

## NATIVE AMERICAN LITERATURE UNIT

### Overview:

Contemporary Native American literature is grounded in the oral traditions of the various indigenous groups of peoples who have and who do live on the American continent. While the differences among the many different cultural groups are great, there are commonalities as well among these orally based traditions. The following is a general overview of the Native American oral tradition which informs the works of contemporary Indian writers.

### Cultural Beliefs:

If culture is a system of beliefs and values by which people organize their experience of the world, then it follows that forms of expressive culture such as these myths should embody the basic beliefs and values of the people who create them. These beliefs and values can be roughly organized in three areas:

1. beliefs about the nature of the physical world
2. beliefs about social order and appropriate behavior
3. beliefs about human nature and the problem of good and evil

### Recurring Themes:

1. It is considered important that **human beings live in harmony with physical and spiritual universe**; this may be achieved through the power of thought and of words (i.e., rituals can bring rain, keep evil away or heal relationships). Words, then, should be spoken with great care, and there is the deliberate use of silence at times.

2. People must hold **a deep reverence for the land**. Traditional accounts of a tribe's origin and history can include references to specific places, especially the sacred places in the homeland. Momaday says in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*:

Once in his life a man ought to concentrate his mind upon the remembered earth, I believe. He ought to give himself up to a particular landscape in his experience, to look at it from as many angles as he can, to wonder about it, dwell upon it. He ought to imagine that he touches it with his hands at every season and listens to the sounds that are made upon it. He ought to imagine the creatures that are there and all the faintest motions of the wind. He ought to recollect the glare of noon and all the colors of dawn and dusk. (83)

3. **Directions** and the idea of **circularity** appear and are significant in stories (note the persistent use of numbers or the recurring theme of returning home, for instance).

4. The strong **sense of community** is found ever present in tribal literatures as they stress the need for cooperation and good relations of individuals within and with group. High value is placed on the characteristics of generosity, helpfulness and respect for age and experience. These traits are seen not only as desirable but as essential for survival of the individuals of the group and the culture itself.

## **Stylistic Devices:**

**Repetition**: Repetition may seem boring; however, it is an aesthetic device that can be used to create expectation. Consider the number three and how several aspects of our Euro-American experience are organized in terms of three (ready, set, go; small, medium, large; green, yellow, red (for traffic lights); the three little pigs). We could count to four or five or seven, as respectively the Zunis, the Chinooks, and the Hebrews did. These repetitions have the function of creating a sense of expectation, and when one arrives at the full number of repetitions, a sense of completeness, satisfaction, and fulfillment occurs.

**Symbolism**: A person, place, thing, or event that has meaning in itself and that also stands for something more than itself. Most symbols used in literature are personal symbols; even though a symbol may be widely used, a writer will usually adapt it in some imaginative, personal way so that it can suggest not just one, but a myriad of meanings. One of the most commonly used symbols in literature, for example, is the journey, which can stand for a search for truth, for redemption from evil, or for discovery of the self and freedom.

**Characterization**: The process by which a writer reveals the personality of a character. A writer can reveal a character in the following ways:

- By telling us directly what the character is like (direct characterization)
- By describing how the character looks and dresses (indirect characterization)
- By letting the reader hear the character speak (indirect characterization)
- By revealing the character's private thoughts and feelings (indirect characterization)
- By revealing the character's effect on other people—showing how other characters feel or behave toward the character (indirect characterization)
- By showing the character in action (indirect characterization)

**Diction**: A speaker or writer's choice of words. Diction can be formal, informal, colloquial, full of slang, poetic, ornate, plain, abstract, concrete, and so on. Diction depends on the writer's subject, purpose, and audience. Some words, for example, are suited to informal conversations but are inappropriate in a formal speech. Diction has a powerful effect on the tone of a piece of writing.