

A Comparison of House Made of Dawn by N. Scott Momaday and Ceremony by Leslie Silko

by sumo nova

In both *House Made of Dawn* by N. Scott Momaday and *Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko, there are striking scenes of both violence and alcohol. Because alcohol and alcoholism are socially very prevalent for most American Indians, it is interesting to see how two American Indian writers represent alcohol in their novels. In particular, there is a scene in each book where the main character is or has been in a bar and commits a violent act. Both of the authors portray the bar, the drinkers and the brutal violence in repulsive language in order to push a social agenda against alcoholism. First a passage from each book will be looked at in detail, and then the reality of alcoholism and American Indians will be researched for further insights.

The passage in *House Made of Dawn* reveals to the reader a pathetic image of the bar and leads up to the violent act that follows in the next paragraph:

The rain diminished, and with nightfall the aftermath of the storm moved slowly out upon the plain. The last of the wagons had gone away from the junction, and only three or four young Navajos remained at Paco's. One of them had passed out and lay in his vomit on the floor of the room. The others were silent now, and sullen. They hung upon the bar and wheezed, helpless even to take up the dregs of the wine that remained. The precious ring of sweet red wine lay at the bottom of a green quart bottle, and the dark convexity of the glass rose and shone out of it like the fire of an emerald. The green bottle lay out in the yellow glow of the lamp, just there on the counter and within their reach. They regarded it with helpless wonder. Abel and the white man paid no attention to them. The two spoke low to each other, carefully, as if the meaning of what they said was strange and infallible. Now and then the white man laughed, and each time it carried too high on the scale and ended in a strange, inhuman cry-as of pain. It was an old woman's laugh, thin and weak as water. It issued only from the tongue and teeth of the great evil mouth, and it fell away from the blue lips and there was nothing left of it. But the mouth hung open afterward and made no sound, and the great body quaked and the white hands jerked and trembled helplessly. The Navajos became aware of him. And throughout Abel smiled; he nodded and grew silent at length; and the smile was thin and instinctive, a hard, transparent mask upon his mouth and eyes. He waited, and the wine rose up in his blood. (72-73)

The description of the Navajos in the bar is the probably the first and most depressing image of this passage. While one is passed out in his own vomit, the others either ignore his condition or are helpless to aid him. The phrase "they hung upon the bar" gives a strong sensation of helplessness as if they are being thrown about and are desperately holding on to the established purveyor of alcohol. The following flashes of red, green and yellow in the dark bar paint a drab picture of sickness and depression.

Then, the main character, Abel, and the albino are introduced. A general malaise is established when Momaday describes how they talk "carefully" to each other even though they are in an informal social setting of a bar. The description of the white man's laughter as "too high" and ending strangely in a painful "inhuman cry" makes the skin crawl. Momaday creates an eerie foreshadowing for the next paragraph's violence as the laughter falls "from the blue lips" as if the lips were bloodless already from death. And the whole time they are talking Abel has a "mask" of a smile. Because Momaday tells the reader that the smile is just a mask, it leaves the questions of why? What is coming next?

In the next paragraph, Abel kills the albino with a knife. The weapon choice is important because there is a close proximity and a very physical interaction with a knife when killing rather than the “safe” distance physically and morally of a gun. The only motive the reader can fathom for the murder is the attention that Angela gave and received from the white man at the ceremony that they and Abel attended. However, it seems rather surprising as there aren’t many (if any) hints of Abel’s sense of possession or strong attachment to her before this event.

In Ceremony, Silko also portrays a contemptible scene of alcohol and violence with this passage:

The others were quiet, but Emo started laughing. His voice echoed around the room.

“You drink like an Indian, and you’re crazy like one too-but you aren’t shit, white trash. You love Japs the way your mother loved to screw white men.”

Emo’s shirt had dark circles of sweat under each arm. Tayo watched his belly and the way the shirt stuck to it with sweat; he watched the belly quiver when Emo laughed at him. He moved suddenly, with speed which was effortless and floating like a mountain lion. He got stronger with every jerk that Emo made, and he felt that he would get well if he killed him. But they wouldn’t let him do it; they grabbed his arms and pulled his hands out of Emo’s belly. He saw their mouths open, yelling, but he didn’t hear them, and the snow tumbled over him. The silence was dense; the darkness was cold. (63)

Emo’s response to Tayo after he calls him a killer is to laugh in defiance. The other friends are quiet and most likely contemplative about what Tayo has claimed. But Emo dominates the barroom with his defiant laughter and then insults Tayo with the accusation of his “half-breed” nature caused by his scandalous mother. Silko describes his sweaty stomach as it jiggles with his laughter, a disgusting scene of sweat-ridden, fatty flesh which lends to the reader a reaction of abhorrence for Emo. Then Tayo with the natural movements of a “mountain lion” pounces upon him and gets “stronger with every jerk that Emo made” dominating him physically.

It seems clear that his deafness to their yells is a depiction of his mental inability to process the situation. His blunt statement that “the silence was dense; the darkness was cold,” doesn’t mince words as it reports his retreat from the attempted murder of Emo. Earlier in the novel Tayo talks about swallowing “beer in big mouthfuls like medicine” (40). Here we get a reiteration of the idea of medication, or being cured, when he confesses that “he felt that he would get well if he killed him.” It seems as if there is a connection between the alcohol and the violence for Tayo, and this connection can potentially heal him.

Now that the passages have been treated in detail, what is their dialogue with the reality that American Indians face? Certainly there exists the image of the “drunken Indian” and these novels don’t seem to negate this stereotype. Instead, there is a heavy usage and presence of alcohol in the stories and there are many scenes that reinforce the idea that American Indians are drinking and how it constantly affects their lives.

This direct treatment of alcohol is most likely necessary considering the real world of American Indians, especially those that live on the reservation. “Many researchers (Mail and McDonald 1980; May 1996) have reported a style of drinking frequently engaged in by both Indian youth and adults in which drinkers consume large amounts of alcohol in a short period of time and continue drinking until the supply is gone” (Beauvais 254). This behavior happens repeatedly in both novels, and is especially described more fully in Ceremony. This “binge drinking,” which does happen among the general population as well, is quite destructive and usually associated with alcoholism. And Laurence French adds that “alcoholism has registered as the single most serious health problem, accounting for the four leading causes of death among American Indians: accidents, cirrhosis of the liver, suicide and homicide” (82).

It makes sense that both books deal with the last listed cause of death, homicide, as “alcohol related homicide is 2.4 times as prevalent [in American Indian population as in the general population]” (Beauvais 255). In other words, an intoxicated act of violence, particularly homicide, is more common to the setting of the American Indian than that of a non-Indian. This adds to the realism of the novels.

The next question that begs to be asked is why is there such an alcoholic tendency among the American Indian population? And why does it lead itself to violence? The first has been answered in a multitude of ways, some being more understandable and less deterministic or racist than others. Genetics have been quoted as having a large role in their addiction or inability to deal with high amounts of ethanol. However, when writers discuss this in articles, there is rarely any solid scientific information backing up their arguments and they feel like old evolutionist or progressive racist propaganda stating that the American Indian somehow is less mentally able to manage the complexities of the white man’s world. Some other theories are based on the fact that (*some*) American Indian cultures had ceremonies that included versions of weak alcohol, peyote and other such materials. So now that there is an abundance of stronger substances the American Indian societies are not able to manage, once again, these new challenges. Other explanations are simpler, for example, that the American Indian society is poor and almost all poor societies have problems with alcoholism.

For Alf Walle, “in situations where cultural traditions are significantly undercut and where [the American Indians] are unable to help their members cope with problems faced, individuals may begin to act in counterproductive ways” (64). This seems to help clarify the reasons for Abel’s sudden violence because he had been completely severed from his culture when in the war and when he returns to the reservation there isn’t anyone to help him reconnect. Abel may have felt that he finally had something going for himself with Angela and when that was threatened by the albino, he decided to end the competition for her attention. However, the murder landed him in jail, thus cutting off connection between him and Angela, and for that matter his cultural traditions once again, a decidedly counterproductive action.

Laurence French offers that “the combination of cultural alienation and personal disorganization (anomie) places these marginal

However, to find one answer for all these questions that could apply to all American Indians no matter what nation, tribe, clan or individual would be impossible. What is important to note is what the authors are presenting in their novels. Momaday offers a vulgar and destructive path of alcoholism that is finally recovered from once Abel returns to the cultural traditions. And Silko paints an evil picture of alcoholism that Tayo is also able to break free from once he shatters the cycle or “ceremony” of violence. It is also important to understand the reality of alcohol on and off the reservation for American Indians. These books by portraying alcohol, alcoholics and bars in a most disdainful light are struggling to impress this view upon other American Indians and also upon the stereotypes that the general population holds.

Works Cited

Beauvais, Fred. “American Indians and Alcohol.” *Alcohol Health and Research World* 22(1998): 253-259.

French, Laurence. “Alcohol and Other Drug Addictions Among Native Americans: The Movement Toward Tribal-Centric Treatment Programs.” *Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly* 22(2004): 81-91.

Momaday, N. Scott. *House Made of Dawn*. Harper: New York, 1999.

Silko, Leslie Marmon. *Ceremony*. Penguin: New York, 1986.

Walle, Alf. “Native Americans and Alcoholism Therapy: The Example of Handsome Lake as a Tool of Recovery.” *Journal of Ethnicity in Substance Abuse* 3(2004): 55-79.

Related

- [Dawn Dishwashing Detergent: Dawn Original, Dawn Oxi and Dawn Direct Foam](#)
- [Behind the Mask: The Rise of Leslie Vernon \(2007\) Movie Review](#)
- [Author Comparison: Comparison Essay of Faulkner, Wright and Walker](#)
- [Dawn of a Remarkable Music Era: 1960s Rock and Roll](#)
- [Ceremony of Hope Sponsored by Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance](#)
- [The Pro's and Con's of Eloping Versus Planning a Wedding Ceremony](#)

[« Eragon 2 Disc DVD Set Review](#)

[A Response to Wisdom Sits in Places by Keith H. Basso »](#)

© 2020 Sumo Nova · [Contact](#) · [Privacy](#)

Suggested books and resources to further your understanding of House Made of Dawn by N. Scott Momaday. Perfect for in-depth school essays and projects. It was written by Leslie Marmon Silko, one of the most respected contemporary Native American novelists. James Welch is a Native American novelist who writes about the American West. His first book, Winter in the Blood (1974), is set in the early 1970s. A summary of Indian perspectives can be gathered from Native American Testimony: A Chronicle of Indian-White Relations from Prophecy to the Present, 1492- (read more). This section contains 224 words (approx. 1 page at 400 words per page). View a FREE sample. More summaries and resources for teaching or studying House Made of Dawn. Keywords: Navarre Scott Momaday, House Made of Dawn, style, narrative voice, Native Indian culture. Discover the world's research. 17+ million members. With a view to offering a subjective, community and regionalist picture of the fights between villistas and carrancistas in the north of Mexico, the author decided to reproduce stories passed [Show full abstract] on to her by relatives and neighbours, thus creating a deeply polyphonic and testimonial tale. Hence, orality gives shape to a text where the dialogue with literary forms of the Mexican folklore is highly discernible. Comparison Of House Made Of Dawn To Catholicism – A Lterary Analysis Essay, Research Paper In the novel House Made of Dawn by N. Scott Momaday, there are many religious references (mostly Catholic references) intertwined within the story. One must wonder why the story of a Native American s struggle to return to his cultural roots would be laced throughout with Catholic references, especially predominate Catholic character names. seems to mirror his Biblical namesake more so than the violent image of Cain. Furthermore, unlike Cain, Momaday s Abel has valid personal reasons for slaying the white man. We first see him as the victim of the white man. At the feast of Santiago, we see the white man brutally beating Abel.