he could. A man kills such an enemy if he can” (95). To Abel, Fragua was a snake, both literally and figuratively. Francisco has already demonstrated the tribal ways for dealing with evil, both in his restraint in not chasing Fragua away from the fields, and by participating in the invasion ceremony. The tribal tradition has ways for dealing with evil that would not have resulted in Fragua’s death or the imprisonment of Abel—the evil committed by both men would have been dealt with communally.

But Abel’s problems go much deeper than one violent transgression against another human being. Lying alone on the beach, body and mind wracked with pain, Abel at last has the vision that will save him. His problem has been an individual one, not a

failure of the tribe, hence it is that he is without community and alone on the beach when this revelation happens. It is a revelation of the need to deal with evil communally, however. He sees men in white leggings running towards him, “running after evil” (96). The vision of these men passing in the night brings the realization that he has been acting out of fear in trying to deal with evil on his own:

Suddenly he saw the crucial sense in their going, of old men in white leggings running after evil in the night. . . . Because of them, perspective, proportion, design in the universe. Meaning because of them. They ran with great dignity and calm, not in the hope of anything, but hopelessly; neither in fear nor hatred nor despair of evil, but simply in recognition and with respect. Evil was. Evil was abroad in the night; they must venture out to the confrontation; they must reckon dues and divide the world. (96)

Abel has always despaired of and feared evil, whereas it was the tribal way to respect all of creation as having a mutual right to exist. Evil is something that must be balanced, not destroyed. Francisco, Momaday’s representative of Walatowa, saw evil’s place in the universe and respected it as part of creation—his recognition for the need of balance is represented by the fact that he is both a sacristan at the Catholic church and a member of the kiva society that takes up and worships snakes.

Abel now recognizes that communal tribal rituals are a means for confronting and dealing with evil, not in the hope of defeating it, but of balancing it out. This truth was foreshadowed by the anthropomorphized rattlesnakes, which Momaday described as going “at sundown into the earth, hopelessly, as if to some unimaginable reckoning in the underworld”—just as these runners had the responsibility to “reckon dues” with evil. Of course, they also invoke the image of wholeness from the prologue. Now that Abel understands how to deal with evil in the world, he is taking his first step towards finding

his place in the universe. “He had been long ago at the center, had known where he was, had lost his way, had wandered to the end of the earth, was even now reeling on the edge of the void” (96). Abel will not be entirely safe from the white man’s abyss of words until he finds the right words to sing his own song and create his own origin story—which is represented as him still being on the edge of the void.

Momaday makes this need for words plain by juxtaposing Abel’s vision with questions from a social worker’s questionnaire. Abel is attended by a social worker because he has been relocated to L.A. by the federal government after his release from prison. The social worker is named Milly and she becomes another of Abel’s lovers. The questions from her questionnaire and their random insertion into the narrative represent the abyss of white man’s words in which Abel is still lost. In order to not succumb altogether to that void, he must consider where “the trouble had begun” for him. But of course he can’t and might never realize it clearly. Even the reader is only vaguely aware, by tracing the constant repetition of imagery in the novel, that the trouble probably began the moment Abel’s father left his young family—this is the reason images of natural procreation recur throughout the novel and are consistently tied to images that represent Abel’s inability to comprehend the natural order of things. Following this attempt to divine where the trouble began is a sexual episode between Abel and Milly. Abel’s sexual encounters in the novel are more effectively dealt with later, in the context of the stereotypes Momaday is deliberately playing with. At the end of this passage, we return to the beach, where Abel’s “whole body was breaking open to the roar of the sea” (101), demonstrating that he’s at last coming to terms with the void, hence nothingness

and evil.

As Abel undergoes all of this soul-searching on the beach, Tosamah holds a peyote ceremony after his sermon. It is full of ritualistic dignity and serves as yet another reminder that Abel has always been surrounded by beauty, but because of his inability to comprehend the natural order of things—represented by his fear of evil and death that continually results in his confronting evil in an inappropriate manner—Abel is never able to witness this beauty, as in this case, when he's lying on the beach following his beating by Martinez rather than attending Tosamah's peyote ceremony. Yet this ceremony might have been some help to him: the altar Tosamah uses has a groove that represents "the life of man from birth . . . through old age to death" (102). In the course of the peyote ceremony, everyone goes from feeling vibrantly alive to dwelling on thoughts of death. This is yet another communal ritual that could have helped Abel deal with the things he fears. Tosamah has, at points in their affiliation, deliberately belittled Abel and broken his spirit, but even he couldn't have assessed Abel's true affliction. He saw only a stereotype, "the longhair," and failed Abel as a missionary or medicine man—he styles himself the "Priest of the Sun" presiding over the "Los Angeles Holiness Pan-Indian Rescue Mission" (84). Tosamah could not have given Abel the words Ben Benally gives him anyhow, and with his taunts indirectly helps Abel realize that L.A. is not the place where he needs to be—so perhaps Tosamah was helpful after all. During the peyote ceremony, Tosamah goes out to the street and serves "notice that something holy was going on in the universe" (106). Momaday juxtaposes this notice being served with the most vivid description of Abel's injuries: his face is cut and bleeding, his eyes are

swollen shut, and both thumb joints have been dislocated. His body is so mangled that he has “the sense that his whole body was shaking violently, tossing and whipping, flopping like a fish” (106).

But something holy has happened, nonetheless: through this connection to the fish Abel has finally discovered how to deal with the unknown. But when he tries to cry out, only “a hoarse rattle and wheezing [come] from his throat” (106). He is still without the proper words with which to make himself whole, just as he was unable to speak to his grandfather or fashion himself a creation song after returning to Walatowa from the war. But his awareness of his condition is growing: “He was afraid. . . . He had always been afraid. Forever at the margin of his mind there was something to be afraid of, something to fear. He did not know what it was, but it was always there, real, imminent, unimaginable” (107). This is the first time he’s come to terms with the fact that he is afraid of the unknown; his admission is highly significant. Abel is finally coming to terms with the unknown, following his revelation about the need for communal handling of evil.

After making this admission, Abel relives the testimony provided by soldiers who witnessed his confrontation with the tank, which is one of the most subversive moments of the novel since it is rendered by the soldier in extremely stereotypical terms but nonetheless shows Abel in a moment of strength and self-possession. Juxtaposed with this moment of strength is Abel at last ordering his own past into a new creation story for himself, much as the Walatowans have their story about the invasion being a dream that will dissolve with the arrival of dawn. Not only does this scene represent the beginnings



of an origin story, it also represents Abel's newfound understanding of the role death plays in the cycle of life: Abel relives the memory of a goose hunt he went on with his brother in which the moon plays a significant part, since it represents a connection to the natural order of the world. This memory shows that Abel is beginning to reconstruct his memories of his past into a serviceable personal mythology, so Momaday slips into a prose style which makes heavy use of introductory "ands":

And they were getting close to the river, and a cloud drew across the face of the moon and the center of the cloud was lead gray and full of dark patches like smoke and they also moved across the moon, and the edge of the cloud was silver and sharp and billowing even as it moved across the throbbing November moon. (109)

Walter J. Ong, in his work *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, has noted that an "additive" or polysyndetic style such as this is characteristic of oral storytellers, as opposed to the "subordinative" style of written texts (37). Abel is beginning to craft his own story out of his memories by slipping into the voice of a tribal storyteller.

The subject of Abel's personal origin story is the role death plays in the cycle of life, for the purpose of this storytelling is to integrate Abel into the natural order of the world. At some level this is the function of all oral traditions. After Abel's brother Vidal has shot the goose, Abel wades into the water to get it and finds it is still alive. Abel, we're told, is afraid, "but the bird made no move, no sound." And then Abel carries the goose "out into the moonlight, and its bright black eyes, in which no terror was, were wide of him, wide of the river and the land, level and hard upon the ring of the moon in the southern sky" (110). Like Fragua, the bird is calm in the face of death,

staring off into the distance instead of regarding its executioner. But the presence of water and the fact that the goose is staring at the moon, instead of Fragua's unknown vision, points to Abel's own sea- and moon-centered revelations. Abel holds "[t]he moon and the water bird," as a symbol of the proper way to regard death (111). Abel finally understands the goose's willingness to give itself up in death so that he and his brother might eat of it and live, which Momaday encodes as Abel's acceptance of the sea's relationship to the moon: "*And somewhere beyond the cold and the fog and the pain there was the black and infinite sea, bending to the moon*" (112).

Once he has this revelation about the cycle of life and death, Abel has the will-power to get up and save himself—in short, he has been equipped to survive by this revelation and the story in which he encodes the newly discovered information. In remembering these scenes of the wholeness of the natural order, Abel is accumulating yet more power to change his life. Once he's been to the hospital and his wounds taken care of, Abel will return to Walatowa to live as the regeneration of Francisco's bone and blood, which will mean a life of living off of the land as his grandfather did. Momaday follows up this nascent maturation with a monologue from Milly, presumably one she delivers to Abel. It is about her father and the antipathy that he felt towards the land he owned. "*Daddy plowed and planted and watered the land, but in the end there was only a little yield. And it was the same years after year after year; it was always the same, and at last daddy began to hate the land, began to think of it as some kind of enemy*" (113). This passage functions chiefly as a contrast with earlier descriptions of the Pueblo men who worked the land by the light of the moon. They have "tenure in the land,"

whereas Milly's father demonstrates the poverty of vision of the latecoming things.

Milly also tells of a daughter she'd had who died at a young age, and in the hour of her death "*seemed not afraid but curious, strangely thoughtful and wise;*" to Milly, "*the most unreasonable, terrifying thing of all: that my child should be so calm in the face of death*" (115). Milly has inherited her father's poverty of vision, as she find it terrifying that someone should be calm in the face of death. But this is specifically the lesson Abel has just learned: death is not something to be afraid of; just as good must balance evil, so death stands in harmony with life. Without even a line break to start a new section, Momaday returns to Abel's present consciousness as he still lies on the beach, immobilized, but realizing that he must get up or die of exposure. The memory of what so terrified Milly has empowered Abel. He has constructed a creation story that helps him deal with death and is therefore prepared to survive. As he gets up and walks away, he reminisces about "running on the beach" with Milly and Ben at night, when "the moon was high and bright and the fishes were far away in the depths," swimming freely in the abyss as Abel is at last learning to do (116). He is reliving a time when the moon was high and bright, symbolizing his newfound sense of place in the world and discovery of the order of the universe.

Addressed by voices from the past: Infusing literary with oral traditions

The next section, which takes place on January 27<sup>th</sup>, consists entirely of Tosamah's second sermon, "The Way to Rainy Mountain." This sermon, which is almost

entirely reproduced in Momaday's book of the same name, published in 1969, the year after *House Made of Dawn*, recounts Tosamah's pilgrimage to his Kiowa grandmother's grave at Rainy Mountain in the Oklahoma plains. It serves the same purpose for Tosamah as *The Way to Rainy Mountain* serves for Momaday.

*The Way to Rainy Mountain* is comprised of mythical, historical, and personal passages. It is, in a sense, Momaday's own personal creation myth. By combining all three forms in one work, Elaine A. Jahner argues in "Metalanguages," Momaday is exploring "the way oral narrative develops into written form":

Momaday establishes himself as the one addressed by voices from his own past and he allows himself to be called back to what is primal, situated literally in that territory where the Kiowas began their journey toward their distinct cultural identity and situated psychologically in those emotions and linguistic responses that Momaday has located as starting points for his own journey toward artistic identity. (157)

In discussing the Oklahoma countryside, Tosamah notes that, "To look upon that landscape in the early morning, with the sun at your back, is to lose the sense of proportion. Your imagination comes to life, and this, you think, is where Creation was begun" (117). Momaday's whole career has been preoccupied with the idea that creation stories must be assembled—not just by tribes but also by individuals—in order for survival into the future to be possible. Hence he infuses his literary works with the perspectives and rhythms of the oral traditions that encoded these creation stories for the tribes.

The juxtaposition of the timeless prologue with such specifically dated chapters, as noted, is one means by which this infusion occurs. Repeating scenes, such as Tosamah's sermon on "The Way to Rainy Mountain," nearly verbatim in subsequent

works is another way in which he tries to inform his literary works with the perspectives and rhythms of oral traditions. “I think that my work proceeds from the American Indian oral tradition, and I think it sustains that tradition and carries it along,” Momaday affirms, adding, “I like to repeat myself, if you will, from book to book. . . . My purpose is to carry on what was begun a long time ago; there’s no end to it that I can see” (Schubnell 107). By repeating images not only within a work, but from one of his literary works to the next, Momaday is, in a sense, revising and reshaping the tales he is telling, much as an oral storyteller would be revising and reshaping stories that existed long before he ever told them. Though it is fixed in time and there is no repetition of the image of the runner in “The Way to Rainy Mountain” sermon, it still carries this sense of the wholeness of the universe encoded in the oral traditions because it carries on what was begun a long time ago, by Tosamah and Momaday’s people, the Kiowa.

Ben Benally is “The Night Chanter.” He narrates the entire third chapter, except the sections that are transcriptions of the Navajo songs he sings for Abel, carrying on the healing rituals that the Navajo people began a long time ago. Learning these songs is especially important to Abel, since half of his ancestry appears to be Navajo and hence any personal origin myth he might construct would need to take this into account. The chapter begins on February 20<sup>th</sup>, with Ben telling us that Abel has left L.A. to return to Walatowa. Ben relates the particulars of Abel’s stay in L.A., making plain the connections between Abel’s revelations in “The Priest of the Sun” and the motifs of the rest of the novel. For instance, we finally meet Martinez, the crooked cop who has beaten Abel so severely. He is called “*culebra*”—rattlesnake in Spanish. In keeping with

earlier snake imagery, Martinez is yet another manifestation of evil that Abel confronts by himself, but this one, as we've seen, finally leads Abel to an acknowledgment of the need for communal rituals to deal with evil. Accordingly, Ben has constructed a ritual for he and Abel to deal with another evil, alcohol: he and Abel will return to their respective reservations, quit drinking, and re-engage with their tribes' traditional ways of life. "He was going home, and he was going to be all right again," Ben says.

And someday I was going home, too, and we were going to meet someplace out there on the reservation and get drunk together. It was going to be the last time, and it was something we had to do. We were going out into the hills on horses and alone. It was going to be early in the morning, and we were going to see the sun coming up. . . . We were going to get drunk for the last time, and we were going to sing the old songs. We were going to sing about the way it used to be. . . . We had to do it a certain way, just right, because it was going to be the last time. (133)

Ben made up this plan, but Abel "believed in it," making it into a new ceremony for himself, a ceremony he won't have to perform alone. In assuming the names and gestures of their "conquerors," the Walatowan people had adapted their rituals to new circumstances while still holding on to their "own secret souls." In similar manner, Ben and Abel are adapting the old songs to a ceremony in which they are giving up alcoholism and celebrating their return to the ways of their people.

Though Ben created the idea of this new ceremony and also tells Abel of the Navajo Beautway and Night Chant, Ben himself is conflicted, both wanting to pray (133-34) and feeling "ashamed" to sing these songs in front of Tosamah and the other men, who are drinking and singing their own songs, beating on drums and having a good time. Ben, seemingly more out of concern for Abel than as an affirmation of his tribal heritage, sings the Night Chant for Abel. It is a healing song, in which the "Male deity" is

petitioned, “Restore my voice for me” (134). The usefulness of this song for inarticulate Abel is entirely obvious. Momaday closes the book with the image of Abel running, ritualistically supplementing the prologue’s introductory image with the end of Abel’s wordless purgatory because while Abel is running he is singing “House made of pollen, House made of dawn,” words from the Navajo Night Chant. These words he at last finds are Navajo, a clear indication that Abel’s father was himself Navajo. Ben also, at one point, reckons that he and Abel “are related somehow,” because the Navajo have a clan that they call by the name of the place Abel is from (140). The fusion of Abel’s lineage, and the fusion of Momaday’s own influences—that is, the oral and literary traditions—are manifest in this last run. By bringing us full circle, Momaday argues that the timeless beauty inherent in the oral traditions can be located in a novel, just as the second time we see Abel running it is located in time.

Ben is “The Night Chanter,” and he plays the role of medicine man to Abel by helping guide him through his journey, but Ben is by no means entirely connected to his tribal heritage. He has no chants to make sense of the white man’s words, just like Abel and the rest of the Indians in L.A. “They have a lot of *words*, and you know they mean something, but you don’t know what, and your words are no good because they’re not the same; they’re different, and they’re the only words you’ve got” (144). This sounds the theme that first started with Tosamah’s oration on how the white world has diluted truth with a surfeit of words. It is clear that Native Americans’ words still have power—they save Abel, for instance—but Ben seems to have trouble keeping sight of that, chiefly because he has been sucked into the American dream of “money and clothes and having

plans and going someplace fast” (144). These are the dreams of human latecoming things, people who exhibit a poverty of vision, like Milly’s father, who was so disconnected from the land from which he tried to make a living that he saw it as an adversary.

Despite the democratic ideal that everyone should have access to things like money and clothes, Ben finds that it’s hard to get even those basic material possessions. “And you want to give up. You think about getting out and going home. You want to think that you belong someplace, I guess” (144). But then, he says, “. . . you know it’s no use; you know that if you went home there would be nothing there, just the empty land and a lot of old people, going noplac and dying off” (145). Like Abel, Ben’s world represents an uneasy synthesis of modern society and traditional ideals. Ben did, apparently, have the benefit of learning his tribe’s origin myths, which is why he’s more capable of balancing the warring parts of his psyche.

But Ben is really kidding himself, and on multiple levels. For one thing, Ben is a grunt on a factory line, where he met Abel, and he is nowhere close to achieving the American dream he desires. As Carol Oleson writes,

His rewards for industry and dependability are an airless room, an occasional escape in alcohol from the meaninglessness of being a replaceable bolt in a huge machine, and police protection in the form of Martinez, who can rob or beat him for amusement whenever he likes. (74)

Momaday, of course, does not let Ben’s aspirations to material excesses of industrial society go unchallenged. Ben “can tell himself over and over that the sacred land is dead and the old way gone forever. Momaday, on the other hand, has been saying that the old way is not dead, but sleeping, and soon it will emerge to continue its development”



(Oleson 74). Ben's singing has provided a basis for healing to someone as seemingly hopeless as Abel, proving that Momaday is, as Oleson says, communicating a vision of a hibernating culture whose vitality will return—a process that is symbolized by Abel's own spiritual journey from wholeness, through trials and tribulations, and back to wholeness.

But Ben himself has already refuted his conviction that the land is dead and the old ways dying off, since he has his own personal origin story and seems to attach great import to it. The idea that Ben will someday return to the reservation is underscored by this origin story about his grandfather, who told Ben “stories in the firelight” when he was “little and right there in the center of everything, the sacred mountains, the snow-covered mountains and hills, the gullies and the flats, the sundown and the night, everything.” He speaks in the second person at this point, seemingly to Abel, telling him that the reservations where they grew up were “where you were little, where you were and had to be” (143). The reverence Ben has for this time of his life belies his conviction that the reservation is a dead place. Ben, like Momaday in his fusing the oral and literary traditions, is capable of holding two views at the same time—a dichotomy that seems contradictory but is actually able to be reconciled by adapting old stories to new situations. Momaday has already presented evidence that Ben will return to the traditional life on the reservation in the ritual he creates for himself and Abel to give up alcohol. Momaday is suggesting that Ben is simply undergoing his own journey.

Ben tells us about Martinez, the “culebra,” harassing himself and Abel, stealing Ben's money on payday like some kind of schoolyard bully and smashing Abel's hands

with his flashlight when Abel doesn't seem cowed by the harassment (58-59). Because this whole chapter is narrated by Ben, we aren't given a description of Martinez beating Abel the way we witness Abel murdering Fragua. We're just told Abel goes out one night, after losing his job, skipping interviews for another, and sinking ever deeper into alcoholism, "to get even with *culebra*" (166). But then, the confrontation in this instance is not the crucial thing; the revelations Abel has as a result are what really matter. The misery of Abel and Ben's living and working conditions in L.A. is palpably evoked by Momaday, and so it seems as if Abel, after being released from the hospital, must return to Walatowa a defeated man. But this is not the case, as we know because we have already witnessed Abel's revelation of how to deal with the unknown and evil and because Ben has given him the words he needs to begin healing himself. That this healing process will ultimately result in a functional personal origin story for Abel seems assured by an episode Ben relates in which Angela St. John comes to visit Abel in the hospital. A discussion of this episode, however, will make more sense once I've examined Abel and Angela's relationship, which I intend to do within the context of observing the postindian aspects of the novel, to which I now turn.

#### Postindian imagery

The Pueblo people in *House Made of Dawn* embrace the idea of survival as resistance, Vizenor's "survivance." The fact that Abel comes to realize the power of myth and ritual is the overarching postindian statement that the book makes. It subverts

the stereotypical image of the “Vanishing Indian” by demonstrating Indian people and the “long outwaiting” of their “conquerors.” Abel is an alcoholic; his father has deserted the family; his mother and brother have died of disease; and Francisco, the only character whole and secure in a traditional lifestyle for the entirety of the novel, is old and lame and at the end of the novel he dies. These are all conditions that can be pointed to as evidence that Native Americans are simply not capable of surviving in the modern world; they are as the grunions: helplessly stranded on the beach. But Momaday turns that image on its head by using it to portray the way Abel learns to deal with death and the unknown through tribal rituals. Ben is a symbol for the Indian man trying and failing to live in the white world by leaving the tribal world behind him, but he gives Abel the words he needs to begin the healing process. In essence, then, *House Made of Dawn* thus becomes one large subversion of the Vanishing Indian stereotype.

The apotheosis of this project of subversion occurs in the fourth and final chapter, “The Dawn Runner,” in which Abel returns to Walatowa six days before his grandfather dies. Each morning at dawn the old man finds his voice and speaks. Momaday provides each of his six ramblings in succession, imparting the sense that Abel will carry on as “the regeneration” of Francisco’s “blood and bone,” which is pointed to by the first of the sections in which Francisco speaks at dawn. When Abel was little and his brother still alive, Francisco takes his grandsons to a place sacred to the Walatowan Pueblo people.

They were old enough then, and [Francisco] took his grandsons out at first light. . . He made them stand just there, above the point of the low white rock, facing east. They could see the black mesa looming on the first light, and he told them there was the house of the sun. They must learn the whole contour of the black mesa. They must know it as they knew the shape of their hands, always and by heart. The sun rose up on the black mesa at a different place each day. . . . They

must know the long journey of the sun on the black mesa, how it rode in the seasons and the years, and they must live according to the sun appearing, for only then could they reckon where they were, where all things were, in time. (177)

The image of the mesa “looming on the first light” recalls the image of the tank “looming there in front of the sun.” Just as the fish first symbolizes Fragua but ultimately comes to represent Abel’s salvation, this image of something looming in front of the sun is also made to stand for the opposite of what it once signified. This image goes from representing the confusion and destruction of war to representing the light of wisdom guiding subsequent generations into the future—thus the apparent chaos of the modern world is balanced with the order imposed on the world by the tribal rituals that give people a sense of their place in the natural order. “These things he told to his grandsons carefully, slowly and at length, because they were old and true, and they could be lost forever as easily as one generation is lost to the next, as easily as one old man might lose his voice” (178). Abel has come to perceive the necessity of origin stories and tribal rituals for survival, which is why Momaday places this memory in the fourth chapter and not sooner. Only now that he understands the natural order of the world can Abel make any sense of this lesson his grandfather has taught him.

Momaday has presented us with a character, Abel, who was so confused and disoriented by the modern world that he temporarily lost his voice. Tosamah says that in telling him Kiowa stories, his grandmother was asking him “to go with her to the confrontation of something that was sacred and eternal” (88). This is the same language used to describe the runners after evil in Abel’s vision—those runners “venture out to the confrontation.” What is being confronted is evil and death, and Abel understands that

both have a place in the cosmos—as much as good and life. Now Abel can prepare his grandfather’s body for burial in the traditional style, signifying his return to tribal ritual (189). He then rubs himself with ashes, as is proper, and joins the runners at dawn (190). When he begins to run, he sings, signifying his rejoining of the tribe’s ritual life coincides with his process of healing. Abel’s achieving a sense of place in the universe is characterized not as something learned but, consistent with the idea that he has always been surrounded by beauty, as something instinctual—“He could see at last without having to think. He could see the canyon and the mountains and the sky. He could see the rain and the river and the fields beyond. He could see the dark hills at dawn” (191). Abel overcomes all the stereotypes of the Vanishing Indian and achieves the tribal understanding of his place in the natural order of the world; Momaday is demonstrating that the Indian worldview is just as viable in the modern world as it was in the time before the invaders came.

Though this is a novel written out of a complexity of motives, the subversion of Indian stereotypes emerges as Momaday’s chief purpose and goal. Throughout, several characters treat Abel in a manner consistent with mainstream stereotypes. Some characters, like the soldiers he fought with in the war, Tosamah, and Angela, treat Abel as if they see him as a stereotype. But in the murder of Juan Reyes Fragua, Momaday is actually playing off of the stereotypes his readers might bring to bear on the novel and its protagonist. In the scene that depicts Abel and Fragua in the bar and then the murder, Momaday calls Fragua “the white man” 14 times but never by name. What’s more, the murder scene is depicted with strikingly sexual language, as Abel can feel Fragua’s

“uneven blowing at his ear, and felt the blue shivering lips upon him, felt even the scales of the lips and the hot slippery point of the tongue” (78). “What is happening here,” Alan Velie determines in *Four American Indian Literary Masters*, “on a literal level, is that Abel is killing the albino while, on a symbolic level, the white man is raping Abel” (58). In *Orientalism*, Edward Said mentions the strange concurrence between imperialism and sexuality, writing that, to the West, the Orient suggests “not only fecundity but sexual promise (and threat)” (188). Momaday depicts Fragua as approaching Abel sexually, which Abel perceives as threat. Momaday writes, “Abel waited. The white man raised his arms, as if to embrace him, and came forward. But Abel had already taken hold of the knife, and he drew it” (77). Momaday is almost setting a trap for his readers, because he never tells us what Fragua thought he and Abel were going to do but gives us this depiction of Fragua attempting to “embrace” Abel. Because Fragua’s character is given no agency and thus kept entirely on the level of symbolism, Momaday seems to be playing off of the expectation that Native Americans would visit the same violence on their oppressors as has been visited on them, if given the chance. “It is curious, but, given the nature of the American publishing industry, militance is commercial, and anger, not complacency, is the ‘conventional stance’ expected of blacks and Indians by the literary world” (Velie 7).

However, Fragua is an albino Indian man, not a “white man,” and so is a conflation of Abel’s alienation from both the Native American and mainstream white cultures. Abel does not seem particularly angry in the scene in which he kills Fragua; indeed, the preceding bar scene shows that his act is carefully planned out, a measured (if

misguided) reaction to something he needs to address, probably his own lack of place in the world. He has been betrayed as much by his Indian father as by white society, both of which find manifest in the albino Indian. By destroying the albino, perhaps he hopes to destroy everything that has confounded him and excluded him from the natural order of the world.

Momaday's insistence on subverting stereotypes means that none of the symbols or images in the novel can be read simply. The fish motif is initially used along with snakes to identify Fragua, yet ends up as a symbol of Abel's revelation; snakes too, of course, are not entirely evil within the symbolic order of the novel, either, though Abel perceives them that way at the time of the murder, when he sees Fragua as both snake- and fish-like. Likewise, the image of a black mass looming in front of the light of the sun is used to represent the chaos of modern warfare and the tribal rituals that maintain a sense of order. Momaday's use of the phrase "the white man" is also thoroughly ambiguous. When "the white man" beats Abel violently, Momaday is imparting a sense of injustice: "Abel was not used to the game, and the white man was too strong and quick for him" (44). But Momaday seems to suggest, in calling Fragua "the white man" and thereby making Abel his opposite, a representative Native American, that this violence cannot keep Indians down, except to the extent that they allow it. Had Abel dealt with evil in the prescribed tribal manner, this violence would have had no long-term impact on his life because he would have dealt with the white invaders in the ceremony with his grandfather, rather than murdering an Indian man he saw as being as evil as the white invaders. But Abel does not—cannot—comprehend the universe and hence deals with

evil improperly; again, because he has been raised in an “unnatural” or non-traditional manner, and his lack of a father resulted in ignorance as to his proper place in the world and the proper way to deal with evil.

Just as his father bears some culpability in Abel’s problems, Tosamah, another Indian man, also treats Abel harshly and prevents his integration into the community of urban Indians living in L.A. Clearly Momaday sees some of the problems besetting Indian peoples as arising from the different perspectives of reservation Indians and city Indians. Tosamah sees Abel as fitting the stereotype of “a longhair,” someone unfit for survival in the modern world: “They gave him every advantage,” Tosamah says. “They gave him a pair of shoes and told him to go to school. They deloused him and gave him a lot of free haircuts and let him fight on their side. But was he grateful? Hell, no, man. He was too damn dumb to be civilized” (134). Possibly he is being at least partially ironic when he says that “they let him fight on their side,” but his treatment of Abel demonstrates that he may well be serious. He clearly blames Abel for being unable to handle the bad effects of white society and to capitalize on the good effects at the same time. He baits Abel, abusing people from the reservation, what Tosamah calls longhairs, in a deliberate act of provocation. Drunk as he is, Abel impotently attempts another violent confrontation with his oppressor. Instead of harming Tosamah, however, Abel falls over drunk, and is made to look ridiculous in front of the other Indian men at Tosamah’s “Pan-Indian Rescue Mission” (146). The only alternative to being sent to prison that Tosamah can envision for Abel would have been to “get some fat little squaw all knocked up” and lie around all day getting drunk and living off of welfare (135-36).



He ridicules Indians who make pottery for sale by ironically quipping that they “boost the economy” (136). We’re never told what Tosamah does for a living, which only helps to portray him as an Indian who is comfortably making a living in the white world without losing his sense of heritage. This prejudice against longhairs on the part of Tosamah seems to arise from the fact that he is “educated” in the white definition of the term and “doesn’t come from the reservation” (137). This lack of sympathy for Abel on Tosamah’s part is as harmful to Abel, at this point, as his lack of integration into the tribe at Walatowa. Being alienated from both communities excludes him from ceremonies—the invasion ceremony at Walatowa, the peyote ceremony that Tosamah hosts—that would have helped him confront evil and death in a much more effective manner precisely because at the time those beneficial ceremonies are being held, he is off confronting evil alone in the persons of Fragua and Martinez.

But at the same time that he denigrates reservation Indians like Abel, Tosamah demonstrates a certain respect for Abel’s act of defiance (136). He thinks Abel killed Fragua so that his trial would highlight the abuse of Native Americans by the federal government of the United States, what Tosamah calls a “Jesus scheme.” Tosamah thinks that Abel was trying to martyr himself: “They put that cat away, man. They *had* to. It’s part of the Jesus scheme. *They*, man. They put all of us renegades, us diehards, away sooner or later” (136). Tosamah respects the fact that Abel went to jail for something he believed in, as he seems to include Abel and himself in the category of “renegades” or “diehards” that white society is forced to deal with. We know it isn’t quite the case that Abel was making some moral stand or otherwise standing up for a belief. Tosamah is

projecting his own desire to be some sort of revolutionary leader onto Abel, believing that Abel stood up for a cause and could possibly galvanize a resistance Tosamah is longing to see: “One of these nights there’s going to be a full red moon, a hunter’s moon, and we’re going to find us a wagon train full of women and children. Now you won’t believe this, but I drink to that now and then” (136). Even Tosamah’s sense of revolutionary fervor is stereotyped, as he casts it as a scene out of a Western movie. The real reason Abel went to jail, and his real fate—which, as I’ve shown, is not likely to be marrying “some fat squaw” and raising “a lot of little government wards” but more likely living off of the land as his grandfather did—subverts these stereotypes through which Tosamah views Abel and the world. What’s more, the resistance against white society, Momaday shows us, has been going on ever since the invaders “conquered” the tribal societies, and it isn’t a spaghetti Western or a reproduction of the persecution of Jesus Christ but survivance, what Momaday calls “a long outwaiting.”

Tosamah is not altogether blinded by stereotypes, however, and he does have some shrewd insights to convey. The novel’s harshest condemnation of white society comes in the form of his sermon on the white man’s surfeit of words and resultant dilution of “the Truth.” In no scene does Momaday utilize this motif better than in describing Abel’s trial for murder, in which the court is, “Word by word . . . disposing of him in language, *their* language, and . . . making a bad job of it” (95). Father Olguin, the missionary in Walatowa, tries to testify on Abel’s behalf, saying that “in [Abel’s] mind it was not a man he killed,” but something more like an “evil spirit.” “I believe that [Abel] was moved to do what he did by an act of imagination so compelling as to be

inconceivable to us,” he tells the court. The prosecutor rebuts by restating “the facts”: “He committed a brutal and premeditated act which we have no choice but to call by its right name” (94). “Homicide is a legal term,” Olguin returns, arguing that “the law” is not the proper context in which to judge Abel’s actions. But through yet another semantic game, the prosecutor recovers the advantage, arguing that “*Murder* is a moral term. *Death* is a universal human term” (94). Father Olguin’s relativist assertions that Abel possesses “A psychology about which we know very little” fall on the deaf ears of a court that sees its many moral and legal terms as defining absolute conditions of life. The court ignores whatever may truly be the matter with Abel and sends him off to prison; Abel is little more than the pawn in one more word game from which the prosecutors have emerged victorious. Nevertheless, Momaday manages to turn the trial to Abel’s favor, subverting the idea that modern courts of law are the sole arbiter of moral judgment. To the court, Abel is nothing more than a soon-to-be-convicted killer. The only other testimony given in the court proceedings to which we are privy shows that there is actually much more to the man. The testimony is that of a white soldier who witnessed Abel’s confrontation with the tank. His account, riddled with the stereotypes through which the soldier sees Abel, is quite revealing.

Oh Jesus, he just all of a sudden got up and started jumping around and *yelling* at that goddam tank, and it was maybe thirty, forty yards is all down the hill. Oh Jesus, sir. He was giving it the finger and whooping it up and doing a goddam *war dance*, sir. . . . We couldn’t *believe* what was going on. And there *he* was, hopping around with his finger up in the air and giving it to the tank in Sioux or Algonquin or something, for crissake. And he didn’t have no weapon or helmet even . . . they all started shooting at him, *pop, pop, ping, ping, pow!* Jesus, we could see the leaves kicking up all around him, and him whooping it up like a—I don’t know what, sir. Yes, sir, clapping whoops from his mouth just like in the movies. . . . Then finally he took off through the trees kind of crazy

and casual like, *dancing!* (108)

Since his return from the war, Abel has been inarticulate and alienated from his Native culture. The tank looming in front of the sun seemed to have symbolically blotted out any sense of order that may have existed in Abel's mind, once and for all supplanting his sense of the natural order of the world with a pervasive sense that the world is founded on chaos. Yet at the moment the soldier describes, when Abel confronts the great mechanized evil of modern warfare, he calls out in his native Pueblo language, Tanoan, and in the face of this death-dealing machine Abel is "calm." He also performs a sort of war dance that somehow protects him from the enemy fire.

Despite the heavily stereotyped description of the scene that we're given by the soldier, who saw it all as something "just like in the movies," this is a powerful moment for Abel. He is actually exhibiting both traits that he would spend the rest of the novel recovering—fluency with the words of his native language and an acceptance of death. This moment of calm and self-possession helps underscore the pervading sense of inviolable wholeness that Momaday created with the prologue. But this time it is not Abel running that conveys that wholeness—in this case he dances. Trying to run away would have been a fearful reaction—just as he ran from Nicolás *teah-whau* as a child.

Not choosing to react out of fear may have saved Abel's life on this occasion, but a fear of death is one of Abel's chief problems throughout the novel, symbolically resolved when he remembers the goose hunt with his brother. Abel's other chief preoccupation throughout the novel is procreation. Abel's first sexual encounter in the novel points up his lack of a healthy model of procreation. He has sex with "a daughter

of Medina,” but it is not satisfying for him: “the wine had made him nearly sullen and his laughter was put on and there was nothing to it. Her body, when at last it shuddered and went limp, had not been enough for him” (17-18). He wants her again, but she gets dressed and runs away. “And he could not catch her because he was drunk and his legs would not work for him. He tried to get her back, but she stood away and laughed at him” (18). Though we presume he copulated successfully with the girl, we still get the sense that Abel is impotent in some way, since he is too drunk to experience this sexual encounter as fulfilling. Again, drunkenness is used as a stereotype of Indians unequipped for survival. Momaday chooses to follow this episode with Abel’s vision and his subsequent disastrous involvement in the eagle hunt, so it is clear we are to assume this sexual encounter is a ritual that is unsuccessful.

Since this first sexual encounter fits the stereotype of the Vanishing Indian, it is not surprising when Abel’s next sexual episode comes about because of stereotypes. But just as he’s done with so many other images and motifs in the novel, Momaday turns this around, too, using what could have been entirely detrimental to Abel to show how he resists the stereotypes white people attempt to apply to him. When we meet Abel’s first lover, Angela Grace St. John, we’re told she’s come to Walatowa for the mineral baths because her back has been sore for several weeks and the water is supposed to be curative (30). Angela will eventually help Abel in creating his own origin story, and she sounds the healing theme from the start. But soon after Angela meets Abel, Momaday reveals her fantasy:

Once she had seen an animal slap at the water, a badger or a bear. She would have liked to touch the soft muzzle of a bear, the thin black lips, the great flat

head. She would have liked to cup her hand to the wet black snout, to hold for a moment the hot blowing of the bear's life. (34)

Her desire for Abel corresponds to this wish to hold "the hot blowing" of a bear's life. She sees him as primal or animalistic, and therefore in racial terms and as inferior: a savage. But Abel is still inarticulate, voices no opinions, and will not give her a "clear way to be contemptuous of him" (35). His silence incenses her, and she wants to "throw him off balance" by asking him, "How would you like a white woman?" (35). A strange and racialized come-on, but one Abel might be expected to react to—yet Angela notes that Abel remains "like a wooden Indian—his face cold and expressionless." This ends up only intriguing her more; Abel's stoic demeanor is like the corn dancers' "grave and mysterious" dance during which they "looked straight ahead, to the exclusion of everything." "What was it that they saw?" she wonders.

Probably they saw nothing after all, nothing at all. But then that was the trick, wasn't it? To see nothing at all, nothing in the absolute. To see beyond the landscape, beyond every shape and shadow and color, *that* was to see nothing. That was to be free and finished, complete, spiritual. (38)

Angela's sympathy for the Native worldview is revealed in this poetic passage. The "nothing" Angela believes the corn dancers and Abel can see is something like the silence Tosamah sees as being the primal state that is made of the Word, which for him is the Truth. These are decidedly Native American views of the nature of reality, but the irony is that Abel experiences only a meaningless void. To use Tosamah's metaphor, silence is emptiness for Abel, not another manifestation of the truth.

For Angela and Tosamah, however, the void is a positive presence. So though Angela here shares an almost Native point of view, she regards Abel in stereotypical and

racist terms. Viewed through her essentialist lens, all Indians must have the same sense of spirituality. Despite the promise of her ability to bridge the racial and cultural divide, she shares as much with the soldier who testified that Abel spoke “Sioux or Algonquin or something,” as she does with Tosamah. Abel is somewhere afloat between the two worlds—white and Indian—just as Angela is. He sees the world as chaotic, without order, as a result of his experiences in the white man’s war. But Angela’s stereotypes cannot contain him any more than the soldier’s stereotyped version of the tank encounter could conceal Abel’s strength.

Abel has been chopping wood for Angela and she returns home one day to find him on her front stoop, “not waiting, it seemed—still and stolid” (59). Abel is still the stoic Indian to her. After throwing herself at him in the kitchen and then taking him to her room, Angela asks, “What will you do to me?” as if she’s a little white girl that has been kidnapped from civilization by a “savage” Indian. Abel does not ravage her as she wants, though. The result is that “she went limp and the edge of her desire was lost” (62). Abel’s first sexual partner went limp after sex, and Abel could not get her back; Angela goes limp before the sex, “but he knew what he was doing...and he brought her back slowly.” Momaday has intentionally made the latter sex scene the inverse of the first. The important difference is that this time Abel is not the drunk Indian: “At last he raised up and she set herself for him. . . . He was dark and massive above her, posed and tinged with pale blue light. And in that split second she thought again of the badger at the water, and the great bear, blue-black and blowing” (62). Abel redefines the stereotypes Angela uses to define him: the bear imagery becomes him, he is in control of the

situation, rearing up over Angela, just as the image of him doing a war dance and escaping the enemy bullets is not the cheap movie imagery the soldier speaks from.

Angela, in this scene, proves to be at the center of the web of imagery—here, Abel is “dark and massive above her,” echoing the way Fragua, in his “black glasses,” passes “above” her for an instant at the rooster pull (44). Similarly, both the tank and the mesa “loom” darkly in front of the sun; the tank in particular was an initially threatening image that has proven to have inspired in Abel a positive sense of agency that no event has before his lovemaking with Angela. The image of something dark rearing up above something light is part of the constant “repetition of things” and demonstrates Momaday’s development of that repetition of images, accumulating opposite meanings that will balance each other. In order to deliver us from the prologue’s running Abel to the final chapter’s running Abel, we must go through a metaphorical journey of change. The chief change Abel must go through is to see the harmony in the universe, and all of *House Made of Dawn*’s imagery serves to illustrate this harmony to the reader. And in demonstrating the viability of this sense of harmony even within the Euro-American art form of the novel, Momaday is demonstrating that the oral traditions, like Native Americans themselves, are not in danger of vanishing, but will survive and some day flourish.

This process—this reversal of the significance of imagery—is also manifest in Abel’s relationship with his next lover, Milly, the social worker in L.A. Milly does not pursue Abel as Angela did; instead, Abel pulls Milly to him and starts kissing her. She is “like a small animal,” we’re told, though Momaday does not reveal in what way she is



animalistic (100). This description serves only to symbolize the reversal of roles that has occurred between Abel and his sexual partners. Interestingly, this time Abel does come to fit the animal imagery: “His nostrils flared to the odor of her body, and he was brutal with her” (101). He ravages Milly the way Angela seems to have longed to be ravaged by an animal. Milly, with her questionnaires, represents the barrage of white man’s words that inundate Abel, and through his coupling with her he comes to fit the stereotype of an Indian lashing out violently at the white world. Thus, he inverts the sexual dominance of imperialism that he was victimized by while murdering “the white man,” Fragua. Again Momaday has subtly reworked his previous imagery to fit the pattern of accumulation and release: sex has accumulated meaning as an act in which Abel was capable of subverting the stereotypes through which a white person tried to view him, and that energy was released when he not only fulfills Angela’s stereotype of a savage, animalistic lover, but also fulfills the conventional stance of an Indian man angrily striking back at the white oppressor.

Whatever negative energy Abel has accumulated through his sexual relationship with Milly is released when he meets Angela again, as she visits him in the hospital following his beating by Martinez. She has had a child since leaving Walatowa, and tells Abel about the origin story she has constructed for her son:

Peter always asked her about the Indians, she said, and she used to tell him a story about a young Indian brave. He was born of a bear and a maiden, she said, and he was noble and wise. He had many adventures, and he became a great leader and saved his people. It was the story Peter liked best of all, and she always thought of *him*, Abel, when she told it. (169)

Angela’s story restores to the Abel-as-bear-lover image the sense of empowerment and

self-possession that he somehow violates in being animalistic and violent with Milly. Peter is not actually Abel's son, because Angela is already pregnant when she comes to Walatowa in the first place. What Angela has done is demonstrate to Abel the ability to use imagination to re-order the past and create a mythical story of origin, an invaluable lesson to a man who desperately needs to construct his own personal origin myth out of two sets of ancestry and heritage. We do not ever get to see Abel construct his own story, but there are certainly clues that he is at last capable of seeing his past in a manner that will allow him to do so. His memory of the goose hunt with his brother and his grandfather's raving about the time he showed both of his grandsons the "house of the sun" demonstrates that Abel has plenty of raw material to work with.

Momaday repeats images throughout the novel, constantly shifting their significance and import so that they ultimately balance each other out and the pervading sense of wholeness and calm set up by the prologue is maintained when we reach Abel running the second time. Despite the confusion and chaos into which Abel is plunged in the body of the novel, we are always dealing essentially with the same terms, the same way of looking at things that is decidedly Native American in perspective. *House Made of Dawn* uses postmodern tactics to demonstrate that worldview. "The postindian warriors of postmodern simulations," Vizenor says, "would undermine and surmount, with imagination and the performance of new stories, the manifest manners of scriptural simulations and 'authentic' representations of the tribes in the literature of dominance" (17). Momaday shows us "the principle of harmony in the universe" by using the same images over and over, often using the same image to illustrate both "good" and "evil"

aspects of the world. By establishing this harmony between good and evil, life and death, light and dark, in his novel, he subverts the stereotype of the Vanishing Indian. The Indians in Momaday's novel are not all dying out or being subsumed into the dominant culture because their very way of life allows them to balance all things. Momaday undermines and surmounts a slew of stereotypes that are common in mainstream media, showing that Native Americans have never ultimately lost the ability to determine who they are and where their place is in the world. In other words, the tribal way of life is not and was never in danger of becoming obsolete or being eradicated because the Native worldview is so constituted as to accept and establish harmony among all aspects of life on Earth. In other words, Momaday has infused *House Made of Dawn* with the ritual power of the oral tradition, perhaps the greatest act of subversion accomplished by the novel, since it demonstrates that the Euro-American art form has not sounded the death knell for oral traditions but can in fact be made to carry them into the future.

#### Suggestions for further inquiry

Perhaps the most obvious "lesson" white culture can take from Native American culture is—trite but true—a respect for the ecosystem of our planet. Momaday does not explicitly make this point in *House Made of Dawn*, but that can certainly be read as implicitly contained in the novel's depiction of modern warfare, the way the tank nestles "into the splash and boil of debris" as it crests a hill (27). Abel is rendered inarticulate and ineffectual by his experiences with the horrors of mechanized war—a statement all

the more powerful because Momaday never shows us the violence Abel witnessed, only its aftermath for one human being. Far more scathingly rendered, however, is the novel's condemnation of white society's dilution of "the Word," especially the scene in which Abel is dealt with by a judicial system that asserts its authority over him through word games even while it is totally insensitive to the cultural realities from which he came. Hence the poetically precise language Momaday uses—he does not waste any words in this rather slim but deeply complex novel. Of course many writers, from Hemingway to Cormac McCarthy, have used such sparse styles to rather startling effect. But Momaday's motives in assembling the novel in this manner is what is so important. This technique makes *House Made of Dawn* particularly suited to drawing the reader into the world the novel creates and forces the reader to participate in creating its meaning. This is nothing new, either, of course, as Momaday's own favorite writers, including Faulkner, Melville, Dinesen, and Dickenson, are all adept at engaging their reader. And this is a recognized part of the literary endeavor—so much so that an entire school of critical theory, reader response, has been created to study the ways in which the audience of a literary text participates in creating that work. But the fact that this is a calculated strategy of Momaday's for overcoming the isolating tendency of literature is what I find particularly intriguing. This is entirely different from the monolithic writers of the Western canon who, in the process of creating great literature, incidentally force people into a dialogue with their work. Momaday's work is, in a very real sense, communally created; not only because the reader is relied on to be conversant with the text, but also because of the multiple cultures—Navajo, Pueblo, Kiowa, and EuroAmerican—on which

he draws. *House Made of Dawn* challenges the Western tradition of a writer being the sole proprietor of their work.

“Americans pay high prices for maintaining the myth of the Individual,” Tony Kushner writes in the Afterword to his play *Angels in America*. “We have no system of universal health care, we don’t educate our children . . . we hate and fear inevitable processes like aging and death” (150). Kushner cites “the myth that you alone are the wellspring of your creativity” if you are to be properly a “Writer” as low on the list of evils visited upon our culture by the myth of the Individual, but it is especially appropriate that he cites it at all for the present discussion. And if he’s right that “the myth of the Individual” contributes to our fear of aging and death, that makes it especially germane to the present essay, since one of Abel’s chief problems was precisely a fear of death. While I am not attempting to dissect or otherwise explicitly criticize the isolationist tendencies of our culture, that criticism is somehow implicit in this study of how Momaday’s novel conveys the wisdom of a tribe that keeps its members connected to the order of the world. Our literary traditions are certainly, at times, used to explore our place in the world, and *House Made of Dawn* points up exciting possibilities for using the novel to encode what we’ve discovered about our place in the order of the universe.

Though *House Made of Dawn* is a novel deeply concerned with healing, Momaday does not actually allow his protagonist to be healed. He simply puts Abel on the path to healing by the end of the novel, perhaps in acknowledgement that it takes a whole lot more than one book to heal a human being as disturbed as Abel. This deeply controverts a Western literary tradition that has led to the creation of so-called “self-help”

books that represent themselves as having the answers to what ails you. *House Made of Dawn* employs the art form of the novel to its fullest capabilities by drawing on the ritual power of oral traditions, while at the same time humbly accepting its inherent limitations. While so many postmodern novels have become self-indulgent and irrelevant to anyone but a literary scholar's life, *House Made of Dawn* is rooted in an art form that has a practical purpose in people's lives, which is ultimately perhaps the greatest benefit we can take from a study of oral traditions alongside of literary traditions.

There are several directions in which the study of oral and literary traditions can go. This essay has entailed an application of Derrida's idea of the novel as a web to *House Made of Dawn*, and there are two other modern literary theories that could prove equally as enlightening. As mentioned, reader response theories could be used to examine the ways Momaday and other writers drawing on oral traditions create a communal work within a medium that tends to isolate its audience. Traditional tribal storytellers brought their people together in a communal space to share the stories that establish their identity and relationship to the world. These stories were handed down and retold for generations, meaning that, in a sense, the stories of the tribe were finding voice in the storyteller as much as the storyteller was finding their voice in the stories. This is consistent with the Heideggerian notion that "mortals speak by responding to language in a twofold way, receiving and replying" (1133). Linda Hogan says of Tosamah, who confronted something "sacred and eternal" by listening to his grandmother's stories, that "he is inspired by the language which speaks through him and by its capacity to recover, mentally, the world from which people have become divided"

(137). Hogan has applied Heidegger's concept to Tosamah. To an extent, this essay, which discusses how Momaday infuses his novel with the oral tradition, can be seen as an examination of the language of tribal peoples speaking through Momaday as much as Momaday is crafting a novel out of oral traditions. But a much broader and general application of Heidegger's idea to Native American literature may prove especially revealing of how the oral traditions are being carried into the future by Native novelists.

But the side-by-side study of oral and literary traditions need not be confined to Native Americans, or even other writers with a tangible connection to some tribal heritage like the many so-called postcolonial writers from Africa and the Middle East. Two writers who loom the largest in the Western literary canon have relationships with oral traditions that have not been adequately examined: they are Chaucer and Shakespeare. Chaucer, for one, composed most of his works mentally and for the sole purpose of delivering them orally at court. He only had them written down as an aid to memorization, an indicator that he was living in a culture somewhere between orality and literacy. And Shakespeare, who did compose on paper, also only intended for his works to be publicized orally, in his case through theatrical performance. Shakespeare's plays are representative of yet another stage of culture in some liminal zone between orality and literacy that would bear considerable fruit if it were examined more closely.

The study of oral traditions as equal—and intrinsically connected—to literary traditions is a relatively new field of inquiry. For some time, however, literary theorists like Derrida and Heidegger have been postulating concepts that illuminate this subject without explicitly engaging oral traditions, even while the spoken versus the written word

has been taken up as their area of inquiry. This is further evidence that the literary study of oral traditions is long overdue, since literary theorists, after ignoring orality for so long, seem to have come full circle. *House Made of Dawn* is a particularly well-suited launching pad for an examination of oral alongside literary traditions because Momaday's novel demonstrates that survival is dependent upon an understanding of the past; people—individuals and collective groups—need to formulate origin stories that will carry them into the future. Unless literary scholars and theorists compose adequate stories based on the oral traditions of the past, literary traditions run the risk of losing their efficacy in the future.



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