Chapter IV
A Proud Proclamation
(The Ancient Child)

Terri Goldie in *Fear and Temptation* (1989) is of the view that the image of the Native is a constant production of semiotic representation of the writers. These semiotic representations construct the reader’s perception and participation in knowing the Natives. Native American literature has led to the constant questioning of the epistemological dimensions of the writers’ process of indigenization. Momaday’s *The Ancient Child* (1989) is a representative work of this perception. Apart from its subscription to the general theme of ‘search for an Identity’, the novel offers an analytical probe into the issues of social identity. It is a proud proclamation into the lost identity of Natives in the light of western assimilation and disruption. Momaday purposefully chose the complicated theme of fragmented narration and self narrative of meaninglessness of civilization in *The Ancient Child*. The novel displays the craft and gem like brilliance of Momaday. He proposes two primary perspectives of life through Locke Setman and Grey. Locke Setman becomes an artist. Through his paintings, he unveils the mythological mysteries of Native cultures. But his success as an artist in the contemporary world fails to provide him peace. Set feels sick, weak, and inarticulate and aspires to explore an identity of his own. He disappears for a serious exploration and self discovery. In this process, he comes in contact with Grey a medicine woman
who continues the legacy of old medicine woman. Grey, who grows up imagining Billy the Kid the native mythological hero, saves Set from becoming a Bear. Bear is the spirit animal of Native people and symbolizes ‘survival’. Set transforms himself from civilization to primitive, from the scientific to the mythological, from an artist to a warrior under the guidance of Grey. As a medicine women Grey gives Bear medicine to Setman. As a consequence, Set experiences a conflict between the old ‘self’ and the emerging ‘Bear.’

The Ancient Child subscribes to the Postcolonial proposition of exploring and reclaiming the past. John McLeod in Beginning Postcolonialism (2000) presents the dichotomic character of the past: glorious past and inglorious past & usable past & unusable past. In Native culture, exploration of the past celebrates and accomplishes the search for an identity. The Ancient Child hinges on the exploration of the past and retrieves the glorious nature of past history. Momaday indulges in imaginative exploration to recuperate the dismantled or disrupted glorious Native history. Understanding the significance of interrelatedness of Native identity and mythmaking, Momaday centralizes the Kiowa myth of the boy who became a bear to explore the Native History. The two protagonists, Grey, a Navajo Kiowa woman and Locke Setman, half Kiowa artist embark on a quest for discovery and transformation. Grey, infatuated by the myth of Billy the Kid, imagines herself as a lover of Billy and grows into a medicine woman only to facilitate the
realization in Setman. Momaday’s confirmation that Myth is the beginning and
the end of a Native culture is realized in his attempt to proclaim the glory of
Native culture. His exploration into Native mythology and culture highlights
the violent intrusion of the Western culture at the cost of the ancestral
intelligence of Natives. The glorious Native history of the past is used as
springboard to realize the contemporary Native’s ‘quest for identity’.

_The Ancient Child_ subscribes to the post modern modes of narrative self
reflexivity. Tim Woods in _Beginning Postmodernism_ (1999) explains that Post
modernist fiction is preoccupied with the inscription of multiple fictive selves,
narrative fragmentation and narrative reflexivity. It is also preoccupied with
the interrogation of ontological bases and connections between narrative and
subjectivity. Grey and Locke Setman are the reflections of multiple reflexive
personalities. Grey moves comfortably towards appropriation and assimilation
of Native cultures. Setman experiences schizophrenia in his move towards
understanding Native cultures. Schizophrenia is perceived as post modern self,
organized around plural and multiple identities. Setman struggles to fight
against the repressive mechanisms of mainstream culture. He is placed in a
privileged atmosphere. Adopted by a retired philosophy professor in San
Francisco, he is irrevocably displaced from his father’s Kiowa culture.
Trapped between the two worlds, Setman suffers from an identity crisis and
becomes a victim of schizophrenia. The schizophrenia intensifies when
Setman finds his father’s grave and Kiowa relatives. The schizophrenic status
gives him unstable identity. He procures the identity from the rudiments of his memory. This instability becomes agony and he acquires the true identity through mythic reality, discovering his identity as bear. His transformation begins with the recognition of ‘ancestral intelligence’.

*The Ancient Child* offers an incomprehensible world of Native multiple cultures. The social and cultural variety in Natives provides a greater space for the analysts to offer a prognosis of the cultures. Native cultures possess rich heritage of oral literature. Oral literature remains to be the Universal barometer in exploring the genesis of literature. The novel offers a perfect exemplification as a repository of oral literature.

The basic view of the Indigene as a sexual figure is an extension of the western and masculinist reification of the other. From the beginning of the twentieth century, with the emergence of Freudian Psychoanalysis the very perspectives of Western society in evaluating individual sexual psyches have changed. Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality* (1976) provided a deeper insight to understand the changes in the different attitudes of sexuality during the nineteenth century. He has examined the repressive forms of the society in controlling complicated array of sexualities. It is from these perceptions, Natives are considered as objects of sexual exploitation. They are merely considered as pounds of flesh. Set is exploited physically in the school by non-Natives. Grey is also subjected to exploitation by the white teachers during her schooling. They stand out to be physically exploited and in total disarray of
childhood experiences. When they get close and seek solace in the relationship, it stands out to be unhealthy relationship. Set is forty in age and Grey is nineteen. Set dislikes continuing the relationship and disappears in the woods. The perception of Indigene as a commodity of sexuality is understood in the larger context as an extension of patriarchy. Though Indigene and woman are objects of white western culture, Momaday presents Set and Grey as victims of sexual exploitation. He takes an extended view of Mannoni’s view of sexuality in a racial context. Momaday succeeds in employing the complicated perception of Indigene as a standard commodity of sexual exploitation without ambivalence. Momaday also breaks the valorization of Indigene maiden as an ethereal romantic figure. He presents Grey as a philosopher and liberator of Set. Set liberates himself from the fatigue and weariness of life under the philosophical surveillance of Grey. Apart from its incomprehensible elucidation, the novel is perceived lucidly in the following manner.

_The Ancient Child_ is a famous and important work in the twentieth-century literature. The novel is about both physical and spiritual journey of an American Indian artist exploring his heritage and the mythology of his people and it investigates alienation and discrimination. The early reviews have praised the book as a dazzling new work.

The novel is divided into four books: “Book One: Planes”, “Book Two: Lines”, “Book Three: Shapes”, and “Book Four: Shadows” and each book is
further divided into twenty five, twelve, five and two chapters respectively. Momaday includes a brief “Prologue” and an “Epilogue.” The author lists the historical characters that appear in the novel. They are Henry McCarty, also known as Billy the Kid, Pat Garrett, Bob Olinger, J.W. Bell, Sister Blandina Segale, Set-angya and Maman-ti. All the other characters are fictional. A quotation from Jorge Luis Borges, an Argentine writer, follows: “For myth is at the beginning of literature, and also at its end.”(1)

The “Prologue” consists of a Kiowa story about a boy turning into a bear and chasing his seven sisters into a tree. The tree tells the sisters to climb higher, and they float to the sky to become the stars of Ursa Major, the Big Dipper. This is a Kiowa story of Tsoai, or Devil’s Tower, a natural monolith that rises above the Wyoming landscape near the Belle Fourche.

This story of a Native American’s search for identity alternates scenes from the lives of the two main characters, Set and Grey. Interspersed among these scenes are tales from Kiowa myths and Western legends, each with relevance to the main characters’ quest for identity.

Early in the novel, Grey watches over the deathbed her ancient grandmother, Kope’mah. She dreams of the legendary outlaw Billy the Kid, and imagines herself as his lover and companion. She is at this time also growing gradually aware of her powers as a medicine woman.

Set, in San Francisco, is at the peak of his career as a painter. Orphaned at the age of seven, Set has been reared by his adoptive father Bent with love
but with little or no sense of his heritage as a Native American. Now in middle age, he enjoys a strong and mutually supportive relationship with Lola, although he and Lola remain fairly independent of one another. When a cryptic telegram summons him to Oklahoma by telling him that Grandmother Kope’mah is near death, he is intrigued. He has never heard of Grandmother Kope’mah and almost believes the telegram has been sent to him in error except for its tantalizing mention of his biological father, Cate. He goes to Oklahoma but arrives too late; the grandmother is dead. There, however, he meets Grey and is unsettled and captivated by her beauty and dignity. His other relatives convince him to attend an Indian gathering before returning to San Francisco. At the gathering, Grey asks Set to paint her face for a dance, and she presents him with a medicine bundle that contains “bear medicine” that she says belongs to him. This brief exchange creates a strong bond between them that Set fails to understand.

Back in his own world, Set’s stature as a painter continues to grow. His agent, Jason, arranges an opening for Set in Paris, and he travels there with Lola. When they learn that Bent has had a small stroke, Lola returns to San Francisco to attend him. Set has a one-night affair with the Parisienne owner of the gallery where his paintings are being shown. On return to his hotel, he finds a frantic message from Lola telling him that Bent’s condition has worsened. He returns immediately but finds that his father has already died.
Orphaned a second time, Set is plunged into grief and depression. Lola suspects Set’s infidelity, and their relationship suffers. Cut off from his only loving relationships, the lost and alienated Set experiences a kind of mental breakdown. He wanders the streets aimlessly and spends days on end in his studio, painting and drinking, often forgetting to eat or sleep. Lola and Jason eventually have Set hospitalized.

Meanwhile, on the Oklahoma plains, Grey is slowly, intuitively becoming aware both of Set’s crisis and of her own role as his savior. Touched by the spirit of her grandmother, she feels her powers as a medicine woman growing. She begins writing an account of her dream life with Billy the Kid and also begins creating masks. She waits, knowing that Set will be drawn to her. One stormy day, he arrives.

With Grey’s aid, Set begins to recover from his breakdown. As she leads him on a journey, both physical and spiritual, to the Navajo lands of her mother’s tribe, Set and Grey begin to fall in love. Along the journey, she guides him through a spiritual metamorphosis into a bear, a necessary part of his spiritual recovery and of his discovering his identity as a Native American. At home with Grey’s mother, sister, and niece in Navajo country, Set is completely healed. He and Grey are married and conceive a child. At the novel’s close, Set goes alone on a “vision quest” to capture the full power of his bear medicine and to complete and solidify his identity as an American Indian.
The Kiowa myths and legends interspersed throughout the novel are an important part of the book. One myth tells of a boy who is suddenly transformed into a bear while he is playing with his sisters. Another is the story of the “lost boy,” a lone child who one day appears at a Kiowa camp. The Kiowa are astonished, because the boy has appeared as if from nowhere. He speaks a strange language and amazes them by his total lack of fear. They give him food and shelter and are ready to adopt him as one of their own, but when they awake the next day he is gone. The mystery of the lost boy is so troubling to them that they find they must invent a story to explain his sudden appearance and equally sudden disappearance. Another legend that recurs throughout the novel is of the historical figure Set-Angya (“Sitting Bear”), an old Kiowa chief, whose courage was so great it seemed a kind of madness. The figures in these stories all provide parallels to Set’s experiences.

At the novel’s opening, Grey is a self-assured, uninhibited adolescent. She develops mainly in terms of the natural maturation that comes with age. She already has a powerful sense of self, is equally at home in her two worlds (Kiowa and Navajo), and understands the sources of her strength. “Never had Grey to quest after visions,” (11), Momaday repeats throughout the novel; she easily creates her own. Early on, she manifests these qualities of strength and self-assurance in a fairly adolescent way— declaring herself mayor of the collection of abandoned sod-houses where she lives and daydreaming about life with Billy the Kid. Her power and freedom reach their apotheosis in her
fantasies about life with Billy the Kid. In these fantasies, she is totally free, brave, supremely capable, and loved. As she matures, and especially after she meets Set, the same qualities she has in abundance in her dreams begin to exhibit themselves more strongly in her real life. At the age of twenty, she understands her responsibility to guide and heal Set, a worldly, successful man approximately twice her age. Grey engineers Set’s rites of passage and brings him into a stable and supportive Indian family. Grey’s development mirrors Set’s, without the turmoil and emotional and spiritual confusion. Because Grey has always been deeply connected with her native culture, she knows and understands her own identity.

Set is the product of a very different environment. An orphan, he is cut off completely from the Indian world. In adulthood, Set seems happy and successful but has no real connection to the community around him. His only true sense of himself is found through his art. When his father Bent dies and his relationship with Lola sours, Set is cast adrift. He experiences a nervous breakdown of sorts that leaves him physically and mentally weakened and vulnerable. With Grey’s help, he is able to rediscover and connect with the culture of his ancestors, and thus become whole again.

Lola is a foil for Grey. She is beautiful, friendly, and talented, but she is thoroughly Anglo-American in orientation, ambitious, cultured, and materialistic. Although she and Set share an emotional bond through their art, her values are contrasted with the traditional spirituality of Grey. While she is
not to play as important a role in Set’s life as Grey, her love and assistance form a critical part of Set’s progress toward understanding his identity.

Billy the Kid lives entirely in Grey’s imagination in *The Ancient Child*. Her fantasy relationship with him serves as an important bridge, connecting Grey not only to the past of her grandmother’s era and to the non-Indian world, but also to a vision of herself as powerful, courageous, and sensuous. Billy, like many of the characters, is kind of an “ancient child”—young in years, but hardened and cynical in outlook. Despite his notoriously cold-blooded nature, Billy exhibits the charm, playfulness, and respectful courtesy of a child.

Kope’mah, the ancient medicine woman, is Grey’s guide on her journey toward becoming a medicine woman. In Kope’mah’s memory live vivid images of her tribe’s glorious past and also their deepest suffering. Like Billy, she provides Grey with a powerful connection to the past. Even in death, Kope’mah remains a vital force in Grey’s and Set’s lives. Her funeral is the occasion of their first meeting, and her spirit continues to inform and inspire Grey as she develops as a medicine woman.

The “bear boy” connects Set to Kiowa legend and hence to his Native American heritage. Set’s development parallels the ancient tale of the bear boy. He has the bear’s “medicine,” and one of Grey’s roles is to help Set make the transformation to the potent bear and back to manhood again. The bear boy’s connection to Set is never defined explicitly; rather, he serves as one of
the novel’s many “ancient children” through whom the protagonists discover themselves, as they identify with these mythic figures and interpret their lives within the framework of these powerful ancient stories.

A major theme of *The Ancient Child* is the importance of finding one’s true self and finding a home. The novel revolves around a Native American man, comfortable and successful but not quite at home in the Anglo-American world, who must discover his native culture and his own identity and role therein. Momaday’s own experiences of living equally in the Anglo and Indian worlds offer him a unique and powerful insight into this question of discovering one’s sense of self and one’s place in the world. This, however, is not a uniquely “Indian” theme. The question of assimilating into a dominant culture while retaining one’s unique cultural identity is an important part of the American experience, and the need to understand oneself and one’s place in the world is universal.

Momaday believes that one of the ways for an individual to find this identity is to use stories, such as the Kiowa myths and Western legends that figure so prominently in the novel, to interpret and understand experiences. This is clearly seen in the case of Grey, who builds up a personal fantasy around the legendary character of Billy the Kid and uses the fantasy to explore and strengthen the qualities she wishes to have. Set is not an active dreamer like Grey, but Momaday shows the importance of stories to Set’s life by
setting up clear parallels between Set’s experiences and ancient myths through the stories of the “bear boy” and the “lost boy.”

Tied to Momaday’s belief in the power of stories is his theory that there is really only one essential story, told and retold in many variations. In *The Ancient Child*, he expresses this theory through the character of Set:

Yes, he believed, there is only one story, after all, and it is about the pursuit of man by God, and it is about a man who ventures out to the edge of the world, and it is about his holy quest, and it is about his faithful or unfaithful wife, and it is about the hunting of a great beast. (216)

Part of the individual’s development rests on one’s ability to understand and place oneself within this story and to create one’s own unique version of it. Momaday’s work exemplifies this belief. He incorporates pieces of past works and elements of his own experiences to create *The Ancient Child*. For example, Grey’s writings about Billy the Kid are taken from a previously unpublished sequence of poems by Momaday entitled “The Strange and True Story of My Life with Billy the Kid.” Even the book that inspires Grey to write bears a striking resemblance to Momaday’s 1976 work *The Names*. In subtler ways, Momaday incorporates motifs that have occurred elsewhere in his writings: the landscape that shapes the protagonists’ lifestyles, the portentous thunderstorm, the visit to the burial site of one’s ancestors, and the vision quest. This is not mere recycling of previous work; rather, it is Momaday’s
own demonstration of how a single story (or elements of a story) can be reinterpreted to mean different things and to create different identities. By synthesizing the diverse elements of ancient myth, past writings, his own experiences, and pure fictive imagination, Momaday creates a novel that is at once a unique piece of fiction, may be his own story, and a universal story.

An understanding of Momaday’s beliefs about telling and retelling a single story helps to explain the significance of the novel’s title. Ancient characters, young or old (such as the boys in the Kiowa myths), can be revived and rejuvenated by a retelling of their story. New stories (or characters) have an ancient quality because they are part of one timeless story. Grey is a kind of ancient child, a young woman undergoing a maturation process (the “story” of growing up) that is itself as old as humanity. Even in youth, she has wisdom beyond her years. Set must become like a child in order to realize his full, adult identity. As the children have an ancient quality, so do the ancients have a childlike quality. Kope’mah and Worcester Meat, Grey’s ancient relatives, easily conjure up and re-experience scenes from their lives through their imaginative powers. They remain simple and playful even in advanced age.

*The Ancient Child* is in many ways a natural continuation and synthesis of Momaday’s earlier works. In light of Momaday’s view that there is “only one story,” the reader is not surprised to see themes and images repeated from works such as *House Made of Dawn* (1968) and *The Way to Rainy Mountain*
This is chiefly the belief in the individual’s power to re-create the self through the imaginative use of powerful stories.

The novel also shares with Momaday’s earlier works a fascination with the power of language. Momaday has even coined the term “wordwalker” to describe his view of himself as an artist. Momaday’s work displays an acute awareness of words, language, and tone, for example, in Set’s obsessive meditation on his own name during his mental breakdown, and in the difference between the rough frankness of Grey’s (imagined) spoken dialogues with Billy the Kid and the even elegance of her writings about him. In *The Ancient Child*, Momaday combines modern narrative fiction with poetry, the Western lore of the dime novel, and the oral storytelling tradition of the Kiowa people, constantly shifting time, place, and perspective. The resulting narrative is disjointed, but this is critical to the theme of the novel. The “story” of this novel synthesizes these diverse elements, just as the vision of Set’s own personal “story” synthesizes the fragmented elements of his life.

Momaday, like his protagonist Grey, is of mixed Kiowa descent and spent much of his youth on Navajo reservations in the Southwest. In addition to being a writer and poet, he is, like Set, a painter. *The Ancient Child* is in many ways Momaday’s own story; in it, Momaday draws heavily on his own experiences as a Native American artist balancing his life between the Indian and Anglo-American worlds.
To categorize Momaday as an “Indian” writer, however, would be to limit the scope of his work. Momaday resists being pigeonholed as a spokesman for the American Indian. *The Ancient Child*, with its thematic concerns about cultural assimilation, its emphasis on discovering individual identity, and its reliance on landscape for defining moods and developing themes, is a thoroughly universal in nature.

It is the story of a creative mind disconnected from its blood heritage. The story personifies the conflict of nurture and nature in Locke Setman, Kiowa adopted into the white world, and Grey, the young Kiowa/Navajo who brings him his Kiowa soul in the form of a medicine bundle.

Grey and Set rather nakedly represent the unreconciled dualism of Momaday’s own spiritual and intellectual heritage. Set turns his back on the white world, becomes “Indian,” marries Grey, and is saved, becoming “a bear.”

Earlier, the description of the ominous holy man beating Set with the bear paw in the blessing/conveyance ceremony is a patent recreation of the scene in *House Made of Dawn* when the satanic albino beats Abel with the dead rooster, and similarly the death of Worcester Meat repeats, for no particular reason, elements of the scene of Francisco’s last days in the earlier novel. In the novel Momaday uses dreams and visions to find pathways to blood ancestry and racial memory.
Momaday’s novel continues his journey across a magical landscape. Its hero, Set, discovers he is the reincarnation of a Kiowa child of legend who turns into a bear. The bear chases seven sisters and a brother up Devil’s Tower, but the siblings escape into the sky, forming the stars of the Big Dipper.

“Yes, it’s an unusual novel--much different from House Made of Dawn,” said Momaday, and “It’s a love story, a mythic tale. . . . It even has dime novel elements. And it has the old, old idea of a man searching for his identity.” (Los Angeles Times, Interview, Nov 20, 1989)

The Ancient Child is a largely autobiographical novel. Like Set, his character, Momaday is a painter who has had shows in several galleries in the Southwest (“I didn’t make Set a brain surgeon for a reason,” said Momaday, laughing in an Interview). Like Set, Momaday believes that dreams and visions are pathways to one’s blood ancestry and racial memories. And like Set, Momaday believes the violent power of the “bear spirit” dwells inside him.

“With certain animals in the Indian cosmology, you can acquire power and benefit from knowing them,” said Momaday. “But the bear is hostile, a confrontation that can only be expressed as a struggle” (Los Angeles Times, Interview, Nov 20, 1989). Usually the bear is dormant, said Momaday. But it often surfaces in bursts of anger and destructiveness. Or it may flood him with a new artistic vitality.
The novel is modeled on the nineteenth-century American Dime Novel genre. The Dime Novel was usually about American Indian and white relations. The first familiar example of this genre is Ann S. Stephen’s *Malaeska, the Indian Wife of the White Hunter* (1860). In the Dime Novel genre there is usually a prelude which clues the reader in to the “loss” the protagonist has suffered. As a result of this loss the protagonist is isolated from society. Before long, however, he or she encounters an “insider” who has traits similar, but is a member of a community. This “insider” usually has some “possession” that has been inherited, which is threatened by one or more “villains.” The protagonist is then reintegrated into the community by protecting or recovering, the insider’s possession. While *The Ancient Child* does not have a prelude, it does have a prologue which is an abbreviated version of the “Story of Tsoai.” It is a story the Kiowas created to explain a mysterious rock formation they encountered. Momaday asserts that they “incorporated it into their experience by telling a story about it” (Woodard, *Center* 15). As Momaday explains, “all things can be accepted, if not understood, if you put them into a story” (Woodard, *Center* 15). The “Story of Tsoai” also helps to explain the astronomical phenomenon of the Big Dipper. Additionally, however, it is about the disappearance and loss of children. A longer version of the story, for example, tells about the tremendous grief and the loss of the children. The longer version appears in Chapter One of Book Two of *The Ancient Child*. In this longer version, the reader is informed that
out of grief “old Koi-ehm-toya ... cut off two fingers on her left hand” (130). It seems that Momaday would not frustrate his reader’s generic expectation at so early a stage in the development of the novel by omitting to cite a significant loss, therefore, we may ask: What is lost in the prologue? The answer is the children. What has Set, the protagonist of *The Ancient Child*, lost? He is like one of the lost children. He, too, has lost his connection to his family. He has lost his father and mother.

Grey is the “insider,” although she is viewed as peculiar or eccentric by the standards of her community, and the possession that she has is herself. It is her mind and her body that are repeatedly threatened by villains such as Dwight Dicks and the racist ideology that casts Indians, like herself, as otherworldly. She is struggling, like Set, to find her own sense of self. On occasion she, like Set, has been sexually abused. However, *The Ancient Child* deviates from the Dime Novel genre because Set is unable to significantly aid Grey. Unlike the protagonists of the Dime Novel, who are strong, confident, Set is physically and mentally sick. The Dime Novels have heroes, but Set is not a hero. Through protecting Grey, which Set’s brief recovery and marriage seem to indicate he will be able to do, he would be reintegrated into the community. However, Set wanders off into the woods after he learns of Grey’s pregnancy, and is not heard from again, thus, finally, circumventing the reader’s expectations of the conventional Dime Novel.
One unique Native American narrative device is “clustering.” Michelle Trusty-Murphy suggests that Momaday characteristically uses a uniquely Kiowa form of clustering (122). Clustering involves locating the center of a story and moving out from there. This is radically different from traditional western narratives that have a beginning, middle, and end, but no center. The center is not the same as the middle. The center is what holds the story together. Trusty-Murphy specifically examines Momaday’s *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, but examining *House Made of Dawn* and *The Ancient Child* are also equally productive and illustrative. For example, Trusty-Murphy finds that *The Way to Rainy Mountain* is located in a real place, that is Rainy Mountain, and from this center she identifies grandmother, personal memory, and weather as clustering around this “place” (143). All of these things are related to one another through various interactions. For instance, grandmother is tied to blood memory which is tied to sun dance and which is tied to creation, landscape weather and to gatherings. This is tied to grandmother, and so on in ever widening concentric circles. Likewise, *The Ancient Child* has a center, which Momaday makes it convenient to identify by stating in chapter 24, “this is the center of the story” (121). Note this is not the middle of the story, the novel goes on for some three hundred pages. This is a clear indicator that this is the most important chapter in the book, it is the center of the story. What is the center of the story? Catlin Setman explains to his son Set: “Loki, this matter of having no name is perhaps the center of the story. Words are names. The old
man understood that, and he used his understanding to soothe and console his people. And everyone felt better.” (121)

The center of *The Ancient Child* is Set’s search for his self, for his name. Set remembers being called Loki by his father. He remembers the story his father told him about a boy who wanders into camp, and then is gone in the morning. The event is so startling to the people that the storyteller makes up a story about what happened, explaining it was not a boy who wandered into camp, but a bear:

That would have been to deceive them. They could no longer have believed their eyes and ears. So he offered them something in the child’s stead, a bear in the boy’s place. And, they thought: Yes, so it was; it must indeed have been a bear; yes, a little bear came into our camp and babbled to us. Curious and playful it was, a cub. And, Loki, imagine, the little boy must have returned to the woods that same night... and surely the Piegan camp dreamed of him and how they would play with him in the morning, Perhaps the women thought of how they would make him handsome shirts and leggings, and of how they would give him a name, for he was an extraordinary being. And then, when it was suggested to them that he was a bear, what must have been their response? Oh, they were relieved, for they had not then to explain a strange and unlikely thing to themselves. But they must have known a sense
of loss. And the boy, Loki, what became of him? What brought him to the camp of the Piegans in the first place? And what urged him away? Was it a yearning, a great loneliness? Did his tracks become the tracks of a bear? Did his lively, alien tongue fade into the whimper and growl of a beast? (121-2)

A bear wandering into the camp was not so unusual, and the people accepted that explanation. Their world was in order again. However, the boy did not really turn into a bear. The people simply accepted the story that he was a bear all along because they could not understand a world in which strange boys wander in and out of camp. This story also serves as an interpretive key to the novel.

The important thing is recognizing the story that Catlin Setman told his son Set, and Set’s search for his name, as the center of the story. Reinforcing this center is the question asked in the first line of the book: “Quien es?” Those words are reportedly the last words Billy the Kid hears in his life. That question is fatal to him because he does not know the answer. He dies because he could not answer that question. “Quien es?” does mean “Who is there?” but it also means, “Who are you?” Obviously, it is essential that Set discovers his origins, and finds out who he is in order to survive. Later, Grey asks Billy, “why didn’t you drop the son of a bitch?” (11); emphasizing, once again the center, or theme of the novel. To not know who one is fatal, even fora legend. Also, associated with Billy’s death is a young woman, Paulita Maxwell.
Significantly, Grey fancies herself Paulita. From the reader’s first introduction to Grey, it is obvious that she has a problem recognizing and living in reality. In addition to her imaginary conversations with Billy the Kid, she also has visions, and is able to “burst into tears” at will (12). She considers herself beautiful, tall and lithe, with a delicate mouth, and aquiline nose, when, in fact, she is “not more than five feet five inches,” with heavy brows, a short, tilted nose, square jaw, crooked teeth, a prominent mole on the left corner of her mouth, and downy (hairy) arms (18-19). She has delusions, not only about what she hears and sees, but also about her own body. Although she is not beautiful in any conventional sense of the word, the narrator does engage in some clever jeu de mots by saying she has a “beauty beyond telling” (19). Which can be interpreted as meaning you could not tell that she was beautiful, or she had a beauty that could not be told. Then author introduces Grey’s sexual partners. First, Perfecto Atole, a middle-aged Jicarilla man, Murphy Dicks, a boy of her own age, and his father Dwight Dicks, who rapes her after his son boasts of having sex with Grey in exchange for a horse. Later, we are introduced to Grey’s last lover in the novel, Set. Set is a 44 year-old painter, who is beginning to feel alienated from his art because, as a commodity, it was beginning to determine him instead of him determining it. He is not happy. For instance, though men and women seemed to admire him, “there were times when the disillusionment was so great that he wept” (37). It seemed to him that nobody cared about what was in his soul. What he wanted, more than
anything, was a child, someone to see what he did with a child’s eye instead of the “narrow-eyed glib” and “calculations” of dealers and critics (37). The real meaning of a person’s life’s work is how it is seen by his or her children, without a child he became “sick and tired” (38). Note, “sick and tired” is repeated twice with an affirmation. We learn some of the reasons for Set feeling sick and tired. His mother died in childbirth, his father died in an accident when he was seven, he was placed in an orphanage, the Peter and Paul Home, where he was sexually abused by Sister Stella Francesca until he was adopted by Bent, a philosophy professor. Set remembers being called Loki and having a dog called Lukie. He has vivid dreams about his mother, whom he cannot possibly remember, but strangely enough he has no recollection of his father until he is notified by telegram of grandmother Kopemah’s death, a telegram with his father’s name on it sent by Grey. Set becomes fascinated with his father’s name on the telegram. The telegram has his and his father’s name on it. It was a thing of “impenetrable meaning, an enigma, perhaps an omen. It bore his father’s name, therefore his spirit” (52). His brooding becomes restlessness, then determination and he travels to Oklahoma to visit his father’s family. Once there, he encounters Grey, whom he mistakes for a boy, a “deranged boy” (60). However, the text does not support that reading. For instance, Jessie instantly recognizes Set’s description of the “boy” as Grey (66), and later when he awakens to see the same “boy” he calls out “Grey,” and she answers him (72-3). Thereby confirming, without doubt, that she is the
“boy.” In addition, the realistic description of Grey as being short, stout, with heavy brows and downy arms also supports her being mistaken for a boy in the dark or at a distance.

Set and Grey are both obsessed with the dead. Set thinks visiting his father’s grave and the graves of his ancestors will help him remember his father and to find himself. Instead, he finds that “he was out of place among the groups of strangers … weeds had grown up long ago over the grave of Catlin Setmaunt” (105). The “weeds” functioning metaphorically, of course, to show the passage of time and events between him and the father he knew as a child. This scene is chilling because it seems to forecast the hopelessness of Set’s goal of finding his father and his self. Similarly chilling is the image of Grey sleeping on her grandmother’s grave and imagining that she hears her grandmother telling her Set is a bear (116). Grey and Set have a macabre bond. Separately, they may be all right, but together they exacerbate one another’s injuries. Interestingly enough, Set knows, or at least suspects, that he is going mad. Set wonders if he is “losing his mind” (61). And, the narrator says, “Set reels inside himself, he applies color to his brain with a knife ... a deranged boy glares from the shadows” (123). He interrogates the mirror, a “Cyclops,” a monster with one vacant eye, “are you Set?” (132). In addition, he becomes unaware of his everyday surroundings, like the phone which he does not notice ringing, staring into the mirror for an interminable amount of time, and loss of appetite. He asks himself, for example, “When did I last eat, I ought to be
hungry?” (135), and, of course, talking to himself. Why? Again, because he needs his father. Set pleads, “We need good fathers, Bent. Be my father” (136). He asks when did Lukie, his dog, die. Lukie is an obvious metaphor for himself; his father called him Loki. Therefore, what he is really asking is when did Loki, Catlin’s son, die; and when was Set, Bent’s son, born? Who am I? Immediately after this questioning, he reiterates his fear that he is losing his mind: “I am beginning to doubt my own mind” (138). Furthermore, he reflects that this crisis is not a new one: “A disease has been eating at my inside for years ... (I am) beginning to be desperate ... I am fighting for my life” (138). Another indicator that he is going mad is his dreams about himself being called Loki. Interestingly, the voice calling him is his, but he does not know who or where he is. He is in search of himself. Indeed, he has not known who he was for a long time. For instance, in his first meeting with Jason, his agent, and Lola, his lover, he jokes about a “creeping figure among the trees, a shadow” being a self-portrait. (144)

He explains that from the time he was adopted that he was forced to be responsible for creating an identity, but his ability to maintain that identity was coming to an end. Likewise, Grey forces him to be responsible for creating an identity which he is able to maintain for a while, until he disappears into the woods. The point is, he has a debilitating need to please those who are close to him. He readily accepts the responsibility for acting out the role they foist on him as long as he is able precisely because he does not have a clear sense of
self. The person who almost succeeds in intuiting this awareness in him is the art critic Alais Sancere. She points out to Set that the image of a horseman in one of his paintings is like a centaur, or a man becoming a centaur. She tells Set about Kafka’s story of the Red Indian and horse becoming one; Kafka’s work being an exemplar of the metamorphic and malleable nature of the human psyche. To Set, “It seemed as if something was rising to the level of consciousness, a recognition, a truth,” and “it was as if Alais Sancere had saw very clearly something in me that I had failed to see in myself” (161). An aspect of Loki that is often overlooked, which is also characteristic of Set, is his suffering. Loki was bound to a rock and tortured like the Greek Prometheus. Set’s adopted father, Bent, was a philosophy professor. Consequently, Set is probably more familiar with the Western metaphorical meaning of the name Loki, than he is with why his real Native American father called him Loki. However, before he is able to make the connection, Bent dies. Then he is overcome with guilt and grief, guilt for cheating on his lover Lola with Alais, and Lola being unable to contact him about Bent’s stroke because of his affair with Alais, until Bent has already died. Set helplessly pleads; “Bent, be my father. Be my father, Bent. I love you.” (162)

The text of the novel shifts its focus back to Grey and her fantasies about her life with Billy the Kid, her ability to talk to animals and the dead in her dreams. The text makes a careful distinction: “Above all she had been born to dream ... in her dreams ... the animals and dead talk to her” (173). And, “To
dream that was at the center of life, hers anyway” (173). In her dreams the grandmother instructed her. In her dreams the earth, eagles, fishes, coyotes, tortoises, mice and spiders instructed her. In her dreams she knew of things that had long since been lost to others. She knew of things that lay in remote distances of time and space. She knew of winter impending upon the top of the world, of sheer glacial vastnesses, of huddled ancients, walking like bears through the mists. And she knew of the ancient child, the boy who turned into a bear. The point is, it was all in her dreams, just as her life with Billy the Kid was in her dreams. She dreams that she is Sister Blandina visiting Billy in jail; she imagines she is riding around naked with a turtle mask on and carrying a spear, she even thinks she turns into a turtle; she imagines she hears her grandmother’s voice, and then she suddenly awakens in bed. It was ail simply a dream. Grey also dreams that Set will be her husband, in her mind he is already her husband because he accepted the medicine bundle from her hand (174). And, once she has the opportunity to act on her dreams about Set, she does so by enlisting the help of Perfecto Atole. Grey’s relationship with Perfecto Atole is a strange one. He is a middle-aged man who had sex with her when she was just a child, certainly no more than an adolescent. It was her first sexual experience, and although they appear to have an amicable relationship now it is obvious that she has a lot of pent-up rage against him. She cuts up the expensive boots he gave her as a gift, perhaps a gift for having sex with him. Grey takes pleasure in telling him how she cut up the boots and in publicly
displaying the remnants: “I cut the tops off and made shakers out of them” (283). What is she expecting when she asks Perfecto to attack and humiliate Set? She cannot lose in her thinking; Either Set becomes enraged and beats or even kills Perfecto, just as Abel kills Juan, in *House Made of Dawn*. Or, Perfecto, who on the horse looks like a centaur, the image that represents Set’s father, severs Set’s bond with his father through his act of unmitigated violence and terror. It is certainly reasonable to assume that Set has shared his paintings and images and their interpretation with Grey. For instance, Grey has already isolated him into a world of women, and the first man he encounters in a while looks like the image he has created of his father, but this man savagely attacks him with a bear’s claw. He naturally becomes enraged and delirious. It is a simple thing for Grey to convince him he turned into a bear or at least that the spirit of the bear came over him, and that without her, he is a senseless and enraged animal subject to a power that he cannot control, but she can. He must therefore submit to her and her secret wisdom as a medicine woman to be able to live at least the appearance of a normal life. Perfecto Atole deserves some comment. He can be compared with the albino, Juan Reyes Fragua, in *House Made of Dawn*. They are both described as snakelike and innately threatening, as well as overtly sexual. There is also the serious implication of sexual history between Juan and Abel because Abel stabs Juan “deep into the groin” instead of, for instance, the heart or belly or neck (*House Made 78*). Perhaps Juan molested Abel as a child, certainly Perfecto’s “taking” of the “girl’s virginity”
is improper. Therefore, how can he be instrumental in the “healing” of Set? Does Grey really love Set? Set, like Perfecto, is a middle-aged man. Set is 44 and Grey is only 19. Somehow, that just does not seem healthy. Especially considering Grey’s history of being sexually abused by older men, and the absence of her own father—who would be approximately Set’s age. Therefore, it is not unwarranted to speculate that Grey, in her collection of middle-aged men as her lovers, Perfecto Atole, Worcester Meat, and Set, is, in a way, searching for her own absent father. In and of itself, the age difference may not be damning, although it is certainly suspect, but combined with all the other problematic elements in Grey’s life. It makes the relationship between Set and Grey very inappropriate and dangerous to both. Grey’s own life story indicates why she needs Set to be dependent on her, and why she needs to be in control. Grey has experienced many traumatic sexual experiences in her young life. Her first sexual experience was the result of manipulation by an older man, Perfecto Atole, instead of mutual self discovery between young people who think they are in love. Further, Grey does not have the opportunity to have sex lovingly with the young man she wants to have a meaningful relationship with, Murphy Dicks, but instead she uses the excuse of trading sex for a horse to have sex with him. Of course, his subsequent bragging about the exchange to his father, and probably to his friends, leads directly to the father of the young man, Dwight Dicks, brutally raping her. She subsequently follows Murphy Dicks to where he is attending college, Oklahoma State University, perhaps to
tell him what his father did or the real reason she had sex with him was because she loved him. However, instead of a relationship she finds only rejection and further humiliation. All of these things add up to create a state of mind in which she needs to dominate, and to be in control of the man or men she has sex with in order to feel safe. She is barely more than a child herself.

In the end, she loses control and Set dies or disappears. Either way, she ends up one more Native American mother with a fatherless child, Grey re-imagines Dwight Dicks raping her as an incident in which she gains control of the situation and her body. While Dwight Dicks is raping her she is imagining that she is making love with Billy the Kid, then she is brought forcefully to the dirty floor of the stable:

In an instant her intense pleasure was turned into pain, concentrated and excruciating. A burst of brilliant red light flashed upon her closed eyes. She screamed in pain. Her eyes burst open. The face above her was red and swollen and dripping sweat. In that instant she saw the face of Bob Olinger (a deputy who brutalized Billy the Kid), but in the next she beheld the huge transported head of Dwight Dicks . . . She was nearly blind with rage and desperation and hurt. And already there was in her the seed of sorrow, well below the level of articulate indignation, let alone rage, that would be with her the rest of her life. In that one moment she became almost the personification of hatred, like
Olinger, more stricken and diseased with hatred than she could have believed possible. In this unspeakable happening she was forced for the first time to a hatred of the world, of herself, of life itself. (96-7)

Then there is a short excerpt from her book about Billy the Kid, and the next moment, “moonlight poured in the window of the grandmother’s room. Grey lay asleep on the bed, one of the grandmother’s shawls across her legs” (210). Obviously, her mad, naked ride and bizarre conversation with Dwight was all a dream. Also, it is only in her imagination that she is “lithe.” It is even questionable if her book about Billy the Kid really exists or if it, too, is just in her head. For example, earlier it is shown that “words fail her,” and “she knew what she wanted to say, but she could not say it in writing” (185). The narrator informs the reader that “sometimes she would sit over her notebook for hours, and nothing would come of it, and tears would fill her eyes” (186). She wonders if it is “Billy who is articulate, or [i]s it she?” (192). Grey tells Set to lay his hands in the sand and snow and to sing to the earth and the high Rio Arriba plateau would do him good. But, Set gets sicker: “He broke out then into a cold sweat, and his whole body quaked. On his hands and knees on the shoulder of the road he had never felt worse. He was tearing, drooling vomit, weak and humiliated. He wanted to die.” (276)

When Grey puts her hands on him, he tears away. She continues to tell him it is just the spirit of the bear awakening, but “there on the high plateau of
Rio Arriba he would have given anything to hear Bent’s voice again-and across some unfathomable chasm of time his father’s.” (277)

Also, when she looks into her mind she wants to see her grandmother Kope’mah, but she sees “instead the face of Annie Oakley or that of Emily Dickinson” (194). She “imagined herself Sister Blandina or Saint Teresa or Joan of Arc” (194). Although she looks at her rough hands and thinks they are the hands of a medicine woman, she immediately imagines she is Sister Blandina, sitting on a small chair “regarded her delicate white hands” (195). She is demonstrating, not the complete and secure sense of self that characterizes mature medicine people, but the classic psychic trauma of a victim of colonization that the psychotherapist Frantz Fanon describes in one of his books, Black Skin, White Masks (1952). Fanon discusses the insidious phenomenon of the colonization of the mind. Linda Hogan (American Indian Poet) has a similar phenomenon adumbrated metaphorically in her poem “The Truth Is”. Grey is obviously afflicted with some type of schizophrenia and Set appears to be suffering from severe depression, or more probably, bipolar disorder. Grey and Set seek mythic solutions to contemporary real-life problems. Turning into a bear or becoming a powerful medicine woman are simply not options for most Native American young men and women living in modern America. It is important to read the story metaphorically (a sophisticated use of language that represents more than words are capable of representing in and of themselves) and realistically. Of course, this is not to
say that psychiatry offers any ready solutions. Abel, it should be recalled, did spend some time in a psychiatric hospital after he killed Juan:

The walls of his cell were white, or perhaps they were grey; he could not remember. After a while he could not imagine anything beyond the walls. The essential character of the walls consisted not in their substance but in their appearance, the bare one dimensional surface that was white, perhaps, or grey, or green.

(Momaday, *House 97*)

In *The Ancient Child*, Set, too, had psychiatric treatment, but beyond labeling, nothing is done to alleviate his condition: “He is dangerously self-centered.” (235)

*The Ancient Child* is a sophisticated syncretic novel that reveals startling truths about the Native American experience and about literature by and about Native Americans. It is a story about the crisis of identity and one man’s struggle to discover his true self. Written as four books, *The Ancient Child* explores the undeniable tie to identity and the discovery of how the soul truly exists. Through dreams, visions, myths, dialogue, and thought processes the reader begins to understand the true nature of the main characters and their acquisition and acceptance of their true identity. The story couples myth and reality as way of juxtaposing the different societies, Native American vs. Western. Also, through the use of distinct dialogical differences the reader can further gather where a character is heralding from and how they tie their
identity to their homeland. In the case of Grey, she possesses one dialect when with her Kiowa family, and another when she’s with her mother and the Navajo’s.

The novel is truly a masterful work that combines the sweet poetic language of a dream world with ruthless punches of reality to create a story that can resound through the hearts of readers across generational and cultural boundaries. Through the use of Spanish, Navajo, and Kiowa words and phrases, the reader becomes embroiled in the world of Momaday and the depth of the lives of these struggling characters. The beauty of the world that surrounds these characters is often eclipsed by their desperation for a true and whole identity and the harshness of their realities. Delicately portrayed and profoundly thought provoking, *The Ancient Child* is truly a work of art. It is not a normal pick for a science fiction or fantasy story. Rather, publishers and critics usually reserve a book of this caliber for “modern ethnic fiction.” Like most non-fantasy stories, *The Ancient Child* takes place on earth and in the modern day. The main character is neither sorcerer nor space pirate but he is a man of mixed Kiowa descent, and he is a painter. This man, Locki, or Set as he is often called, goes on a personal journey of discovery into America’s heartland and Momaday’s birth state, Oklahoma. Here he finds enchantment, his family roots, and the seed that will one day make him become Set, the bear.

Momaday relies heavily on religions and traditions to provide the backbone of this great novel. Loki Setman, for instance, as a name, comes
from Nordic, Egyptian, and Kiowa religions. Locki (also spelled Loki, Locke, etc.) is the god of mischief who has been trapped until the Nordic doomsday, the Ragnorak. Set is the ancient Egyptian god of storms and disorder. He, too, plays a trickster role. Then, too, Set is the Bear in Kiowa. The Bear, in many Native American religions, represents introspection. The origins of these names highlight Momaday’s characterization of Locki Setman. He is a Kiowa trapped in a white man’s world where he is a trickster figure haunting his white step-father and girlfriend. Set is also an introspective character rediscovering his identity.

Also, Momaday heavily steeped this story in oral traditions, in particular, the story of the boy who transforms into a bear. The story of *The Ancient Child* is written in oral form to maintain the tale’s authenticity. Momaday intersperses the oral narrative of the “ancient child” throughout the text to remind readers of the Bear’s presence. At the same time, Set’s story absorbs the Kiowa’s distinct oral tradition, which makes his journey uniquely Kiowa.

Where this book deviates from most anthropomorphic stories is in the book’s emphasis. This book is about the transformation of a man into a bear. What happens after the actual transformation remains unsaid: it is inconsequential to the author. Whatever repercussions may assault Set after he succumbs to the bear will not be discovered in this book. That is a tale Momaday leaves untold.
The novel has a powerful, lyrical voice that raises the standards of anthropomorphism. Readers become part of the dreams and visions of Set and the mysterious Kiowa medicine woman, Grey. Grey lives in a mid-1800’s dream-world where she is Billy the Kid’s outlaw companion. The scenes with Henry McCarty (alias Billy the Kid) are sensually astounding; Momaday brings to life an American West full of harsh realms and heart-rending betrayals.

Set struggles to recapture a life he never knew. He feels trapped in his relative success because his agents and audiences continue to ask him to sacrifice his soul and his paintings for the sake of financial success. Set’s agent persistently reminds him to paint bigger canvases with brighter colors because that is what is in style at the time. Despite his attempts to be true to himself, Set finds his integrity and self-respect compromised. As Set feels more and more disillusioned, and looks towards a fuller life with his Kiowa family, the bear inside him awakens and begins to possess him.

Something that really distinguishes this book from any other anthropomorphic story is the results of the transformation into a werecreature. The bear frees Set from his corrupted, jaded life. The transformation’s metaphor is that a lost Kiowa man rediscovers his heritage and, along the journey, he learns about who he is and what it means to be a Kiowa. In this story, the metaphorical and physical transformation completes the writer’s theme of self-discovery. Anthropomorphic literature, then, is the extra spice
thrown into Momaday’s literary recipe to make the story both authentic and effective.

Momaday’s writing not only describes the problems of a Kiowa’s dissociation from his family and ultimately his tribe, but Momaday also takes care to nurture the anthropomorphic and not take any aspect of the traditional lycanthrope story for granted. Readers wanting a story that goes above and beyond physical transformations should read this astounding novel and keep it close to heart. Like so many other American ethnic writers’ books, this book becomes so absorbed into an ethnic genre, that many people forget that The Ancient Child is also an unbelievable tale on the horizon of fantasy literature.

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