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House Made of Dawn

by

N. Scott Momaday

1968



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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

The setting is a Native American reservation in New Mexico and a neighborhood in Los Angeles, California from 1945 to 1952.

CHARACTER LIST

Major Characters

Abel - The protagonist of the novel, he lives on a reservation in New Mexico with his grandfather, his mother and older brother having died, until he goes to war. He comes home and commits.....

Francisco - Abel's grandfather, he is an elder of his tribe as well as a sacristan of.....

Father Olguin - The priest of the mission in the town where Francisco lives.

Rev. J. B. B. Tosamah (the Priest of the Sun) - a Native preacher who preaches in a

Minor Characters

Mrs. Angela Grace St. John - A woman who comes to the church and speaks to Father Olguin. She.....

Vidal - Abel's brother who dies as a boy.

Nocolas teah-whau - An old woman with a white mustache and a hunched back who bets for.....

Juliano Medino - A man whose house Abel and Francisco visit for a gathering of people,

Many additional minor characters are identified in the complete study guide.

CONFLICT

Protagonist - Abel, a young man who tries to make the transition from reservation life....

Antagonist - The results of the European-American encroachment on Native American land and...

Climax - Abel kills the albino after the Feast of Santiago.

Outcome - Abel is put in jail and relocated to Los Angeles, California where he suffers from.....

SHORT PLOT/CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)

The novel opens in a prologue in which Abel is running in the dawn. In Book 1, Francisco, an old man, goes to town to pick up his grandson Abel at the bus station. His grandson has been away at war and gets off the bus drunk. Francisco tries to act nonchalant but is crying. Abel wakes up the next day and remembers his childhood with his mother and brother. His father left them when he was quite young and he always felt like a foreigner among his people because of it. He remembers his first hunt in which he killed a female deer. He remembers going to a dance when he was a teenager. He had gone with a girl to the dunes and had had sex with her. He saw an eagle with a snake in its mouth. He went to the elders to tell them of his vision. He went on the eagle hunt with them the next day. They went high into the mountains of the Grand Canyon where he caught a female eagle. That night he went to see the eagle and was ashamed to see it so defeated, so he killed it. In town, Father Olguin finishes mass and sees a white woman drive up. She is Angela St. John. She has come to benefit from the mineral waters of the town. Angela St. John needs someone to cut wood for her. Father Olguin sends Abel.

The feast of Santiago takes place in the town. It involves a spectacle of a white man, a Native American albino, who rides a black horse among other riders and sacrifices a rooster. He beats Abel, one of the riders, with the rooster. Angela watches the spectacle. Abel comes back to Angela's house and finishes cutting her firewood. She has begun to feel a strong attraction to him and after he finishes, he comes into her house and they have sex. The feast is held in the town honoring the harvest. The Lady of Porcingula is honored in a

THEMES

Main Theme

The main theme of *House Made of Dawn* concerns the beauty of the old customs of Native.....

Minor Theme

The minor theme of the novel concerns the difficulty of the younger generation in making the.....

MOOD

The mood of the novel is reverential. The novel reads as a sort of prayer to the old ways, especially....

BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

Navarre Scott Momaday was born in February 27, 1934. His Kiowa name is Tsaoli-talee. He was born near Anardarko, the Oklahoma Kiowa Indian agency. His parents are Al Momaday, a Kiowa, and Natachee Scott, who was part Cherokee. His parents were both artists and teachers who worked at small schools during Momaday's childhood. In 1935, his family moved to northern New Mexico, where he grew up on Navajo, Apache, and Jemez Pueblo Indian reservations. Because he grew up on reservations, Momaday experienced the daily life of traditional tribal life. He also witnessed the problems caused by U.S. policy in regards to

LITERARY/HISTORICAL INFORMATION

The publication of *House Made of Dawn* in 1968 initiated what scholars call the Native American Renaissance. It won the Pulitzer Prize in 1969 and opened the way for other Native American writers to publish works which deal with Native life in the United States. This Renaissance has continued to this day.

Momaday mixes forms in his novel, mixing the genre (literary kinds) of autobiography, history, fiction, memoir, and ethnography. In *House Made of Dawn*, Momaday explodes the stereotypes of Native Americans that have been built up over the centuries in European-American dominated media. He includes such diverse characters as the old man Francisco who is both a Catholic sacristan and an elder and medicine man of his own people, the new age preacher the Reverend Tosamah, who lives in Los Angeles and performs idiosyncratic sermons on the central Christian story of the beginning of the world in the Word of God, the peyote ceremony and other sermons for the lost souls among the Native American community in the city, Benally, a.....

CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES

PROLOGUE

Summary

The house made of dawn is made of "pollen and rain." The hills are multicolored and horses of several colors are grazing on the plain. Abel is running. At first he runs hard and breathless, but then he begins to run easily. He is far enough out that he cannot see the city any longer. It is dawn and the road takes him to clusters of juniper and mesquite trees. The sun goes behind a cloud and then comes out again. Abel is naked to the waist and his arms and shoulders have been marked with burnt wood and ashes. It rains. It is winter time. He becomes small in the landscape and looks as if he's standing still.

Notes

The prologue has a strong tone of reverence for the land. Abel seems to be someone who has been away from the land for a long time and is returning. His running is represented as a sacred act of marriage or reunion with the land.

BOOK 1: *The Long Hair: Watatowa Canon de San Diego, 1945*

CHAPTER 1: July 20

Summary

The landscape is made up of a river valley with scattered hills and fields. The land is worked by poor people, who create small and irregular plots for their fields and who harvest their fields by the light of the moon. They see the harvest as a gift from God.

It is hot now at the end of July. An old man named Francisco drives a wagon led by a team of mares along the river. He stops and gets down to check a trap he has set for a bird. He's disappointed that it caught the wrong kind of bird. He wants a mountain bluebird so he can make a prayer plume. He disentangles the bird and lets its body float down the river. Then he re-ties the trap with a larger loop to avoid the same mistake in the next trapped bird.

He gets back into the wagon and drives toward San Ysidro. He sings to himself of his grandson, Abelito, who is coming very late. As he drives along, he remembers a race he ran when he was a young man. It was run along the same river road. He had rubbed himself with soot and ran at dawn. He had overtaken Mariano, who had a reputation for being the best of the long-race runners. Years after that race, he had drawn a picture of a runner and had written the year 1889 under it.

Francisco crosses the river at a bridge at noon and notices that no one is outside in the heat, not even the children who often chase after him making fun of him. He can hear car tires as he approaches the junction. His ride has been seven miles. Just after one o'clock, the bus arrives and Abel gets down. He's drunk. Francisco feels the stares of the other bus passengers and he tries to act nonchalantly about his grandson's drunkenness even though it makes him so sad that tears come to his eyes. He gets Abel into the wagon and heads them back toward home.

Notes

The first chapter of the novel features Francisco, an old man who remembers his youth when, in 1889 he won a running race over the swiftest runner in the region, Mariano. Momaday conveys Francisco's character largely through his actions and his memories. Before he does this, however, Momaday describes the landscape of California which shapes his characters so subtly. The description of the landscape melds into a description of Francisco's actions in untying a trapped bird and letting it go. This scene is described in the slow time of the everyday. It's clear that Francisco comes to this spot often to deal with his trap. He traps birds to prepare prayer plumes.

The contrast between Francisco's prayerful meditations on the land and Abel's drunken slobbering as he falls from the bus steps jolts the reader into a recognition of the time period of the setting. The time seems to be the 1930s. It is clear that Francisco has had to adjust to the encroachments of European Americans. This reality is given in two hints: he is made fun of by the town children and he is conscious of the image he and his grandson present to the other bus passengers.

CHAPTER 2: July 21

Summary

Abel sleeps the entire day and the next night at his grandfather's house. At dawn the next day, he wakes up and goes outside to see the land. He remembers his boyhood here with his brother Vidal. They had gone out one day to the field of the cacique, the Indian chief. They had explored the box canyon together. He remembers seeing the shadow of a huge cloud and feeling like "great leaning walls" were closing in on him. He had cried and had always remembered that feeling of terror. He and his brother returned to the men who had almost finished their work. His mother came with Francisco in the wagon which she had loaded with good food. The group ate together, but in groups according to family and clan.

Abel never knew who his father was. People said he was a Navajo, a Sia, or an Isleta. Abel only knew that his father was an outsider and that sense had made he and his mother and brother seem like foreigners. Abel knew in those childhood days that his mother was going to die soon. That afternoon he rode home in the wagon beside his mother and listened to his grandfather sing. His mother died only a month or so later. He remembered her being beautiful and having a soft voice.

Abel was frightened by the old woman Nicolas tea-whau. She was a Bahkyush woman and a witch. She once screamed at Abel a terrible curse and he had run away as fast as he could. Then he had tried to get the snake-

killer dog to come with him because he was afraid. The dog wouldn't come for fear of something. He felt a strong sense of fear in the land and always remembered this "particular sound of anguish."

In his later childhood he once waited outside the house while he heard the old men go inside for the last time and pray. He remembers the prayer even though he doesn't know the words. He remembers the low sound of it. He had seen his brother's face, which was thin and colorless with pain. Because he was alone, he spoke his brother's name.

When he was seventeen, Francisco had woken him one morning and taken him hunting. He killed a female deer. He had to track her to find her dying of her wound.

Francisco had hitched the wagon on January 1, 1937. It was night time. They arrived at Sia and waited at the house of Juliano Medina for day break. Navajos and Domingos arrived. When the sun came out the singers came out and the dance began. Everyone was very excited and the men shot their rifles into the air. The dance was "nearly perfect." Abel drank some wine and went with one of Medino's daughters to lie down on a dune beside the river and have sex. He hadn't been satisfied, but she had jumped up afterwards and laughed at him. He tried to chase her but was too drunk to catch her.

He saw an eagle overhead with a snake in its talons. It was an "awful, holy sight, full of magic and meaning." The Eagle Watchers Society was the sixth to go to the kiva that summer and autumn. They were a special society because they had come from the group of people who, before the middle of the last century, had immigrated from the Tanoan city of Bahkyula. They had been beset by "marauding bands of buffalo hunters and thieves" for so long that they had finally given in to despair. Disease had set in and they were almost wiped out when the patrones, their distant relatives had taken them in, despite the threat of contagion. Despite their deep hurt and humiliation, the Bahyush had thought of themselves as a people. They carried a sacred flute, their bull and horse masks of Pecos, and a statue of their patroness Maria de los Angeles. The chief of the Eagle Watchers Society, Patiestewa, carried the traits of these people in magnified form. They had acquired a sense of deep humility which had paradoxically made them a proud people. The Bahkyula were medicine men, rainmakers, and eagle hunters.

Abel is walking along the road down from the mountain where he had once trained one of the horses of John Raymond, a rancher. He gets to the Grande Valle, and is overwhelmed by the sight of its astonishing beauty. "Such vastness makes for illusion, a kind of illusion that comprehends reality." As he stands there, he suddenly sees two eagles cavorting with each other. He kneels down behind the rock "dumb with pleasure and excitement." They are golden eagles and the female is larger and older. She carries a rattlesnake in her talons. She lets go of the snake and the male rushes for it and catches it up. Then he lets go of the snake, but the female doesn't go after it again. Able watches the two eagles fly away into the distance.

He knows the eagle hunters are planning to set out for the mountains. He goes to Patiestewa and tells the chief that he saw the eagles and the snake. Abel says he thinks he should go along on the eagle hunt. Patiestewa agrees. The next day they begin. They stop along the way at holy places where they pray and make offerings. When they arrive at their destination, they form a circle so they can catch rabbits as bait for the eagles. The old men expertly throw short clubs at the rabbits. Abel takes a rabbit and places it in a sack. He washes his head to purify himself and then goes to the cliffs alone. He finds a shrine, a stone shelf with a slight depression, and he places a prayer offering on it. Then he goes into the house and covers the opening above him with a latticework of branches that he has cut. He places the rabbits on top of the boughs. He begins to sing, calling out.

The eagles come on, catching sight of the rabbits. A male eagle catches a rabbit. A female comes along and reaches for one and misses it. She rushes back for it and when she does, Abel grabs her legs. He pulls her down and hoods her and places her in a sack. Then he goes back to join the old men. Another man, Juanito, has also caught an eagle, older and male. The old men gather around the eagle and speak to it asking it to take their good will and sorrow. The attach a prayer plume to its leg and let it go. Abel goes to see his eagle. It is so terrible

looking without flight that his eyes fill with tears and he cuts its throat.

Abel thinks of his grandfather always telling him to do something but not understanding him. When he had left for the war, he had stayed around the outside of the house feeling lonely. Francisco had been working in the fields and Abel wondered if he would come to say good-bye. When the bus arrived, Abel got on board, the first time he had ridden in a motor vehicle. He didn't look back at his grandfather's fields until it was too late to see.

Abel can remember all of his past in vivid detail, but he cannot remember the recent past at all. It is a number of "years without meaning, of awful calm and collision, time always immediate and confused, that he could not put together in his mind." He can only recall one memory. He had woken up on a hill in the afternoon not knowing where he was and quite alone. He could see the bodies of men all around him. He could only hear one sound, the sound of an approaching machine. He had been awakened in the first place by the cessation of mortar fire. He had watched as the machine came on and had begun shaking violently, but the machine passed close to him and passed on.

Now the land is silent as he watches the rims of color in the canyon. He can see the gleam of the mission's spire and he can hear the sound of the Angelus. He feels cold. He sees a car going to the mission. He sees the light of dawn hit the walls of the houses of the village. He feels hung over and his mouth is sour from being sick on wine. He stands for a long time and then begins walking downward.

At the mission, the day is an ordinary one for Father Olguin who is preparing for mass. He is from Mexico. He is a good looking man except for an eye that is clouded over and droopy. He sees that Francisco has already knelt at the small glass panel at the altar and he sees Bonifacio, the altar boy standing in the corner. He tells the boy to hurry and begins to dress. He sees a woman get out of a car and wonders what her story is. After mass, she comes to talk to him. Her name is Mrs. Martin St. John. Her husband is a doctor and has suggested that she come to this place for the mineral waters since she has pain in her back. She is living at the Benevides house and asks Father Olguin if he knows of any of the Indians who would come and chop wood for her.

Abel returns to his grandfather's house that afternoon, but his grandfather isn't home yet. He goes to the river and walks along its edge. He sits down and looks at the farmland. He sees his grandfather working in the fields. He feels momentarily like he's at home.

Notes

In this chapter, measured in dates, Momaday reveals in his slow and gradual way that Abel has been away fighting in the second world war. He has come home damaged by the images of war, especially emblemized in the image of the massive machine swallowing up the world and threatening to overwhelm Abel but then passing him by. He has come home to stay with his grandfather.

The chapter works in a series of flashbacks, which work their way from Abel's childhood to his recent experiences in the war. The reader gets a sense that Abel has always felt himself to be an outsider since his father is unknown to him and his father's origins are supposed to be foreign to his mother's and.....

OVERALL ANALYSES

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Abel - He is a character inscrutable to both his own people and the European Americans with whom he comes into contact. In creating him in this way, Momaday avoids the prevalent stereotypes of Native Americans which have so saturated U.S. media since the colonial era.

Benally calls Abel a "longhair" using Tosamah's derisive word for a traditional Indian. Abel is traditional in several ways. He marks the major passages of his life in the old ways. In the same section in which Francisco remembers the bear hunt, he remembers the dance at which he had sex for the first time. He doesn't

Francisco - He is the single figure representing the old ways, but even Francisco is a bridge figure, serving as a holy man of his own people and a sacristan of the Catholic mission on his reservation. He is introduced as he is going to town to pick up his grandson who is returning from war. This trip to town is emblematic of Francisco's character. He stops on the way by the river to check a trap he has laid for a special kind of bird. He.....

Father Olguin - He is a man who is displaced into a community whose ways will forever remain inscrutable to him. Even though at the end of the novel, Father Olguin wakes up feeling at peace with his place in this community, he retains his outsider status as evidenced by his reaction to the news of Francisco's death. Momaday sets this scene up carefully so his readers will understand the significance.....

Benally - He is what some might call the a successful assimilation, in contrast to Abel's tragically unsuccessful attempt at assimilation. He has lived in Los Angeles for a number of years, having settled into a job and an apartment. More significantly, Benally has settled into a view of the world which gives him a

Tosamah - He is the most modern of the Native American characters in the novel. He was not raised on a reservation and he has been educated in European-American schools. The section of the novel in which Tosamah gives his sermon on St. John's gospel is what anthologists most often use for excerpts. Yet

PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

Momaday plots *House Made of Dawn* on a series of flashbacks. Francisco lives half in the present and half in the past until his old age when he begins to live almost exclusively in the past. Abel also lives with one.....

THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS

House Made of Dawn comes back again and again to the beauty of the old customs of Native Americans and their viability for the newest generation. The old customs are tied to the rhythms of the land, a fact which receives its best image in the last one of the novel. This image is of the mesa which serves as a sort of platform for the play of the sun as it makes its way from dawn through the day. Before the end of the novel, Momaday prepares the reader to see its significance when he has Francisco remember the time he took Abel and Vidal to the mesa and told them to memorize it like they knew their own hands. He reminded them in slow and careful words of all the times of the Native calendar which are marked on the rock by the movement of the sun. It signals when harvest should be performed, when ceremonies conducted, and when planting should be done. In the last scene of the novel, Abel goes to the mesa to run with the old men runners in celebration of the seventh dawn, the dawn in which his grandfather died. As the sun breaks over the surface of the mesa.....

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. List the main figures of the newer generation Native Americans. What do these characters have in common? Do you see hope for them?
2. List the figures of the older generation Native Americans. How are they portrayed? With reverence or tragedy as if they were a dying breed?.....

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