The values and perceptions of oral literatures were preserved in Native Poetry. Native poets look back to storytelling and they recall the visionary singers and healers. Native poetry is the synthesis of ethical ways of living, spiritual vision, secular and utilitarianism and the skills of survival. It is gleaned from ethnography, folklore and linguistics. Native American poetry summarizes culture specific cross tribal profiles of Indian life, distinct from mainstream America. Native American poetry was not acknowledged and less published till the mid twentieth century in America. There were only handful of anthologies. There were only few Native poets discussed in Elemire Zolla’s *The Writer and the Shaman: A Morphology of the American Indian* (1969). Some of the poets like John Rollin Ridge (Cherokee), Alexander Lawrence Posey (Creek), Bertrnt N.O. Walker (Wyandot), Mourning Dove (Okanogan), Will Rogers (Cherokee), Charles Eastman (Sioux) and Luther Standing Bear (Sioux) were discussed. The poetry of these poets was not provided with critical reception and much of their work went unheralded. But for many of the American readers these are the first Native American voices of Poetry.

As part of the resurgence of Native American consciousness many revised anthologies of folkloric tradition were published. John Bierhorst’s *In the Trail of the Wind* (1971), William Brandon’s *The Magic World* (1971), Jerome Rothenburg’s *Shaking the Pumpkin* (1972) initiated the Native
American poetic tradition. It is during this period of evolution, Natachee Scott Momaday (Momaday’s mother) released *American Indian Authors*, that provided a survey of poetry from Chief Joseph to Vine Deloria. This is followed by the publication of Terry Allen’s *The Whispering Wind: Poetry by Young American Indians* (1972) which introduced fourteen young poets who reflected integrated arts of tribal culture in their poetry. The Native resurgence is further consolidated by Wlater Lowenfel’s *From the Belly of the Shark: Poems by Chicanos, Eskimos, Hawaiians, Indians, Puerto Ricans in the USA, With Related Poems by Others* (1973), which has dismantled the White Poetry Syndicate with the proclamations of ethnicity. Duane Niatum’s *Carriers of the Dream Wheel: Contemporary Native American Poetry* (1975) brought together the artists, teachers and students as literate poets. This anthology has published the poems of Momaday, Simon Ortiz, Roberta Hill, Leslie Silko, Anita Probst and other popular Native American Poets. The anthology of Kenneth Rosen *Voices of the Rainbow: Contemporary Poetry by American Indians* (1974) and Geary Hobson’s *The Remembered Earth: An Anthology of Contemporary Native American Literature* (1979) consolidated the geographical kinship and offered a collation of tongues. These anthologies have evoked multiple forms and have reawakened diverse perspectives of Native American life. Introducing experimental forms these anthologies have consolidated the generated American Indian renaissance.
To understand Native poetry genuinely, one has to understand the pervasive influence of Tribal poetics. Without depending on the written alphabetical order, Native cultures have evolved with visualized inscriptions, carvings, paintings, pictographs, petroglyphs, ritual codes and artifacts that portrayed different forms of tribal literatures. Apart from these, Algonkin birchbark scrolls, Iroquois shell beaded warmpum belts, Sioux winter count pictography on buffalo skins, totem poles, sand paintings and weaving designs are inclusive of Tribal poetics. Oral culture which is a common factor is survived and remembered through myths, rituals, song poems, narrative tales, legends and parables. In Native cultures, Oral tradition unifies the people. The Native cultural unification is expressed through Oral literatures. The literary history of Natives is circumscription of memory, imagination and seasonal rituals. The Native poets see themselves keepers of the primordial and sacred words. They consider rhythm, vision, craft, nature and words as divine gifts that form the centrality of human life. The key concepts of Tribal aesthetics like inherited body of tradition, a mutual past and present, integrated relationship form the subject of Native poetry. Despite variety in Native histories, Native poetics resist western literary conceptions through interconnectedness. Given the diversity in organic aesthetics, Native poetic kinship unites the people.

Momaday’s contribution to Native American poetry is of immense significance. His influence on the evolution of Native poetry is historical. He
began publishing poetry in *The New Mexico Quarterly* (1959) as an undergraduate at the University of New Mexico. After the invaluable contribution for several years, He is known as the best Native poet who has radically transformed the history of Native poetry. Momaday’s lyrical imagism, musicality of words and the melodic cadences unfurled the world of Native reality. His anthology *The Gourd Dancer* (1976) with the poetry over twenty years consolidated his position as a poet and artist. His Native self spirit is reflected as a visionary transience. His counter voice revealed the darker restlessness and spawned the intensely conscious world poetry. His imperceptible world of silence and his artistic contemplation created a world of intelligible collective wisdom. In the world of poetry Momaday moves through the history of man’s idea of himself. He continues his artistic pilgrimage, unfurling a whole narrative sequence of Native life. He strikes a familial tone with an inclusive sense sharing the human history. It is from these broad perspectives of perception, Momaday’s *In the Presence of the Sun* need to be understood. Momaday’s imaginative exploration in recuperating the dismantled and distorted history of Natives is almost in resonance with the West Indian poet Wilson Harris. In the process of offering a chronological evolution of the history of Natives, Momaday draws the sources from the folkloristic tradition of Natives.

*In the Presence of the Sun: Stories and Poems* (1992) is a republication of many previously published stories, poems, sketches, and drawings. While it
includes a voice that is more formal and Western, it also contains the feel of
the oral tradition that is found in his work *The Journey of Tai-me* (1967). This
collection presents a perspective that is reflective of Momaday’s life, one that
is multicultural and multigeographical. It is a celebration of unusual works of
extraordinary range. It is informed with wonder and delight, sorrow and joy,
the evanescence of seasons and the persistence of the human spirit. It is a
concentration of riches, a distillation of thirty years in which the creative
impulse is defined, refined, and sustained. Here are the best expressions of a
man who is intensely alive to the world and whose vision reaches to the
horizon and beyond. Momaday inhabits the element of language easily. He is a
“man made of words”. A glorious testament to Native American past, this
book features over seventy poems and sixteen new stories. The words, poems,
and stories are enhanced by Momaday’s own line drawings and
complementary images. His drawings are in turn fine, bold, provocative, and
moving. His voice is ancestral and contemporary, profoundly American and
genuinely universal. This book brings Momaday’s work to a new generation of
readers. Momaday combines the mainstream modernism of American poetry
with an oral-language inspired reference to Kiowa and other Southwest Native
American traditions, particularly the Navaho.

Momaday’s early work is in syllabic poetry, which is based on a number
of syllables per line, rather than on the structured meter of rhyme of traditional
poetry. This form allowed him more freedom of expression than rigid meters
imposed; additionally, some arrangements of this syllabic poetry resemble the rhythms of Indian verse translations and oral traditions. This variety reflects Momaday’s deep appreciation of the poetry of Emily Dickinson, Paul Valéry, Wallace Stevens, Yvor Winters, and the early nineteenth-century American poet Frederick Goddard Tuckerman. Momaday, mentored by Yvor Winters, was necessarily influenced by his philosophies and style. But Momaday’s love of poetry precedes his study with Winters. The anti-romantic literature of Frederick Goddard Tuckerman, a contemporary and intellectual opposite of the transcendentalists, and of Emily Dickinson are also clear forerunners to his poetry. Of her, Momaday notes that she taught him about “the mystery and miracle of language” (Schubnell, *Conversations* 84), and about capturing the sense of human isolation, tragic finality and intellectual survival.

However, Momaday’s broad perspective of fifty years of creative life lends him to a vision of history that is unique. Through the arts he sees his people before Columbus. Momaday’s poetry reflects the sweep of his life: from his impressive childhood among various Indian traditions to his inspiring adult travels in Europe. These diverse interests are reflected in his poetry. As Momaday comments, “if you look closely into these pages, it is possible to catch a glimpse of me in my original being.” (*In the Presence of the Sun* XX)

The book is divided into four sections, “Selected Poems,” “The Strange and True Story of My Life with Billy the Kid,” “In the Presence of the Sun: A
Gathering of Shields”, and “New Poems”. These sections show a variety of forms, tones and content in the form of poetry and short stories.

The first section, “Selected Poems,” includes images of his own personal journeys and experiences living in the Southwest on mesas and in the plains. Included are items important to the Kiowa - bears, horses, and shields as well as the memories and experiences of another time and another place. Poems such as “The Horse That Died of Shame,” “The Gourd Dancer,” and “The Stalker” confirm Momaday’s continued emphasis on the importance of the oral tradition. This section presents glimpses of events that sound like excerpts taken directly from *The Journey of Tai-me*. It comprises some twenty-eight poems written on a variety of subjects. This section consists of Momaday’s first poem titled “Earth and I Gave You Turquoise”, which was published in 1959 in the *New Mexico Quarterly*.

The second section, “The Strange and True Story of My Life with Billy the Kid,” carries on Momaday’s ongoing fascination with this character. His imagined conversations and interactions with Billy the Kid (an Outlaw Legend) represent another character that has become mythic and has obviously found its way into the minds of Indians like Momaday. The whole section focuses on the legend of Billy the Kid and it begins with what seem to be biographical poems about Billy the Kid: “A Word on Billy the Kid,” “Billy the Boy at Silver City,” “Trees and Evening Sky,” “Billy the Kid, the Departure of His Soul, 14 July 1881,” “Two Figures”, etc.
The third section, “In the Presence of the Sun: A Gathering of Shields,” describes cultural objects that are significant to the Plains people in multiple ways. An initial entry into this section tells how the shields are made, why they are important, and who carries them. The shield is emblematic of Plains culture. It is art and so must be aesthetically pleasing. It reflects its individual maker. It represents another reality like a mask, it is a story, and, finally, its shape is a meditation on life. Along with each prose poem we are introduced to an image of a shield. This section tells sixteen parables of Native American culture and history in the framework of the Shields of the Plains Indians. The prose poems involve a world of characters, including a courageous man, a cowardly man, a hermit, and someone who buys a shield from a store. It consists of significant stories and poems such as, “A Word on the Plains Shield,” “The Shield That Came Back,” “The Sun Dance Shield,” “The Shield That Died,” “The Shield That Was Looked After by Dogs,” “The Shield of Two Dreams”, etc.

The final section, “New Poems,” presents poetry that relies more on Western poetic traditions and more universal human subjects such as parenthood, chastity, and futility. It includes recent poems and drawings of Momaday. These poems intensely explain the images and voices of Native American culture and past. Momaday’s keen relationship with nature shines through these poems: “The Death of Beauty,” “Of Ambition,” “Rings of
Bone,” “If It Could Ascend,” “My Words Do Not Hold,” “Fort Sill,” “At Risk”, etc.

“Selected Poems”

One of Momaday’s first published expressions of his fascination was the poem “The Bear,” written while he was a graduate student in the early 1960s at Stanford. It has become a “signature” poem that connects all his major collections. It opens with Angle of Geese (1974), and The Gourd Dancer (1976).

“The Bear” is not only a long-standing personal testament to Kiowa storytelling traditions but also to Momaday’s continuing respect for Yvor Winter’s concepts of post-symbolist poetry and syllabic verse. The reappearance of “The Bear” throughout Momaday’s career is one of the more striking examples of his commitment voicing his many cultures.

“The Bear,” takes place in the wilderness at midday. The day is calm and sunny, “in the windless noon’s hot glare” (12). The bear is quietly walking through the forest, not hurriedly or destructively. The bear is very old. He has many scars, and a misshapen limb as a result of an old trap injury. It still causes him pain. Then he moves out of sight as buzzards fly overhead.

This poem’s pattern is logical. It is as if Momaday is standing in the wilderness when he sees a bear some distance away. The bear is obscure at first. He blends in with his surroundings. As he walks on without notice of
Momaday, he moves in and out of sight, yet always seems to be there. As the bear moves closer, Momaday gets better.

The message that Momaday is trying to convey is that although this bear has fought many battles and seems to be defeated, he is still surviving. He is old, scarred, and in pain, but is still courageous, noble, and one with nature: “his somnolence, whose old age / has outworn valor, / all but the fact of courage?” (6-8)

To help convey this message, Momaday uses imagery. His use of imagery is very effective in helping the reader visualize the scarred, aged, and crippled bear. To do this he uses the denotations of the words, “... old, ... scarred, ... crooked, ...,” (6, 13, 16) in describing the physical appearance of the bear. The reader pictures a bear that has lived a relatively long time. He has a coat with marks left from old wounds that have healed, and he has a limb that has bends or angles that are not natural. Also, Momaday uses the connotation of the phrase, “... outworn valor ...,” (7) to convey the bear’s bravery in countless battles. Furthermore, Momaday uses the word “... dimensionless. ...”(11), and the phrase, “... seems forever there. ...”, (10), to convey the idea that the bear is one with nature and the bear’s spirit is throughout the wilderness. As for the description of the wilderness, Momaday’s use of imagery paints a picture of the setting in the reader’s mind. The reader can picture the “wall of leaves,” (2) and feel the sun’s heat around mid-day.
The bear represents the Kiowa people. Many years ago they were as the bear, free and at one with nature. They were a proud and courageous people that fought many battles as did the bear. They were seen but went about their daily life. They moved yet were still a part of their environment. They had been through much more difficult times than other cultures. They, too, were caught in a trap that maimed them as a people. They were surrounded by the white culture which suppressed their language, religion, and beliefs. Today, since the white culture diminished their numbers and attacked their culture, it is as if the truly pure Kiowa is gone from sight and the white culture circles waiting to envelope them at a weak moment. The bear is a symbol of power, strength, and nobility, all that the Kiowa believe themselves to be. Their culture may have been scarred and maimed, but they are still all of those things. They are as the bear, courageous survivors.

Momaday’s poem “Buteo Regalis” relates the beauty and mystery of nature, moving from a frail rodent’s instinct of danger to a robust, sharp-eyed hawk’s instinct to feed. This timeless cycle of life and death is related in a sequence of events that take place within a matter of seconds. This heightens the intensity of the poem because readers have no time to prepare for the immediate danger facing the rodent and no way to release the intensity this danger creates, never actually witnessing the kill. In his poignantly familiar “Buteo Regalis,” Momaday has captured the essence of the life and death cycle in the form of hunter and hunted.
The instinct of nature is through a male rodent’s awareness of his own “frailty,” a frailty which is “discrete” to the rodent’s senses (1). Grounded on this Earth, readers turn with the rodent as he senses danger. To the bewilderment of the persona, the hawk’s “winging is unheard” and “unseen,” yet the rodent some how knows danger lurks. (2-3)

Schubnell remarks, “Buteo Regalis,” like “The Bear” descriptive in character, “captures the flight of a hawk ready for the kill. The elegance of its descent and the prey’s instinctive knowledge of danger are combined in a sharp portrayal of nature’s splendor and asperity.” (N. Scott Momaday 215-16)

Then, the hawk’s majestic movements are a “distant motion made whole” (3). Its flapping is so rhythmic that each movement appears not separately but as a single, “unbroken” motion (4). At this precise moment, the motion of the hawk becomes the hawk. It is this motion which will lead it toward its goal. When “it . . . tilts broad-surfaced wings,” it is only motion that is tilting (5). At the same time, the focus shifts to the width of its broad wings, wings that give it the power to outmaneuver its prey. The hawk has become the space it takes up in the sky. Thus, not the hawk, but “the span bends to begin the dive” (6). Then, as the hawk nears its prey, it becomes flashing colors: “alternately white and russet” (7). White is the dominant color of its underside, and russet is the dominant color of its back. Both colors are seen alternately while the hawk is flapping its wings in its dive. White is seen when the hawk’s wings flap upward; then, russet dominates as its wings flap
downward. These colors become increasingly sharp as the hawk approaches the earth. Finally, the hawk is shape: “angle and curve, gathering momentum” (8). As it dives, its specific features are blurred; only angle and curve approach earth. This progression from motion to shape is how an onlooker might view a diving hawk. First, only a slight movement is seen; then as the hawk closes, it gets bigger and becomes an expanse. Finally, only flashes of color and shape are seen as the hawk swoops toward Earth.

Regalis in Latin is so like the English word regal. It immediately connotes the persona’s reverent opinion of the hawk. In line four, the persona characterizes the hawk as “singular.” Of course the hawk is alone in the sky not being a pack bird, but in this case singular also implies the abilities of this hawk and all hawks, superior and exceptional, male or female. In addition, Momaday believes that the “act of naming is equivalent to the act of creation” (Schubnell, “N. Scott Momaday” 182). The hawk was given the species name Regalis, because it is regal, and it is regal because it was given this name. Furthermore, using the hawk’s species name, Buteo, highlights its connection to all living creatures. Everything is eventually part of everything else. The rodent must die, so the hawk may live, which relates that the life and death cycle is part of all families, and thus in all living creatures.

Momaday wrote “Buteo Regalis” during his first year at Stanford. It was a time in which he was greatly influenced by his mentor, Yvor Winters, who “urged his students to organize poetic lines by the number of syllables”
Momaday appears to have taken this advice because each line in “Buteo Regalis” contains ten syllables, giving this emotionally intense poem a quality of balance and control. This balance and control, as well as the taxonomical title, express the orderliness of nature and of the hawk. Moreover, the syllabic quality of “Buteo Regalis” allows the lines to flow as smoothly as the hawk flies. According to Yvor Winters, this is especially true in lines two, four, five and six because of Momaday’s use of iambic pentameter. Winters believes that these lines contrast with the rest of the lines which are syllabic; lines one and three suggest the rodent’s hesitation, and lines seven and eight suggest the hawk’s rapid descent (Forms of Discovery, 290-291). In addition to encouraging him to organize his poetic lines according to the number of syllables, Winters also urged Momaday “to avoid the obscurity of symbolist poetry” in two ways: first by “conceptualizing an abstract idea within a rational framework,” and second by “conveying the idea through a cluster of sharp sensory details” (Schubnell, “N. Scott Momaday” 181). According to Matthias Schubnell, “Buteo Regalis” is “typical of this method” (“N. Scott Momaday” 181). Schubnell asserts that “the elegance of [the hawk’s] descent and the prey’s instinctive knowledge of danger are combined in a sharp portrayal of nature’s splendor and asperity” (“Momaday’s Poetry” 216). Kenneth Lincoln agrees, characterizing this poem as a “sharply detailed hawk’s vision” (“Old Songs Made New: Momaday” 246). The mystery of instincts, the beauty of a flying hawk, and the eternal
cycle of life and death are all related as clearly as the knowledge that other rodents will turn, and other hawks will kill. Through this natural cycle of events, Momaday’s disciplined poem “Buteo Regalis” has captured the essence of nature, harsh yet beautiful.

Momaday’s sympathies for the environment are apolitical; rather, he asserts that the human relationship with nature is a spiritual and aesthetic one. Unlike many writers of the American West, Momaday does not romanticize Nature’s response to humans. Nature is unresponsive, unemotional; death and life are both natural phenomena. One of Momaday’s illustrations of this concept is seen in his poem, “Comparatives.” The first stanza is a fish gasping on the sunlit deck of a ship, the second stanza is that of a desert fossil of another fish trapped in the throes of the same silent agony. The final stanza compares both fish to the wind on waves:

It is most like
Wind on waves—
mere commotion,
mute and mean,
perceptible—
that is all. (28-33)

The poem, “Earth and I Gave You Turquoise” is an elegy consisting of five sestet stanzas. In this poem, the speaker pays tribute to a deceased love and makes plans to join her in the afterlife. The first stanza establishes the
relationship between the speaker, “I,” and the subject, “you.” The opening lines of the poem tell that the happy life experienced by the speaker and the subject ended when the subject became ill. The reader infers that the subject died after becoming, “We lived laughing in my house / and told old stories / ill when the owl cried.” (3-5)

Momaday’s four poems of the “Plainview” sequence are, as the title suggests, reflections on the world of the Kiowas in the southern plains.

In “Plainview: 1” Momaday composes a fiction out of sense perceptions—light and shadow, sound and motion, shapes and color—combined with the result of his imaginative response to the ominous mood which informs a landscape under the threat of an approaching storm. The eleven magpies the person sees are figments of the imagination, “illusions,” as the last stanza makes clear. But at the same time they are an integral part of the poet’s reality. The poem proceeds in relating the imaginative magpies to the physical world. The resulting reality is a synthesis of sense perceptions and imagination.

“Plainview: 2” is an emulation of indigenous poetic patterns: as with “The Delight Song of Tsoai-talee,” its parallel structures, repetition, and accretion are characteristic of American Indian chants. The poem is an elegy on the decline of the Plains Indian world. The peoples of the plains—among them the Kiowas, Comanches, Cheyennes, Arapahos, and Dakotas—reached their golden age after acquiring horses from the Spaniards. Horses gave them
mobility and power, both as buffalo hunters and warriors. It is therefore appropriate to render the disintegration of these cultures in terms of the demise of a horse. Deprived of the animal around which Native culture flourished, the old Indian is left with memories and dreams of a better time. His flight into alcoholism is an expression of his inability to adapt to new circumstances as well as a way of easing the pain of his nostalgia.

“Plainview: 3” is a celebration of the sun, the central object of veneration among the Plains tribes. Momaday renders the spectacle of sunrise impressionistically, using concrete language and images. Three metaphors are compounded in this depiction of the rising sun:

The sun appearing: a pendant
of clear cutbeads, flashing;
a drift of pollen and glitter
lapping, and overlapping night;
a prairie fire. (1-5)

“Plainview: 4” deals with the extraordinary story of Milly Durgan, whose experience epitomizes the drama of frontier life in Texas and Oklahoma at a time when white settlers were still at the mercy of powerful Kiowa raiders. When she was eighteen months old, Milly Durgan was kidnapped in a raid led by the Kiowa warrior Little Buffalo at Elm Creek, Young County, Texas, on 13 October 1864. While the other captives were later ransomed, Milly was adopted by the famous Kiowa warrior, Au-soant-sai-mah, and given her Indian
name, Sain-toh-oodie. Most Kiowa captives were treated as slaves, but Milly was raised by kind foster parents and enjoyed the wealth, status, and protection of a respected family. She married the Kiowa chief, Goombi, and never regretted her Indian existence when, late in life, she learned about her true origin. After a brief visit to her relations in Texas she returned to the Kiowas in Oklahoma.

The prose poem “The Fear of Bo-talee” captures and moves far beyond popular stereotypes, for example, begins with familiar images of a brave Plains warrior and a contemporary drunken Indian. It reveals a private moment, a glimpse of ironic self-reflection when Bo-talee admits: “Certainly I was afraid. I was / afraid of the fear in the eyes of my enemies.” (4-5)

The other prose poem, “The Horse that Died of Shame,” is about a hunting horse:

Once there was a man who owned a fine hunting horse. It was black and fast and afraid of nothing. When it was turned upon an enemy it charged in a straight line and struck at full speed; the man need have no hand upon the rein. But, you know, that man knew fear. Once during a charge he turned that animal from its course. That was a bad thing. The hunting horse died of shame.

(15)

The language itself is direct, simple, and clear. We picture the horse’s speed like a shooting star’s, the horse’s flight as a transfiguration, all
immediately. No single word challenges the common vocabulary, no image
demands reflection before we can see it in the mind’s eye. The bare statement
somehow, by virtue of its appearance in a book of poetry, merits the label
“poem.” And the “poem” is accompanied by a head note, presumably prose,
since head notes are usually not poems themselves. Besides, the head note is a
excerpt from *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (1969), where it was certainly
“prose.” The poem follows its head note like a succeeding paragraph. The
poem at once continues and comments upon the head note. Without the head
note, the poem would still speak its language clearly and summon the image
Momaday concentrates his vision upon, but the meaning would become
private.

“The Horse that Died of Shame” transforms a moment of folklore into a
moment of supernatural magic. The headnote tells a tale we do not quite
believe on a naturalistic level, a story whose climax violates our sense of the
nature of horses, but a story with no other demands to make on our credulity;
up to the moment of the horse’s death, the story seems “true.” The poem,
however, renders the idea of the horse’s death in an extended metaphor, taking
the one “lie” of the folktale and magnifying it into a magic image of a
supernatural horse abandoning an unworthy master and, by implication, an
unworthy plane of existence. The horse’s supernatural origins, unmentioned in
the headnote, Momaday signals immediately by a reference to “many colors,”
a term from Navajo mythology and associated with the gods. At once the term
announces the spiritual nature of the horse and vivifies the sheen of its blackness. Its speed, natural in the headnote, becomes unnatural, unlimited, as Momaday “dreams” of the horse accelerating into a blur then. “The Horse that Died of Shame” combines a story of an act of cowardice, signifying the decline of the Kiowa spirit, with a description of the way in which this traditional tale prevails in Momaday’s imagination and dreams and affects his vision of the world around him.

“The Delight Song of Tsoai-talee” suggests that repetition with variation as one of the most important stylistic characteristics of Native American song and ceremony. “The Delight Song of Tsoai-Talee,” which celebrates the land and Native culture. Tsoai-Talee is a Kiowa name given to Momaday by a paternal relative. The name, which means “rock-tree boy,” refers to the two-hundred foot volcanic butte in Wyoming which is sacred to the Kiowas and is known to Anglo-Americans as Devil’s Tower. “The Delight Song of Tsoai-talee” reflects an aboriginal ethic which holds that man is an integral, but not dominant part of creation. It is a prayer of thanks for having existence in a world of endless wonder and beauty. This poem is a contemporary appropriation of the individual to the universe, based on native tradition and resulting in harmony and delight.

Again the poem “Headwaters” is a tribal emergence myth that incorporates “myth and sacred landscape, visual and aural media, the remembered earth and its speaking-image past” (Lincoln, “Old Songs” 250).
Both “Carriers of the Dream Wheel” and “Headwaters” indicate the idea of creation as something with a specific origin, a source that can be identified by the “roots” or “aboriginal names.” Both poems use a combination of ancient and modern aspects of the oral tradition in that even though the content of the poems center on the idea of language being the origin of creation, both use the written word, a technique that did not originate in the oral Native American traditions. Kenneth Lincoln claims that “modern literary tools have stocked the quivers of native ‘word-senders’ to write their differences, to transcribe tribal distinctions, to chant and tell America from ancient oral texts, speaking with bear hearts” (“Indian Poetry” 60). Momaday himself reinforces this apathy towards language in an interview with Joseph Bruchac, “we do not now know what we can do with words” (Survival This Way 183).

“Headwaters”, the title of the poem suggests the current water which is wild at source and slow at the plain:

Noon in the intermountain plain:

There is scant telling of the marsh—

A log, hollow and weather-stained,

An insect at the mouth, and moss—

Yet waters rise against the roots,

Stand brimming to the stalks. What moves?

What moves on this archaic force
Was wild and welling at the source. (1-8)

This poem depicts the quest for the root to Native American people who are subjected to remain under the control and influence of British migrated people to America. Root searching is the main theme of this poem and the poet has used the pastoral setting to indicate the contemporary human situation. Setting in this poem is the intermountain (valley) and time is afternoon; 12 pm. A log is lying, uprooted, midday in a valley, there are insects, this log is decaying but still from its root water is brimming; coming out.

Its noon at the intermountain and there is a scant telling of marsh. There is hardly any wert land. He uses there instead of here which implies a distance between speaker and the land he is talking about. Speaker belong to Kiowa tribe and he finds himself distant from his original land America after Europeans came and he too finds the land dry because of the loss of its natural beauty. The log in the poetry stands for Native American tribe. Temporarily, it has become lifeless. It is “weather stained” means it has been exposed to all kinds of weather. This suggests the Native Americans have been there in America since time immemorial. Moss and insect are the cause of its lifelessness. Then moss and insect symbolically stand for European invaders. Because of their invasion, Native American identity has become identityless. Momaday argues that the natives have been together with the pains and pleasures of America. Therefore they deserved to be the first class civilians of the nations. From the roots of this log water is brimming. Then Momaday
compares Natives to the headwaters which becomes slow when it comes to the plain. At the root the headwater is wild, archaic and stronger. This means though Native Americans look weak outside because of subjugation, they are strong as the source headwaters. Its root is strong since time immemorial. After all this poetry is a challenge to the Euro American tendency of undermining the Natives.

Another poem “Angle of Geese” is an example of what critic Yvor Winters calls “post-Symbolism,” a style of writing which employs sharp sensory details to deliver meaning. The occasion of the poem is the death of a friend’s child. Momaday discusses the difficulty of conveying condolences, and the inadequacy of language to convey his feelings at the funeral:

How shall we adorn

Recognition with our speech? –

Now the dead firstborn

Will lag in the wake words teach. (1-4)

The speaker’s musings on death bring to mind another event: his killing of a goose while hunting as a boy. As the goose dies in his arms, it gazes at the rest of its flock which has rearranged its formation and flown on. The death of the goose has a profound effect on Momaday, making him aware of his own mortality. In the poem the goose has a symbolic dimension. It becomes an archetypal figure whose death releases it from the bondage of time:

So much symmetry!—
Like the pale angle of time
And eternity.
The great shape labored and fell.
Quit of hope and hurt,
It held a motionless gaze
Wide of time, alert,
On the dark distant flurry. (17-24)

In these stanzas the geese have raised, the men have shot, and one bird has fallen into the river. Momaday remarks on the symmetry of the formation of geese as they fly off. Here the meaning seems to be that death is not something to be dreaded, but rather a means of escaping the trammels of time. The dying goose is already “wide of time,” (23) another catachresis implying that while still alive the goose has already entered another temporal dimension. Momaday contrasts death in nature with mainstream ideas of death in the poem “Angle of Geese.”

“The Gourd Dancer” is a tribute in four sections to Momaday’s grandfather Mammedaty, whom he never knew in person but came to know in his racial memory and the verbal dimension of Kiowa lore. Momaday is a successor to his grandfather in the Gourd Dance Society. Thus, the poem makes a statement about the relation between generations in the larger context of Kiowa history and, on a metaphysical level, about the notion of immortality and individual human life in an oral tradition.
In a number of prose works Momaday has directed his energy at salvaging the memory of his ancestor, most notably in *The Names*. The first section of “The Gourd Dancer” is entitled “The Omen.” Consisting of two quatrains in blank verse, it establishes in its opening line the centrality of the Kiowa homeland. “This place” is the repository of tribal myth and history, the focal point of Momaday’s personal and racial heritage. Through lines two and three, Momaday stresses the dependence of blood memory and the passage of time—the receding sun and the seasonal rhythm stand as images of change—on the changeless, everlasting land. Memory and time have existence only in relation to place.

Lines five and six describe the physical landscape, but they also suggest its effect on the human imagination. “A vagrant heat” intimates the flux and intensity of memories, while “shadows turning like smoke” evoke the elusive and indistinct imaginative responses to the physical environment. The omen refers to the owl, a bird which symbolizes transmigration in Kiowa thought. The owl, a creature animated by the souls of the dead, functions as a catalyst for Momaday’s epiphany of his grandfather. “Remote within its motion, intricate with age,” (7-8) the bird signifies the world of the past. In its distant and aloof nature, it is a challenge to the human imagination.

In this context the owl carries a second meaning. It refers to Mammedaty, who was an owl prophet. The poem’s second section, The Dream,” reinforces the notion of ancestral interrelatedness established in “The
Omen.” It consists of Momaday’s dream of his grandfather’s dreaming about
dreaming, a deliberate construction of a chain of imaginative experiences,
dreams, and recollections which constitute the oral tradition. Again, the
opening line establishes the fixed point as “this house,” to which everything
else is related. This first sentence, “Mammedaty saw to the building of this
house,” suggests more than just a physical activity. It points beyond its
primary meaning of “attending to” the construction of the building;
Mammedaty is involved in a spiritual activity, having envisioned the house
and pursued this vision as a matter of course. Momaday establishes a link
between the sound of the hammers, implied in the silence after the day of
work, and the sounds of nature, which take over when human activity rests.
The blows of hammers find an echo in the drumbeats of Mammedaty’s
imaginative dance.

Mammedaty’s dreaming of the imaginative in the last three lines of this
second section is described in terms of the physical. The dream of “the
summer breaking upon his spirit” is likened to the drumbeats and gleaming
gourds of the Gourd Dance. Implicit in this poetic strategy is the notion that
the worlds of dream and reality are the same, an idea corroborated by
Momaday’s beliefs in the illusory nature of existence and the reality of
dreams.

Section three, “The Dance,” of “The Gourd Dancer” opens with an
inversion: at the end of “The Dream” Mammedaty was dreaming of the Gourd
Dance; now he is actually dancing, dreaming of the mythical past which gave rise to the Gourd Dance ceremony. This inversion is designed to dissolve even further the separation between the real and the ideal dominant in Anglocentric thought but alien to American Indian philosophy.

In the third line Momaday again takes up the images of wind and “the pale slanting plane of the moon’s light.” The three lines “The long wind glances, moves / Forever as a music to the mind; / The gourds are flashes of the sun,” (3-5) suggest that Mammedaty, in his dream, is drawn toward the mythical origin of his dance. The story of the origin of the Gourd Dance tells of a young man who, on a solitary quest, encounters an enemy in the shape of a wolf. He kills the wolf-like man.

The second stanza of “The Dance” elaborates on Mammedaty’s place within Kiowa tradition. His being is contained in his ritual garb as well as in his name and the story of the giveaway. His part in the Gourd Dance ensures cultural survival. The final section of “The Gourd Dancer,” “The Giveaway,” amplifies the significance of language in Kiowa culture. Momaday’s imaginative reenactment of the ceremony in Mammedaty’s honor is framed by two statements on the physical and verbal dimension of human existence. According to Kiowa thought a name is a very important thing. It is never dealt with lightly. A name contains the essence of its bearer, not only during his lifetime but beyond it. This attitude toward names is typical of oral cultures. Mammedaty, on hearing his name spoken in public, is aware of the seriousness
of the impending event. He is “thoughtful, full of wonder, and aware of himself and of his name” (4-5). Momaday draws attention to this dual existence in body and language which constitutes the central premise of the oral tradition. It is in the verbal dimension that life becomes timeless. Existence in place is temporary; in language it is eternal, as long as the old stories continue and the names prevail in the memory of the people.

Momaday conjures up the giveaway ceremony in all its dignity and excitement. The black horse, Mammedaty’s gift of honor, is a symbol of the life force, of “the wild way” (5). Its excitement is analogous to Mammedaty’s in view of the seriousness of the occasion. For the ceremony is not only a matter of honor; it represents the making of a tradition. In that his name is attached to the ceremony, which is perpetuated as a story in Kiowa oral tradition, he is being immortalized. “The giveaway” is thus something of an initiation ceremony in which Mammedaty enters the verbal dimension of existence which goes on forever in the tribal mind.

In “New World” Momaday combines syllabic verse and imagistic expression with the ambiguity and creativity of sound typical of the oral tradition to generate a sense of the aboriginal perception of the universe. “New World” is a hymn to the beauty of nature and is more than a poem; it is a prayer for communion with the universe and for the strength which emanates from the beginning of the world.
Momaday’s poetic construction of the natural world rests on the use of juxtapositions and the careful selection of minute details. The main oppositions are earth and sky, sun and moon, light and shadow, heat and cold, motion and motion suspended. The poem’s structure is cyclical: after setting the scene in the first stanza, Momaday follows the course of a day from dawn to noon in stanzas two and three to dusk and night in the last stanza.

The three opening words, “First Man / behold,” are characteristic of American Indian creation myths, in which a creator lines up the people to view, for the first time, their new world. The notions of creation and procreation are sustained by the images of rain and pollen, two fundamental elements in the chain of life. Momaday indicates that what he selects for description is beautiful not only in its appearance but in its interrelatedness and function within nature. Sky and wind attain a distinct concreteness: the sky is conceived of as a surface reflecting the sunlight; the “winds that low and lean upon the mountains” (11-15), have almost a personal character.

“Carriers of the Dream Wheel” defines better than any poem the spirit of the oral tradition. The poem shows that it is the imagination that has always given life to Indian cultures. It is the “Wheel of Dreams,” their “sacred songs” and “old stories,” living orally, ever one generation from extinction, that expresses their reality, and enables them to find and feel a wholeness and meaning in existence:

This is the Wheel of Dreams
Which is carried on their voices,
By means of which their voices turn
And center upon being. (1-4)

The Wheel of Dreams, which is both the body of the songs and stories and the dynamic imagination that calls them into being, defines the reality of the First World: men “shape their songs upon the wheel / And spin the names of the earth and sky, / The aboriginal names” (7-9). In *The Names* (1976) Momaday explains his belief that the real essences of things are inherent in their names. Thus, the great power of the Wheel that enables men to name things, and, in a manner of speaking, creates or reveals the nature of the world.

The most evocative lines in the poem are the final four. They express just how the oral tradition sustained and renewed itself and gave life to the people. The contemporary relevance of these lines and of the poem is that it states how the old traditions can be preserved and regenerated today. Contemporary Indian poets are the current “Carriers of the Dream Wheel,” and it is through their poems that contemporary Indians can define their reality and “center upon being” (4). This is obviously what Duane Niatum had in mind when he used this poem as the title poem of his anthology of contemporary Indian poetry.

The first four lines of the poem establish the reciprocal relation between the dream wheel and its carriers. The imaginary realm of histories and myths, visions and songs, survives in their voices, and the keepers of the oral tradition
have existence in and through it. It is a fundamental tenet of American Indian thought that the world came into existence through language, that nothing truly exists unless it has existence in language. This theory of creation is intimated in the lines:

   It [the Dream Wheel] encircles the First World,
   
   This powerful wheel.
   
   They shape their songs upon the wheel
   
   And spin the names of the earth and sky,
   
   The aboriginal names. (5-9)

The concluding six lines combine the ancient and contemporary aspects of the oral tradition. As long as this heritage is kept alive in the communal experience of American Indians, they will continue to know who they are and what their destiny is. In “Carriers of the Dream Wheel” Momaday “explores the verbal dimension of American Indian cultures” (Schubnell, N. Scott Momaday 232). Kenneth Lincoln describes Momaday’s verse as having “a dignity of voice, anciently learned, bearing the weight of ancestral history” (“Old Songs” 240). This poem illustrates the important relationship between language and creation.

Viewed in the context of Momaday’s other writings about storytelling and language, “Carriers of the Dream Wheel” may actually be a warning to Native Americans not to take their storytelling traditions lightly. Lincoln also suggests that “language is believed regenerative, even sacred, and makes
things happen” (“Indian Poetry” 74). Thus, the poem calls for a renewing or continuance of the ancient stories, songs, and traditions. Clearly, language is an integral part of both Native American and Christian cultures. The spoken and written word has the power to either create or destroy depending upon the respect paid to each. Momaday’s poem celebrates those who carry on this respect. If ritual is one form of human expression which ensures man’s link to tradition and the web of life, the oral tradition is another. In “Carriers of the Dream Wheel,” Momaday explores the verbal dimension of American Indian cultures. An individual inherits his tribe’s accumulated wealth of orally transmitted stories and songs, “the dream wheel,” which shapes his existence and his perception of the world around him.

Another poem “The Stalker” shows the fragility of Kiowa existence before the acquisition of the horse.

The sequence of eight prose poems which constitutes “The Colors of Night” is a product of Momaday’s stay in Moscow in 1974. In attributing a color to each of the sections Momaday creates a spectrum, a dark prism which makes up night. The stories are imbued with a sense of wonder and mystery which accounts for their peculiar charm.

The first section “White” is about a man who retrieves and cherishes the bones of his dead son, is a moving example of the respect for the deceased which is common among Indian peoples. Moreover, the old man’s proclamation “that now his son consists in his bones,” (7) powerfully attests to
his belief in the indestructibility of a man’s essence or, to use the Christian term, his soul. The color white refers to the polished bones which “gleam like glass in the light of the sun and the moon” (8-9). The story is a poetic treatment of a historical incident recorded by James Mooney in Calendar History of the Kiowa Indians (1898).

The second section, “Yellow,” is an etiologic myth about how it came about that dogs howl at the moon. Enchanted by the yellow brilliance of moonlight on a river, and inspired to sing what is to be his death song, a boy follows the mystery of sound and vision and drowns in the swirling waters. The story is, however, primarily concerned not with death but with metamorphosis: the boy emerges from the river as a dog, howling at the moon, presumably reproaching the moon for its deceit. As in the first poem, death is presented as a matter of transformation rather than annihilation.

In the third section, “Brown,” Momaday makes a humorous claim against empiricism. The secret of how terrapins evade a flood by climbing to higher ground defies the most scrupulous observation. The implication here seems to be that although nature has been stripped of many of its wonders by analytical, scientific investigation, there still remain mysteries which frustrate reason and feed the imagination.

Section four, “Red,” deals with the moral implications of magic. A man has used his “powerful medicine” (1-2) to create a woman out of sumac leaves, and he lives with her for a while. The title of the poem refers to the woman’s
skin color, which resembles that of pipestone. When the man mistreats her, he loses both his magic power and the woman, who disintegrates and becomes part of nature again, “leaves scattered in the plain” (8). Once more, the story bears witness to the belief in the infinite possibilities of creation, transformation, and deconstruction.

The fifth section, “Green,” is a puzzling statement on the nature of reality:

A young girl awoke one night and looked out into the moonlit meadow. There appeared to be a tree; but it was only an appearance; there was a shape made of smoke; but it was only an appearance; there was a tree. (1-5)

Human reality goes beyond what is verifiable by reason. It is constituted as well by dreams, visions, and illusions. Momaday had noted that “there are modes and modes of existence.” The reality of a tree, he seems to say, is valid, whether it is a product of sense perception or of the imagination.

In the following section, “Blue,” Momaday qualifies the nature of reality in an important way: reality, he suggests, is ultimately a function of language; only what has existence in language can be said to be real. The parable of the child who appears in a camp and talks to the people in an unintelligible language is the account of a vision the reality of which is denied because it cannot be transformed into language: “After all … how can we believe in the
child? It gave us not one word of sense to hold on to” (10-12). Had the child
given his name, he would have acquired an identity and a sense of reality.

Section seven, “Purple,” relates the transgression of the sacred rules
which regulate the relation between man and the animal world. A man
slaughters a buffalo, for no reason other than sport. His fellow people witness
the sacrilege with shame and grief. The moral implications of the story are
amplified by its etiologic character. The buffalo’s hump and spine are
transformed into a mountain on the western horizon, and its blood, bright and
purple, colors the setting sun, darkens, and creates the night sky. The results of
these metamorphoses are permanent reminders of the sacrilegious act in the
people’s physical environment.

The final section, “Black,” is another illustration of the existence of
mysterious forces in the universe which cannot be accounted for but have to be
believed. What the woman who “steals into the men’s societies and fits her
voice into their holiest songs” (5-6) represents remains in doubt. At the end of
a sequence of poems which centers on a world of magic and mystery, she
stands as the embodiment of mystery itself.

“The Colors of Night” is an attempt to give some clues to the way in
which American Indians view the world. Theirs is a mythical world view, a
fact which accounts for the difficulties a non-Indian reader may have with this
poetic cycle.
“North Dakota, North Light” is a reflection on the terrible powers of winter. Man and animals seem frozen in a dazzling, brilliant winter landscape. After an opening statement on the encroaching presence of cold, Momaday frames the remainder of the poem by references to “the sheer, lucent plane,”(2) repeated with slight modification in the final line, “… the sheer, shining plane” (15). The only motion in this scene of extraordinary beauty is the wind which is deflected from the hunter’s weapon: “A glassy wind glances / from the ball of bone in my wrist.” (5-6)

“Long Shadows at Dulce” is written in syllabic verse of six syllables to the line and consists of four individually numbered stanzas, each of which represents a miniature poem in its own right. These four stanzas capture in a highly personal, imagistic manner the mood and activities of autumn at Dulce, a small town on the Jicarilla Apache Reservation in northern New Mexico. Although only two months are referred to by name, the four stanzas form a sequence from September to December Momaday’s poem is a commemoration of impressions during a brief stay at Dulce where he worked as a schoolteacher in 1958.

In the first stanza Momaday addresses the ambiguous nature of September. His characterization of the month as “a long illusion of itself”(1-2) presumably refers to the transition from summer to fall which lies in the air but is nothing more than a vague presence defying sensory perception. The third line, “the elders bide their time,” is ambiguous: it may refer to old people who
await the approach of winter, perhaps of death; simultaneously it alludes to the elderberry trees which seem to defer the change of color, the sign of the arrival of autumn.

Stanza two captures the joy and excitement among the children when, at the end of summer, the sheep are rounded up in the camps and the community gathers for social activities. Stanza three communicates the atmosphere of November by way of an extended metaphor. It is the time of the bear hunt: “November is the flesh / And blood of the black bear, / Dusk its bone and marrow” (7-9). The sense of melancholy and the slowing down of life which announces the coming of winter are brilliantly reflected in the image of the final stanza: “In the huddled horses / That know of perfect cold / There is a calm, like sorrow.” (10-12)

In the beginning of “Crows in a Winter Composition” , the poet broods on “nothing,” which by its nature does not appear; but out of absences then gather the “soft distances” and “several silences / Imposed one upon another,” mutually “unintelligible.” Winter itself muted, receding, layered, and indistinct, is evoked in this waiting time with “nothing” (2-8). The poet seems almost at peace with no demarcations, no meanings, no edges in the snowy landscape, no words. The raucous cries come “whirling down and calling” (11), on this quiet scene, as noisy words break the peace of silence and dark definitions intrude on the white expanse. The crows stand in the yard below
highlighting “the gray, luminous crust” (14) of snow. The marginal tone sullies winter’s calm by realizing things greyly into focus.

“The Burning” is an elegy for the heroic age of the Indian cultures. The poem is a conceit: the apocalyptic destructiveness of the fire is a very apt metaphor for the ravaging advent of the white man. The poem catches with great success in explaining the tragic innocence of the Indians as they learn of the approaching disaster, watch for its arrival, and finally submit to the unavoidable will of its drive. What is most striking about the poem is the ease and naturalness with which Momaday sustains the conceit. The imagery is stark and suggestive, and the detail precise and telling. The final lines are extremely moving in their desperate inevitability: “And in the foreground the fields were fixed in fire / And the flames flowered in our flesh” (15-16). “The Burning” is a new and significant direction for Momaday in his treatment of native materials. It is also a fine attempt at a mature summation of the themes he has treated before.

“The Burning,” reveals Momaday’s skill at blending visual artistic perception with poetic language to create a powerful historical and political allegory in sixteen lines. By combining the abstract and the concrete, a variety of binaries arise: the distant and the near, the historical and the current, a creativeness and a destructiveness. Like many Native American poets, Momaday uses the landscape as a canvas to paint his view of history, which accords with so many Native American tribes who view themselves as the
original and continual stewards of the land. The first eight lines of the poem describe a violence of cosmic proportions observed from a distance. Then the second eight lines describe a more recent time and place, one of more subtle potential energy, but still with a violent undercurrent carried along from the earlier lines. This backgrounding and foregrounding technique is typical of Momaday’s poetry as he employs his visual artistry in the form of a “word painting.” (Woodard, *Ancestral Voice* 156)

If we consider “The Burning” a poem of destruction, we might look at this poem as a repudiation of the development of the atom bomb and its use in World War II, especially in light of one of Momaday’s first published poems, “Los Alamos” (1959), in which he associates “the destructive potential of technology” with the atomic laboratories located in the town named in the title. (Schubnell, *N. Scott Momaday* 192-93)

Both Kenneth Mason and Charles Woodard refer to the poem as an “apocalyptic” vision of destructiveness visited upon the Native American people by the European invasions. From line to line, Momaday describes in powerful starkness the Native peoples’ gradual recognition that devastation of their land and life style is moving toward them; and through his technique of “foreground-and-distance” (Woodard, *Ancestral Voice* 156), Momaday encapsulates the history of the white decimation of the Native races on the North American continent in a conceit that becomes “pictorial prose” (Woodard, *Ancestral Voice* 155). Finally, the last two lines of the poem
suggest the “history of violence” reflected on a landscape and “buried in the national consciousness.” (Maddox, “Native American Poetry” 743)

The connection between painting and poetry instills “The Burning,” on the whole, in Momaday’s concept of the landscape as a canvas and in his background and foreground technique already mentioned; but, the connection is more specific through his use of visual forms in such words as “planes,” “shapes,” “shadows,” and “wall.” It is fitting that he should use four concepts since “four” is a sacred number in many Native American cultures, and, in fact, the use of visual shapes can be found in much of Momaday’s work. In his novel, *The Ancient Child* (1989), the four parts of the book are titled “Planes,” “Lines,” “Shapes,” and “Shadows”—almost the exact contours found in “The Burning.” This use of forms helps Momaday frame his ideas in concrete language while expressing emotional responses, a technique developed under the auspices of Yvor Winters at Stanford. (Schubnell, *N. Scott Momaday* 198-202)

Momaday presents a moral judgment on an abstract theme in an associative structure. He has crafted this poem from a mental concept, but created one that is also strong in image. Nevertheless, whether one interprets “The Burning” as a tribute to the evolution of life on this planet or as a political, moral stance against the violence inflicted upon the North American landscape and its original inhabitants, Momaday’s poem demonstrates his artistry of poetic vision. Using the powerful metaphor of fire, Momaday
associates oppositions of time, distance, and transformation using forms and rhythms that ring timeless, and through these connections, he forces to re-examine the histories in light of his multiple angles of vision.

“The Strange and True Story of My Life with Billy the Kid”

The Billy the Kid collection contains both poems and short stories. In “A Word on Billy the Kid” Momaday establishes the physical reality of the famous outlaw: his date and place of birth, family, aliases; he also establishes the facts regarding Sister Blandina, who met Billy the Kid twice in his lifetime.

“In the Presence of the Sun: A Gathering of Shields”

`The imagistic prose collection entitled “A Gathering of Shields” begins with a tribute to the spiritual, cultural, and artistic value of the Plains Indian shields and includes ink drawings of the shields gathered for a ritual ceremony. The shields are more than the tools of warriors. They symbolize the best and worst of those who created and carried them. Some, such as “The Shield That Was Touched by Pretty Mouth,” “The Shield That Was Looked After by Dogs,” and “The Shield That Was Brought Down from Tsoai,” carry great power because of the history of their bearers. Others, such as “The Shield of Which the Less Said the Better,” are of no value: This shield, taken by soldiers and sold in Clinton, Oklahoma, for seventeen dollars, lost its value despite its antiquity. That the final shield, “The Shield of Two Dreams,” reflects the dream of the father passed on to the daughter fits with Momaday’s idea of
tradition passed on but modified to fit new contexts and new social values. These shields represent their individual creator, his contribution to the survival of the group, and the spirit that he leaves behind.

“New Poems”

Of the newer poems, “The Great Fillmore Street Buffalo Drive” captures a historical moment of final slaughter as a buffalo herd is driven to a senseless death on Pacific Coast boulders, but one buffalo “dreams” back to a canyon wall and disappears into shadow, at one with nature: “One bull, animal representation of the sun, / he dreams back from the brink / to the green refuge of his hunter’s heart.” (14-15)

Poems such as “Wreckage” and “Mogollon Morning” that place the poet amid canyon walls and rock, learning from the light and shadows, are Momaday at his best.

Momaday’s “Rings of Bone” relies on use of paradoxical images. The rings of bone and the old men are images of American Indian past, and the leaves, which initially reside in the background, soon become the more prominent images of the survival of American Indian traditions. The initial falling and dying of the leaves, for example, can represent the obsolescence of these traditions; however, the vibrant motion of these leaves – as they are blown and scattered by the wind – can also suggest a resurrection, a continuity of the traditional ways. Yet, Kenneth Lincoln’s reference to a new generation of American Indian writers, who have placed much less emphasis on American
Indian traditions, invites another interpretation of “Rings of Bone.” Although Momaday may not have intended to address this issue directly, the poem itself can be perceived as a response to this new phase in American Indian literature.

While many American Indian writers like N. Scott Momaday have struggled to “emphasize that their work does not constitute a disruptive break with oral traditions but is, instead, a necessary if complicated extension of older traditions,” there has risen a new generation of writers who have sought to exfoliate much of the “Indianness” with which they do not identify (Maddox 91-92). Some of these new generation of American Indian writers choose to belong neither to the world of the white culture nor to the world of their ancestors; instead, as Kenneth Lincoln perceives, they “draw up the drawbridge, close the tent flap, and declare Indianness off-limits. . .” (“Native American Poetry” 70). Momaday’s “Rings of Bone” seems to address the rise of this new generation of American Indian writers, whose works reflect an intentional breaking from the previous, more traditionally-grounded literature of their predecessors.

When examining “Rings of Bone” through this lens, Momaday’s use of what non-Indians may deem traditional American Indian images seems to express a concern for the new generation of writers he himself has helped to propagate. He begins “Rings of Bone” by creating two dichotomous images from American Indian history. “There were rings of bone / on the bandoliers of old men dancing” (1-2). The juxtaposition of “primitive” and modern images
is in one sense traditional in that it speaks to the condition of many modern
American Indian writers. The two images also serve to demonstrate another,
more intra-cultural struggle: the rising tension in the voices of a new
generation of American Indian writers who seek to divorce themselves from
many traditional associations with “Indianness.” The “rings of bone” (1), then,
could represent those American Indian writers like Momaday, Silko, and
Erdrich whose works have come to be anthologized and popularized by a
dominantly white literary world — depicted in the second line as “old men
dancing” — and to represent or define modern American Indian writing. Those
white, predominantly male members of the literary world who seem to stand
defiantly at the door of Western literature are “dancing” in delight as the “rings
of bone,” like spoils of war, dangle from their bodies. The “bandoliers” help to
create this image of the white literary canon, depicting it as a large, powerful
force that has used American Indian writing simply to further its own strength.
The second stanza introduces a change in the scene:

Then, in the afternoon stippled with leaves

and the shadows of leaves,

the leaves glistened

and their shine shaped the air. (3-6)

Momaday uses the leaf to draw the reader to a natural scene that is
painted, or “stippled,” by the colors of leaves. As the first stanza presented the
old dilemma — the American Indian writer’s struggle with identity — the
second stanza allows Momaday to voice the more recent dilemma facing American Indian literature, for the leaves could represent the new generation of American Indian writers and their “compulsive separatism” (Lincoln, *Sings With 70*). It is important to note that, at least in the second stanza, the leaves are still affixed to the unmentioned tree. This could certainly demonstrate how, in spite of their ultimate separation, these new writers were considered by other, more traditional American Indian writers as integral to the genre as a whole and as imperative to the American Indian movement in literature. The “shadows of leaves” (4) could also represent those Indian writers of the past, whose works, though timeless, have now given way to the literature of this new generation, who once “glistened” (5) in the afternoon sun and whose “shine shaped the air” (6). These new writers were to be the hopeful future of American Indian literature, leading it in new and important directions.

Momaday begins the third stanza with a dark, transitional tone. “Now the leaves are dead” (7). This is not a literal death, of course, for this new generation of American Indian writers still flourishes. The death is a spiritual one, perhaps. These “born again warriors” to which Lincoln refers are perhaps dead to many of the old American Indian ways of their predecessors (*Sings With 70*). In fact, they have grown “Cold” (8), or indifferent, to not only the cultural traditions of their ancestors but the traditions found in its literature as well. It is here that Momaday could be revealing the deliberate separation by these new writers from the unmentioned tree in the second stanza. The leaves
are now “crisped upon the stony ground” (9). It indicates both a non-consuming burning effect as well as a sense of desiccation. This may allude to the future of these new writers who seek to abandon all that affiliates them with their ancestral heritage, suggesting that the success they hope to find so independently of their American Indian culture may lead, at least, to a spiritual demise. Then, the thermal coldness that came upon the leaves in line eight is now demonstrated in “webs of rime” that “fasten on the mould” (10). The leaves, detached from their branches, cannot even securely fall to the ground, which has been covered and somewhat protected by a thin, icy veil. Instead, “the wind divides and devours the leaves” (11). Momaday uses these vivid natural images to create a sense of ironic fate. These new writers, choosing to break from the metaphoric tree from which they originated and were nurtured, now flit about aimlessly, like leaves, “divide(d) and devour(ed)” by the “wind” that indiscriminately howls and tears between the two worlds they have rejected: the white world and the American Indian world.

There is as much retrospection as there is wisdom in the final stanza of “Rings of Bone.” He begins by explaining how “the leaves have more or less to do / with time” (12-13), suggesting that these new writers are perhaps typical of any generational differences that are to be found within a culture; his generation, too, broke new territory in what was considered by many non-Indians as American Indian literature. In spite of their differences, Momaday finds the one strand that he feels will forever bind the new writers to their
traditional heritage. “Music pervades the death of leaves” (13). Even in the “death” they face by breaking from the “tree.” This new generation of American Indian writers cannot help but make a music as did their predecessors. Momaday reflects this idea in the last two lines of the poem: “The leaves clatter like the rings of bone / on the bandoliers of old men dancing” (14-15). This haunting refrain of the first two lines of the poem now conjoins the image of the leaves with those of the men and the rings of bone. Even if the clatter of their music seems non-traditional, these new poets, Momaday suggests, will still be associated with their American Indian heritage — particularly by the “old men” of the white literary world.

Like Simon Ortiz, Momaday would contend that “the way of survival for the contemporary Native person can only be a continuation of the old way. . . passed on from one generation to the next” (Maddox 734). “Rings of Bone,” then, may serve to demonstrate how these new American Indian writers — in spite of their determination to be independent of their ancestry — face a difficult existence, for they are attempting to break from that which cannot be dissolved.

The poem “December 29, 1890” is about the massacre that occurred at Wounded Knee Creek on December 29, 1890. It is now recognized as one of the most significant and tragic episodes in the history of white and Native American relations. Nearly 300 men, women and children of Big Foot’s band of Minneconjou Sioux were killed by the U.S. Army with Hotchkiss guns
(Brown, *Bury My Heart*) 1. As the band fell dead that winter morning, so too would a people’s dream. The dream of unity, harmony, and continuity in tradition; and thus December 29, 1890 heralded an end of one phase of an indigenous people’s way of life. Momaday, intrigued and disturbed by this history and its ever present effect on Indians, responds in his poem titled after the massacre’s date. The poet uses the famed photograph of the slain and frozen corpse of Big Foot as his touchstone for his lament. That image and many others of the massacre and genocide of thousands of Indians at the hands of whites during the late 1800s, continue to inspire the recurrent theme of annihilation in Momaday’s work and in the work of other contemporary Native American poets and novelists.

“December 29, 1890” suggests both political and social issues regarding the relationship Native’s had with the government and its military. The lines do so vividly by recounting what was with what is. For example the first line, “In the shine of photographs,” lets the reader know that photographs were taken of the dead, which was an act that would have been considered sacrilegious to many Lakota. Death and the dead are spiritually revered. Whites photographing the slain was yet another manifestation of dominance. Although some contemporary Indian poetry addresses this theme overtly, Momaday’s poem does so subtly.

Although “December 29, 1890” discusses the tragic implications of the photographs, his drawing/sketch of deadly images in an expressionistic style
that is placed next to the poem demonstrates how European styles and Native American images can reinforce each other and show the tension between two worlds. His interpretation of that day, caught in the photographs, falls in syncopated rhythm, as he unfolds, chronologically, the story and tragedy:

In the shine of photographs

are the slain, frozen and black

on a simple field of snow.

They image ceremony: (1-4)

The massacre and its aftermath are described in a sequence, as if these couplets were displaying a series of still photographs. The actual photographs to which Momaday refers in line one, were taken after the massacre. The bodies of slain Indian men, women and children, presumably had become frozen and black due to the winter and exposure. The first line of the second couplet, “on a simple field of snow,” continues the sequence, providing the reader with a satiric image of what Momaday sees in the photograph. He finishes the second couplet with an explicit statement, “They image ceremony:” (4). This line has two significant purposes in the poem: first, to communicate the dream of the ancient ones to those who are listening, and second, to show how that dream was killed brutally and senselessly.

The sequence becomes seasonal in the next lines mixing images of life and death:
women and children dancing,
old men prancing, making fun.
In autumn there were songs, long
since muted in the blizzard.
In summer the wild buckwheat
shone like fox fur and quillwork,
and dusk guttered on the creek.

Now in serene attitudes (5-12)

Interestingly, the sequence follows the seasonal cycle backwards. Possibly, Momaday is suggesting the unnaturalness of the situation. Also visible is the subject of life contrasted with death. In the third couplet, we see a native people alive and engaged in the tradition of dance as part of their ceremonies. In the fourth couplet, the people, along with their tradition are all but gone, muted and dead. The subject of nature, landscapes and their importance in relation to Native American tradition, culture and literature is also visible. In the sixth couplet, the poet remembers the ancient significance of dusk and other times sacred and important to continuity of tradition. Of course, the images of former seasonal vitality by contrast, heighten the tragedy of the frozen death which is stressed in the harsh sounding words of the final couplet.

The famous image of Big Foot’s corpse was obviously a major impetus behind Momaday’s poetic response. The Indian warrior Big Foot was
instrumental in helping the band of Minneconjou Sioux fight for their traditional way of life, for their dream. In death, still and glossy like the famed photograph of him, he is ancient now and has been “drawn in ancient light” (14). The songs and sacred ceremonies, like the Ghost Dance, he and other ancients fought for are now passed on through oral tradition and writing, of Momaday and other American Indian authors committed to keeping the stories and dream alive beyond the times of tragic death reflected in Big Foot’s frozen image.

In “At Risk,” the poet discovers his connections with ancient cave painters and finds his own face mirrored in the masks of ancient animals dancing on cave walls: “I lay in a cave, / On a floor curved in blood” (17-18). This poem is an apt close to a collection that, as a unit, suggests the author’s struggle to find a poetic voice, an identity that reflects his multicultural essence.

Momaday’s varied use of paintings and drawings: some with smoothed, muted, edges (a self portrait) and others with striking, sharp outlines (a buffalo), also show his artistic influence and expression from both worlds. Schubnell comments on the subject as follows:

Momaday’s work, however, reflects the multiple cultural contexts and traditions into which he was born or that he explored later as a student of literature and painting. It thus poses particular challenges, for Momaday writes out of the tension between these
ethnic worlds, assimilating and synthesizing a wide variety of elements from Native American, European American, and European oral, literary, and artistic traditions. (“N. Scott Momaday” 175)

Critical reaction to Momaday’s poetry has been enthusiastic, with commentators praising both his early syllabic verse and his later prose poems and free verse. Yvor Winters first brought critical attention to Momaday’s poetry in his 1967 study *Forms of Discovery: Critical and Historical Essays on the Forms of the Short Poem in English*, in which he placed Momaday within the post-symbolist tradition. Since then, critics have both agreed with and refuted Winters’ conclusions. Although Momaday’s early poetry has been hailed as among the most significant of the century, with some critics calling such poems as “The Bear” and “Before an Old Painting of the Crucifixion” masterpieces of syllabic verse in English, more recent critics have stated that they prefer Momaday’s prose poems for their exploration of Kiowa concerns and incorporation of native oral traditions. They also note that these works are less abstract and more personal and celebratory than Momaday’s earlier, more formal works. Momaday himself has stated that after composing his syllabic poems, “I worked myself into such a confinement of form that I started to write fiction and didn’t get back to poetry until much later” (Schubnell, *Conversations* 98). Despite the tendency to divide Momaday’s poetry into two distinct types or periods, scholars have consistently praised Momaday for his
ability to work with various poetic forms, his talent for exploring different cultures from diverse perspectives, and his imaginative interweaving of myth, history, and contemporary Native American experience.

For scholars and critics in search of pure Indian literature, Momaday’s fiction and poetry may be viewed as contaminated impostors rather than Native American breakthroughs. Of course, these readers ignore the fact that intertribal relations made Indian literatures multicultural long before Columbus labeled native peoples Indians. Certainly today, as the Indian authors repeatedly remind, the Native America experience is a complex multiethnic, multicultural and multidimensional experience. And since, with each generation, American culture is becoming more multicultural. Momaday’s poetry is also foreshadowing of central multicultural issues that will challenge all serious American writers of the twenty-first century.

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