

## The Magic of the Word

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### Abstract

*The novels Ceremony, House made of Dawn and Love Medicine are chosen to demonstrate the function and importance of orality, myths, words and rituals. The investigation of storytelling tradition should be helpful to a meaningful analysis of how literature relates to the world. There is an attempt to draw a line between the Euramerican ("white") and the Indian side, emphasizing the emotionality of the Indians and the comeback to old traditions. The ceremonies, stories and words are a demonstration of life and liveliness. Storytelling and song singing takes on the form of a ceremony, and brings relief and healing of soul.*

Leslie Marmon Silko, Louise Erdrich and Scott Momaday show their audience the great importance of those aspects of life and literature that are hidden to usual thinking, but near the core of living. Some authors are gifted the wonderful skill to show us our world as a new one and change our view at it; they move the horizon.

The focus is on storytelling as inspired by the Native American tradition. The plots of their novels serve as the ground for producing a larger context, an extension to the real world through metastories. The smaller stories fit into a larger story; single parts of the world connect with the whole.

There are elements in the novels *Ceremony*, *House Made of Dawn* and *Love Medicine* that speak of Indians from the inside of tribal culture. This "inside" is represented by stories, stories inside of stories and stories about stories. Robert A. Morace, who takes a closer look into *Love Medicine* and other Erdrich works, states: "In its very structure, *Love Medicine* calls attention to the communal nature of storytelling and to the communal need for story" (43).

The creation of a bigger story is what Silko works with. Her hero, Tayo, is undertaking a quest in his own story but within others. His

quest is not only to find some lost cattle, but also to find himself, representing all the Indians. This way, the story of Tayo meets the story of wider peoples, meaning Indians, but also their meeting with the incoming Europeans - the "white" Americans.

The meeting happens through a kind of communication, a language. Brewster E. Fitz classifies the language Silko has developed in her novels (Donahue, 156): "a perfect 'language of love,' a language that moves beyond the oral/written split and is itself not a language of signification or representation, but of being itself" (1).

Working with the magic of words is not solely the domain of Silko, but it is common to other Native American authors. Momaday shows the value of words through the character of Tosamah, the Priest of the Sun, who talks about his grandmother.

And be assured that her regard for words was always keen in proportion as she depended upon them. You see, for her words were medicine; they were magic and invisible. They came from nothing into sound and meaning. They were beyond price; they could neither be bought or sold. And she never threw words away.

(Momaday, 85)

The priest of the sun is not modest with explanations. When he talks about the beginning of the world according to the Bible, he shifts the whole affair to thinking in the means of quiet, then sound, a word. And the word of God is the world, is the creation, and is the magic. (81) Gretchen Ronnow emphasizes a Lacanian point of view, when he is writing about words and Indian tradition. Lacan is compared to an Indian shaman in the way he regards words.

Much like Ku'oosh, Lacan believed that the word is instituted in the structure of a semantic word, that of a language. The word never has only one use. Every word always has a beyond, sustains several functions, envelops several meanings. (Ronnow, 73)

Using words this way descends from traditional Indian myths. Hertha D. Wong explains that: "As well as family and community stories, Erdrich has incorporated some traditional mythical and contemporary Chippewa narratives, characters, and images into her fiction" (97). Also *Ceremony* and *House Made of Dawn* bring their heroes back through traditional stories, so they are involved in a huge kind of ceremony, which extends beyond one evening, beyond any concept of time.

The tradition of the stories and songs comes from an oral heritage. Each of the novels contains a character that brings stories to life. The singing and storytelling in *House Made of Dawn* is, along with others, provided by Ben, who is best friend to Abel, the main protagonist.

Ben Benally functions as Abel's singer by singing prayers over him which engage the powers of restoration or self-healing....it is clear that Ben told Abel the bear stories in the hospital when he was recuperating from the beating, sang the Horse Song in a story, and sang the '*House Made of Dawn*' prayer on the night before Abel's departure on the train back to New Mexico. (García, 92-3)

When Ben is singing, the form of the song is largely of a different quality than the other text. The same happens in *Ceremony*, where the Indian stories and songs are visually different, formed in stanzas like poetry. This has a special meaning; the form describes something that is close, but at the same time far above from what is happening in the novel. Above the novel are the "real" stories and the reality.

In stories and songs, words are the powerful units. Momaday remembers that even the biblical world begun with a word. Used incorrectly, words can also insult, hurt, and cause unforgivable damage. Words are, Silko suggests, the most powerful weapons for Indians. How Lipsha had understood the words of the Bible reflects a way one can grasp the reality of the world. The Priest of the Sun in *House Made of Dawn* preaches in detail about the importance of the word, thus tells us more about the word and the oral tradition. The word, that is dealt with, such as any word, is something very powerful, because it can change what is happening. Moreover, it can bring something (the world) to life. The change itself is seen as life, which makes the word alive.

Do we realize how much the word is connected to magic? The Eurocentric and white<sup>1</sup> culture has forgotten this. Perhaps that is the reason why poor Nector Kashpaw has to yell his prayers aloud.

We sat down in our pews. Then the rosary got started up pre-Mass and that's when Grandpa filled up his chest and opened his mouth and belted out them words. HAIL MARIE (sic) FULL OF GRACE<sup>2</sup>. He had a powerful set of lungs. And he kept on like that. He did not let up. He hollered and he yelled them prayers, and I guess people was used to him by now, because they only muttered theirs and did not quit and gawk like I did. I was getting red-faced, I admit. I give him the elbow once or twice, but that wasn't nothing to him. He kept on. He shrieked to heaven and he pleaded like a movie actor and he pounded his chest like Tarzan in the Lord I Am Not Worthies. I thought he might hurt himself. Then after a while I guess I got used to it, and that's when I wondered: How come? So afterwards I out and asked him. "How come? How come you yelled?" "God don't hear me otherwise," said Grandpa Kashpaw. (Erdrich, 235)

Lipsha, the narrator at this moment, comments on the situation. His verbalizations carry two intertwining aspects, humorous simplicity together with often tragic, revelations.

I sweat. I broke right into a little cold sweat at my hairline because I knew this was perfectly right and for years not one damn other person had noticed it. God's been going deaf. (Erdrich, 235)

The insight on the word and discourse in general, is that it is the "maker of the world, not its mirror [...]. The world is what we say it is, and what we speak of is the world" (Vizenor, 4) The Priest of the Sun describes how the Word is losing its power through the "white man":

He talks about the Word. He talks through it and around it. He builds upon it with syllables with prefixes and suffixes and hyphens and accents. He adds and divides and multiplies the Word. (Momaday, 94)

How much of the original word has remained is a question. The suggestion is that there is not very much. Is God deaf, or have we lost the power to talk to him, lost the ability "to ask in the right way"? (Erdrich, 236). Once again Erdrich brings the reader to laughter, involving a tragic part; Lipsha is comically tragic and tragically comic:

Besides the dictionary, which I'm constantly in use of, I had this Bible once. I read it. I found there was discrepancies between then and now. It struck me. Here

God used to raineth bread from clouds, smite Philippines, sling fire down on red-light districts where people got stabbed. He even appeared in person every once in a while God used to pay attention, is what I'm saying. (236)

In Lipsha's words, Erdrich also establishes a relationship between Gods of the Europeans and those of the Indians.

Our Gods aren't perfect, is what I'm saying, but at least they come around. They'll do a favor if you ask them right. You don't have to yell. But you do have to know, like I said, how to ask in the right way. That makes problems, because to ask proper was an art that was lost to the Chippewas once the Catholics gained ground. (236)

*House Made of Dawn* is an English translation of the title of a Navajo ceremonial song. In this way the mythical materials are made the core of the book. The material comes from three different nations, Jemez Pueblo, Kiowa, and Navajo (Introduction. *House Made of Dawn* N. Scott Momaday, 1997). Krupat notices that *House Made of Dawn* begins with the traditional invocation of Jemez storytellers: 'Dypaloh'." (2002, 93) Krupat claims this word is of important significance, shifting the whole text into a category different than classic Eurocentric novel.

With a single word, *House Made of Dawn* assumes a place within a Native American literary tradition in which stories have serious responsibilities: to tell us who we are and where we come from, to make us whole and heal us, to integrate us fully within the world in which we live and

make that world inhabitable, to compel order and reality.  
(Krupat, 2002, 92-3)

Susan Scarberry García speaks not only about the beginning word of the novel, but also about the concluding one, which is "Qtsedaba". She states that by doing this, Momaday "is placing his story solidly within oral tradition" (8). Here, García comments that this is the device that Momaday uses to establish the "bond between narrator and audience or writer and reader (8).

Krupat notes that Linda Hogan has also investigated this issue within *House Made of Dawn*. Hogan has written that it: "uses the traditional Native American oral concept of language where words function as poetic process of creation, transformation, and restoration" and that "The author, like the oral poet /singer is 'he who puts together' a disconnected life through a step-by-step process of visualization" (2002, 94).

The novel is composed as a fragmentary mosaic. There are glimpses of memories of different people mixed together with native stories about Tai-me (Momaday, 85), the Kiowa God, that has helped the nation survive and rise. There is a description of a sound that is at first not heard, because there is nobody to listen to it. Once the sound happens, the sound is: exists. This existence of the sound means that the word is, *something is*. The wall has been broken through and a space is filling up. It is an ancient story of the Kiowa people, as they met Tai-me, their bread winner. The story is old and powerful and is told to the Priest of the Sun by his grandmother. The Priest preaches to his audience, trying to explain the difference between white and Indian world.

The difference can also be shown in Abel's deeds. He has killed a white man, because he felt he was obliged to. He would do it again. There is a different perception of the affair from the side of the whites. Abel follows what they make of it. He can see that they use words as weapons against other people. Momaday uses the word *dispose* (102) to show what they do to him with words.

Word by word by word these men were disposing of him in language and they were making a bad job of it. They were strangely uneasy, full of hesitation, reluctance. He wanted to help them. He could understand, however imperfectly what they were doing to him, but he could not understand what they were doing to each other. (102)

Momaday, through the Priest of the Sun, describes the Word, which forms the mind/world. Silko presents it as a story of the Thinking Woman. Thoughts are forming the world. In *Ceremony* it happens through a story, through orality, ceremony and wizard games.

Momaday's contribution is more "white" in a way. This is also in the use of the name *Abel*. Momaday gathers much of the basis of the novel from the Bible. Still, Abel is not a character rooted in the neither white ways nor Christianity. He is an Indian. He does not even attempt the white ways very much. Nonetheless, the novel has its ways to demonstrate that the white culture is another part of the story. If the only argument was that many of the events take place in a city, this could be enough for proving that the culture we read about is as white as it is Indian.

The Indian identity is emphasized here, which obviously is easier seen if contrasted sharply with another. Thoughts form the world and getting to know the world means also formation and formulation. This also works backwards: The world forms the character/person and his thoughts. A story does the same: it informs and forms the listener. Another line from the Priest of the Sun confirms this, when he speaks about his Indian grandmother: "When she told me those old stories, something strange and good and powerful was going on" (Momaday, 95). Retelling the story also is a lively process. It transforms the storyteller, the story and the listener.

There is one more aspect to the word. It is revealed in connection of Tayo's search for real friends. Although he had known that he should beware of Harley, Leroy and Emo, he forgot. He can not help feeling happy and relieved when he sees them approaching on the road: "Leroy's truck. Leroy and Harley. His stomach smoothed out and he felt

loose. He was smiling and suddenly close to tears because they had come when he needed friends most." (Silko, 238)

But the situation soon changes and he is able to realize what they were looking for; their search was after human blood: Tayo's blood. They betray him. Gretchen Ronnow observes a connection to the function of the word: "This betrayal is a function of words which wound easily and which are always devoted to ambiguity since they have no proper meaning" (72). Thus the word can be either good or evil; however it is more likely unbiased, it is a powerful instrument which carries the force of the creator (God), carries the thought, story, and enables the happening of it.

Words are the instruments. Among those instruments, stories are also influenced by other elements. Gerald Vizenor introduces *Narrative Chance* by explaining how landscape and motion function in the stories.

Native American stories are told and heard in motion, imagined and read over and over on a landscape that is never seen at once: words are heard in winter rivers, crows are written on the poplars, last words are never the end. (xiii)

Suggesting that there is never an end to the telling pulls the narrative closer to reality. Krupat is referring to postmodern borders between fact and fiction, and he mentions a "time when the line between history and myth was not very clearly marked. But that is the way things have always been for Native American literatures" (Krupat, 1993, 59). This is exactly what Silko and Momaday do: blur the line between the reader and the story, make the reader involved. This is also discussed in an essay by David L. Moore.

[Silko] leads her readers through the personal ritual of *Ceremony* to sacrifice their egos, their epistemologies, and their ideologies on the rebuilt altar of history [...]. By

assuming the role she builds for them and bearing witness to a different history, recognizing “that theirs was a nation built on stolen land” (Silko 199), they may effect a different reality. (151)

This doubles the effect of the actual Ceremony, which Silko acknowledges by ending the novel with a song that is the end of the *Ceremony*:

Sunrise,

Accept this offering,

Sunrise. (262)

Kimberly Blaeser describes Momaday’s work as “passing the code”: “By his enactment of the reader’s role within the story of the text Momaday essentially teaches the imagination.” (53) There is also a note about the reader as he/she takes part on the literary work by reading it: “The same possibility exists for the reader as they respond to Momaday’s text and co-create the literary work” (53). Though Blaeser is writing about *The way to Rainy Mountain*, this also applies to *House Made of Dawn*.

However, in an orally kept story, changes happen. Change is also what Betonie, the old shaman in *Ceremony*, emphasizes in rituals. Arnold Krupat elucidates how the ceremonies are tightly connected with words:

[...] change is in fact a thoroughly traditional practice, and that oral cultures have always engaged in the sort of unnoticed selective forgetting or updating that can permit them to change while yet remaining the same [...]. Betonie says that the ceremonies are different though the same; they are “traditional.”(2002, 110)

What is the distance between oral story and literature, one might wonder. There are some features that enable seeing the matter in a similar way. Arnold Krupat theorizes about the shift between orally preserved (and thus lived and retold) stories and modern native literatures. The novels of Silko, Erdrich, Momaday and other authors have descended from their orally conveyed predecessors, but have already moved into another field which is more white. In addition, Krupat is referring to the simple act of actually translating and writing the stories down for the first time. He is talking about “the transformation of oral literatures into textual literatures” (2002, 25). Krupat explains how to relate oral and written Native American stories:

Euramericans, to transcribe and translate Native American verbal expressions, must assume that it<sup>3</sup> is in some degree *like* Euramerican (“Western”) literary expression (otherwise it would not be recognizable to “us” as literary art) but also that it is in some degree *unlike* Euramerican (“Western”) literary expression (otherwise it would not take the obvious into account, that it is transmitted orally, in non-Indo-European languages, frequently in ritual or ceremonial performances, and so on). (2002, 25)

The meeting point of the white/Eurocentric and Native American worlds can be seen in the point where mixed blooded Indians put their stories down on paper, in the white/Eurocentric tradition and succeed in making their stories come alive in the minds of the readers. The point is not in the stories being put down or conserved, but in their re-reading and thus re-living similar to re-telling. The Native Americans have met and finally accepted all the losses that left them wounded and bleeding. But the novels *Ceremony*, *Love Medicine* and *House made of Dawn* generally suggest the embracement of all the changes, which also include positive

contributions the meeting of cultures has brought. Owens sums up what he believes Native American authors are aiming to say:

The past permeates the present, coexisting through cyclical temporality within the spatial reality of the Native American world, staying with us in a single breath where we have been, where we are, and where we are going. As nearly every Native American author has sought to demonstrate, the loss of the past means a loss of self, a loss of order and meaning in the present moment, and an inability to contemplate a future that is part of that moment. Storytelling serves to prevent that loss; it bears, as Michel Foucault has said, "the duty of providing immortality" (59).

The story flows with its own speed, in its own world. Reading the story, people can realize that this is their (our) world, too, and their (our) speed, too. People had words before nowadays and also had the understanding of what they meant, but lost it, rediscovered it, lived it, and changed it. This is the "Ceremony". The message of Louise Erdrich, Leslie Marmon Silko and Scott Momaday is to live, to continue in the story, accepting and changing.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The term will be used here the same way it is used in the novels, for it is clear who is meant by it. In the novels, the term is used by Indian characters, marking the cultural border between the Native Americans and the other inhabitants of the land. What is called "white" includes the Euramerican people and the culture they brought.

<sup>2</sup> Nector Kashpaw deliberately replaces the name of Mary with the name of his wife, who, in a phase of her life aimed to become a Christian saint. Here comes a rather complicated issue, where different aspects come to meet. In short, Marie describes herself as talking with the devil, who is told to have been talking to the Indians in the past (and no other nation). At the same time she *is* a saint by the way she lives her life. During a complicated labour, Marie reconciliates with her

Indian part. She becomes a witch, in the sense of having acquired wisdom, that comes from knowing both ends.

<sup>3</sup> Here *it* means oral and written Native American stories

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