

October 7, 2013
English 229 Native American Literature
Essay #1

Native American poems often respect, reflect and rejoice living creatures and the natural environment, regarded as beautiful and spiritual gifts, given to the natives and blessed by Mother Nature. Each gift has its own voice, behavior and message to pass on, told through the storyteller. To the Native Americans, each gift is significant, nothing is disregarded. Furthermore, no gift leaves without appropriate thanks and praise; for example, lyrical poems written are in remembrance of the natural and resourceful blessings. Three Native American poems, “How to Write A Poem About the Sky”, “Prayer to the Pacific” and “Horses at Valley Store,” in Leslie Marmon Silko’s Storyteller, are not just poems of literature, but also, lyrical prayer-chants voicing the historic and moral tales of animals and the natural environment. Furthermore, the lyrical prayers positively reflect the deep spirituality and way of living of the Native American people. Additionally, they feature clever literary devices, such as personifications, metaphors, analogies and hyperboles to depict the animal or natural wonder’s genuine eminence, impact and morals.

To begin with, the lyrical prayer, “How to Write A Poem About the Sky,” starts by introducing the topic in the very first line, ‘you see the *sky* now,’ and repeats the same line at the start of the second stanza. Initially, the sky is described as a dense and solid frozen river, symbolizing its vast and distinct presence. According to the prayer, the sky is so solid that, ‘birds walk across it,’ thus, transferring power from the Earth, where birds are supposed to walk, to the sky, therefore, birds walk across their home, the sky and fly around the Earth. The second stanza reveals Earth is lost in the sky and that,

‘there are no horizons, it is all a single breath.’ Personification is used to give human qualities to the physical and mental merging of the Earth and sky, described as a, ‘single breath,’ under the same name. The prayer describes how Earth is a part of the space that makes the vast universe, and that not everything revolves around Earth, associated with human creatures. In the fourth stanza, a climax conveys a movement, or a perspective shift, that convey a dramatic moral lesson that will shine through readers’ minds, exposing a diverse point of view, a Native spiritual perspective. The line in the fourth stanza, ‘sun splits open,’ initiates the movement, or turn of events. The breaking through the flesh of the Earth represents the splitting of human skin, where presumably, the skin would become vulnerable and exposed, and the splitting would cause blood to gush out from veins that carry the blood. The blue membrane substance leaking through the Earth’s skin in the prayer can represent both human blood and veins, since it seeps through the skin with the consistency of blood, but the membrane’s blue hue is consistent with the color of human veins. The sky and the Earth share a mutually dependent relationship; blood is carried through veins just as the Earth is supported by the sky.

Furthermore, the prayer personifies the relationship between the Earth and sky to enlighten individuals, by narrating a relatable perspective that is deeply spiritual, to express the sky’s vast importance in humans’ lives, and teaches the ways of worship. The sky seems to run in Earth’s veins, as they are parts in a whole universe, the prayer ends with the line, ‘you see the sky,’ because by the end of the prayer, we have a whole different perspective on the sky. ‘You see the sky,’ as you have never seen it before, as an present world, whereas the opening line, ‘you see the sky *now*’ is how you saw the sky

before you read the lyrical prayer and before the, 'shift in winds,' conveyed a moral lesson about how the Earth and sky are only parts in a vast universe.

Similarly, the second lyrical prayer, "Prayer to the Pacific," starts with introducing the subject in the first line, 'I traveled to the *ocean*.' The prayer is emotionally dramatic with its use of line spacing and word usage. For example, in the second line, first stanza, the word, 'distant,' is indented outward away from the rest of the stanza, as if to signify its dramatic distance from the 'land of sand rock,' to the ocean where the storyteller traveled. All clever analogy of line spacing, topic and wording combined. To the traveler, the ocean is the big 'myth of origin,' which is explained further in the third stanza, when the traveler states his ancestor's origin, 'Thirty thousand years ago, Indians came riding across the ocean.' References to ancestors, distance and time first appear in the second stanza, in the line, 'sun floating west to china where ocean herself was born,' personification is used to describe the sun and explain that even the ocean has a mythical place of origin. The reference, 'to china,' in many stanzas is a dramatic hyperbole; as westerners, we view distance as mileage to China and past. The next line, 'clouds that blow across the sand are wet,' compares the desert or, 'sand rock,' terrain to the ocean. He praises the ocean as he respects and reflects, as he states, 'I return to you turquoise.' He will forever remember the great abyss, as he carries back four round stones in his pocket, 'to suck and to taste,' parallel to the way a loved one would carry something token in remembrance of someone that has passed or is distant, like a photograph or article of clothing. The ocean triggers the storyteller to recall memories of his late ancestors, who traveled from the sea on the backs of giant sea turtles, according to the fourth stanza. The sea turtles are analogous to the traveler's

ancestors, because they are both viewed as old looking, slow moving and regarded as mysteriously wise; the prayer even refers to one of the turtles as, 'Grandfather turtle.'

According to the prayer, Grandfather turtle rolled over four times in the sand, repeating the number of stones the traveler carry's back in remembrance. The number four could signify the four seasons and directions; stones stay constant through the seasons, never failing, always persistent, as the ocean is tireless. In the last stanza the traveler storyteller takes a minute to stop moving and be in the present with nature and describe only with his senses. The first line of the last stanza, 'Green leaves in the wind,' reveal the season, summer. The second line, 'wet Earth on my feet,' discloses the weathers behavior, rain, which awakens the traveler's sense of wetness on his feet, as he claims to be, 'swallowing raindrops from china.' The traveler is aware that the raindrops falling, where they are now, could have come from anywhere around the Earth, far away, even from the oceans of China. He embraces nature and by letting the raindrops fall into his mouth and accepts the oceans significant gift, for basic survival. The ocean remains tireless, through daytime, nighttime, and the four seasons, rain is simply a blessing brought from the ocean, that is to be honored and respected. The poem teaches us to be mindful of the little wonders that we might take for granted. The natural environment is a true universal blessing that is conveyed through lyrical prayers and voices through their point of view. In my opinion, that's what makes the prayers so magical and creative. At the prayers conclusion, we sense the rarity of the ocean, both abiotic and biotic, the water is abiotic, but the water's inhabitants are biotic, it is truly a rare gift, a mysteriously enormous 'myth of origin.'

Comparably, water plays an important role to the horses' in the last prayer, "Horses at Valley Store." The prayer emphasizes the horses' daily routines and their persistent effort that send them through the heart of the day, to the Valley Store time and time again, to be appreciated people admire their timelessness, and praise them with a prayer, and gift them with water. The prayer begins by introducing the topic, associated with diligent repetition and movement; the first line reads, 'Everyday I meet the *horses*.' There is a dramatic hyperbole used in the first stanza, as the horses travel everyday though scorching heat and dust, 'carrying the day behind them.' The line exaggerates the stress of the day and heavy materials the horses carry, they aren't actually carrying the day behind them, but their load is quite heavy. Furthermore, the hyperbole is used to express the diligent work of the horses and how they seek no real reward, except for the water they receive from the thankful customers. A great responsibility is given to the horses, as they carry the heavy burden of the day, until the Valley Store, where they are connected with a natural element, water, a gift at the end of their strenuous day.

For instance, the horses' are said to have, 'eyes that smell water. The prayer personifies the horses eyes, making them see and smell the water, to dramatize and express their profound longing for water, after long day under sun's heat. The lyrical prayer closes by restating the tiring and long journey, 'moving through the deep Earth heat,' and concludes with a precious, natural and simple gift of water, from the people at the Valley Store. The people respect the horses and give them the gift of water, while they stand, at a distance, admiring the creatures persistence and timeliness day after day, almost as if they are imagining what it would be like to be in their shoes. The horses walk though the hot sun, to the store, without a single complaint or misstep; this is awe

inspiring to the people. The lyrical prayer emits a sense of endurance and timelessness at the Valley store as the horses appear, ‘outside of time.’ Comparatively, the vast and mythical ocean in, “Prayer to the Pacific,” the uniting magnificence of the sky in, “How to Write A Poem About the Sky,” and the determined horses in, “Horses at Valley Store,” all appear timeless in nature, changing within themselves, but never completely vanishing. Yet, as people who greatly depend on the sky for sunlight, ocean for rain and water and the horses for travel, we take little time to reflect and rejoice the natural wonders and creatures that make up parts of the universe we exist in.

Overall, the Native American lyrical prayers successfully reflect, respect, rejoice and recall past experiences in history, surrounding living and nonliving natural wonders and creatures of the Earth. In each poem, the sky, the ocean and the horses are regarded as beautiful gifts with their own sense of energy and a voice, which seems to be translated and told through a storyteller. Various literary devices are used to further describe the complex nature of these great natural landscapes and creatures, all while relating their experiences to our everyday way of life. The lyrical prayers tell tales of history and nature, and illustrate ways of expression, that allows nature and creatures to be properly respected and rejoiced by the Native American people. Personally, I really enjoyed the first poem, “How to Write A Poem About the Sky,” it was my favorite by far, because every time I read it I found new meanings to metaphors and hidden analogy’s. I think that makes a good story or poem, when you discover new concepts every time you read and are opened to new ways of thinking.

References

Silko, Leslie Marmon. *Storyteller*. New York: Arcade Publishing, 1981. Print.