

## MYTH AND CEREMONY IN CONTEMPORARY NORTH AMERICAN NATIVE FICTION

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### ABSTRACT/RESUME

Although alienation and despair are the dominant tone of contemporary native fiction, many native authors find an antidote to these problems by incorporating sacred materials from traditional native cultures into their works. The best of these authors utilize myth and ceremony as a means of providing both structure to their novels and meaning to the lives of their protagonists. Other authors, sensing a need either to preserve cultural materials or to give depth to their fictional universe, merely tack on sacred materials in an attempt at relevance. By comparing and contrasting the way sacred materials are used by Hyemeyohsts Storm, Lynne Sallot, Tom Pelletier, and Thomas Sanchez, with authors like James Welch, N. Scott Momaday, and Leslie Silko, a distinction emerges between an exploitative, inorganic use of myth and ceremony and an organic use which demonstrates the relevance of the old ways to modern life.

Bien que l'aliénation et le désespoir soient les thèmes principaux de la fiction indigène contemporaine, un grand nombre d'auteurs de cette littérature ont trouvé un remède à ces problèmes en incorporant dans leurs ouvrages des éléments sacrés tirés des cultures indigènes traditionnelles. Les meilleurs auteurs utilisent le mythe et la cérémonie pour fournir une structure à leur ouvrage, et un sens à la vie de leurs personnages. D'autres auteurs, ayant ressenti le besoin de préserver certains éléments de l'héritage culturel, ou bien de donner de la profondeur à leur univers fictif, ajoutent des éléments sacrés dans un simple effort d'apporter à leur fiction une actualité qui lui manquerait autrement. Après avoir comparé et mis en contraste la manière dont ces éléments sacrés sont utilisés, suivant qu'ils le soient par des écrivains comme Hyemeyohsts Storm, Lynne Sallot, Tom Pelletier et Thomas Sanchez, ou par d'autres tels James Welch, N. Scott Momaday et Leslie Silko, l'auteur en fait ressortir une distinction entre une exploitation inorganique et ouverte du mythe et de la cérémonie, et une utilisation organique qui prouve l'importance des moeurs anciennes dans la vie moderne.

Contemporary native fiction, whether American or Canadian, is a literature preoccupied with another culture. Whether Ontario Ojibway, or New Mexico Navajo, native writers dwell on the destruction of their way of life by the culture which surrounds them. The pervasiveness of the theme of destruction has been noted by Kenneth Rosen in the introduction to his collection of short stories by native writers of the American southwest. Rosen notes:

No matter who the author, these stories are all marked with an extremely poignant, elegiac tone and a deeply-felt sadness. All these writers are acutely aware that their once-great culture is being ruthlessly stamped out by a morally inferior white culture, and all of them manage... to give the reader some sense of what it is like to live in a cultural twilight, in the margin of a society to which they do not belong, to which they cannot relate, and about which they feel only pity or scorn (1975 :xi).

What Rosen has not noted, however, is the developing interest by native writers in asserting those elements of their cultures which can serve as an antidote to despair or defeat. The most obvious methods are those which are also the most prevalent; many writers aim for simple cultural preservation through the writing of autobiographical novels, "as-told-to" narratives, and historical novels. In Canada, many reserves have cultural centres where stories and reminiscences by the elders are collected. As well, popular novels like *Hanta Yo* (Hill, 1979) and *Shaman's Daughter* (Salerno and Vanderburgh, 1980) incorporate anthropological materials for the same reason. In each case there is a desire to shore up fragments against ruin. However virtuous this goal may be, these works frequently lack artistic merit as novels. Historical and cultural reconstruction assumes more importance than artistry in characterization, form, technique, or style. Historical novels, moreover, tend to be at their worst when recreating myths and ceremonies. Most often sacred materials are merely tacked on to the novels rather than being integral to plot development. As well, the language used to depict sacred ceremonies often assumes a Hollywood-Biblical tone which effectively destroys their impact.

There is another tendency developing, however, for certain native writers are using myth and ceremony organically and centrally rather than mechanically and peripherally. That is, myths from either the author's traditional culture or Western mythology are utilized as an informing vision, giving depth and meaning to the contemporary lives of their protagonists. Rather than "tacking on" mythological materials to works which are at heart anthropological treatises, writers of this "mythical method," to use T.S. Eliot's term in another context, consciously use their oral culture - myths, ceremonies, and legends - as a "way of controlling, or ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (Eliot, 1964: 123). Artistically, the works of authors utilizing this mythical method are more unified. Not only do the sacred materials provide structural coherence, but a thematic wholeness as well. The alienation which characterizes the native or

half-breed protagonists of contemporary fiction is resolved by the use of an approach which integrated the wisdom of the old ways with the demands of modern life. Writers like N. Scott Momaday and Leslie Silko, in particular, assert that the old ways can be relevant in a contemporary context. These writers demonstrate that alienation and despair can be counteracted by the establishment of a connecting link between the modern world and the transcendent sacred centres of being purveyed by the old culture.

Before exploring the writers of the "mythical method" more closely, it is useful to attempt to define a few guidelines for a novelistic evaluation of the use of sacred myths and ceremonies by native writers. A basic distinction can be made between those writers who manipulate and exploit sacred materials and those who invoke such materials as their informing vision. The anthropological and religious detail tacked on to popular fiction is not the only exploitive method. There are other kinds of gratuitous use of sacred materials. Hyemeyohsts Storm, for example, has reduced sacred mythology to moralistic allegory. Other authors, like Sallot and Pelletier utilize sacred materials in the same way that William Blatty popularized Catholic ritual in *The Exorcist*, to provide a scare, an exciting excursion into an unfamiliar occult tradition. Often, sacred materials are provided merely for nostalgic value; Thomas Sanchez, for example, recreates native ceremonies as a beautiful backdrop to the drama of modern decadence. An overview of several of these exploitive methods will demonstrate the contrast with the writers of the "mythical method."<sup>1</sup>

A book which exploits the sacred materials of the Plains Indians under the guise of preserving their culture is *Seven Arrows* by Hyemeyohsts Storm. When this book was published, the President of the American Indian Historical Society attacked it for reasons that were more historical and emotional than aesthetic (Chapman, 1975:149-51). Native critics felt that the book involved a falsification and desecration of their culture but expressed the reasons for their upset in very general terms. It is possible to articulate more precisely the basis of their complaint. *Seven Arrows* is exploitive not only because of its historical inaccuracies but because it takes profound religious symbols from native ceremonies - symbols which are full of power because they have not yet become trite - and turns them into banal allegories. Storm says that x stands for y, all mystery is explained, and all power is, thereby, lost. Many of the religious symbols which Storm discusses are Jungian archetypes, but their emotional impact is limited by Storm's explications. Carl Jung has noted that: "A symbol really lives only when it is the best and highest possible expression for something divined but not yet known even to the observer. Under these circumstances... it has a life-giving and stimulating effect" (Jacobi, 1959:97). Having exhausted the symbols of Christianity, and, in the last few years, those of the eastern religions, it seems that the need to explicate will continue until the sacred mysteries of the Indians, too, have become meaningless words on paper. Storm's book is the first to attempt so much, no less than the preservation of a people, and achieve so little, only fanciful historicizing and dry allegorizing.

Another novel which exploits sacred materials is *Bearwalk* by Lynne Sallot and Tom Pelletier. In this native version of *The Exorcist*, the curse of the Bear-

walk is visited, for no apparent reason, upon a well-to-do native lawyer and his family. After a severe testing in the manner of Job - his wife, unborn child, and daughter are all destroyed - the young lawyer discovers, rather mechanically, that the evil set forth in the form of the Bearwalk was caused by an imbalance within himself. Yet, the cause of the imbalance is never presented. The reader is forced to assume that it exists because the lawyer had forgotten his heritage as he gained success in the white world. At the end of the novel, profound psychological truths are allegorized in a denouement which remains unconvincing and mechanical. Here, sacred mysteries are exploited to give the reader a good scare.

Sacred materials are exploited in a similar manner in *Rabbit Boss* by Thomas Sanchez. While Sanchez writes well, and describes the ceremonies of the Washo people with originality and reverence, the sacred materials are used only to provide a shot of adrenalin to the reader. The beauty of the Washo religious life is presented only to arouse anger at the stupidity and brutality of the whites whose presence has forever destroyed the harmonious relationship between the Washo and their land. The white men are characterized as cannibals (the first sight the Washo have of the whites is of the cannibalism for survival at Donner Pass), rapists (a Washo puberty ritual is interrupted by drunken, raping white men), murderers (of anyone, particularly those of another race), and animal torturers (one white character goes to Mexico in order to buy the most expensive bull he can find and devour the testicles torn from the living animal). This novel brings us back to Rosen's comments about the elegiac tone of so much native fiction. Sanchez has presented a vision of a people forever degraded and destroyed by an even more degenerate surrounding culture. The religious mysteries - myths and ceremonies - are all impotent against the powerful evil set loose by the alien white culture.

An analysis of authors of the mythical method must begin with James Welch. On first reading, *Winter in the Blood*, Welch's first novel, appears to be another expression of native alienation in a degraded white man's world, like *Rabbit Boss*. Yet a closer reading indicates that Welch's novel is unique among works by native writers, for Welch is not asserting the relevance of native myths, but invoking, instead, a healing vision from another culture. The mythic patterns in Welch's novel are European and related more closely to "The Wasteland" and T.S. Eliot's "Four Quartets" than to any native tradition. In his description of the alienation and restoration of his protagonist, Welch, like Eliot, invokes the pattern of the archetypal Grail quest. The narrator moves through a secular wasteland separated not only from the marginal lives of the local people among whom he moves, but also from those who could provide him with an antidote to the sterility of winter in the blood - his family and his culture.

As Jessie Weston pointed out in her analysis of the Grail legends (1957), the central feature in this archetypal pattern is the healing of the Fisher King and the restoration of life to the Wasteland. The two are inter-related in the Grail legends as they are in Welch's novel. The physical and spiritual maladies which have afflicted the narrator are linked to the winter season, a time of drought and sterility on the Gros Ventre reservation. The landscape in Welch's

novel is more seriously afflicted, however. The fact that the reservation suffers from an ecological imbalance is symbolized in the repeated references to the sterile rivers which no longer contain fish. The continual references to the lack of fish indicate the parallel with the Fisher King stories.<sup>2</sup> The Fisher King is so called not only because he likes to fish but because the fish is a symbol both of teeming life and of Christ as redeemer.

The alienation of the protagonist is a result of experiences which have caused him to feel distant. Distance, the key word in the novel, is experienced not only externally but internally. "I was as distant from myself as a hawk from the moon," the protagonist notes. Above all, he views time and history as the great distancers. The life of the protagonist lacks connection to the eternally recurring patterns of birth, death, and rebirth which are celebrated in the rituals of his people. Instead he lives in what Mircea Eliade has termed "fallen time" - which is personal history rather than eternal recurrence.<sup>3</sup> The narrator believes that certain unchangeable acts have created the distance which characterizes his life. The death of his father and brother, the loss of his home by his mother's remarriage, the loss of feeling in his leg caused by the same accident which killed his brother, the loss of his wife to city life, all of these are seen as irrevocable acts which the narrator can only endure stoically.

Feeling driven from his home by his mother's indifference and a lack of anything useful to do, the narrator goes on a foolish quest for the woman who left him as well as for the rifle and electric razor which she had taken. These secular Grail symbols indicate the low level of adventures which the protagonist experiences in the course of this quest, as well as the futility of his search. Having achieved none of his goals, the narrator returns home. He discovers, in T.S. Eliot's words, once again, that the end of his exploring is to arrive where he started "and know the place for the first time" (1952:145).

Here, he clings to the only elements of his old life which remain - his horse, Old Bird, and a blind old man whom his father had taken him to visit as a child. The old man is a Tiresias, a blind seer, who talks to the animals and lives in tune with the time which is so distant from the narrator. The visit is a re-enactment of a childhood journey and jogs his memory of forgotten events and connections. Subtly, and almost unconsciously, the narrator realizes that the old man is his grandfather. The recognition of his real connections and the destruction of winter in the blood occurs at the same moment the distant thunder announces spring on the reservation.

The full implications of "What The Thunder Said" (Eliot, 1952:47) are conveyed to the narrator later, in the thunder from the bowels of his dying horse. "And then it came to me, as though it were riding one moment of the gusting wind, as though Bird had had it in him all the time and had passed it to me in that one instant of corruption" (Welch:179). Knowledge of his blood connections and the ambiguities of the human situation, including corruption and degradation, is the first step in his healing. In the final scene, he has also come to terms with the deaths in his family which have distanced him from life. His connection to his heritage and his ability to confront life based on that connection is symbolized in his wearing of his father's suit to his grandmother's

funeral. Although he still loves those who lie beneath the earth, he accepts their end, and expresses a sense of hope for the future. Thinking again of the woman who left him, he asserts that "next time" he will "do it right" (ibid: 199). The restoration of life to the wasteland is indicated here in his reflections on the setting. Though distance is still present, the season is early summer and the fertility and endurance of the land and its people is assured by the driving rain. "Some people," he thought, "will never know how pleasant it is to be distant in a clean rain, the driving rain of a summer storm. It's not like you'd expect," he notes, "nothing like you'd expect" (ibid: 193).

Although Welch is seeking an antidote to contemporary despair, the irony in his solutions and his use of European rather than native myths separates him from writers like N. Scott Momaday and Leslie Silko who assert both the contemporary relevance of their cultures and the vitality of their traditional literature. In their novels, they demonstrate that the myths and ceremonies of their people have meaning in the contemporary world. They share with their ancestors, as well, some basic assumption about the function of literature. Paula Gunn Allen, in her study of native folklore, has articulated the psychological and spiritual purpose of the old stories:

The tribes seek, through song, ceremony, legend, sacred stories, (myths), and tales to embody, articulate, and share reality, to verbalize the sense of the majesty and reverent mystery of all things, and to actualize, in language, those truths of being and experience that give to humanity its greatest significance and dignity (Allen, 1975:113).

N. Scott Momaday demonstrates this purpose in his writings. He is one of the first contemporary writers to attempt the ordering of his material in a non-exploitive, and specifically Indian, way. *House Made of Dawn* (1966) is the first of several novels by native authors on a similar theme to appear. In the novel, the young protagonist, Abel, returns to his reservation alienated from himself and his people as a result of his war experiences. By the end of the novel, he has returned to the old ways and participates in a ritual which his grandfather participated in many years earlier. Abel becomes a dawn runner - a runner after evil - one who has learned to walk the mythical "beautyway" instead of the path of alcoholism, confusion, and destruction which he found in the white man's world. While this seems straightforward, there are certain ambiguities which remain. Abel does not articulate, or even attempt to articulate, the reasons for his decision. Nor is the ritual of the dawn running explained. Yet, the reader knows of the symbolic power which the ritual has for Abel. The very silence and ambiguity about the central ceremony is an important part of Momaday's message here. The unexplicated ceremony is a release from the web of white man's words which have captured the protagonist. Throughout the novel, white men use words in an attempt to order reality in a pattern that is alien to Abel's own perception of that pattern.

While one could characterize Abel as the silent Indian of the stereotype,

Momaday has managed to transcend that stereotype by demonstrating that Abel's silence is the only meaningful response to the fallen word. This comes into focus as various characters in the novel attempt to articulate their perceptions of Abel's motives for murdering a white man. Abel had killed the man as a ritualistic killing of evil rather than for personal reasons, but is unable to convey this in words the white judges will understand.

When he had told his story once, simply, Abel refused to speak. He sat like a rock in his chair, and after a while no one expected or even wanted him to speak. That was good, for he should not have known what more to say. Word by word by word these men were disposing of him in language, their language, and they were making a bad job of it (Momaday, 1966:102).

Abel's vision of the dawn runners contains an antidote to meaningless words, for the runners were men of action, not words. To Abel, "they were whole and indispensable in what they did; everything in creation referred to them. Because of them, perspective, proportion, design in the universe. Meaning because of them" (ibid:103-104). The conflict in the novel centers on Abel's confrontation with different patterns of words. One by one, he rejects these patterns until he discovers those which can release him - the ceremonial words of his friend Benally, and the song of the dawn runner.

Throughout the novel, Abel is cornered by people who attempt to confine him behind walls of words. During the war, his bravery is described in ways he cannot recognize. "Abel was listening to him, self-conscious, growing angry and confused that this white man should talk about him, account for him, as if he were not there" (ibid:116). After the war, each of the people who attempt to help Abel to readjust have their own vocabulary. The social worker, Milly, for example, "believed in tests, questions and answers, words on paper... she believed in Honor, Industry, the Second Chance, the Brotherhood of Man, the American Dream, and him - Abel, she believe in him" (ibid:107). Abel's life does not fit any of the phrases she wishes to attach to it, and they drift apart without having communicated anything of enduring value to one another. The priest on the reservation, too, has distanced himself from Abel and his other parishoners with words. At the centre of his being, he maintains a "safe and sacred solitude . . . that exclusive silence" (ibid:194). He comforts his parishoners with the empty words of his office, and comforts himself, not with the words of the Bible, but by reading the diary of his predecessor, a fallen priest. Behind his wall of words, there is neither love, nor comfort, nor sin, only understanding" (ibid:210) and solitude. Even at the end, when Abel is near death in the hospital, he is hounded by words. The nurse badgers his bast friend with questions, "like those questions were the most important thing of all" (ibid: 185). The final blow occurs when his former lover visits him in the hospital. She offers him more words, a story she had made up for her son about "a young Indian brave... noble and wise" (ibid:187) who always reminded her of Abel. The result of all of this is summarized by Abel's friend, Benally. "They have a

lot of words, and you know they mean something, but you don't know what, and your own words are no good because they're not the same; they're different, and they're the only words you've got" (ibid:158).

When all of the words of the white man have failed, it is entirely fitting that Abel has become a man of action, a dawn runner. There are words which accompany this experience, but they are the old words, the traditional song of the dawn runners. Abel finds that this song is sung with no sound and no voice, for it is the song of his being. This "song of his heart" is as full of power and meaning as it was when his grandfather had sung it. Abel thus finds links to his culture and his family by participating in a timeless ritual. Although the words of the dawn song are always the same, because Abel is the singer, the words are now his own.

We must not confuse Abel's attitude toward the words with the attitude of N. Scott Momaday. The difference is apparent in *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (1969) published subsequently. This book also presents the most integrated use of myth, legend, and contemporary reality in native fiction. Instead of mourning the loss of his people, the Kiowa, and their culture, Momaday asserts that his people live, in language and the imagination. Unlike Abel, Momaday has called himself a "man made of words" (1975). In his often repeated address of that title, Momaday states unequivocally the primacy of language. "The story is meaningful. It is so precisely because it is composed of language, and it is in the nature of language in turn that it proceeds to the formulation of meaning (ibid: 109). Yet, as Momaday proceeds, we can see that Abel's experience has not been eliminated, for Momaday notes: "we are what we imagine." The value of the story for Momaday is that it is a means by which man can understand himself and the human experience. He notes: "the state of human being is an idea, an idea which man has of himself. Only when he is embodied in an idea, and the idea is realized in language, can a man take possession of himself" (ibid: 104). In *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, Momaday gives new life to the Kiowa through his language. His formal pattern in the book is experimental. He uses a combination of narrative voices - mythical, legendary, personal, historical, descriptive, cultural. All are blended in the imagination of the consciousness which perceives them. While fragments in themselves, when fused in the imagination, they become the Kiowa. Wonder and delight are, Momaday believes, the two characteristic modes of expression of the Kiowa, and these modes, too, are transmitted to the reader as his own being participates in their experiences.

Myth, legend, and ceremony are, for Momaday, a part of the entire imaginative construct of life, not separate from, but as basic to the integrated totality of being as the physical landscape or the historical records of a people. Momaday does, however, assert the importance of the landscape; and this sense of belonging to a particular place, a landscape which reflects the full spectrum of human experience is a profoundly native vision, for in comparison to the long relationship between the Kiowa and their land, the rest of us are newcomers. Momaday, however, does not exclude us from the experience, for his words and our own imagination can give the most valuable contributions of the Kiowa - their culture, their stories, their integration in the landscape, their wonder and delight

- an eternally recurring life.

To bring the two books together, while Momaday asserts the necessity of language in *The Way To Rainy Mountain*, Abel's healing in *House Made of Dawn* was accomplished without words. The imagination and the intuition are also necessary ingredients - they provide the link between being and landscape. The articulation of that link has many voices. Some are silent, like Abel's dawn song; some are multi-voiced like those in *The Way To Rainy Mountain*. What is essential is that the song brings a new life to an archetypal reality. Schopenhauer's phrase "*eadem sed aliter*," alike but differently, is applicable here. The old song is brought to life again by a new singer.

The works of Leslie Marmon Silko, a native writer of the American southwest, demonstrate as well the relevance of the old ways to contemporary life. For Silko, the old myths and ceremonies provide the only cure for the problem of alienation. Silko points out that the contemporary Indian is alienated not only from white society but from himself, and that "the only cure is a good ceremony."

In Silko's first novel, *Ceremony* (1977), the protagonist's situation is similar to Abel's in *House Made of Dawn*. Tayo is a young man, recently returned from the war, and unable to find a place for himself in the world to which he has returned. Tayo's healing is accomplished in the same way that Abel's was. Tayo learns the relevance of walking in the sacred manner - returning to the old ways to give coherence to the new. But, unlike the protagonist of Momaday's story, the route which Tayo takes into the world of myth, ritual, and ceremony is carefully articulated. While Momaday's story leaves the reader to draw his own conclusions about the motives for Abel's return to the old ways and the meaning of his ceremony, Silko has articulated precisely, the relationship between the old ceremonies and modern life. The specifically "Indian" ways which Tayo learns are: a special ritualistic attitude toward language; a unique relationship to the landscape in which the outer world is seen to reflect the inner world; a view of time as eternal recurrence rather than as historical progression; and finally, a knowledge of the importance of ceremony as a healing process.<sup>4</sup> All of the elements come together as the protagonist discovers a specifically Pueblo apprehension of words and their power.

Silko, like Momaday, believes that words are the means by which reality is brought under control. For her, words form and change reality. We recall Tosameh in *House Made of Dawn* reasserting St. John's message: "In the beginning was the word." This is precisely what Silko believes. Not only is the protagonist in her novel taught that words existed before reality, but also that all existence is contained within an old story. Silko's novel opens with the myth of the thought Woman:

Ts'its'tsi'nake, Thought-Woman  
is sitting in her room  
and whatever she thinks about  
appears.  
She thought of her sisters,

Nau'ts'ity'i and I'tchts'ity'i,  
 and together they created the Universe  
 this world  
 and the four worlds below.  
 Thought-Woman, the spider,  
 named things and  
 as she named them  
 they appeared.  
 She is sitting in her room  
 thinking of a story now  
 I'm telling you the story  
 she is thinking. (p. 1-2)

With the myth of the Thought-Woman, Silko has created a unique point-of-view. We, the readers, are a part of the stories of the Thought Woman, and Tayo, the protagonist of the novel, learns his place in the story as well.

A major problem which the protagonist has is that he knows the importance of stories but does not know how to make them work for him in contemporary life. Before his experiences with the disruptive evil force known as World War II, Tayo could see the way the world fit together. The stories expressed an unquestionable relevance to the world he knew. While in the war, he remembered the stories and the words, but they turned against him in the new landscape. While walking through the mud of the Phillipine jungles, carrying the dying body of his cousin, he used words and stories for sustenance: "He made a story for all of them, a story to give them strength. The words of the story poured out of his mouth as if they had substance, pebbles and stone extending to hold the corporal up, to keep his knees from buckling, to keep his hands from letting go of the blanket" (ibid:11). While the story served to keep them going, the jungle rain pouring over the rotting flesh of his cousin caused him to use other words, more powerful ones; he damned the rain. While this seems understandable enough, when Tayo returned to his home in the American Southwest, he found a drought which lasted for six years and which he knew to be a result of his praying. This guilt over the misuse of words is one thread in a skein of guilt and pain which nearly destroys him before he can be re-united with his people.

Thus, an important element in his healing is the restoration of a proper relationship to the stories. Tayo believes that in the old days the stories kept everything in its proper relationship to everything else. Furthermore, the stories acted as guides; they were the guardians of whatever path one wished to pursue. "If a person wanted to go to the moon - it depended on whether you knew the story" (ibid:19). Upon his return from the war, Tayo finds that the stories have lost their efficacy. He cannot find a story that fits his problem. Diagnosing his problem before anyone else even recognizes that there is one, Tayo's grandmother calls in Old Ku'oosh, a medicine man, to perform the traditional ceremony for putting the souls of dead warriors to rest - the Scalp Ceremony.

Traditionally, this ceremony was performed for any warrior who had killed or touched dead enemies. While Ku'oosh performs the ceremony with meticulous attention to detail, it cannot help Tayo who suffers from another guilt. In his ceremony, the old man reminded Tayo of the fragility of the world and the fact that it took only one man to tear apart its tender balance. Tayo recognizes that he has become the man in another story, a destroyer, "a man who cursed the rain clouds, a man of monstrous dreams" (ibid:40).

While trying to pull himself together, Tayo seeks the company of the other men on his reservation who had been to war and who were not helped by the Scalp ceremony either. Here Tayo finds that stories are still their means of sustenance, but now they are profane stories, stories about white women and big cars. "They repeated the stories about the good times in Oakland and San Diego; they repeated them like long medicine chants, the beer bottles pounding on the counter tops like drums" (ibid:44). This profane ritual offers Tayo and the others only a temporary respite in forgetting.

Tayo is captured in another web of words, as well. The story of his past and his mother's indiscretions have captured him as much as his damnation of the rain. Tayo's aunt continually reminds Tayo that he is the illegitimate son of a woman, now dead, about whom stories are still being told. The village enjoys the stories of the white men she went with, and the way she returned from one such encounter walking naked across the reservation. Thus, Tayo is at the centre of another assault on the fragile world of the old stories. The ceremony which Tayo requires is one which can untangle the interwoven guilt of his war experiences, his personal relationships, as well as the relationship of his family to their tribe.

Tayo's cure is finally effected through the intervention of another medicine man, Betonie. Betonie's home, on the land, is a place where the true ceremonies are preserved. Tayo perceives that everything Betonie does is "part of the pattern" (ibid:126). Betonie is seen as a caretaker of "things which have stories alive in them" (ibid:127). Betonie's attitude toward ceremonies is that of *eadem sed aliter*, alike but differently. He sees things at all times in relationship to other things. He, unlike old Ku'oosh, believes that ceremonies must change in order to remain relevant. He tells Tayo that the coming of the white people made changes essential for then "elements in this world began to slip... The growth keeps the ceremonies strong," he notes, "Things which don't shift and grow are dead things" (ibid: 133).

The path of the ceremony which Tayo undertakes is an arduous one. The ceremony has been in progress for several generations; Tayo must find his place in the story working out his personal demons as well as those of his culture. It is important that Tayo's healing is effected both on a personal and cultural basis. He restores his position in the family by recovering their cattle which have been lost; he restores himself emotionally by establishing a hierogamous relationship with a young woman who is herself the reincarnation of the Corn Woman of Pueblo myth; and he restores himself with his people by recognizing the relationship between the old stories and contemporary life. The most difficult is the latter, for Tayo has to come to terms with the whole problem of his tribe's

relationship to the white world. Tayo's final confrontation in the novel is with his former friends who have been so absorbed by their self-hatred and hatred of the white world that they have become the destroyers of Pueblo myth. As the Destroyers hunt him in the desert of New Mexico, Tayo comes to a place where all the evil he has confronted in the old stories and in the hatred of his peers comes together with the larger forces of destruction in the world. The sacred landscapes of his people have been taken over by a power of evil capable of destroying the entire world:

Trinity Site, where they exploded the first atomic bomb, was only three hundred miles to the southeast, at White Sands. And the top-secret laboratories where the bomb had been created were deep in the Jemez Mountains, on land the Government took from the Cochiti Pueblo: Los Alamos, only a hundred miles northeast of him now, still surrounded by the high electric fences and the ponderosa pine and tawny sandrock where the shrine of the twin mountain lions had always been. There was no end to it; it knew no boundaries; and he had arrived at the point of convergence where the fate of all living things, and even the earth, had been laid . . . the lines of cultures and worlds were drawn in flat dark lines on fine light sand, converging in the middle of witchery's final ceremonial sand painting. From that time on, human beings were one clan again, united by the fate the destroyers planned for all of them, for all living things; united by a circle of death that devoured people in cities twelve thousand miles away, victims who had never known these mesas, who had never seen the delicate colors of the rocks which boiled up their slaughter. . . , the pattern of the ceremony was completed there (ibid:257-58).

As Tayo prepares himself for the confrontation with the destroyers, as he strengthens his commitment to the healing ceremony, he establishes, at last, the link he needs between the old and the new.

Fie cried the relief he felt at finally seeing the pattern, the way all the stories fit together - the old stories, the war stories, their stories - to become the story that was still being told. He was not crazy; he had never been crazy. He had only seen and heard the world as it always was: no boundaries, only transition through all distances and time (ibid:258).

He also establishes a unity between himself and the natural world, for Tayo sees that the pattern of the ceremony belongs to the cosmos. It is "in the sky, in the position of the sun, in the pattern of the stars." When the ceremony has been completed, Tayo finds himself in a new relationship to his people, as well. He has been absorbed by them, he thinks with their words, and sees with their eyes: "The ear for the story and the eye for the pattern were theirs; the feeling

was theirs: we came out of this land and we are hers" (ibid:267). Tayo's official re-instatement to his tribe occurs after the ritual repetition of his ceremony to Old Ku'oosh and the elders.

The final word in the novel, however, is given to Tayo's grandmother, and her words restate the basic idea about words and the power of stories which Silko has been demonstrating. Throughout the novel, Grandma appears as a blind seer. Like the Grandfather in *Winter in the Blood*, though blind and immobile, the old woman comments astutely on the goings-on about her. She, too, believes in the power of the stories. When gossip about her youngest daughter, Tayo's mother, had reached a peak, she had her own way of dealing with such things.

Old Grandma didn't care what anyone said. She liked to sit by her stove and gossip about the people who were talking about their family.

'I know a better one than that about her! That woman shouldn't dare be talking about us. What about the time they found her rolling around in the weeds with that deaf man from Encinal? What about that? Everyone remembers it!' She pounded her cane on the floor in triumph. The story was all that counted. If she had a better one about them, then it didn't matter what they said (ibid:93).

After hearing from Tayo the story of what he has done and the ceremony which he has completed, Grandma comments coolly: "I must be getting old... because these goings-on around Laguna don't get me excited any more. It seems like I already heard these stories before... only thing is, the names sound different" (ibid:273). With these words, Grandma has summarized Silko's pervasive belief in the principle of *eadem sed aliter*, alike but differently, the eternal recurrence and eternal relevance of the old stories and the old ceremonies.

Thus, we have seen that both Momaday and Silko assert the relevance of the old ways to contemporary life. With Welch, they believe that the health of the individual is dependent upon the relationship which he establishes with his people, their culture, and their landscape. Robert Coles, in his study of native children of the American Southwest, has noted that "to be an Indian is to pay heed to the reality, to the textures and contours, of the outer world as a means of coming to grips with an inner world, which is, forever, one's private self" (1977:217-218). While this is true, Coles has not mentioned the impact of the old stories in coming to grips with the private self. Momaday and Silko both point to the wisdom of the old stories as a way to provide pattern and truth to those who seek meaning. The old stories are, for them, the means by which those who have gone before have made their experiences intelligible. The ceremonies are the means by which these experiences can be relived and made integral to the life of the celebrant. The myths and ceremonies, alone, are capable of giving order and meaning to the confusion of ordinary life. Alienation, anomie, chaos, all those problems which threaten the native in the modern

world, lose their importance when viewed as factors that can be dealt with by a controlling myth. All the individual must do is realize that he is not unique, that the same stories have happened before, but with different names, and in different places, and will certainly happen again. We need only recall the joy of Abel's song at the end of *House Made of Dawn* and the reverence of Tayo's dawn ritual at the conclusion of *Ceremony* to see that both Momaday and Silko believe that it is possible for feet which have worn blood-stained army boots in the vicious paths of modern life, to return to moccasins and walk the beautyway. In the works of Welch, Momaday, and Silko, then, myth and ceremony are central and organic. While other native writers expend their energies expressing the futility and disillusionment which confronts a sacred vision in the modern world, the old ways provide both "shape" and "significance" to the novels and stories of Momaday and Silko. The re-iteration of sacred materials in a relevant modern context provides the structure for their fiction, and the spiritual meaning of the old stories provides significant, timeless, and universal information about the nature of the self and the world. The writers of the "mythical method" express the inextinguishable relevance of the native spiritual vision to contemporary life and art.

#### NOTES

1. David H. Brumble, "Anthropologists, Novelists and Indian Sacred Material," *The Canadian Review of American Studies*, Vol. II, No. 1, Spring 1980, pp. 51-48. In this essay, Brumble discusses the use of sacred material by contemporary native and non-native writers. While Brumble's essay is a beginning, he still does not define a means by which the use of sacred material can be evaluated. Brumble attempts to make the distinction between exploitive and non-exploitive use of sacred materials based on the attitude of the author toward his material. Brumble, however, fails to distinguish between an organic use of this material and a manipulative use. He fails to distinguish between the author's voice and opinion and the voices of his characters. Nor does Brumble distinguish between fiction and non-fiction. Thus, there remain serious limitations to the validity of those distinctions which he has made.
2. Although several papers delivered at the symposium on *Winter In The Blood* at the modern Language Association Conference in 1977, commented on the recurring references to fishing in the novel, the relationship between Welch and the Grail stories through T.S. Eliot was not mentioned. During the discussion following the papers, however, Louise Barnett did state: "Another allusion is probably to The Fisher King of T.S. Eliot's *Waste Land* - an image of sterility and ineffectuality. Welch is probably using both of those to get the same effect: that fishing is a kind of failure and frustration." Peter G. Beidler and A Lavonne Ruoff, Ed., "A Discussion of *Winter In The Blood*," *American Indian Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 2, May,

1978, p. 174. I believe that the Fisher King stories inform Welch's novel much more significantly than this, that the pattern invoked involves not only the Fisher King as an image of sterility and ineffectuality but also as an informing vision to the conclusion of the novel, where the hold of winter in the blood has been broken as the narrator stands, feeling, in a healing spring rain.

3. Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return, or, Cosmos and History* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1954). According to Eliade, to live in history, is to live in "fallen" time. History is fallen in the sense that it is merely the accumulation of secular events which bear no relationship to the archetypal and sacred patterns of renewal in primitive societies. Eliade states: "we might say that the archaic world knows nothing of 'profane' activities: every act which has a definite meaning- hunting, fishing, agriculture, games, conflicts, sexuality, - in some way participate in the sacred... the only profane activities are those which have no mythical meaning" (pp. 27-28).
4. See *American Indian Quarterly*, Vol. 5, No. 1, February, 1979. This is a special symposium issue on Ceremony which includes explications of the mythic materials and ceremonial patterns in the novel. It is hoped that the inclusion of Silko in this essay is not redundant, but will emphasize the positive use of mythic material in her fiction.

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Novels and short fiction by and/or about Native Americans/First Nations people that is award-winning, critically acclaimed, has high reader ratings and/or you read it and loved it. Literary fiction only. Other readers should have given the book mostly 3 stars and above. Score. A book's total score is based on multiple factors, including the number of people who have voted for it and how highly those voters ranked the book. All Votes Add Books To This List. 1. The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian by. Native American Culture - Stone Age Culture The life styles of Native Americans ranged from nomadic, semi-nomadic to static. They lived in separate tribes across the vast continent of North America and despite this many of them shared similar beliefs and culture. The Native Americans had occupied North America for thousands of years before the arrival of the Europeans. Their North American culture and pre-historic Stone Age lifestyle and culture had never altered in all of this time. The Native Americans had never undergone the changes and transition to the Bronze Age culture or the Iron Age c Native American literature, the traditional oral and written literatures of the indigenous peoples of the Americas. These include ancient hieroglyphic and pictographic writings of Middle America as well as an extensive set of folktales, myths, and oral histories that were transmitted for centuries. Professor of Anthropology, University of Washington, Seattle, 1941-67; Director, Thomas Burke Memorial Washington State Museum, 1929-67. Author of *Art in the Life of the Northwest Coast Indians* and *See Article History*. Alternative Titles: American Indian literature, Indian literature. Native American literature, also called Indian literature or American Indian literature, the traditional oral and written literatures of the indigenous peoples of the Americas.