In the Presence of the Sun: Stories And Poems 1961-1991 Short Guide

In the Presence of the Sun: Stories And Poems 1961-1991 by N. Scott Momaday

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Contents

In the Presence of the Sun: Stories And Poems 1961-1991 Short Guide....1
Contents....2
Characters....3
Social Concerns....5
Techniques....6
Themes....7
Key Questions....9
Literary Precedents....10
Related Titles....11
Copyright Information....12

Characters

The middle two sections, "The Strange and True Story of My Life with Billy the Kid" and "In the Presence of the Sun: A Gathering of Shields," focus on two disparate aspects of the American West: the legend of Billy the Kid and the material folklore behind the highly-decorated plains shields.

The Billy the Kid collection contains both poems and short stories In the preface "A Word on Billy the Kid."

Momaday establishes the physical reality of the famous outlaw: his date and place of birth, family, aliases; he also establishes the facts regarding Sister Blandina, who met Billy the Kid twice in his lifetime. However, Momaday announces his caveat: "All else of what follows is imagined; nonetheless, it is so." What follows, then, are Momaday's adult versions of the stories that he heard as a boy living in Jemez, the stories he told himself about riding along with Billy the Kid. Yet the epigraph, a couplet, indicates that the other characters in his rhyme are "Death and Death's dog, Time." Clearly, this is more than Momaday's walk through memory lane, and Billy the Kid is more than fodder for a boy's fantasies.

Throughout the collection the narrator's identity is fluid: white, Native American, Westerner, hero, observer— as fluid as Momaday's own identity.

And his exploration of Billy the Kid is equally probing yet mysterious. For example in "The Man in Black," Momaday gives a detailed physical description of Billy the Kid. His black clothing might have been dramatic or ominous; instead it pointed out a sense of somberness, "as if the Angel of Death had long ago found out his name." Beyond his teeth or lips or eyes, he struck the narrator as being a creature of instinct, of survival, like a shark. This description of Billy the Kid is not atypical of an outlaw or criminal.

But Momaday's exploration of Billy the Kid does not leave us with a stereotypical Western outlaw. In the poem "He Reckons Geologic Time According to His Sign," he records a moment when Billy the Kid discovers a fossil fish embedded in rock and ponders upon the significance of an existence that is made permanent. This is not unlike Billy's own permanent existence in legend. Or, in "Henry McCarty Witnesses His Mother's Marriage 1 March 1873," Momaday explores the family life of Billy the Kid before his outlaw days, and the connections made in his mind between beauty and despair, between age and pain. Through other poems and short stories, Momaday reveals a thoughtfulness in the outlaw, a man of remarkable charm and politeness, a man aware of having made his mark upon the world, and who was marked by his experiences.

These mysterious contradictions as well as great detail in Momaday's recreation of the Billy the Kid stem from Momaday's exploration of the legend of Billy the Kid — the experiences, nuances and emotions that the stories of the outlaw inspire in the imaginations of readers and listeners today.

And his exploration of this legend is not limited to this collection of poems and stories. Billy the Kid also converses with a great Kiowa chief in The Ancient Child (1989) which also adds new dimensions to the character of Billy the Kid.

This not the only case where Momaday has explored his native leaders and chiefs. His most in-depth exploration of the Kiowa warriors and their personalities is depicted in the third seetion "In the Presence of the Sun: A Gathering of Shields." This combination of ink drawings and short stories was originally printed as a signed, limited letterpress edition by the Rydal Press in 1992. Reprinted in this text, Momaday makes available this collection of shields to a wider audience.

The shield itself was made of dried buffalo hide mounted on a round wooden frame about 24" in diameter.

The shield was nominally a piece of armor; more significantly, it was medicine and a unique work of art. Momaday points out that the shield is the Plains warrior's "personal flag, the realization of his vision and his name, the object of his holiest quest, the tangible expression of his deepest being" (74). Because the shield is so deeply personalized, the shield is also a mask.

It discloses the reality beyond appearance, thus it is a spiritual weapon, a physical representation of medicine, of the warrior's power. Additionally, each shield has its own story which, to be properly told, requires fasting on the part of the listener and audience, is told in groups of four stories, and only in the presence of the sun.

Each shield of the sixteen in this cycle is distinctively decorated; unfortunately the richness of detail is lost in the black-and-white-prints. However, many of the stories are not about the images on the shields. Rather, some involve the making and giving of shields, or the crucial of someone's life: the birth of a son to inherit the shield, the trading of horses for a dowry, the loss of a son to wars with hostile tribes and with whites. These stories, along with the shields, encompass all aspects of their lives, serving as a still-life portrait of Native American life.

Social Concerns

Momaday's broad perspective of thirty years of creative life lends him a vision of history that is unique: through the arts he sees his people before Columbus, the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the last Kiowa Sun Dance in 1887, the assassination of Kennedy, the march of AIDS and environmental damage across the face of the land. Momaday's poetry reflects the sweep of his life: from his impressive childhood among various Indian traditions to his inspiring adult travels in Europe. These diverse interests are reflected in his poetry. As Momaday comments, "if you look closely into these pages, it is possible to catch a glimpse of me in my original being."

This power to see the sweep of history, one's own time, and one's own "original being" comes through the imagination combined with words.

Momaday originated the phrase "the man made of words." He reminds us that we are all made of words: not only reading and writing, but also conversations, stories, songs, rituals, memory and thought. All these constitute our lives. Momaday also delights in the sound and the sense of words. His poetry forces the boundaries in the meanings of words and challenges our expectations about nature, Native American culture and the genre of poetry.

Techniques

The book is divided in four sections: "Selected Poems," "The Strange and True Story of My Life with Billy the Kid," "In the Presence of the Sun: A Gathering of Shields," and "New Poems." These sections show a variety of forms, tones and content in the poetry and short stories. His early work is in syllabic poetry, which is based on a number of syllables per line, rather than on the structured meter of rhyme of traditional poetry. This form allowed him more freedom of expression than rigid meters imposed; additionally, some arrangements of this syllablic poetry resembles the rhythms of Indian verse translations and oral traditions.

Ivor Winters, Momaday's mentor at Stanford, focused him on morality and reason as central literary expressions, rather than the emotion, association and connotation of the Symbolists.

Winters also expected form and control, and insisted that form was not outside the aesthetic or moral judgments. Nor was form to to be simply imitative or expressive: to explore chaotic or fragmented life in chaotic or fragmentated language was an intellectual cop-out and linguistically selfdefeating. Rather, Winters asserted that the challenge of post-Symbolist poetry, as he called it, is to explore a rational and sensory universe by pushing language to its most fluid, most complex relationship between words. Momaday agreed with Winters's philosophical and aesthetic positions, but his original talent was not stifled by his mentor. He fused this training with his inheritance of Native American language and ritual and his heritage of Southwestern landscapes and peoples.

Momaday's most recent poetry demonstrates a broader exploration of form, tone and content, particularly in a series of heroic couplets: iambic pentameter lines rhymed in pairs. These rhymed pairs are pithy epigrams; some clearly are epitaphs commenting on deceased persons embodying contemporary values and concerns, including sex and procreation, beauty, ambition and hard work. Clearly Momaday brings these values into question, prompting the reader to explore the positive and negative aspects of each value.

Themes

Momaday's sympathies for the environment are not political; rather, he asserts that the human relationship with nature is a spiritual and aesthetic one. Nature itself is indifferent to us; rather, we are enriched by our response to nature — its beauty and mystery — particularly as it enhances our imagination and our art.

Unlike many writers of the American West, Momaday does not romaticize Nature's response to humans: Nature is indifferent, impassive; death and life are both natural. One of Momaday's illustrations of this is in "Comparatives." The first stanza is a fish gasping on the sunlit deck of a ship, the second stanza is that of a desert fossil of an other fish trapped in the throes of the same silent agony. The final stanza compares both fish to the wind on waves: "mere commotion / mute and mean." Similarly, "Angle of Geese" discusses the disconnection between Nature and human emotion, and our forgotten connection with death, another aspect of Nature. Momaday once prefaced this poem with the phrase "For a friend on the death of his child."

The poem questions our conversations surrounding such loss. He notes that the words we say come from custom and courtesy; they cannot offer real understanding. In the second half of the poem, the narrator sees an angle of geese winging away. Its marvelous symmetry of this seemingly-significant formation, its shape high above the concerns of time and pain is a dramatic example of a spiritual revelation that comes through Nature: an example of transcendance as well as indifference.

Nature not only teaches us to transcend the mysteries of death and loss, but it is mysterious in itself. In Angle of Geese and Other Poems (1974), Momaday published a series of animal poems, the best of which are reprinted in this book. Both "The Bear" and "Buteo Regalis" focus entirely on the "inner self" of the animal, what it is like to be in their skins and feathers. On the surface,"The Bear" is about one's sudden meeting of a bear in the wild and its sudden disappearance. But the poem is more empathetic than this. The bear is old, scarred, in pain, limping, but moves silently, carefully and with courage. While the history and description of the bear is fairly detailed — and the poem is accompanied by one of Momaday's paintings — the solid, mortal bear is also ephemeral, ghostlike. In a similar detailed description, Momaday catches the moment of a hawk swooping upon a rodent. Or, more specifically, he captures the instinctive moment when the prey realizes its danger, and the elegance and imminent danger inherent in the hawk.

Nature is not only a means of spiritual mysteries and epiphanies, it is also source for imagination and art. Merely looking out the window into darkness can tir creative longing and can awaken the infinite possibilities of the imagination, as "Anywhere is a Street into the Night" implies. And the tension between art and nature, between the ideal and the real can also be aroused in the observer's imagination, as seen in "Crows in a Winter Composition." The first stanza shows an imaginary ideal: a clear, soft morning on a white field, a snowy blankness for the mind's play. The interposition of a "mindless" flock of crows interrupts this reverie, making the observer ill at ease, even angry. The

landscape has traditionally been the domain of the artist's eye, but these disruptive crows — the raucous real — are also at home in the landscape.

While Momaday is clearly a master of contemporary forms of art and theory, he is not limited to European forms. He is also a master in interpreting and adapting oral forms of language and Native American symbol systems. He most clearly calls upon the Navajo patterns of poetry: parallel structure, repetition, accretion, and the evocation of the six sacred art and directions (the four cardinal points plus the sky and earth). His early "aboriginal" poems such as "Plainview 2" and "The Delight Song of Tsoai-Talee," and later poems such as "Prayer" and "Four Charms" demonstrate these qualities.

Key Questions

Each of the four sections of the book covers a different phase of Momaday's career; thus it lends itself easily to four different discussions, covering the range of history to legends, the landscape and environment, other cultures and many other avenues.

1. How do the stories bring the shields alive? How do the stories enrich the images?

2. Based on the stories, what aspects of the shield are literal? What is figurative or symbolic? What do you learn about the cosmology of Momaday and of the Plains Indians?

3. How is the shield autobiographical (a material record of a life)?

4. How has Momaday preserved an oral tradition?

5. What legendary qualities of Billy the Kid does Momaday borrow from history?

6. What does he innovate? Do his innovations seem consistent with your understanding of history, sociology, the culture of the American West, etc.?

7. How does Momaday's depictions of the Western landscape compare with other Native American writers? With other writers of the American West?

Literary Precedents

Momaday, mentored by Ivor Winters, was necessarily influenced by his philosophies and style. But Momaday's love of poetry precedes his study with Winters. The antiromantic literature of Frederick Goddard Tuckerman, a contemporary — and intellectual opposite — of the transcendentalists, and of Emily Dickinson are also clear forerunners to his poetry. Of her, Momaday notes that she taught him about "the mystery and the miracle of language" and about capturing the sense of human isolation, tragic finality and intellectual survival.

In addition to his study of the antiromantic poets, Momaday was also clearly influenced by the Symbolists.

Indeed, Winters calls their poetry "post-Symbolist," which also included Wallace Stevens and Valery. Their influences are seen most clearly in his earlier poems.

Finally, he attributes writers such as William Faulkner and Isak Dinesen with teaching him how to tell an involving story which draws the reader into a beloved landscape or region, into a family or community.

Related Titles

Momaday's early poems are previously printed in Angle of Geese and Other Poems and The Gourd Dancer (1976). The Billy the Kid cycle was first published in The American West magazine, complete with color illustrations of Momaday's accompanying artwork.

In the Presence of the Sun: A Gathering of Shields is a limited-edition printing with full-color plates of the shields.

The shield paintings have also been displayed on tour.

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