

Kill Hole Short Guide

Kill Hole by Jamake Highwater

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Characters

Sitko Ghost Horse, also known as Seymour Miller or Sy Miller, is the main character of the final novel in Highwater's "Ghost Horse Cycle."

Through a series of dreams, nightmares, and conversations, the reader learns that Sitko was a Native American artist living with a writer named Erik. Discovered by the art world, Sitko became famous for his paintings, thus fulfilling the prophecy made in *The Ceremony of Innocence* (1985) by the Chief at the Beaver Ceremony. However, when he attempted to paint in a way other than what was expected of a Native American, the rumors of his non-Indian background began. Then "fanatics," claiming the paintings glorified "perversion," threatened to burn the gallery where the art was on display. As Sitko tried to defend his name, his fame vanished. At the same time, a "sickness" descended on the city. Although many of his friends died, Sitko was hardest hit by the death of Eric, his lover, who succumbed to the disease just after publishing his first novel. Sitko fled the city only to be captured and placed in prison.

At first no one, even Patu, the villager who brings him food, will tell Sitko why he is in jail. Finally, Patu tells him that because he arrived on the night of a sacred initiation of the young people, the village must determine whether he is good or evil. If he is good, he will live. If he is evil, he and the children of the village must die.

Searching his life to determine whether he is good or evil, Sitko finds himself dealing with the past of his entire family. At the beginning, he is unsure of himself. He tells Patu that he is "one of the leftover people ...

belong nowhere and I belong to no one. I have no family." A Native American in a white man's world, a homosexual in a homophobic society, and an outsider to mainstream art, he seems adrift. What he does have, however, is a world where "the light is blue." It is this light which carries the "memories endlessly through all the senseless circles of time." As he searches more and more into the past, he begins to understand the myths of his existence.

Patu, Sitko's jailer, is a strong woman of the village and a strong character of the novel. With a combination of male and female characteristics, she is reminiscent of Amana in *Legend Days* (1984), the first novel in the Cycle. It is to Patu that Sitko tries to explain the essence of his existence and the reasons behind his paintings. Patu asks, "What happened to you in the world out there?" and Sitko relives important parts of his past. Yet although Patu is a "strong woman," she has no power over the evil Delito.

Although she can order the One Horn Priests and the Two Horn Priests away from Sitko, she cannot stop his execution.

Social Concerns

Published six years after *I Wear the Morning Star* (1986), which was the third novel in the "Ghost Horse Cycle," *Kill Hole* follows the life of Sitko Ghost Horse after the death of everyone in his family. While the other books in the Cycle detail the history of a family in a chronological progression, this novel begins in the future but returns to incidents from the past, as Sitko searches for the reasons for his survival. Gone are some, but not all, of the Native American myths and legends. In their place are references to twentieth-century writers and the personal mythology of the Ghost Horse family.

The novel seems, in part, to be related to the growth of interest in myths during the 1980s and 1990s which was spurred by a new edition of Joseph Campbell's 1949 classic *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Rollo May's *The Cry for Myth* (1991), Highwater's own nonfiction works such as his *Myth and Sexuality* (1990), television shows such as *Six Great Ideas*, and movies such as *Star Wars*. Thus Sitko Ghost Horse is forced to examine who and what he really is when he is held prisoner by the Two Horn Priests and the One Horn Priests who are trying to decide if he is good or evil. Only when Sitko is able to explore his past and understand his life and the forces that molded him, can he face his future.

Highwater also seems to have written parts of *Kill Hole* in reaction to other events happening in the United States. In response to the controversies surrounding himself and the questions about his Native American ancestors, Highwater employs the vehicle of a novel to show the pain these questions have caused, to make a statement about who he is, and to provide a justification for his work. In other ways, Highwater utilizes this book to look at what happens when a society has forgotten or lost its own myths, censored artistic expression (a la the photographs of Maplethorp and the National Endowment for the Arts), become homophobic, and been consumed by a plague (AIDS). To him, a society that has lost its myths, legends and traditions has lost its roots, and, in doing so, has lost its ability to survive.



Techniques

There is no doubt that part of *Kill Hole* is autobiographical. As Highwater stated in an interview in the November 8, 1992 issue of the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, the novel is a "kind of semi-conscious effort to write my own litany."

He went on to say that it is a "layered book that can be read as a story that intends to imply a lot of other things."

With this as Highwater's purpose for writing the novel, it is not surprising that the book differs greatly from the other novels in the "Ghost Horse Cycle" in that it combines Native American traditions and modern European symbolic and impressionistic realism into a cultural hybrid novel of personal exploration and social criticism.

In a starred review in the September 12, 1992 issue of *Library Journal*, Janet Ingraham called *Kill Hole* an "unsettling portrayal of loss, misunderstanding, and a struggle for identity and purpose." Others have praised it as a subtle, sophisticated, beautiful, and harrowing experience. Michael Lee wrote that "[s]traddling the border between prose and poetry, much of this book reads more like myth than novel; dreamlike in nature, it conveys a richly symbolic story about the power of the imagination in helping an individual confront death and devastation, and portrays the horrors that occur when an entire society refuses to acknowledge that power by punishing its artists and ignoring its storytellers." He went on to call it "both a fascinating book and a flawed novel."

Although *Kill Hole* continues the story of the Ghost Horse Family, it has a different plot structure than those which preceded it. All of them are told in a chronological order with the first two being written about Amana in a "storyteller's style." In the third, Sitko tells his own story in first-person.

In *Kill Hole*, Highwater takes a more modern psychological tone and relies on a series of flashbacks and actual dream sequences to fill in the information from Sitko's past. These take the reader back to actions that occurred in both *The Ceremony of Innocence* and *I Wear the Morning Star* as well as to the events that happened since the latter's conclusion.

In the novel, Highwater uses a combination of allusions and references to both Western and "Primal" cultures.

While the setting is in a remote village, similar to an ancient pueblo, airplanes fly overhead. Native American symbols of the owl, the fox, and the moon appear throughout the novel as do quotations from writers such as Stendhal, Joseph Conrad, and Thomas Mann.

From Joseph Campbell's path of the mythological adventure come the section titles of the book: Departure, Initiation, and Return.



Themes

A recurring theme of Highwater's is that of the outsider in the mainstream society. In the past novels of the "Ghost Horse Cycle," the outsider has been the Native American who is forced to live in a world dominated by the white man. With Kill Hole, the outsider is expanded to include the unconventional artist and the homosexual, both of whom exist beyond the "norms" created by the dominant society.

Highwater also looks at the role that myths play in the world. He contends that, in the past, the family, or tribal myth served as an anchor for people.

Furthermore, myths were created to tell people who they are, where they came from, what their responsibilities are in the world, why there is evil, and how to deal with the evil. However, modern man has rationalized the myths out of existence and has left nothing in its place. Thus, in an increasingly chaotic world, people are left with nothing except their own personal myths.

Sitko Ghost Horse is truly an outsider. Divorced from his past, a homosexual, and an unconventional artist, Sitko is unable or unwilling to relate or respond to the dominant culture or to the traditional Native American cultural expressions of art, theater, poetry, and dance. He is lost. Fleeing the "sickness" in the city, Sitko drives as far as he can, starts walking, and stumbles into a Pre-Columbian desert village while the native tribe is having the ceremony of the Night of the Washing of the Hair. After being taken hostage by the Two Horn Priests, he is kept in an adobe hut and visited by Patu, the man/woman or "Lhamanaye" (man who lives as a woman), of the tribe.

Only an airplane occasionally flying over the pueblo-like village tells him that he is still in the modern world.

Through his dreams and nightmares, Sitko tries to sort out the reasons for his existence; to determine who he really is and his purpose in life. As he struggles to prove his identity to the people of the village, Sitko comes to grips with his own past. Flashbacks to earlier novels and to events happening since the conclusion of *I Wear the Morning Star* provide memories as Sitko tries to piece together and understand his life. He remembers the strength of his grandmother Amana, his years in the welfare orphanage, the disintegration of his family, his father Jamie's murder of his mother Jemina, his father's death in a car crash, the death of his brother Reno, and then the loss of his lover Eric to the "sickness." Like his grandmother Amana in *Legend Days* (1984), Sitko wonders again and again why his life was spared while those that he loved died. Only as he begins to understand his personal mythology and begins to cover the walls of his prison with his art, can he begin to understand himself.

The conflict between the caregiver and the warrior is seen throughout the novel, especially in the characters of Patu and Delito. Compassionate and concerned, Patu tries to understand Sitko. Delito, however, represents power and fear. The leader of the One Horn Priests, Delito is determined to destroy Sitko. When the One Horn Priests



come to kill him, Sitko realizes that "[h]atred was unshakable, but it could not destroy a person who wanted to go on living." He defies the One Horn Priests and later escapes. As he does so, he hears the fox singing the same song that it sang to Amana in Legend Days; and he sees a fox in the desert.

Key Questions

Since Highwater himself admits that this book has several layers of meaning and is open to a variety of interpretations, *Kill Hole* is an excellent book for discussion. In some cases the discussion can be based solely on the novel itself. In others, comparisons and contrasts can be made with other books in the "Ghost Horse Cycle" or with works of twentieth-century European psychological literature which have similar themes or which explore similar ideas.

If the discussion centers around other books in the "Ghost Horse Cycle," comparisons can be made between the lives of Sitko and Amana and the dream sequences that they both experience. The similarities and differences of the male/female in Amana and the male/female in Patu can also be discussed. In addition, there is the question of whether the art of Sitko is able to hold on to the traditions of the Native Americans as well as or better than the oral tales told by Amana. Even the "sickness" that takes Sitko's friends can be compared to the smallpox epidemics that killed many Native Americans by looking at the causes that brought each of them and their effect on culture and traditions.

In looking just at the novel *Kill Hole*, groups can discuss the following: 1. Examine the ways in which Delito can be seen as a death figure in the novel. Why does he appear to Sitko as both an old man and a young man?

What are the differences in his visit in the city and in the village?

2. As in other novels, Highwater uses the fox, and owl and the moon as a symbol. What does each of them represent? When does each of them appear? What does each of them add to the novel?

3. When Patu gives Sitko the bowl, she makes a hole in it. Then she tells him, "I have killed it. Now the spirit of the bowl is free to go with you. Now both the bowl and you, my friend, are free at last." What does she mean? If Sitko is to be executed, in what ways is he free?

4. If Delito is determined to kill Sitko, why does he heal Sitko's leg?

5. In describing a mythological adventure, Joseph Campbell says that "the hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural forces where he penetrates the source of some mysterious power, and finally, he makes his life-enhancing return to the world." Discuss the ways in which Sitko's adventures in this novel are a "mythological adventure." What has happened that he has a "life-enhancing return to the world?"

6. At the end of the novel, Sitko flees from the prison and hurries toward the mountain. He does not see "the obedient shadows trailing doggedly in his footsteps, nor the trail of



cinders and blood that left its terrible blemish upon the earth." What is happening as Sitko flees? Who or what is the "twisted shadow of a man" that follows him?

7. When the nurse brings the morphine for Sitko to give to Eric, why does he hesitate to give it to him?

8. When Sitko and Patu go to the "hearing," why do the people whitewash the walls of Sitko's prison and erase his paintings? How do these actions relate to statements about art which have been made by contemporary society?

9. Why do you think Sitko returns to the meeting chamber after his first escape? What do the books on the altar tell about the tribe that has captured him?

10. What are the similarities between Sitko's brother Reno and Eric? How are their relationships to Sitko similar?

How are they different?

Literary Precedents

Kill Hole is seen by some critics as a Native American response to Albert Camus's *The Plague* (1948), Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (1925), Franz Kafka's *The Trial* (1937), and T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922). All of these are psychological works of literature filled with symbols and sometimes conflicting themes. Highwater himself says that he is "interested in the subterranean streams that flow beneath the surface of things: dreams, intuition, the irrational, spiritual, and visionary impulses that stir our imaginations ... I have always preferred the night and the shadow side of existence." He goes on to express his interest in the "myth and personal" and to try, in his works, to "describe the fragile place where the inner and outer worlds meet."

There can be no doubting the ties between Kill Hole and Kafka's *The Trial* since, with the exception of a Native American name, the first sentences of both novels are the same. Sitko, like Kafka's Joseph K. is condemned for an unnamed crime by a court that he does not understand; and both men have to justify who they are. However, unlike Joseph K., Sitko has the myths and memories of the past to explore.

Similar comparisons can be made to other twentieth century European works. In *The Plague*, Camus presents his characters with a disease like the "sickness" confronted by Sitko in an attempt to have them question their existence. Mann, in *Death in Venice*, examines the place of the solitary artist in society in the face of social decay and death and questions whether man can achieve permanence through art.

With a "night filled with inconsolable cries ... A piercing whine conveying an everlasting, inexpressible misery," the setting of Kill Hole compares to that of *The Waste Land*. In that poem, T. S. Eliot presents the burden of the past, the need for personal history, and the importance of using myths and traditions to find a meaning to life. These are themes similar to those explored by Highwater.

Related Titles

As the fourth book in the "Ghost Horse Cycle," *Kill Hole* continues the story of Amana and the Ghost Horse family. While the books are all interrelated, they are very different. Each can be read on its own, but greater understanding comes if they are read in sequence. In *Kill Hole*, flashbacks and dreams recreate scenes from *The Ceremony of Innocence*, and *I Wear the Morning Star*. Some of the dream sequences in *Kill Hole* are like the visions and dreams had by Amana in *Legend Days*, the first novel of the Cycle.

There are even glimpses of Highwater's award winning novel *Anpao* (1977), even though this book is not part of the "Ghost Horse Cycle." Highwater again uses the Moon as a symbol of evil.

When Sitko leaves the first "hearing," the Moon is combing her long black hair just seconds before she turns on him and "thrusts her frigid fingers deep into his heart." Even the descriptions of her home are similar to those in *Anpao*.

Highwater has written several nonfiction books about personal and societal myths. Works such as *The Primal Mind* (1985) and *Myth and Sexuality* contain some of the same themes as *Kill Hole*.



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