The Ancient Child Study Guide

The Ancient Child by N. Scott Momaday

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

The Ancient Child is a masterful reworking of a traditional Kiowa tale about a boy's metamorphosis into a bear. Transposed by N. Scott Momaday into modern times, the tale becomes that of a tortured artist—Locke Setman—caught between the Kiowa world of his heritage and the urban, sophisticated world he inhabits as an internationally-renown artist living in San Francisco, where he was raised by his adoptive father, Bent. Because Locke was orphaned at the age of 7, his earliest memories are not of his tribal home, but of a Catholic orphanage where he lived until being adopted by a world-weary and creative philosopher and professor. Locke first comes into contact with the Kiowa world as an adult, when he is summoned to the reservation by means of a cryptic telegram following the death of his grandmother. On the reservation he meets Grey, a beautiful native and aspiring medicine woman who will ultimately be the agent of Locke's own transformation from tortured artist to a self-possessed being whose identity remains enigmatic in the book's final passage.

Book 1, Chapters 1-6

Summary

The Ancient Child opens with a prologue consisting of a brief rendering of the Kiowa myth of the boy who turned into a bear. Eight children are at play when, suddenly, a boy among them is struck dumb, trembles, and begins to run on all fours. His body is suddenly covered with fur and he begins to chase his seven sisters. The fleeing and terrified sisters come upon a great tree that bids them to climb it in order to escape the bear, who seems poised to kill them. They climb the tree and are borne so high above the bear's reach that they become the stars of the Big Dipper.

The first chapter is the death scene of Billy the Kid. It opens with the question, "Quien es?" in Spanish, which can mean either, "Who is there?" as one would ask upon hearing a knock at the door or "Who is he?": a deeper question concerning identity. They are the words of Billy the Kid in July of 1881 immediately before being shot in front of the home of his friends, the Maxwells. After Billy the Kid's death, people gather, many of them crying, at the Maxwell house, and the women prepare his body for burial. This brief chapter ends with a description of Paulita Maxwell's grief at the death of her lover.

Chapter Two is another rendition of the bear myth, told this time from the perspective of the boy, who runs after his sisters ferociously, seemingly without knowing why he is chasing them.

In Chapter Three we are fleetingly introduced to Grey, whom we are told never has to quest after visions. She lays in the grass and imagines herself as Billy the Kid's lover. In her fantasy, she is congratulating Billy for his escape from the prison in Lincoln, a scene that will be described more fully later in the book. Grey then returns in her mind's eye to the scene of Billy's death and the question "Quien es?" becomes a refrain.

Chapter Four is a description—almost a meditation—on the encampment of a Native tribe. The scene is idyllic, with children at play, women and men talking, food cooking and dogs sleeping. It is a camp that is full of life, joy and music. The chapter ends with a sudden change in the merriment of the people, who realize that summer has come to an end and a harder season is fast approaching.

In Chapter Five, Grey considers her appearance in a small metal mirror. She imagines herself to share a deep identity with the beautiful Kiowa dolls she has seen in museums, and thinks herself tall, with an aquiline nose and a small mouth. In fact, Grey is only five foot five inches tall, with a crooked upturned nose and a lush mouth, but she is nonetheless indescribably beautiful.

In Chapter 6 we are introduced to the grandmother, Kope'mah, who is over 100 years old. She recalls the Sun Dance of 1887 when she was a child; she remembers approaching the holy lodge in which was kept Tai-me, the sacred Sun Dance doll. She

enters the lodge and places an offering of blue wool among the other offerings placed there by her fellow tribesmen. The elderly Kope'mah marks this day as the day she became powerful. From that day on, she naturally assumed the powers of the medicine woman and everyone in the tribe accepted her as a powerful woman, despite her tender age. Now, as an old and bed-ridden woman approaching death, Kope'mah summons her great-granddaughter Grey every day in order to transmit urgent wisdom. Kope'mah regards death as something which has come close enough to be an intimate entity, and yet she also regards death as an enigma, a mystery. She believes it appropriate that she will end life by confronting a riddle.

Analysis

The first thing to note about The Ancient Child is its highly unusual form; it is not a straightforward prose narrative, though it is also impossible to call it an unambiguously poetic work. It has been dubbed by some critics an extended prose poem, and that is perhaps the best designation one can give to this work which takes its place somewhere between reality and fantasy, and—perhaps more notably—between the written and the oral. The Ancient Child is a work of literature and we read it rather than hearing it, but it is best understood as a kind of marriage between literary and oral traditions. Oral traditions in any culture are almost uniformly poetic in form; though they may tell a seemingly unpoetic and literal tale, their tellers depend on its poetic rhythm in order to remember the story. Something of this rhythm can be discerned immediately in the opening pages of The Ancient Child. At the same time, the work does not give itself over wholly to poetic construction, and moments of poesy are tempered with extended prose sections, like that which describes Grey's self-admiration in a small metal mirror.

One can state, from the beginning, that this is a work whose chief preoccupation is the question of identity. We have yet to meet our central character, Locke Setman, whose quest for identity forms the core of The Ancient Child, but already in the stories of Billy the Kid's death and of Grey's absorbed self-perception we see a concern with identity. Billy the Kid asks, "Quien es?" and this question opens and ends the first chapter. Grey gazes long and hard at herself, coming to the conclusion that she is beautiful, and though she is correct in this conclusion, she gets the facts all wrong and believes that her beauty is of a different character than it actually is.

More enigmatic is the story of the boy turning into a bear, which is told twice in quick succession from different vantage points. What are we to make of this strange story, and what does it have to do with Billy the Kid, or with Grey? In order to answer these questions, we must come to know the struggles of our hero, Locke Setman, and only at the conclusion of the book will we be in a position to assess the meaning of the bear myth.

Vocabulary

grief, inexpressible, permission, invisible, ephemeral, hurriedly, urgent, destiny, luminous, shimmered, musk, mace

Book 1, Chapters 7-12

Summary

Chapter 7 is a very brief vignette of Grey's horse, named Dog, bolting suddenly and running quickly enough to make a streak like smoke on the skyline. As quickly as he began, he stops, returns to Grey, and begins to graze again.

Chapter 8 is a return to the myth of the boy-turned-bear, this time from the perspective of an old woman named Koi-ehm-toya who watches the scene from her tipi. She wonders why the eight children are running, and decides that they must be playing, though she scolds them in her mind for so carelessly running along the perimeter of the camp.

Chapter 9 is the story of Grey's and Dog's meeting. Dog, then known as Murphy's Law, belonged to the son of Worcester Meat's lease man. As soon as Grey saw the horse, she was able to take his measure and she decided instantly that he would be hers. It is around this time, we are told, that Grey declared herself the Mayor of Bote, Oklahoma.

In Chapter 10, Grey has a dream that she is sleeping with a bear after the grandmother tells her that the bear is coming. In her dream, the bear kneads her with his tongue and she is filled with orgasmic pleasure.

Chapter 11 is very short, consisting only of a snippet of conversation between Grey and Murphy Dicks, Dog's original owner. Murphy tells Grey that it was worth the horse, and she responds in the affirmative. Then Murphy says that Dog is a great horse, and Grey agrees. We do not yet know what Murphy is referring to when he says that it was worth the horse.

In Chapter 12, Grey is caring for the grandmother, Kope'mah, who remains near death and bedridden. Kope'mah returns in her mind to the world of her childhood and begins to talk to figures from the past. She remembers watching a herd of buffalo while holding her father's hand. When someone enters the grandmother's room with a kerosene lamp, she knows it is her son Worcester Meat though she cannot see. She reflects on the fact that Worcester is not like her other sons, being careless and dispassionate. She prefers men who are holy, crazed, and brave rather than practical and bland. She remembers Set-angya, who was shot down by soldiers at Fort Sill before Kope'mah was born, and who was the stuff of legend.

Grey and Kope'mah sit in the room, their hands intertwined. Rain begins to fall outside, and the grandmother begins to tell Grey stories. Outside, Dog whinnies and runs, then subsides. The grandmother begins to speak names, and she ends with the names Setman and Set.

Analysis

These six chapters, perhaps even more than the first six, seem at first to be a disjointed set of brief vignettes, but eventually resolve into the poetic logic of The Ancient Child. What, then, is the nature of that logic? Up until this point in the work, we have not been introduced to Locke Setman, whose quest for identity will give form to the string of vignettes that compose the work. At the close of Chapter 12, however, we are poised to meet him, as Kope'mah in her visionary moments before death utters the name Setman, and connects that name to the enigmatic figure of Set-angya, of whom we will learn more later in the book. Only once we are able to place these vignettes into the larger setting of Locke Setman's homeward journey will we understand how these pieces together form any kind of poetic logic.

This need to exercise patience—to wait for the development of a story of which we are only given bits and pieces—is made explicit in the gradually unveiling myth of the boy-turned-bear. Already by this point in the book, we have read three different renditions of the story, each time from a slightly different perspective. Momaday thereby creates a sense of tension—a kind of discomfiting sensation that something is about to happen, though we know not what or when. Indeed, his preoccupation with this kind of latent, pregnant moment in a narrative will become clear later in the novel when we are told about two of Locke Setman's artworks.

Vocabulary

meticulously, methodically, latent, hog-tie, prominent, instinct, manure, innocence, sagacity

Book 1, Chapters 13-16

Summary

Chapter 13 is a quick overview of Locke Setman's progression as an artist and a description of his current state. By the time Setman was thirty, he had settled on painting as the truest expression of his spirit. Five years later he had already acquired a considerable reputation and had received several important awards. By this point, it was fashionable and expensive to own one of his paintings. By the age of forty, he was in the top tier of American artists and, we are told, was in danger of losing his soul.

No longer is Setman—called Set—able to paint what moves him, in the way that he is moved to paint it; increasingly, those who exhibit, praise, and purchase his work are determining what he paints and how he paints it, and this compromising of his own artistic vision represents a serious decline in Set's life as an artist. Being naïve and passive, Set is unable to resist the external pressures that dictate his artistic practice, and the disillusionment of selling out, as it were, has become so great that Set is driven to weeping with despair. Set longs for children, who are honest and full of wonder, to see his studio and appraise his art, rather than for adults, who are complex and obfuscating, to do so. Set's passivity, combined with his determination even in the face of his own naivety to be his own man, means that he is engaged in a tortuous struggle against himself. This struggle has left him sick and tired, but he is determined to be true to himself.

Around this time, Set paints a self portrait which shows him to be a man of sorrow and deep feelings. Set, we are told, believes that he paints in order to please God, though in fact his reason for painting is to astonish God. His adoptive father, Bent, sees that this is Set's true reason and expounds on this idea by saying that, in fact, God's boredom is infinite and humans have ceased to interest and amuse him. Set's painting is an attempt to break through this boredom and entertain God, Bent continues, saying that God is sustained only by the satisfaction of having created a few things of incomparable grandeur: landscapes, waters, birds and beasts. The bear, he continues, is particularly remarkable, and to make the bear God used both hands. With this reflection on the wondrous nature of the bear, Chapter 13 ends.

Chapter 14 is composed of a series of memories Set has about his childhood. He first remembers being thirteen and sitting in the living room of his adoptive father's home on Scott Street in San Francisco. He is reading an illustrated astronomy and is entranced by an image of the zodiac. As a thirteen-year-old, he imagines being once again in the Catholic orphanage where he lived after his father's death.

Next, Set remembers a dream he had as an adolescent of a beautiful woman with long dark hair and a graceful body. He remembers that after this dream he had dreamt of his mother, who died giving birth to him. Set's first name is Locke and his childhood nickname was Loki; throughout this chapter the thirteen-year-old Set is referred to as

Loki. Loki is aware of a certain empty space in him—a longing for something beyond memory. This longing is, for him, a longing for his mother, who represents the past and who is the cornerstone of his belief in the significance of the past for the present.

In Chapter 15, Grey attends to the grandmother, Kope'mah. Jessie is Kope'mah's granddaughter and wants to be the last indispensable person to her, but realizes that it is only to Grey that the grandmother speaks her mind and heart. Jessie is ashamed of this, but she is not resentful of Grey. The grandmother has had nothing but tea for three days, and has fallen asleep. Grey, too, dozes off in the room, and soon we are in the world of her dreams. She imagines that Billy the Kid has entered the room. She asks him where has been and asks if he is hungry. He responds that he just wanted to see her and that he is on his way with some others to kill the doctors of a sick friend in Colorado. Grey tells Billy that she must stay with Kope'mah and Billy says that he knows, and leaves.

Chapter 16 opens with Set reading a telegram that has been slipped under the door of his studio. It informs him that Grandmother Kope'mah is near death and asks him to come at once. The note also asks that Cate be notified. The telegram is befuddling for Set, not only because he has never heard of Kope'mah but also because his father, Cate, has been dead for many years.

That evening, Set goes to a restaurant and there meets a fellow artist and the artist's female companion, who, when she bids Set goodbye, asks him to take care of himself. That night, Set phones Bent and his girlfriend Lola, and tells them that he is going out of town for a couple of days.

As he sits in the airplane, Set remembers a Thanksgiving afternoon four years earlier when he had sketched a portrait of Lola as she sat on a large rock at Point Lobos, her hair billowing in the wind. He next remembers a moment from his childhood at the orphanage: One of the teachers, Sister Stella Francesca, keeps Set after class and tells him that she is going to show him what they do to boys whose tongues are loose and uncontrollable. She proceeds to sexually molest him, putting his face to her genitals.

Next, Set remembers the words of one of his instructors from the art academy he attended. The instructor had told him that there is nothing for the artist to do but to affirm the beauty of the artistic subject. It is impossible to improve upon reality, he had said, but the artist may at least represent the true essence of his object.

Now, Set falls asleep and dreams of something that happened long ago. He dreams of seeing an octopus washed ashore. He stands over it and studies it, and then probes it with a stick. At his probing, the octopus blushes pink, then blue, then violet, and then begins to writhe. He lifts the octopus with the stick and lays it down closer to the surf. He wonders whether he has saved its life, and whether the octopus has been struggling, in its alien mind, to take account of him. When he awakes, Set wonders what it means that after so many years he has dreamt about the octopus, whom he had not realized played such an important part in his personal imaginary.

Set next reflects on the difference between his art instructor's understanding of art and that of his late father, Cate Setman. Cate, he reflects, knew better than to think that all art is resistance. The art of the earth—its rivers and plains and mountains—are not acts of resistance but of irresistibly following the path of least resistance.

Set rents a car and begins to drive toward the reservation. When he gets there, he sees a small strange boy looking at him with an intent gaze. Set says he is looking for an old woman, and he turns when the answer comes from a voice nearer than the boy. It is Jessie, who tells him that Kope'mah has already died and been buried.

Set sits with Jessie Mottledmare in her house, and she tells him that they are very glad he has come, and that they had tried to get in touch with him a few days prior. Set goes outside to stretch his legs, and he admires the landscape of his early youth. He walks to the river with a dog that hangs about him, and at one point he feels that he is being watched, but he shakes off the feeling.

When Set returns to the Mottledmare house, the Revered Milo Mottledmare is home. Set and he sit and attempt to talk but end in silence when they run out of things to say to each other. Jessie calls them to dinner and they eat boiled beef, fried potatoes and onions, and roasted corn. Set is much strengthened by the meal and the three begin to talk. Set asks about the boy he saw earlier and Jessie says he must be referring to Grey, who is a tomboy.

Set finds himself very curious about Grey, and asks many questions about her origins and habits. Jessie tells Set that Grey's mother is Navajo, and that she grew up in Arizona but suddenly materialized when Kope'mah was very old and proceeded to take over the job of taking care of Kope'mah. Grey lives with Worcester, with whom she is presumably in a sexual relationship despite their enormous difference in age. Jessie and Milo tell Set that Grey doesn't really confide in them, and that she is essentially wild. She has declared herself the mayor of Bote, Oklahoma, which is simply the name she has given to the area across the creek where she lives with Worcester.

Set learns that his grandmother and Kope'mah had been very close throughout their lives and that Kope'mah's last instruction before her death had been to notify Cate. Set makes plans with the Mottledmares to visit the grave of his father the next day and then watch part of tomorrow's dance of the Kiowa dance societies. Set goes to sleep outside in the warm evening. He admires the rural sky. He awakes suddenly in the presence of an unknown person. He surmises that it is Grey. She tells him that Kope'mah wants her to give him back her medicine, and that he must not go without it. Then she turns and runs away. Set dreams of the boy which he saw earlier, and who seems to have been a phantasm. He dreams that the boy had the face of a very old woman.

Set remembers—it is not clear if he is dreaming or not—an incident at the orphanage. He sat on a bench in a small wood that lay at the boundary of the orphanage's playing field. A bee bit his thumb and he had to go to the infirmary to be treated. The next morning, Sister Stella Francesca scolded him for having gone beyond the permissible boundaries of the orphanage. She told him that there are bee-wolves in the woods,

which she said is another term for bears. Some months later, Set tells Sister that he is no longer afraid of bee-wolves, and she responds joyfully by saying that he is a good boy.

Analysis

We have discussed already the poetic form of The Ancient Child, and the way that Momaday strings together vignettes in order gradually to build a level of suspense that will take shape as we journey with Locke Setman toward the fulfillment of his identity. This form continues in Chapters 13 through 16. Note how the image of the bear remains insistent and appears in unlikely places. We hear of the bear not just in the many-faceted tellings of the Kiowa myth, but also in Bent's meditation on God's boredom, and in the incident of Set's bee sting at the orphanage.

Bent asserts that Set's art is a kind of provocative act—an attempt to astonish a God who has grown bored with the dullness of a humanity no longer driven to original acts. God's satisfaction, Bent says, comes not from humans but from the incomparably beautiful things he created—certain grand structures and beings. Chief among them, Bent asserts, is the bear, which God had to use two hands to create.

Why should Bent make such a claim, and from whence comes this primordial knowledge of his? Here we see the inherently poetic nature of this work exemplified. We do not question Bent's knowledge because the truth of his statements belongs not to the ordinary world, but to the mythic world. His connection to that world does not inhere in any particular of his biography or experience; it is simply part of the book's poetic economy.

Momaday can put prophetic and sublime words in the mouth of any character because his characters shift between being flesh-and-blood people and mythic agents. Bent is as much a symbol as he is a person, and he plays different roles as the narrative demands that these different roles be played. This analysis holds for many of the book's characters, including Set himself, whose transformation into an embodied mythic figure is the central story of The Ancient Child.

These chapters contain some particularly discomfiting scenes of a sexual nature. Most disturbing is the memory Set has of Sister Stella Francesca molesting him as a punishment for his loose tongue. The sexual dream Set has about his mother, whom he never knew, is discomfiting also, though in an entirely different way. It is interesting that both of these scenes take form in characteristically hazy forms of consciousness; one is a memory, the other is a memory of a dream.

Again and again throughout the work—and, indeed, in the very poetic form of the work—Momaday blurs the boundaries between consciousness and the unconscious, between waking life and dreams, and between reality and myth. Some have called this blurring an intentional attempt to assert something about the nature of reality--a kind of programmatic statement of indeterminacy and the arbitrariness of the designations we

have created between sanity and insanity, among others. But it is more appropriate to see this blurring as an expression simply of Momaday's artistic experience. We can surmise that Momaday himself experiences—constantly or intermittently—the world in the poetic, blurred way that he has represented in his writing.

His own statements on artistic perception are rather explicitly given in the thoughts of Locke Setman, who is a painter struggling to give form to the world has he sees it. And how does Locke see the world? He sees it as charged: a place full of essences and magnetic, unseen truths. It is a world in which the drawing of a piece of artwork is an act of spiritual seeing, and in which the struggle to remain true to one's artistic perception is a struggle worthy of falling ill for.

Locke Setman, for all his artistic vitality, is a man visibly ill and enfeebled. When he runs into a friend and the friend's girlfriend Briony the night before he leaves for the reservation, Briony asks him to take care of himself as they part. Surely, then, Set's infirmity is sufficiently visible that total strangers can apprehend it and bid him to mind his health. This illness, we may note, is entirely at odds with the vitality and health that Momaday represents in the person—and the body—of Grey. Grey seems the epitome of good health, and her body is repeatedly described as taut, lithe, tan, and swift.

Vocabulary

critics, collectors, glib, notwithstanding, virtually, experimenting, incredulity, perturbation

Book 1, Chapters 17-22

Summary

Chapter 17 is an extended fantasy by Grey. She imaginatively places herself in the historical moment of Billy the Kid's escape from the Lincoln jail. In her fantasy, she has beautified herself and is now standing before Billy's handlers, J.W. Bell and Bob Olinger. She greets Billy as if they are strangers and, in shaking his hand, hands him a secret note.

She then goes across the street to wait in a chair in front of the Wortley Hotel. The note, as it turns out, reads simply: "outhouse." Bob Olinger leaves to have lunch, leaving Billy in the custody of Bell. Billy asks to go to the outhouse, and there he urinates loudly while preparing the shotgun he finds there. He comes out of the outhouse pointing the gun at Bell, who backs away. The two have actually developed an amicable rapport during the period of Billy's capture, and Billy does not want to shoot him. He asks Bell to cooperate, but Bell panics and turns to run away. Billy finds himself forced to shoot and kill Bell.

Olinger hears the shot and rushes from the dining hall back to the building where Billy is housed. As he rushes up, he finds himself staring down the barrel of Billy's shotgun. He takes comfort in the ethereal beauty of the woman in the white dress sitting in front of the nearby hotel (Grey) before Billy shoots him dead. Billy then takes a horse from the nearby horse yard and gallops away to the cheers of the townspeople, to whom he is a hero.

In Chapter 18, Dwight Dicks is clearing out the straw in the barn with his son, Murphy. Something is on Dwight's mind and he calls Murphy over to ask him if he gave away his horse, Murphy's Law. (Recall that Murphy's Law was Dog's name before Grey became his owner.) Murphy replies that he did not give the horse away, and Dwight asks if he sold him. Murphy enigmatically replies that selling the horse is closer to what he did, and Dwight asks if he got a fair price. Murphy replies that he did, and that he thinks there is more to come. Dwight becomes giddy and replies that he could use some of whatever it was that Murphy received in exchange for the horse.

In Chapter 19, Grey is imagining that she has reunited with Billy the Kid after his escape from the Lincoln County Courthouse. Billy and Grey are in bed having sex, but when Grey is jolted from her fantasy, her pleasure becomes pain. She realizes that she is being raped by Dwight Dicks. She struggles not to faint from the pain and anger, focusing on responding to this violence and insult. She pretends to have enjoyed sex with Dwight and asks to get on top of him. She massages his penis, bringing him once again to an erection, before grabbing a length of baling wire and winding it around his wrists. She then takes a fork nearby and drives it into his throat, just deeply enough to draw blood but not enough to kill Dwight.

Next, Grey takes a pair of curved cutting pliers and begins to cut Dwight's foreskin off. She leaves a quarter of an inch of its circumference intact, so that Dwight must finish the procedure himself. She rubs some ointment used on wounded calves on Dwight's penis and leaves him, fainted, on the barn floor. She rides Dog to the river, where she bathes for a long time.

In Chapter 20, Set begins his day early. He and Jessie have biscuits and gravy for breakfast and set out for the cemetery where they visit the grave of Kope'mah and of Set's father, Catlin Setman. Set feels nothing at the cemetery, and has already distanced himself from the place. He sees his trip as an interlude in his busy life and is eager to return to his familiar environs.

In Chapter 21, Set remembers when Lola Bourne purchased a painting of his after a show at a gallery in San Francisco. The painting was of a grotesque man in red clothes approaching a window, which formed the frame of the painting. Set's agent Jason had advised him not to show it at the gallery, saying that it would disturb potential collectors and critics. Set decided to show it anyway, and Lola Bourne, whom Set first met at the show, said that the painting disturbed her and that she liked it. Set approached her and asked why she liked it. She said that the painting contained a profound energy and excitement. Set asked her what the man in the figure was up to, and Lola replied that he was about to be transformed.

In Chapter 22, Set and Jessie meet up with Milo at the dance of the Kiowa dance societies. They walk around, and Jessie introduces Set to members of the tribe, many of whom are Set's relatives. When Set meets Grey, he is struck by her beauty, and recalls how close he was to her the night before when she appeared to tell him about his medicine.

Grey asks Set to paint her face for the dance, and he obliges. He watches her dance and marvels at her beauty and grace. Afterward, they meet at the Mottledmare camp and Grey hands him a small rolled blanket that contains the medicine entrusted to Grey by Kope'mah. They both hold the blanket for a long time at the moment of transfer, and an electric, mystical energy passes between them. Grey senses a sort of evil in the blanket, and is exhilarated.

Analysis

We are forced to contend with the meaning of Grey's Billy the Kid fantasies. They are entertaining enough, but their purpose in the narrative is difficult to decipher. On a superficial level, we can say that they reveal something about Grey herself, but it is something that could have been conveyed easily enough without extended fantasies: namely, that Grey does not live squarely in the realm of the real.

Grey is an extraordinary woman, and this we know from Momaday's explicit and extended comments about her beauty, her talents, her powers, and her unique relationship with Kope'mah. At the beginning of the book, her fantasies are introduced

with the statement that Grey does not have to quest after visions. Visions come effortlessly to this 20-year-old, who is simultaneously and extraordinarily physical and supernatural.

Chapter 19 gives us a clue into the function of Grey's Billy the Kid fantasies. Though Chapter 19 opens with scenes of intimacy and affection between Billy the Kid and Grey, it transitions suddenly into a brutal scene of Dwight Dicks raping Grey. The moment of transition is that of Grey's sexual pleasure in her fantasy being translated into her extreme pain in reality.

It seems that Grey has managed to transport herself to the realm of fantasy in order to escape the violence that is being done to her. This escapist movement is something that has happened without her knowing it and without her willing it; as soon as she returns to the realm of the real, she forces herself to remain conscious in order to fulfill her purpose of retribution against Dicks. With tremendous presence of mind and composure, she tricks her rapist into submission and then brutally exacts her revenge by circumcising the man with a pair of shearing pliers. It is interesting to note that Grey does not relish this violence, but feels that she must carry it out as part of some larger purpose—some logic to which she is subject.

If we read further into this strange function of fantasy in Grey's mental life, it becomes clear that fantasy as a coping mechanism may be more mystical than it at first appears. Perhaps Grey's ability to transcend suffering through her imagination—not just to avoid it, but to transmute it into something else—is key to her power and her calling as a medicine woman. Note that Grey's fantasy is sexual; she does not escape into an event that is a complete non sequiter from the violence of her rape. She has actually taken the violent experience she is undergoing and transformed it into a sexual experience. Though she must ultimately return to reality and face Dwight Dicks, she does so armed with the power of her fantasies, which is, in the end, her own power.

Chapter 21 is a brief memory of the day Lola Bourne purchased a disturbing painting of Set's, and the description of the painting therein is telling. The man in the painting is approaching a window that forms the frame of the painting, and the effect, we are told, is disturbing. Set does not know what the figure means, and he asks Lola, who is obviously moved by the work, to tell him what she thinks it means. Lola answers instantly that she believes the man is about to be transformed. Here emerges one of the book's central themes: transformation.

The book's structuring myth of the boy-turned-bear is quite obviously a tale of transformation. A boy becomes a beast, and his seven sisters become stars. The meaning of this transformation remains obscure, but the fact of transformation could not be clearer. Less obvious is Set's own transformation. We can reveal now that he will, by the end of the book, have been transformed into a bear, though the nature of this bear remains unclear. Set's transformation is strange, ambiguous, hazy, and enigmatic. We are not sure what he has been transformed into, but we know that he has been transformed, and the meaning of the transformation is clear enough: Set has found his identity and the meaning of his own name.

In his final transformation, Set has effected a kind of definitive homecoming. He has returned to his ancestral home (and, finally, to Grey's ancestral home) and in so doing he has found something at once ancient and new: his own artistic vision.

Note then, the interesting anti-parallel quality of these two stories of transformation. In one, a boy becomes a bear in an unambiguous way, but the meaning of this transformation remains obscure. In the other, a man becomes a bear in an obscure way, and the meaning of the transformation is unambiguous. The tension between these two stories makes the parallel much more interesting than a straightforward correspondence. It is as if Momaday is telling us that narratives and myths are always inherently mysterious. A story and its telling are mystical, supernatural even. Set's painting is poised at the moment of a transformation whose meaning is suspended in an unreachable future, and so too is The Ancient Child.

Vocabulary

sentiments, remote, sojourn, commerce, exerted, mounted, advantage, unattainable, untouchable

Book 1, Chapters 23-25

Summary

In Chapter 23, Grey goes to the cemetery and lays on Kope'mah's grave. She listens, and tells the Grandmother that she can hear her. She asks Kope'mah what it is like to be the bear, and whether he knows that he is the bear. She asks whether he has a vision and a song, and whether he can suffer and delight hugely and anciently, with respect and belief.

Chapter 24 begins with Set's memory of being with his father Cate. They are walking along the wharf together and Set is weaving among the people in the crowd. They come across a shark that has washed up and is dead. Set marvels at the grave beauty of the animal. In his memories, Set is unable to place everything in order. He remembers that one day, suddenly, his father was gone and he was in the orphanage. He meditates on the fact that he loved Sister Stella Francesca because there was nobody else for him to love during the time he was at the orphanage.

Next, Set recalls a story that his father told him in his childhood. In the story, a little boy comes seemingly from nowhere into a Piegan camp. He is completely unafraid, and babbles in a language the people do not understand. Animated, he stands before the people all night, speaking and gesturing. They give him a place to sleep and are excited to adopt him and spend more time with him the next day. When they awake, the boy is gone. The people are disturbed deeply by the boy's disappearance. The old women begin to grieve. An old man comes forward and calls the boy's reality into question, suggesting that perhaps it was just a little bear that came into the camp. In so doing, he relieves the people of their grief. They nonetheless have a sense of loss.

Chapter 25 is a very brief episode. Set turns inside himself and, we read, applies color to his brain with a knife. There is a scene of smoke and dancers, and an ancient woman inhabiting the body of a girl. A bear comes forth.

Analysis

Chapter 23 is short, but in it are words that shed light on Momaday's vision for Locke Setman. Grey asks Kope'mah whether he (we are left to assume that she is referring to Set) is able to suffer and delight hugely, anciently, with respect and belief. What does it mean to suffer and delight hugely and anciently? The experience that Grey is describing is an experience of sublimity that goes beyond pain and pleasure; in this experience suffering and delight share something which is much deeper than either pain or pleasure, and what they share is a kind of wordless understanding of the meaning of the earth and of history.

To suffer and to delight anciently is to carry within oneself the rhythms, pains, movements, battles, and feasts of one's ancestors, and to bring all of these experiences

to bear on one's own encounters with the world. Grey, we have already been told, is like an ancient sage in the body of a young woman. She communes with the grandmother in a way that belies her youth, and in this relationship we see the pairing of old and new that is to define Set's life as an artist.

We see that Set's sensitivity to ancient rhythms and deeper meanings has been evident since he was a boy. In his memory of the shark moored on the shore, and of his own reaction to the shark, we see a young boy whose senses thrill to the mysteries around him. Watching the shark die, Set is overcome with the mixture of delight and suffering that this creature represents. The shark is gravely beautiful and thereby delights him beyond anything he has encountered, but his passage into death is also an occasion for mourning. The sublime combination of deep enjoyment and deep pain in the encounter with the shark continues the evocative images of Chapter 23. Set and Grey are both artists for whom the world is always pregnant with transcendence and charged with meaning.

The story of the bear as it is told in Chapter 24 adds to our understanding of the myth the element of belief and of mourning. The myth, it should be noted, is a variant of the boy-turned-bear. Here we see not a boy transformed into a bear, but a wandering boy who is transformed into a bear only in the minds of the people to whom he appeared. His transformation in their minds is not a sudden, unexpected metamorphosis, but a suggestion by an old man who plants a seed of doubt in his people's minds in order to relieve them of the suffering they feel at the loss of this beautiful boy.

Vocabulary

elaborate, incessant, translucent, prominent, lull, backlighted, impression, regalia, shivered, exhilarated

Book 2, Chapters 1-4

Summary

Chapter 1 brings us back to the myth of the bear. The sisters and their brother-turned-bear have vanished. In the days and weeks following their disappearance, the people come out at dusk and wait for the stars. They are filled with wonder and loneliness when the stars become visible and some of the people make exclamations, while others remain reverently silent. After a great storm rolls through the camp and the skies are darkened for four days, the people no longer convene in the evening to mark the disappearance of the sisters and the transformation of the brother. Now they go on with their lives as if nothing has happened, including the parents of the lost children. It is decided that the parents will not grieve and nobody faults them for their decision. Only the old woman Koi-ehm-toya grieves again; one morning, as it snows, she emits a series of cries and cuts two fingers off her left hand.

Chapter 2 opens with Set looking into a mirror and speaking to himself. He loves his face, with which he has always been on intimate terms, but now his face appears to him as a mask. The rest of the chapter is a stream-of-consciousness as Set continues to stare at himself in the mirror, hears the phone ringing, loses a sense of time, hears rain begin to fall, and feels terribly ill.

Chapter 3 opens with Set calling for his adoptive father, Bent. He has awaken from a series of strange dreams and in the morning feels both dread and relief. Some of his dreams were of his boyhood, and he remembers the cook his father hired when he was a boy, Senora Archuleta. Once, Set dared to call her by her first name, and afterward he went to confession because he felt such guilt. Set recalls the time he went to the opera with his father and Senora Archuleta, and the way she had all the words of a Bizet opera memorized.

Set directs his meditations at Bent, telling him (whether only in his mind or actually to Bent, we do not know) that he is beginning to doubt his mind. Set feels dependent on his work—he must work to feel alive—and yet he cannot bring himself to work. He recalls that Bent told him that the seventh naval rule is never to take yourself too damned seriously, and he is ashamed of his angst.

Set goes to see Bent later that night and tells him that he is preoccupied. Bent notes that he is drunk and the two play chess, though Set plays poorly. Bent listens to Sets troubles sympathetically but with unflinching honesty.

That night Set dreams that he is a boy, and that he is lost in the woods. He hears his own voice calling out for himself frantically, and concludes that he has lost his own self.

Set's professional success continues, and a new gallery owner asks to exhibit his work for a fifty percent cut of the profits.

Set now addresses Lola, again most likely in his own mind, telling her that things have changed between them, and that he no longer knows who he is.

We next learn more about Set's agent Jason. Jason is preoccupied with money, though his interest lies more in the game of attracting money to himself than in accruing it per se. Set notes that, though he is essentially a simple man, he has the talent of making himself appear to be complex, and in this deception inheres Jason's ability to seem interesting to sophisticates. He is a Bostonian and an Ivy Leaguer and he wears dark suits and exquisite silk ties.

The next scene finds Set working in his studio, Jason reviewing his recent work, and Lola sitting at a table in the studio reading a magazine. Jason is asking Set when he will again make colorful pieces on large canvasses. He encourages Set to make such pieces, as they are very popular, but Set tells him that he is currently more interested in working on paper, and in drawing in ink and graphite. Jason regards these media as unpromising, which is to say, unprofitable.

Lola and Jason look at the drawing that Set is working on. The drawing is a hazy one, of trees and a creeping figure. Set declares it a self-portrait. Jason laughs but Lola does not.

Lola then proceeds to attempt to provoke Jason physically by putting her attractive body subtly on display. Set has noted that Jason is attracted to Lola, and he is amused by her playful attempts to irk him with her attractiveness.

Set goes about his normal life but does not feel himself. He senses that something has taken possession of him. Lola notes the change and feels a loss as a result. Set wishes not to hurt her but cannot hide the changes in himself. Set recalls when he first met Lola, at the showing where she bought the painting deemed disturbing by Jason.

A few days after that showing, Lola invited him to her house to see where she had placed his painting. Set notices then how attractive Lola is, and when she shows him his painting, she waxes poetic about its meaning and impresses Set with her artistic sensibilities. She compares his painting to one by another artist, Emil Nolde. Lola serves Set wine instead of tea, and the two go for a walk. During the walk they acquainted themselves with their past and their interests. Lola is a piano teacher and a cataloguer of rare books. She is independently wealthy but works on principle.

During their walk, it becomes clear that there is romantic tension between the two. Lola says she can do a headstand. She shows Set, and as she stands on her head her skirt falls down and her underwear is exposed. They dine at her house and quickly decide that they will be lovers.

Set and Lola become a couple, but their lives do not accord with each other. She is a social butterfly and he is somewhat reclusive. In order for his art to flourish, he must spend time alone in his stark studio, and she is often disappointed that he does not accompany her to her many social engagements. They work out a schedule in which Set spends all morning working and the two reunite in the afternoons.

One day, Lola meets Set at a bar. She has just spoken to Jason, and she tells Set that he is to have a show in New York City and another in Paris.

Set paints furiously with the aim of producing a considerable amount of new work for his upcoming shows. His New York debut is a huge success and several overpriced pieces are sold. In New York he meets Alais Sancerre, the gallery owner who is to show his work in Paris. Set notes that there is a strange tension between his friends and acquaintances and that the night seems to be more about their interpersonal tensions than about his art. Lola, in particular seems sullen.

That night, however, Lola is in a different mood. She produces some paints and tells Set about a performance art exhibit she has seen in which a man and woman were painting each other's bodies. Lola asks Set to paint her body, and she paints his. They admire the results. She asks him if this is the first time he has ever painted a woman's body, and at first he says that it is, but then he remembers painting Grey's face before the ritual dance.

This remembrance forces Set to remember the medicine bundle that Grey gave him, to which he has given little thought since returning from the reservation.

Set has lunch with Alais Sancerre in New York, and they discuss his work and upcoming show in Paris. She tells him that his work is fascinating, and that he is a mystery She asks him about a particular painting with a centaur venturing beyond time. Set had not previously considered the painting's subject a centaur, but feels that Alais has revealed it to be a centaur. She asks him if he had Kafka's description of a centaur in mind when he painted it, and he admits that he did not, and is not even familiar with the Kafka to which she refers. She notes that Kafka was interested in transformations, particularly in The Metamorphosis.

On the plane back to San Francisco, Set has a seizure. He grips Lola's hand until he nearly draws blood, and she is tremendously concerned for him.

Chapter 4 opens with Grey poring over a book and composing prose and poem pieces. She is reading an account of a certain native woman who was an exceptional rider. She was able to gallop across a plain and snatch a dollar bill that had been stuck upright in the dirt. Grey is inspired by the story and places a matchstick in the ground that she intends to grab while galloping on Dog. She spills off her horse repeatedly before finally mastering the trick.

We return to the fantasy world in which Grey is a character in the life of Billy the Kid. Billy is holed up in a general store with a group of fellow bandits and five men with shotguns are telling them to come out. After a shootout, Billy runs out to retrieve his shotgun, thereby exposing himself to shooting. He is shot in the thigh and staggers away. Grey is filled with anxiety, wondering whether the wound is fatal.

Grey is still a girl, but womanhood has begun to take hold in her. She holds herself, the earth, and its creatures in great respect. She is to become a medicine woman, not by her own decision, but because it is meant to be. The grandmother instructs her in her

dreams. Grey chants sacred words over the grave of the grandmother and the grave of Catlin Setman, whom she sees as a kind of intermediary between herself and Set. She knows that Set is the man who most requires her wisdom and spirit.

During the day, Grey busies herself with a written memorial to Billy the Kid and various ordinary tasks: reading and listening to music, taking care of Dog, and assisting Jessie with household chores. At night, she channels the presence of the grandmother and learns the way of the medicine women. She begins to make masks out of paper, cloth, and leather. By candlelight, she strips and examines her body, which has become more womanly.

The following pages are, we are left to surmise, pages from the chapbook memorial that Grey is composing in honor of her fantasy life with Billy the Kid. The memorial is a meditation on Billy's life and her own relationship with him. In it, she wonders at the meaning of his name and asks him, rhetorically, whether he thought often of his mother in times of darkness. Her prose is interspersed with poems she has written about Billy.

For Grey, writing is very different from riding a horse. The art of riding is, in the end, a skill to be mastered through hard work. Writing, on the other hand, is not a question of straightforward master; it is a mystical act, in which bringing the thought into word and onto the page is an inexact alchemy, a magic of sorts.

Grey writes about Billy's death at the hands of Pat Garrett, and sympathizes with Paulina Maxwell and with Deluvina Maxwell, who heaped verbal abuse upon Garrett after Billy's death. She marvels, also, at the fact that Pat and Billy had been friends despite being mortal enemies, and that death, for them, was a bond stronger than friendship.

Grey thinks also of Sister Blandina Segale, the Italian nun who had come to America as a child and was a special friend and sympathizer of Billy's. She went to visit him when he was imprisoned in brutal conditions at Lincoln, and she was filled with shame at his treatment.

Returning to Grey's life on the reservation, we learn that she misses Murphy Dicks, with whom she shared a strange and passing romance. One afternoon, she decides that she is ready to show off one of her new masks. The mask is reptilian and sinister. She strips, puts the mask on, and takes off at full speed on Dog. Everyone who sees her pass is shocked and alarmed. She slows and rides up to Dwight Dicks, who is struck dumb. She greets him and asks him how his penis is. He replies, deferentially, that it is fine, and she rides on.

Analysis

This section opens with another version of the bear myth. This time, we see the perspective of the tribe in the wake of the event. Remember that the story is not simply about the transformation of a boy into a bear; it is also the story of the loss of the seven sisters. Pursued by their brother, they climb a tree and are borne so high that they

become stars. The myth is in part an origin myth to explain the stars of the Big Dipper, but having taken on a life of its own, the loss of the seven sisters is an event that calls for thought and explanation of its own. We learn that the parents of the girls (and the boy-turned-bear) decide not to grieve, and instead act as if nothing has happened. It seems that the grief of the inexplicable loss is simply too much to be borne if acknowledged.

The decision to forgo grief through denial has a deep resonance with the story Set's father told him as a boy: the story of the boy who wandered into the Piegan camp. As in that story, the tribe is faced with a loss that is too painful to face directly. In both cases, there is a decision to go on as if nothing has happened, though in the story of the Piegan camp boy it takes the question of an elder—"How are we to believe in the boy?"—to bring about the necessary doubt that will allow the people to reject their own memories.

We see here that memory, as much as it is the bearer of tradition and ancient truths, also poses a grave danger to man's wellbeing. Remembering—living squarely in the real of every moment that one has lived—is an altogether dizzying and mortifying experience. One must be able to forget, to fantasize, and to deny in order to be healthy and to live fully.

Grey's other life—her life with Billy the Kid—is a prime example of this kind of coping mechanism, and of the way that coping mechanisms, when taken to extremes, can become artistic processes. From Grey's visions of Billy the Kid eventually emerges a chapbook of prose poems and lyric poems that push Grey beyond the world of artisanship and into the world of true artistry.

Though we see in these chapters Grey's own struggle with the art and craft of writing, her artistic process and her way of living are still entirely at odds with Set's. Set is a tortured artist, a man visibly ill and wrung out from his struggle to remain authentic. The difference between the two is more than a difference of personality. Grey is a woman who has and knows her place in the world; she is part of an order and a tradition that stretches back before history, and her connection to that order is palpable. She can turn to the grandmother's grave for wisdom, and to the long tradition of medicine women for guidance in the practice that will consume her and form her identity and her destiny.

Set, on the other hand, is a man displaced, an artist at odds with a world in which he has no clear place and no home. Though he comes from the Kiowa tribe, his connection to it has been severed by the death, first of his mother, then of his father. All he has are indistinct memories to tie him to the past, so that when he gets the telegram informing him of Kope'mah's death, he does not even recognize the name of the woman who was so close with his own grandmother. The severance of tradition that Set's condition represents is total; forced to live in an orphanage where the only person to love was a woman who sexually abused him, his life has been for a long time a study in a kind of social poverty. Set has friends, lovers, and of course his adoptive father, but he is detached from the kind of all encompassing and enriching community of which Grey is a member.

Like much of Native American literature, then, Grey's identity quest is a journey homeward. In the tradition of identity quests in American literature, the hero typically makes a journey away from home in order to discover his authenticity in a world apart from the stifling world he has always known. In Native American literature, however, the quest for an identity is the struggle to reclaim something stolen. And though Set's severance from his community is not literally connected to the white man's displacement of the native from his own land, it can be read symbolically as relating to this displacement. By making Set's loss of home a question of parental death, Momaday has universalized the Native American experience of diaspora and given readers for whom this displacement is not a pressing reality a way to relate to the feeling of being adrift in a world not one's own.

Indeed, he ties this experience to the struggle of the artist for authenticity which is a thoroughly modern—some would argue even postmodern—conundrum. After all, it is not only Native Americans or orphans who must make their way in a strange land. Today, Momaday suggests, most people of artistic sensibilities must struggle to find a life that is authentic and rich despite being moored in a landscape inherently inhospitable to the kind of visionary life an artist must have. The world today—and perhaps this problem is perennial—is a world of expediency. Jason, Set's dealer, represents this kind of expediency in an explicit way. His concern is not to spur artistry and authenticity in Set, but to attract money to himself. What is particularly fascinating in Jason as a symbol is that his obsession with money is not greedy per se. He is not preoccupied with making himself rich; rather, he is preoccupied with the craft of making money. It is a game of sorts with Jason to see just how profitable he can make an art show, and just how many galleries he can convince to exhibit Set's work.

What we see, then, in the dialectic between Jason's craft and Set's art is the difference between craftsmanship and artistry. One might imagine that they are close cousins, and, indeed there is much to admire in both. But craftsmanship, it seems does not spur in its holder the same burning need for authenticity that that the artist must experience. Craft is more a tool than a vision and, as such, it can enervate the work of true artists when it interposes itself, and it always interposes itself.

Vocabulary

descended, gleaming, thickly, adopted, enemies, carnival, ashamed, grieve, compulsion, emanates, transparent, linen, confession, brilliant

Book 2, Chapters 5-8

Summary

Set and Jason are driving to the opening of his show at the Colombes Gallery at the beginning of Chapter 5. A rainstorm has come to Paris and Jason is nervous that nobody will come to the show. Set is not worried, but he wishes Lola were with him to dispel Jason's nerves and charm everyone at the show. She has stayed in San Francisco to look after Bent, who has fallen gravely ill but seems to be coming out of his illness.

The rain abates and the gallery is packed for the show. Alais Sancerre is in top form, and she looks beautiful. Set drinks numerous glasses of champagne and is in good spirits. At the end of the night, Set leaves with Alais. They celebrate with a fine meal and then return to her apartment. In her room she disrobes and sits nearly naked on Set's lap. They make love and Set spends the night. When he returns to his hotel the next morning, the receptionist hands him a note from Lola. It is urgent. When he phones her he learns that Bent has had another stroke, and that he is near death. Lola asks him where he's been and Set brushes the question off.

When Set arrives back in San Francisco, Bent is already dead. Set is unable to comfort Lola as he ought, and she feels his betrayal. Late at night, Set walks from his studio to Bent's house—his childhood home. A policeman asks him for I.D. and sends him away.

Set returns to his studio, where he slips into a manic state. He paints all night, creating painting after painting. Eventually he collapses in total fatigue, aware of his own mental and physical deterioration. As the days go by, Set becomes increasingly self-destructive. He drinks heavily and does not eat or sleep for days, until he eats ravenously and sleeps for days on end. In between his manic states are periods of great calm and creativity, during which he paints works that are better than anything he has produced up to this point. He feels that he is being true to a story that transcends him.

Chapter 6 begins with a return to the narrative of Billy the Kid. Billy and four others are in the rock house at Stinking Springs and they are surrounded. The front door bursts open and Charlie Bowdre runs out. Garret raises his rifle and shoots Charlie dead. Garrett and Billy talk. Garett tells Billy to come out, and Billy agrees to do so as long as Garrett promises not to shoot. Billy surrenders and is taken prisoner. Garett allows Billy to say goodbye to the Maxwell women. It is presumed that this will be their last goodbye, but as we have already read, Billy will soon escape from the courthouse in Lincoln.

Grey looks out at the plain and relishes its grandeur and beauty. She mourns that it has been cut up by fences and by white men's notions of property, and she imagines the peak of human existence that occurred when the plains Indians allowed their landscape to exist in all its grandeur.

Grey reflects on her heritage, which is half Kiowa and half Navajo. The Kiowa are known as lordly, tyrannical and domineering. The Navajo, on the other hand are not. She remembers the great Kiowa men, including Set-angya.

Grey imagines herself telling the story of Set-angya to Billy the Kid. Set-angya was the chief of the Crazy Dog soldier organization of the Kiwoa tribe. This group of the ten bravest men in the tribe was solely responsible for defending the tribe from danger. Set-angya's son was killed on a raid in Texas, and Set-angya went to Texas to gather up the bones of his son. Set-angya was later imprisoned at Fort sill along with two other chiefs for their part in a raid. As he and the two other chiefs went along in the wagon, Set-angya began to sing the song of the Kaitsenko, which is a song that is only sung in the face of death. The others became upset, and Set-angya said that he would be dead by the time they reached a cottonwood tree up ahead. At that point, he pulled a knife and attacked the teamster before being shot dead.

Grey tells Billy that she imagines he would have done the same in Set-angya's shoes, but Billy replies that he is not contemptuous death and brave on principle the way that Set-angya was. He is foolhardy and reckless and these are the primary sources of his bravery.

Now Grey knows that it is time to summon Set to her. She constructs an altar that includes relics from Kope'mah and, along with Jessie and Milo, she brews and drinks a strong tea with peyote. Near morning, Grey has a vision of a beautiful woman that she imagines to be the grandmother when she was young. From her hair, eyes, and mouth emerge golden eagles that sore upward.

The chapter ends with the scene of Billy the Kid's death at the hands of Pat Garrett. Having made love to Paulita Maxwell, Billy emerges with a knife to cut a piece of meat from a side of beef that is hanging on the side of the house. He hears something and calls out "Who is it?", at which point he is shot. Grey imagines herself witnessing everything from a distance, and when he has been killed, then she is ready to turn away from the scene, and from the fantasy in general.

In Chapter 7, we see that Set has suffered a mental breakdown and has been hospitalized. He is being treated by Dr. Charles Teague Terriman, who is Lola's cousin. Terriman tells Lola that Set is self-centered and trapped in some acute awareness of himself. If a hundred women loved him, he says, still it would not be enough. He also says that he is preoccupied with the thought of being a bear, to which Lola responds that it is a bear preoccupied with the conviction that he is a man.

That night, Lola begins composing a letter to Set in which she expresses her confusion about his self-destructive episodes, and wonders how to reach him. She falls asleep in the middle of writing the note.

Chapter 8 is either a dream or a fantasy of Set's. He is back at Bent's house on Scott Street, wandering through the rooms. He goes to his childhood room and looks out through the balcony. He sees Bent in the garden standing next to a fountain. He calls to

him and asks him what he is doing. Bent replies that he is looking for the boy, and then he disappears, receding into the brightness of the garden.

Analysis

In this section we are immersed in the dark night of Set's quest for his identity. We know, as does Grey, that he must return to her and to the myths of his people if he is ever to reclaim any kind of authenticity and health, but Set remains committed to his jet-setting life as a popular artist, though it is a life which leaves him disoriented and enfeebled.

When Set goes to Paris, he seduces and is seduced by the beautiful Alais Sancerre. Their sexual encounter occurs on the night that Set's father Bent is dying, and Set knows nothing of it because Lola's messages are going to his hotel and he is at Alais's apartment. More notable than his infidelity to Lola is his attitude to women, Lola included, more generally.

One is tempted to call Set a womanizer, but he is altogether too passive to earn that title. He does not pursue women, but he makes himself available to women who are enchanted by his artistic nature. While there is nothing inherently repellant about his quality of Set's, this passivity can be read as symptomatic of his broader failure to come into his own and find himself. In allowing any beautiful woman of a nature reasonably close to his own to become his lover, he is failing to respect both himself and the women in question. Rather than finding women who activate something unique in him and who are clearly part of his story, he slips into relationships—even very committed ones—without being truly enraptured by anything other than the woman's superficial qualities. Even in Lola's case, the attraction is fairly superficial though the connection is an intimate and real one.

Contrast Set's sexual life with Grey's. Grey, too, has had her share of peripheral lovers. Perfecto Atole and Murphy Dicks were not up to her, and yet she took them as lovers and fulfilled her sexual desires with them. She is nonetheless filled with a deep respect for herself and others. What makes the difference between Grey's sexual encounters and Set's? The difference lies in narrativity. Grey inhabits a mental, spiritual, and social world that is ordered, however fantastical and supernatural it can be.

She is true to a story and faithful to a logic that transcends her. Her relationships with Perfecto and Murphy, however superficial, abide by that logic. When Dwight Dicks rapes her, he violates that logic, and though she dreads the act, she carries out the retribution demanded by the logic she experiences in the world. Set, on the other hand, is a man without a story. His narrative poverty is most evident in his romantic relationships, where the ground of any bond seems to be a combination of physical attraction and his partner's admiration and understanding of his art.

The words of Dr. Terriman are accurate: Set is a terribly self-centered person and he is acutely aware of himself. Whether this is the plight of every artist or just the plight of a man left with nothing to examine other than his own psyche is up to the reader.

The story of Set-angya becomes particularly interesting when contrasted with Set's own story. Both characters are great-souled men who suffer and delight anciently, and both are essentially contemptuous of death. But because Set-angya has a reason to die and a story to be faithful to, his contempt for death takes the form of bravery. In Set's case, contempt for death takes the form of self-destructive action and the creation of beautiful art. His gradual transformation into the bear, like Set-angya, whose contempt for death is brave and transcendent, is well underway by this point in the novel.

Vocabulary

lucidity, hazardous, ability, facets, streaming, gesturing, subconsciousness, ravenous, numbly, paralysis

Book 2, Chapters 9-12

Summary

In Chapter 9, Set expresses his rage with Dr. Terriman by throwing a vase into his face, breaking it. Set is angry with the doctor because he feels he is crudely and intolerably invading his mind by analyzing the symbol of the bear to him. Though Terriman knows many wonderful stories from the annals of folklore, his psychoanalytic attempts disturb Set deeply. We learn that he was hospitalized six weeks prior after having been found unconscious in his studio. The studio stank of whiskey, vomit, and urine, and next to Set was the open medicine bundle containing the skin of a bear cub and various other strange items.

In Chapter 10, Grey awaits Set's return to the reservation. Jessie is anxious and asks whether they ought to perform the night ritual with peyote tea and a fire once again, but Grey tells her that it is not necessary, and that Set will come soon, though she refuses to give a specific time. With Milo's help, Grey slaughters a cow and eats its raw, pulsing liver in the way of her ancestors. She feels it is a fitting action, but also longs for her mother's Navajo land, and yearns to plant seeds in the ground. She yearns to be a Navajo woman. Grey realizes that Set needs her, and she patiently awaits his return.

When Set arrives, he arrives with Lola. He sits in the Mottledmare's home, where Lola is very much out of place. When Grey comes in from the rain looking wild and strange, Lola realizes she is in the presence of the woman who will take Set over from her. The two women hold hands and realize the nature of the transfer. Lola thanks Grey and goes on her way unencumbered by the man whom she had ceased to understand.

Chapter 12 is a vision or dream in which Billy the Kid comes to Set-angya to pay his respects and earn Set-angya's approval. Set-angya admires the speech Billy declaims, but, as it turns out, it was written by Grey. Set-angya tells Billy that he died in the proper way. The next morning, Grey goes outside to pray and then draws lines on the red ground that describe the journey that she and Set are about to undertake.

Analysis

Set's transformation is now well underway. We see in his interaction with Dr. Terriman that he no longer has a reasonable measure of restraint; bothered by the doctor's attempts to analyze his psyche, he lashes out violently. In his actions Dr. Terriman sees a delusional man who is self-centered and capable of great violence. Interestingly, however, Lola understands that Set's transformation is real and that he is not a man preoccupied with being a bear, but a bear preoccupied with being a man. As when she saw lucidly to the meaning of Set's paintings, often understanding him better than he understood himself, Lola is able to see Set's transformation as real and weighty. We do not know what it means, in any precise sense, that Set is becoming a bear. We see him

become brusquer and behaving in animalistic ways, but are we to assume that he literally is metamorphosing into a bear? This question will remain unanswered to the end.

Lola's ability to see to the heart of a situation is on display again when she and Set finally go to the reservation. Grey has summoned Set through her incantations and rituals, and though she has had no communication with Set, she is confident that he will heed her summons. When he comes accompanied by Lola, Grey takes possession of him simply and without words, and Lola understands what has happened. Far from being jealous or angry, Lola understands that this is what ought to be. She holds hands with Grey and in their contact is a moment of benediction and friendship.

This is not the first time we have seen unconventional and deep bonds between two unlikely people. Recall Grey's relationship with Kope'mah. Toward the end, when Kope'mah's speech had become indistinct, Grey still did not strain to understand her because the communication that was occurring was occurring at a wordless level. Words created a rhythm and a vector for something decidedly non-verbal between the two women.

In Grey's fantasies of Billy the Kid, also, we see a strange bond between Billy and his pursuer Pat Garrett, which Momaday calls the bond of death. This bond is for the two men a bond stronger than friendship. The idea that such a bond could be real and good in its way is only rendered coherent in the context of the worldview Momaday has intimated through The Ancient Child. This is a worldview in which suffering and delight can be wedded in a yet deeper experience of reality, and in which one's tie to history and myth places one in an ordered relation to the cosmos.

Vocabulary

peering, teamster, principle, goodwill, glimpse, considerable, renunciation, squalls, methodically

Book 3, Chapters 1-5

Summary

Chapter 1 again relates the story of the boy who came into the Piegan camp only to disappear the next morning. After the boy's disappearance, hunters would return from the woods with stories of encountering the bear-boy. One hunter said that he had been paralyzed by the bear's presence, and that the bear had come up to him and lain his head on his genitals. In that moment, a deep understanding passed between hunter and bear, both of whom were without fear. Then the bear cried in a human voice.

The last paragraph of Chapter 1 concerns Tsoai, the great tree stump tied to the myth of the boy-turned-bear. Every man begins his day by casting his eyes on Tsoai and acknowledging its existence. This acknowledgement reminds the man that everything is at it should be in the world.

In Chapter 2, Set and Grey set off for Lukachukai, Grey's childhood home among the Navajo. They take a pick-up truck, and Grey drives. Set tells Grey that she is beautiful and she responds that she has good genes from the Kiowa and Navajo and therefore must be beautiful. Set comments on the crudeness of her language, and she responds that she is able to talk in a refined way if she pleases.

Grey tells Set that he will probably like her mother and sister, but that it will take some time for them to warm to him. Set wonders aloud why he is making this journey, and Grey tells him that it is because he is Set. Set affirms his identity.

Grey tells Set about her mother and sister, both of whom are old fashioned but anachronistic also, in their ability to navigate the modern world.

On the second day of their drive, Set says that he has begun to feel much better and healthier. Grey agrees, but soon Set has to ask Grey to pull over and he vomits repeatedly on the side of the road. Grey tries to comfort him and he reacts angrily. He finds that he cannot cry, but can only emit a low guttural sound.

Grey drives them to the ranch of Perfecto Atole, the man to whom she lost her virginity as an adolescent. She speaks cryptically to him about the role he must perform in Set's transformation and Perfecto, who flirts with her, finally agrees. Perfecto drinks peyote tea and prepares himself for the strange ritual he will perform. He mounts his stallion and gallops after Set. Set tries to run away but it is impossible; Perfecto knocks him down with a hit to the throat using a bear paw. Set experiences an anger beyond anything he has ever experienced. He transforms his anger into a morning prayer, and that day he and Grey set out again for Lukuchukai.

By Chapter 3, Grey and Set have arrived at Lukuchukai. Grey is transformed instantly once she is back in the camp of her Navajo mother. She becomes domestic, feminine, and bears a different kind of strength than she did with the Kiowa. Set's transformation

also continues. He begins to run and regain his health. He is gradually accepted by Grey's mother and sister, and is wholeheartedly accepted by Grey's niece Nanibah.

Lela, Grey's mother, asks Set if he wants to marry her daughter, and he replies that he does. It is arranged and soon they are wed.

Chapter 4 tells the story of Worcester Meat's death. Jessie and Milo want to tend him and ask him to stay in Kope'mah's bed, but Worcester prefers to die alone. He goes to his own cabin and Jessie and Milo leave him with provisions, saying that they will return to see if his already dead in three days. On the second day, Worcester goes outside and happily walks in his garden before falling dead.

We learn in Chapter 5 that Grey is pregnant. Set and Grey have settled into a natural rhythm. At night, both channel their wisdom, Set as the bear and Grey as the grandmother.

Analysis

Set's transformation accelerates in this section, though the movement is one into a destiny which remains unknown to the reader. We know he is becoming a bear, but just what this means is unclear. More clear is the fact that Set is regaining is health and his connection to the earth. He is now a husband and a father, no longer a tortured artist.

We no longer hear anything about Set's art. We know that when he first arrived at Lukuchukai, he was still drawing and painting, but by the time of the wedding there is no mention of his art. Does he still paint? Is he still an artist? One interpretation is that Set's art has been transformed as well; no longer does he need to express himself in the medium of canvas and paint; life itself has become an art, and his connection to the earth and himself has rendered artistic expression gratuitous.

Grey's own transformation is also noteworthy. Upon arriving in Lukuchukai, she undergoes an instantaneous transformation into a traditional woman after the fashion of her mother and sister. No longer the wild tomboy, her wisdom is now understated. Her being is deeper, somehow, as she no longer needs the trappings of masculinity and power to assert her own identity. It is as if her life among the Kiowa was a chapter in a story that had to be told. She had to become the strange, strong medicine woman for a time in order to lure Set home and effect his own transformation, but now that the transformation has been completed, she has moved on to the next chapter of their life together.

Vocabulary

utensils, mementos, remotely, assumptions, coordination, suspenseful, descriptive

Book 4, Chapters 1-2 and Epilogue

Summary

Chapter 1 is in the lyric voice of the native myth. It is a brief account of the movement of a people as a result of wars and other disasters. Those who come in their wake find the charred wood of fires, the bones of birds, and the tracks of a great bear.

In Chapter 2, Set has gone to the area around Tsoai on a spiritual journey. He has had nothing but tea for four days, and he settles in a clearing. He sees in his mind's eye Grey, who is swollen with their unborn child. He is filled with love for her, and then his mind turns to the story of the bear. He is the boy chasing after his sisters, and they are running toward the wood. They are all laughing and delighted as he pretends to be a bear. Suddenly, he feels a change in himself and sees fear come over his sister's faces. Their faces become like masks and he is overcome by a great a loneliness.

In the Epilogue, we are told that Koi-ehm-toya's great-great-grandson became a renowned maker of shields. He never saw Tsoai but knew Tsoai in himself. The last of his dreams was of children moving toward a wall of woods.

Analysis

The last section of The Ancient Child takes us into the mythic world. The lyrical voice of the final two chapters and the epilogue force us to confront, for the last time, the meaning of the bear myth and of Set's transformation into the bear.

We have seen variants of the bear motif throughout the work, but in the end the myth we are dealing with is that of the Kiowa, a plains people. The most explicit and lucid explanation of the bear motif was that of Dr. Terriman, which the reader may recall prompted Set to throw a vase in his face. The bear represents the human unconscious; it is an index of the tensions and struggles that mark every human psyche and every human society. The story is not a happy one: a boy becomes a bear, pursues his sisters, and all eight are lost forever. But from this tragedy emerged the great tree stump Tsoai and the stars of the Big Dipper, both of which are markers of the order, grandeur, and beauty of the natural world.

The Kiowa—as with other non-industrialized peoples—had to live in close proximity to nature. Modern trappings did not shield them from the powerful forces that create and destroy. We hear throughout the book about powerful storms, and this is no accident. They are a reminder of the savagery of nature and the need for humans to humbly find ways to shield themselves, both physically and spiritually, from the ravages of a cosmos infinitely greater than themselves.

The bear then, embodies what is difficult in the relations among people. The bear is an index of the strife than can grow between men and women, and the difficulties that

arrive both among and between peoples. Sexual frustration and sexual violence figure large here, and the fact that Set and Grey have both been victims of sexual abuse is also no accident.

In the end, both Set and Grey are bears of a sort, and in bearing the burden of the difficult in social existence, they defend their people from the greatest threat of all: reality. They are consummately mythic beings and, as such, they bear a truth that transcends the bland violence of the real. As artists and visionaries they sustain their people's history and rituals and, beyond sustaining them, breathe life into them. Their function can be likened to that of Set-angya, the ancestor whom we learned was the leader of the bravest Kiowa men responsible for defending the tribe.

Set-angya was a man contemptuous of death, and on his shoulders rested the burden of protecting his people. Without him, all was lost. The society would have disintegrated in the face of the ever-present threats of man, beast, and nature. The defense that Set and Grey provide is of a different order; rather than defending the physical life of a people, they defend the spiritual life of a people. In this defense lies the essential meaning of the bear, and the key to The Ancient Child.

Vocabulary

tentative, willows, debris, subsided, vertical, fissures, stallion, loneliness

Characters

Locke Setman

Locke, known as Loki in childhood and Set in adulthood, is the book's central character. He is a painter who lives in modern-day San Francisco. He has achieved a great measure of professional success, but does not know who he really is and struggles to remain authentic despite the pressures of the commercial art world. More and more, he finds his art being dictated by the desires of critics and collectors rather than by his own internal vision. After receiving a cryptic telegram informing him of his grandmother's death, he goes to the Kiowa reservation to find that the grandmother, Kope'mah, is already dead. There, he meets the young Kiowa-Navajo woman Grey, who gives him a medicine bundle that will eventually be the source of his transformation into the bear of Kiowa myth. Set's mother died giving birth to him and his father died in an accident when he was seven years old. He spent some time in a Catholic orphanage before being adopted by Bent, a philosophy professor who remains an important force in Set's life to the end. By the end of the book, Set has married Grey and regained his health in his new life at Lukuchukai, Grey's childhood home among the Navajo.

Grey

Grey is 19 years old when the novel begins. She is a remarkably beautiful half-Kiowa half-Navajo woman who appears among the Kiowa suddenly and forms a strong bond with Kope'mah. She takes care of the old woman on her deathbed and learns much from the wise and powerful medicine woman. After Kope'mah's death, Grey becomes a medicine woman herself. She is wild and something of a tomboy. She was a voracious reader as a child, and her knowledge of the life of Billy the Kid is transformed in her imagination into an extend series of scenes in which she places herself in the story of Billy the Kid. She imagines herself as his lover and decides eventually to write a prose poem celebrating his life. Writing the book represents a rite of passage for Grey, who feels that she is ready to let go of this fantasy life and become a woman. Grey first encounters Set when Set comes after receiving the cryptic telegram about Kope'mah. She gives him a medicine bundle entrusted to her by the grandmother, which is to help effect his transformation into a bear. Later, she draws Set to her by using rituals and building an altar, and she takes him with her to the Navajo camp, where they are married and, by the end of the book, awaiting their first child.

Lola Bourne

Lola is one of Set's lovers. She is a piano teacher and a cataloguer of rare books. She first meets Set at a gallery exhibition where she purchases a painting of his that is considered very disturbing. Set is impressed by her interpretation of his painting and, later, is struck by her beauty and grace. Though Lola is a social butterfly and Set is

more of a reclusive artist, they find a way to co-exist and attain a certain stability and intimacy. Eventually, Lola will travel with Set to the Kiowa reservation, where she will leave him in the care of Grey. Though she mourns his loss, she is relieved to regain her independence after having to struggle with Set's mental deterioration after the death of his adoptive father, Bent.

Bent Sandridge

Bent is Set's adoptive father and a philosophy professor. He is a man consummately and unflinchingly honest. He nurtures Set's life as an artist and does not allow him to indulge in empty excuses when he begins to struggle with artistic authenticity. Bent dies after a massive stroke while Set is in Paris for a gallery showing.

Alais Sancerre

Alais is the director of the Colombes Gallery in Paris. She is a beautiful and charming woman. She first meets Set in New York at a show of his, where she admires his art. After his showing in her gallery, the two go to her apartment and have sex. It is while Set is at her apartment that he misses the messages from Lola Bourne informing him of Bent's second and fatal stroke.

Sister Stella Francesca

Sister Stella Francesca is a strange figure from Set's time in the orphanage. Set says that he loved her because there was nobody else to love. She sexually abuses Set, telling him that it is a punishment for having a loose and uncontrollable tongue.

Billy the Kid

Billy the Kid is a historical criminal of the Old West, known simultaneously as a dangerous man and a beloved folk hero. He is the subject of Grey's fantasy life, in which she fancies herself his lover. He is a brave and good man, and meets his end at the hands of Pat Garrett after making love to Paulina Maxwell.

The Maxwells

The Maxwells are a family that harbors Billy the Kid. Paulina Maxwell is Billy's lover.

Pat Garrett

Pat Garrett is a sheriff who makes it his mission to hunt down Billy the Kid. He captures him once, but Billy soon escapes from the Lincoln County Jail. He finally kills Billy in the dark at the Maxwell home, after Billy asks, stumbling in the dark, “Quien es?”

Murphy Dicks

Murphy Dicks is the son of Dwight Dicks, who is Worcester Meat’s lease man. Murphy and Grey have a casual sexual relationship, and Grey uses sex to get Murphy’s horse, whom she renames Dog.

Dwight Dicks

Dwight Dicks is Murphy Dicks’ father. He rapes Grey and is circumcised by her as retribution. He learns his place and comes to respect Grey’s authority.

Jessie and Milo Mottledmare

Jessie is Kope’mah’s granddaughter and Milo is her husband. Grey lives across the creek from them. Jessie was responsible for taking care of Kope’mah before Grey came to the Kiowa reservation, but it is only to Grey that Kope’mah has ever spoken her heart. Jessie is not a jealous woman, but she is ashamed of her side role in Kope’mah’s final days. Milo is an uncomfortable but good man who assists his wife and Grey in the enactment of medicinal rituals.

Objects/Places

Kiowa Reservation

The action of the novel is largely divided between the Kiowa Reservation and San Francisco. Grey, the Mottledmares, the Dicks, and several other incidental Kiowa characters live on the reservation.

San Francisco

Set lives in San Francisco throughout much of the novel. There he is a reputed and successful artist. He moved there as a young child after being adopted by Bent Sandridge. Set enjoys his life in San Francisco but longs for something else.

Medicine Bundle

The medicine bundle is a ritual package of herbs along with a bearskin and the dried penis of a wolf. Kope'mah entrusts the bundle to Grey to give to Set. It is meant to effect his transformation into a bear. When Grey hands it to Set, a strange power passes between the two.

Dog

Dog is Grey's horse. Dog is often present in the narrative as Grey rides from place to place. At one point he is characterized as an embodiment of the storm spirit.

Peyote

Grey uses peyote tea to induce hallucinations and visions during rituals. She uses the hallucinogen when attempting to call Set to the reservation in his time of illness.

The Plains

Though the Kiowa reservation is in the Plains, the Plains encompasses a much broader area, as well as a broader idea. Grey thinks of the Plains of times gone by as the pinnacle of human living; the wide open spaces and freely grazing animals represent for her a level of engagement with the landscape that has been detracted from by the incursions of modernity and private property.

Centaur

The centaur is a curious figure in Set's paintings. Set himself does not recognize his drawing as that of a centaur, but Alais Sancerre does, and Set agrees with her. The centaur—an animal half-man, half-horse—represents transformation and metamorphosis: central themes in the novel.

Themes

Transformation

The central and most insistent theme of The Ancient Child is that of transformation. The bear myth is the first and clearest bearer of this theme. In it, a young boy becomes a bear who chases his sisters until they are born into the heavens and become the stars of the Big Dipper. Set's own transformation forms the core of the narrative. A successful artist, Set struggles to come to terms with the dictates of financial success. Adrift in a world that has no inherent order or narrative, Set can take hold of his identity only through a transformation. Though he has had no experience with the Kiowa since he was a boy of 7, Set's story is tied to the Kiowa through the person of Grey. Grey has her own transformations throughout the book. She journeys to the Kiowa reservation from Lukuchukai, land of the Navajos, to care for Kope'mah and become a medicine woman. Later, she abandons the fantasies of her girlhood and comes into her own as a wild and powerful woman. Finally, upon return to her childhood home she becomes an understated but still powerful woman of great sagacity. She, too, finds her identity through a transformation into the wife of the bear.

The Power of Myth

Another theme that looms large in the work is that of myth's power to transform experience. Note that embedded within this theme is theme of transformation, which is refracted in many of the book's aspects. The myth of the bear punctuates and structures the narrative, but, beyond this, Momaday treats the issue of myth more explicitly. In the story of the boy who comes to the Piegan camp, we see the clearest exposition of myth's power. The people are devastated by the boy's disappearance and worry about his wellbeing. They are distraught and despondent and there is seemingly nothing that can be done to assuage their suffering.

One day, however, an elder of the tribe simply asks how they are to believe in the boy. His question suggests that there is doubt as to the boy's identity. Perhaps he was not a boy at all: perhaps he was a bear cub, and he has gone back into the woods whence he came. The way that this myth operates is instructive: the elder does not try to persuade the people that nothing happened—that there was a moment of collective delusion. He simply poses a question that prompts the people to question their interpretation of reality.

In other words, he takes something real (the experience of the people) and transforms it into something otherworldly and strange (a talking bear cub) simply by posing a question. Myth is powerful because it is based on reality, and, indeed can be seen as the bearer of a truth that transcends reality. Perhaps the boy was a boy and not a bear, but had the people not turned to doubt and fantasy in order to cope with their grief, they would not have created a myth which, being full of possibility and charged with the

supernatural, could be endlessly explored and plumbed for meanings. The task of maintaining the power of myth in a world so steeped in the literal and the expedient falls to Set and Grey, at least in their own community.

Authenticity and Identity

Set is quite clearly the character through which Momaday most directly expresses his own struggles and anxieties as an artist. Like Set, Momaday was raised between two worlds. Set's connection to his tribal home has been severed through the deaths of his parents, and he has found his way in San Francisco as a well-regarded and sophisticated postmodern artist. Still, something links him to his past, and when it becomes clear that he cannot stand up under the numbing pressure of professional success, he must return home to reclaim his essence and thereby remain an authentic artist.

The struggle for authenticity lies at the heart of the book, and transformation is the answer to this struggle. The two themes, then, are inextricably linked at it is only in light of the other that each can be understood. It is difficult, however, to give authenticity any precise definition. We can say that it has something to do with independence and fealty to an inner vision. We know that Set experiences the world in a unique way (and it can be argued that all good artists do, and perhaps that everyone has the potential to do so) and that he struggles to make material his vision. The artistic struggle would exist independent of extenuating factors, but under the additional pressures of demands from critics and collectors, Set begins to lose his soul, as he puts it.

The vision of identity and authenticity that Momaday offers us by the end of the novel is at once extremely simple and extremely complex. It is simple insofar as it is dictated by one's name. Set's name means bear in Kiowa, and in this name lies his essence. This identity, however, is also very complex because it is an authenticity that is wordless, deep, ancient and mythic. It combines the very many indescribable aspects of human experience: grief and delight, struggle and triumph, power and subjugation, strength and weakness, history and myth, reality and fantasy. Set discovers his authenticity and his identity in the bear, but this simplicity belies a complexity of meaning. Who is the bear? Quien es? The answer lies between and among the words that comprise the prose-poem that is The Ancient Child.

Style

Point of View

We are most often taken into the psyches of Set and Grey throughout the novel, though we sometimes venture into the minds of peripheral characters like Dwight Dicks or Jessie Motteldmare. Only when we inhabit the mental space of our main characters, however, do we slip into a unique first-person voice. By marking the distinction between the two central characters and the rest of the cast in this way, Momaday marks them as unique. Their quality of people set-apart and as bearers of something sacred is what draws the two together and makes their independent but ultimately converging journeys so compelling.

Setting

The book is set on the Kiowa reservation, the Navajo reservation, and San Francisco, with two brief scenes in New York City and Paris. As important as the geographic setting of the novel, however, is its positioning in the spatial world of myth, history, reality and fantasy. Much of the novel is devoted to extended fantasies of Grey's imagined life with Billy the Kid. The landscape of these fantasies reveals much about Grey's hopes. In this landscape she admires her beauty and carries out the story of her romance with a singular individual. Set, too, moves between the spaces of reality and imagination. After Bent's death, in particular, Set begins to inhabit an internal world charged with his impending transformation. His journeys into this alternate geography are what prompt Dr. Terriman to deem him a self-centered man.

Language and Meaning

The book is composite in its style. It is neither all prose nor all poetry, and the voice shifts from character to character and between reality and fantasy. This multi-layered quality reflects the complexity of identity in general and, specifically, of Native American identity in the modern world. Ancient myths remain relevant, but so too do postmodern existential struggles. By shifting between mythic voice, prose narration, and fantastical poems, Momaday is able to convey something of this complexity.

Structure

The book is unusual in that it consists of a series of fairly brief vignettes. Some chapters are composed of scarcely more than a few sentences, and each has a title that is drawn from the chapter itself. The novel is further divided into four books, each of which marks an important moment in the narrative. The structure can be likened to a piece of jewelry, or even the medicine bundle itself: it is a collection of seemingly disparate elements that together form an enigmatic but profound whole.

Quotes

In the distance there were the voices of children. The air was very still. Paulita Maxwell, Pete's eighteen-year-old sister, did not weep, could not, though her heart was breaking. She kept to the darkness, her eyes open wide, as if to see something there take shape, the invisible become visible. She felt her skin tighten and become as hard and brittle as pottery. She believed that if someone should touch her she would shatter. (1, Book 1)

The horse Dog bolted, and butterflies sprang from the grass. They rose to spangle the sky, to become the prisms and confetti of the sun, to make a wide, revolving glitter, an illumination on the air like a magnified swarm. He beat his hooves into the rosy earth, throwing up clods like hail. He raced along with his head and tail high, making a streak like smoke on the skyline. Then, dispassionately, he returned to the girl on the knoll and began to graze. (7, Book 1)

Set imagined it was to please, but it was to astonish God that he painted. His presumption and arrogance were pronounced and dangerous, for they would certainly lead to the Sin of Despair, thence to death and nothingness. Bent said so, half in jest, only half. Rather, as Set himself said on occasion, he painted in vain, in order to relieve the terrible boredom of God. He expounded: God's boredom is infinite. Surely we humans, even with our etiquette and our institutions and our mothers-in-law, ceased to amuse Him many ages ago. What sustains Him is the satisfaction, far deeper than we can know, of having created a few incomparables - landscapes, waters, birds and beasts. He takes particular pride in the stars, and it pleases Him to breathe havoc upon the oceans. He sighs to the music of the desert at dawn. The eagle and the whale give Him still to ponder and admire. And so must he grieve for the mastodon and the archaeopteryx. And the bear - ah! He used both hands when he made the bear. Imagine a bear proceeding from the hands of God! (13, Book 1)

Lola Bourne bought one of his paintings, an acrylic on paper entitled 'Night Window Man.' It was a strange piece, even to Set, and it was powerful. It was a bright green frame, a window, in which was a roiling blue and gray background, a thick, ominous depth; and from this there emerged a figure, a grotesque man with red hair and red dress, approaching. Set had begun with nothing but color in mind; it had taken form quickly and of itself, as it were. He thought well of it, but he supposed it would not sell. . . . "'Yes,' said Set, pleased. 'What do you suppose he's up to, the little man?' "'I think he's about to be transformed,' she answered. (21, Book 1)

Set studied the drawing and applied paint carefully to Grey's face. His had was not steady, but he did a reasonably good job under the circumstances. She was standing so close, looking into his eyes, and her skin was so smooth - and she was so beautiful. What he was doing seemed a very honorable and dignified and intimate thing. There was a slight cleft in her chin, and the daub left the impression of two opposing, black half moons. Jessie and Milo were looking on with interest and approval. Milo had emerged from the tent in the full regalia of the society. He wore a roach headdress, a brilliant red and blue cape, and long black stockings. Even in this impressive uniform, he

was a comic caricature of a warrior. Like Worcester Meat, Milo was an original. (22, Book 1)

He had been afraid of Bent, as he had been afraid of Sister Stella Francesca from the first. But then he loved her, for he was a child, and there was no one else to love. (24, Book 1)

We need good fathers, Bent. Be my father. I had a strange dream. Oh, Bent, I had strange dreams. In the mornings I awoke with both dread and relief. Something happened to me. Oh, it wasn't the journey to Cradle Creek - the pilgrimage, as you call it, to Cate Setman's grave - not that singular, impulsive gesture, anyway (but that figures in too, somehow). No, what happened was something that began a long time before that. I don't understand it. I don't know how I can tell you. There is such a darkness, Bent. The world has so much of the night in it. I didn't know. (3, Book 2)

We played at everything, especially words, all the time. We were full of banter and rejoinder, puns upon puns. She would say something, and I would make a play upon it, and then she would carry it on, shamelessly, and these games were to us a sheer delight. Together we knew how to take delight in the world. We were glad to be together, glad in the extreme. We might have been a vaudeville act: 'Do you say so, Mr. Setman?' 'Indeed I do, Miss Bourne.' We wadded napkins and threw them at each other across the restaurant tables of San Francisco. We sang duets in the back seats of taxis. We necked in elevators, at the movies, on street corners. We made spectacles of ourselves. Setman and Bourne. (3, Book 2)

Already she had considerable power, but she would have more, as she learned more of the world. In her dreams the grandmother instructed her. In her dreams the earth, eagles, fishes, coyotes, tortoises, mice, and spiders instructed her. In her dreams she knew of things that had long since been lost to others. She knew of things that lay in remote distances of time and space. She knew of winter impending upon the top of the world, of sheer glacial vastness, of huddled ancients, walking like bears through the mists. And she knew of the ancient child, the boy who turned into a bear. (4, Book 2)

It was wonderful, she thought, that Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid had been friends. They had joked and gambled together. More likely than not they had traded horses and women and confidences. It was wonderful that there came a moment when their friendship ended - each man could probably fix the moment on a calendar or a clock - and from that moment they were deadly enemies. And each man knew, surely, as surely as he knew anything at all, the he would kill the other if he could. Death became a bond between them stronger than friendship. For Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid, death was a covenant. (4, Book 2)

Very slowly he walked through as small meadow toward the nearer of the two sod houses. There were bluebonnets, yellow violets, and strawberries in patches in the grass. He stopped and stood among the wildflowers. Tears came to his eyes, blurring and magnifying his field of vision. And through his tears he perceived the brilliance of the meadow. The wildflowers were innumerable and more beautiful than anything he

had ever seen or imagined. And when he thought his heart could bear no more, a dragonfly rose up, glancing and slipping just above him. In his brimming eyes it divided again and again to effect an iridescent swarm upon the sky. And he took a step, laughing, and another - dance steps. Then he declined slowly to the ground, and he was serene and refreshed in his soul. (4, Book 3)

Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Set is said to have been transformed into a bear by the end of the book. What do you take this transformation to mean? How does this transformation relate to the many tellings of the bear myth throughout the novel?

Topic 2

In The Ancient Child, Momaday devotes a fair amount of description to women's bodies. What does this preoccupation with the physical, as well as the nature of his description, tell us about Locke Setman, or about Momaday himself? Does this obsession with physicality relate to any of the novel's themes?

Topic 3

Both Set and Grey are sexually abused in the novel. Why do you think Momaday thought these scenes were necessary? How does Grey's reaction to her rape evince her own power, and how does this relate to the rest of her sexual experience?

Topic 4

By the end of the book, it is unclear whether Set is still a painter. Do you think he is? How do you interpret the book's epilogue in relation to this question?