

## ANALYSIS

*The Way to Rainy Mountain* (1969)

N. Scott Momaday

(1934- )

## HISTORY

“We watch the people leave their northern homeland by the Yellowstone and Missouri rivers circa 1680-1700 and enter their golden age on the Plains.... We imagine the Kiowas garnering wealth in horses from trade fairs with the Arikara and Mandan and from raids on Spanish frontiers. Following their friendship with the Crows, we see the Kiowas take hold of their new homes in the Black Hills until the invading Dakotas and Cheyennes drive them southward sometime before 1775. The Kiowas could not keep the Black Hills, but they created stories of the seven sisters, their brother, and the origin of Devil’s Tower....

In early 1821 Jacob Fowler, who was on a trading trip to the Rocky Mountains, recorded that his expedition encountered the Kiowas in what is now Pueblo County, Colorado. The Indians fed the visitors meat, beans, and boiled corn; carried the white men across the frozen river behind them on their horses; and shared lodges as refuge from ten inches of snow. Fowler describes one encampment of Kiowas, Comanches, Arapahoes, and other nations as encompassing seven hundred lodges and twenty thousand horses.... Then in 1833 a miracle happened. The Kiowas created calendars for storing their history. Their painted annals are outlines of visual images that evoke memorized and systematized history for oral historians.... In 1849 the tribe was ravaged by a disease so dreadful that people who woke up in perfect health were dead a few hours later; whole families perished and camps were exterminated, leaving their teepees standing empty. The Kiowas called it... ‘Cholera Sun Dance’....

Calendric winters speak of the relentless invasion of outsiders into the southern plains world. Twin tip is above the winter bar of 1864 mark Kit Carson’s attack on a Kiowa camp. In 1867 the Kiowas, Comanches, and Kiowa-Apaches were forced to move onto a reservation. In 1874 the tribes made their last concentrated military effort against the invaders. Big-Meet was killed by the soldiers. In the winter of 1875 came the final irony, when the government confiscated ten thousand horses from the three tribes, sold them, and brought domestic animals to replace the bison. Killing a single bison became a rare event. At last, the Kiowas had to kill and eat their ponies to keep from starving during the summer... By the summer of 1882, Dohasan, whose hereditary duty it was to secure the buffalo for the Sun Dance, was unable to find even one, and there was no dance.... In 1890...the Indian agent [called] United States troops to disband the Kiowas as they were preparing for their sacred ritual, which the government considered barbaric and disruptive. Thus was Kiowa culture brought to its knees. Momaday argues, however, that despite the destruction and defeat, the Kiowas fulfilled their destiny as they had imagined it.”

Lawana Trout

*Approaches to Teaching Momaday’s The Way to Rainy Mountain*  
ed. Kenneth M. Roemer  
(MLA 1988) 33-35

## EVOLUTION OF BOOK

“I think Momaday’s essay [“The Way to Rainy Mountain,” 1967] is one of the greatest pieces of short prose I have ever read. I should have trouble naming another; it is very short, yet it contains: the history of a people (the Kiowas) and the pathos of their combined grandeur and triviality; the biography of a Kiowa (Aho), in which the history is summed up; a commentary on both the grandson and author. N. Scott Momaday can hardly drop a short phrase which does not haunt one. Nothing is wasted in this essay. Few poems stay in my mind as this prose stays.”

Yvor Winters

poet, critic, friend and mentor of Momaday at Stanford

invited commentary (1967)

“I highlight the role of Momaday’s Stanford teacher and friend Yvor Winters in the work’s conception and artistic development and trace the evolution of the privately printed *The Journey of Tai-me*, a collection of Kiowa folktales, to the sophisticated multigenre work in its published form. This evolution reflects Momaday’s growing sense of identity as a Kiowa Indian in the course of the work’s composition.... Most of Momaday’s writings must be read as self-conscious realizations of his Kiowa identity, that, indeed, they constitute a survival technique for Kiowa culture as a whole....

*The Way to Rainy Mountain* gradually took shape over a period of six years following Momaday’s revelatory encounter with the Tai-me bundle and his experience at Rainy Mountain cemetery.... As Momaday focused his attention on retrieving the remnants of Kiowa oral tradition, he realized how much American Indian oral poetry and mythology had already deteriorated and that speedy research was imperative to salvage what was still within reach. Deprived of his grandparents as living sources of Kiowa tradition, Momaday collected stories from tribal elders. His inability to speak the Kiowa language greatly hampered this fieldwork....

Although Winters was thinking of a poetic cycle, his ideas anticipated the changes Momaday made in transforming *The Journey of Tai-me* into *The Way to Rainy Mountain*.... The development of *Rainy Mountain* from a collection of Kiowa tales to the blending of these stories with anthropological material and personal reminiscences reflects a growing crystallization of Momaday’s Kiowa identity. The associations between the three voices in each triad—the legendary-mythical, the historical-anthropological, and the personal-autobiographical—result in a fusion of these different views of reality in the author’s imagination into a unified whole, which manifests the core of Momaday’s understanding of himself....

*The Way to Rainy Mountain* constitutes one attempt by a modern American Indian to preserve the soul of his culture and to reaffirm his identity as a Kiowa. The way in which Momaday has appropriated his past to his existence in a modern world not only represents a cultural survival technique for American Indians but...may serve as a model for students who want to overcome their sense of alienation and rootlessness by exploring their familial and cultural backgrounds.”

Matthias Schubnell  
“Tribal Identity and the Imagination”  
*Approaches*, 24, 26, 28-31

#### TEXT

“In Momaday’s nonfiction the ‘sacred earth’ becomes a redemptive agent in the human quest for knowledge and wholeness. In *The Journey of Tai-me* (1967), the story of the tribal god of the Kiowa whose death his grandmother witnessed at the last Sun Dance, and again in *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (1969), Momaday confronts a world in which experience typically seems fragmentary and inadequate and in which knowledge typically comes as ‘a moment of truth and exile.’ But Momaday also writes as one who is convinced that ‘man’s idea of himself’ finds ‘old and essential being in language,’ in the act of naming and the process of remembering, activities of the mind that are ‘legendary as well as historical, personal as well as cultural.’”

David Minter  
*The Harper American Literature 2*  
(Harper & Row 1987) 2188

“*The Way to Rainy Mountain* is a highly personal, selective, and imaginative work written by only one of the one and a half million American Indians and dealing with only one of the more than three hundred Indian cultural groups (representing about 200 languages) that have inhabited North America for almost thirty thousand years. Still, Momaday successfully implies networks of representative Native American values and aesthetics that non-Indians should consider as valuable alternative perspectives to dominant Western attitudes and as provocative opportunities for the expansion of literary canons.

These perspectives include seeing the land as a crucial aspect of personal identity formation and human ecology; discovering concepts of personal relations—especially with elders—that can provide models for

resolving twentieth-century identity and social problems; acknowledging the power of Native American concepts of sacredness, beauty, and harmony; and revering a sense of oral narration and performance that encompasses economy, delight, wonder, and intrinsic power. By presenting these perspectives in the work of a challenging contemporary author, instructors can help students overcome the notion that Indian values, though laudable, are the heritage of a group of ‘vanished’ Americans....

Rainy Mountain is a small knoll, near a small road in a sparsely populated area in southwestern Oklahoma—hardly a high point on the world traveler’s itinerary. Nevertheless, Momaday’s varied background and the complex mixtures of literary forms in *Rainy Mountain* can invite discussions as far-ranging and diversified as can classes about authors and works categorized as ‘worldly’ and ‘cosmopolitan.’ As a child Momaday experienced close contacts with several southwestern tribes, he has attended and taught in a variety of schools, from small reservation schools to elite American and European universities; he has written for regional publications as well as for international publishers and the *Columbia Literary History of the United States*; he is a member of the Kiowa Gourd Clan and a winner of Guggenheim and Pulitzer awards.

No wonder he has developed a catholic reading taste that ranges from Native American and oral narratives to Melville, Faulkner, Dickinson, Joyce, Stevens, and, especially, Isak Dinesen. No wonder *The Way to Rainy Mountain* combines many different types of literature, and no wonder non-Indian students often find the example of Momaday’s life a fascinating touchstone for discussions of racial, cultural, and professional identities and frequently compare aspects of his book to family stories, Greek mythology, the Bible, American autobiographies, and British and European modernist works.... But Momaday is typically regarded as the leading inspiration for, and dean of, contemporary Indian authors—the author whose works, especially the Pulitzer Prize-winning *House Made of Dawn* and *Rainy Mountain*, initiated what is sometimes referred to as the renaissance of Indian writing...

*The Way to Rainy Mountain*, which Momaday has on several occasions identified as his favorite work, is, moreover, a practical and appealing introduction to both contemporary written and traditional oral Indian literatures. It is accessible to students and adaptable for instructors. The historical and personal voices that correspond to each of the written versions of oral narratives help to make distant and unfamiliar material less remote to non-Kiowa students... Yet, the multiple-journey motif combined with the rich mixtures of narrative voices and genres adds to the reading experience a complexity that is usually associated with much longer works. *Rainy Mountain* contains excellent examples of contemporary Indian prose and poetry, varieties of tribal history and personal and autobiography, lyric versions of tribal narratives, and a few songs.”

Kenneth M. Roemer, ed.  
*Approaches*, ix-xi

“Momaday has told me that he had read virtually none of the published Indian autobiographies by the time he began work on *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (personal interview)... Momaday aims to write autobiography after the fashion of an oral storyteller—in the way of his people. But one might well wonder just what Momaday had in mind here, since there was no autobiography as we know it among the preliterate Indians. This is true in the literal sense, of course: how could there be *autobiography* among preliterate Indians? But there was no tradition of extended first-person narrative either, no tradition among the preliterate Indians that could call forth a narrative telling the story of a whole life. The Indians did, however, tell many different kinds of autobiographical stories, stories of their hunts, their battles, their failings, their quests for powers....

There were certainly other, non-Indian influences on Momaday’s style. Faulkner, for example, must also have influenced Momaday’s decision to experiment with discontinuous narrative and multiple points of view.... For Momaday is trying, in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, to give his literature audience a sense of what it is like to experience stories in an oral culture, a sense of what it might mean to conceive of the self in an ancient way.”

H. David Brumble III  
“*The Way to Rainy Mountain* and the Traditional Forms of American Indian Autobiography”  
*Approaches*, 41-42

“If Rainy Mountain represents the object of a quest, the destination of a journey, Momaday’s book, through its distinctive form, explores the paths along which we move to get there.... The complicated structure of *The Way to Rainy Mountain* initially baffles students. The central portions of the text are composed of numbered sections, which are further divided into three parts marked by different typefaces. This unorthodox form—the graphic variation of the individual pages—constitutes an intellectual puzzle. A strategy that responds to this challenge is to work inductively, taking each section and trying to figure out what the parts have in common and what differentiates them....

All three parts of section 3, for example, contain references to dogs; the parts of section 13 all mention arrows and those who make them. Not all the sections yield their meanings easily, however; a number of sections permit differing interpretations. Section 7 exemplifies these elusive portions of the text. What is the commonality in this section? Is it, as Robert Berner has suggested, division—the boy splits into two boys, the horse separated from the rider; the author separate from his reflection in the water? Or is it a variation on the theme of ‘man’s idea of himself’: self-reflexiveness, contemplation, contemplation of one part of the self by another?...

The three-part sections emerge as three ways of experiencing meaning and gaining knowledge. In the first of each section Momaday presents traditional Kiowa myths, which function on the panhuman level of meaning. Some of the stories are explanatory, recounting the past, showing how things came to be as they are. The origin myth in the first section explains not only how the Kiowas emerged into the world but also why the tribe is relatively small. Other myths explain the derivation of words (sec. 2) and the importance of treating dogs well (sec. 3), and a sequence of stories explains the source of the Kiowas’ special relation to the sun and to the sacred object of their religion, Tai-me (secs. 4-10).

A number of the myths are admonitory. They warn of the dangers of unwise actions, like those of the brother who ate the mysterious meat (sec. 11) and of the people who created an animal they could not control (sec. 14). And they portray the consequences of unbridled emotions—curiosity (sec. 17) and fear (sec. 20). A third type of mythic story is exemplary. These stories illustrate ways of outwitting enemies, through craft and cunning (secs. 12 and 13), and of dealing with threats to the social order, primarily those represented by unfaithful wives (secs. 13, 16). There are also descriptions of heroic feats (sec. 19)....

Stories of metamorphosis (sec. 11) and of marriage between gods and humans (sec. 4) are familiar from Greek mythology. The monster who is outwitted in the cave (sec. 8) recalls Odysseus’s encounter with the Cyclops, and the buffalo with horns of steel and a vulnerable heel (sec. 16) resonates with the fate of Achilles. Womans disobeying of the god’s prohibition (sec. 5) is analogous to the story of Eve in the garden, and the story of the acquisition of Tai-me (sec. 10) echoes the encounter of Moses with the deity and the calling of the chosen people.

The sacred being who converts his substance into nourishment for his followers (sec. 9) recalls the significance of the Eucharist to Christians; the transformation of an archetypal rebel into a water monster (sec. 11) suggests Satan’s metamorphosis into a reptile in *Paradise Lost*. The killing of a powerful male progenitor (sec. 9) reverberates with both literary allusions (Oedipus) and psychological correspondences (Freud); the passage on the dangers of curiosity (sec. 18) has analogues in fairy tales; what happens when human beings create something they cannot control (sec. 14) is played out in the numerous variants of the Frankenstein story....

In *The Way to Rainy Mountain* the historical mode of learning is presented in the second panel of each three-part section. Here, in contrast to the mythic mode, we find dates, names, and references to specific events: ‘In the winter of 1848-49...’ The information found here is drawn from studies of the customs, social structure, and rituals of the group and constitutes a definition of group identity.... The second part recounts an incident that happened in 1861, when an old man of the tribe, Gaapiatan, sacrificed a fine horse to ward off the smallpox sweeping the community. In the third part the author meditates on that event and identifies with his remote predecessor: ‘I think I know how much he loved that animal; I think I know what was going on in his mind.’ This movement between the historical and personal modes becomes an actual fusion in section 22....

Finally, all three modes of knowing are brought together in the person of Aho, the author's grandmother. She becomes a kind of synthesizing force in the narrative; in section 23 she is responsible for what is found at both the mythic and historical levels. In both these passages strange occurrences surrounding the Tai-me bundle are recounted. The first panel begins with the statement: 'Aho remembered something, a strange thing'; the second records that 'Aho remembered this.' Aho brings together the separate strands of knowledge, and what she remembers also achieves the force of universal truth. 'This is how it was'.... This is the meaning of the beautiful buried woman in the last section. She began as part of the family lore: 'Mammedaty used to know where she was buried.' She had a location that might have been uncovered by historians and anthropologists studying Kiowa culture. But now 'no one knows' where she lies. She has transcended her origin in the world of event and fact and has been made by Momaday into a symbol of his precious heritage."

Joan Henley  
"Exploring the Ways to Rainy Mountain"  
*Approaches*, 47-53

"The American Indian vision of reality, as has often been said, is traditionally structured in four parts. The four directions and the four seasons are models in space and time for patterns in myth and legend, in political and social structures, in religious practice, and in everyday life. The Cheyennes' Maheo, like the creator in many earth-diver myths, was assisted by four birds in the creation of the world. The Hopis, like many other Pueblo peoples, emerged into this world after journeying from the fourth world below. The sky worlds of the Winnebagoes belonged to Hare, Turtle, Trickster, and Earthmaker. Many other examples could be cited, and it is possible that Momaday's four-part division of Abel's story in *House Made of Dawn* derived from his awareness of this tradition.... A convenient approach to traditional Indian four-part intellectual structures is the vision of the Sioux holy man Black Elk as it is outlined in the third chapter of John G. Neihardt's *Black Elk Speaks*....

We should remember the universality of this characteristic preoccupation when we examine the element that may give students the greatest difficulty at first reading—the sequence of legends, historical glosses, and personal recollections that compose Momaday's three-stage history of the Kiowas. These three divisions ('The Setting Out,' 'The Going On,' and 'The Closing In') and the three-part structure of each of the twenty-four sections that make them up suggest that Momaday has chosen to ignore traditional Indian methods in this book. In fact, the question is much more complicated. For one thing, in sentence structure, use of examples, and even the...illustrations...the book reveals subtle four-part patterns. But more important, Momaday's decision to give the core of the book and its twenty-four sections a three-part structure is related to what is probably his primary intention—his conception of language....

It is worth comparing the Kiowa trinity (sun, buffalo, Tai-me) and the buffalo herd, as well as the elements of Black Elk's vision that resemble it, with Jung's discussion of the Christian Trinity. Jung insists that the unconscious mind can be understood in terms of four 'functions' and that psychological deformation is the inevitable result of repressing one for the benefit of the others. The Christian Trinity, Jung believes, is by definition a deformation of this sort because it ignores an important fourth element, Satan, and thus it excludes the natural world, the realm that Satan is assumed to represent, from the structure ('Psychological Approach'). The Kiowa religion, like Black Elk's, did not exclude the natural world; nature was not the enemy, outside the structure, but part of the structure.

The usual pattern in the twenty-four sections of the three major divisions of *The Way to Rainy Mountain* is (1) a Kiowa legend, presumably a story told to Momaday by his grandmother Aho, or at least associated with her because of her tribal identity; (2) a historical or ethnographic commentary on the legend; and (3) a personal recollection somehow related to the legend or the commentary or both. This pattern of legend, history, and autobiography can be compared with the three major divisions themselves. 'The Setting Out' deals with the mythic origins of the Kiowas and with their acquisition of their religion. 'The Going On' deals with the Kiowas in history, in their great heyday on the Southern Plains. Finally, 'The Closing In' records the decline of the Kiowas, the end of their independence, and their final reduction to a condition in which they can be known only in memory and verbal tradition. The movement from legend through history to personal recollection, therefore, ends in a condition in which only the imagination—which is to say, only language—can restore the Kiowas to meaning. In other words, *The Way to Rainy Mountain* can

be understood not only in the three movements—but in a fourth movement, which is the work or art itself, Momaday's book.

Everything Momaday says about language in *The Way to Rainy Mountain* supports this reading of its structure. The journey of the Kiowas, the prologue says, is 'preeminently the history of an idea, man's idea of himself, and it has old and essential being in language.' In 'The Setting Out,' the Kiowas name themselves from their experience of emerging into the world (17; sec. 1). The tribe splits, and the exiles are given a name (18; sec. 2). They acquire dogs when a hunter is saved from his enemies by a talking dog (20; sec. 3), and the brave *Ka-itsenko* ('Real Dog') warrior society originates in words spoken by a dog in the dream of the society's founder (21; sec. 3). Grandmother Spider comforts Sun Boy with a song (26; sec. 6), and her magic word saves the brothers from the giant's cave (32; sec. 8). Finally Tai-me first appears to the Kiowas in a magical moment as a voice (36; sec. 10). All these examples show the truth of Momaday's repeated assertion in 'The Setting Out' that a word possesses sacred power and 'gives origin to all things': 'By means of words can a man deal with the world on equal terms,' as Aho did when she said her word *zei-dl-bei*, which was her 'exertion of language upon ignorance and disorder' (33; sec. 8)...."

Robert L. Berner  
"The Way to Rainy Mountain: Structure and Language"  
*Approaches*, 54, 57-58

"Herein are three major divisions and three prose narratives, all within beginning poem-prologue-introduction and ending epilogue-poem. Similarly, there are three illustrations for each division, in addition to a beginning and an ending illustration. The division titles suggest the three main episodes of the Kiowa story, and each of the twenty-four sections consists of three parts, which correspond to the three journeys, or times: the mythic, the historic, and the biographic. The content of these themes changes emphasis in 'The Closing In' from tribal culture and historic commentary to family memories and stories. The change allows Momaday to reestablish his collective Kiowa identity and to confirm his individual, modern identity in sections 23 and 24. These identities are confirmed by a vision of Ko-sahn derived from the language in the epilogue.

In the journey toward his identity, Momaday must resolve three dialectics: traditional Kiowa culture versus Kiowa society today; his collective, Kiowa identity versus an individual, modern identity; and 'traditional' versus 'creative' mythology. The conflicts that weave through *Rainy Mountain* are resolved in sections 23 and 24 and tied together at the end of the epilogue. Two compelling examples of the attempt to bring the oppositions into harmony are found in sections 10 and 16. Although Momaday uses memory to align his personal life with Tai-me, the central symbol of the Kiowa culture, by moving the sacred image in section 10 from mythic to historic time and to personal experience, this is not yet a confirmation of his journey or a resolution of the dialectical conflicts of his life. In section 16 Momaday traces the buffalo—the animal representation of Tai-me, the sun and spirit of the Kiowa people—to a personal experience with a buffalo that gave him the feeling of 'what it was to be alive' as a Kiowa. But this experience is not yet one of spirit crystallized by imagination into language whereby his quest for balance is fulfilled.

In sections 23 and 24 Momaday resolves his conflicts in a conversion of 'personal and cultural experience, poetry and myth.' In section 23 he understands and experiences—through memory, renewed respect, and an act of imagination—what Tai-me has meant to the Kiowa people and culture, a meaning that is symbolized in language by the 'great iron kettle' at Aho's house. In section 24 Momaday links the mythic tone of the first part with the poetic creation of the third part by opening them with the same words, while maintaining a respectful relation with the historic second part. However, after finishing *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, Momaday had second thoughts on what he had accomplished; it was then that Ko-sahn 'stepped' from his 'language' of the epilogue as a 'vision' and 'restored' his 'faith' in his people, in the immediate accomplishment, and, most of all, in himself, a modern Kiowa with a reestablished connection to his tribal traditions....

One crucial external structure is *House Made of Dawn*, in particular the 'January 27' sermon of Tosamah at the end of 'The Priest of the Sun.' The sermon, a variation of the introduction to *Rainy Mountain*, is titled—not surprisingly—"The Way to Rainy Mountain." At this point in *House Made of*

*Dawn*, one could turn to *Rainy Mountain* as another chapter, or subchapter, of the novel. Tosamah's and Momaday's similarities deserve close attention. The description of Tosamah can apply to Momaday: 'big, lithe as a cat, narrow-eyed, suggesting in the whole of his look and manner arrogance and agony'.... Tosamah expresses some of Momaday's anti-Indian sentiments from the days of his youth at Jemez pueblo. Hence, one is not surprised to learn that a man named Abel did live as a neighbor to Momaday at Jemez and that this man informs, through Momaday's memory, aspects of Abel's character. Although Tosamah is not a 'caricature' of Momaday, he does 'reflect one side' of him.

Another important similarity is the existential-tribal identity of Tosamah and Momaday. While Tosamah, a Kiowa, is a 'priest' in the Native American Church, the peyote way is not conventionally Christian nor is it a traditional American Indian practice. The church is, in part, an American Indian way to maintain a ritualistic religious life while living in the modern world. Yet, for Tosamah and for Abel, the return, retrospectively, to Rainy Mountain and to Tolawa pueblo is a remedy for their need to be complete in their self-identities. Like Momaday, who proceeds through his 'many journeys in the one' toward his whole identity in sections 23 and 24, Abel begins to realize his identity when he returns to the pueblo to resume his life there, while Tosamah, for Momaday, is shed in Los Angeles in *House Made of Dawn* as a 'side' of Momaday. The 'Rainy Mountain' sermon, then, is a departing point for the 'many journeys' with references that parallel and contrast with Abel's final return to the pueblo and the medicinal results....

One reason this book defies easy literary classification is that it is derived partly from the oral traditions of the Kiowa people and partly from Momaday's own writing hand. As a professor of English, Momaday participates in a literate tradition, while at the same time the Kiowan oral tradition, which informs so much of *Rainy Mountain*, has been entrusted to him.... *The Way to Rainy Mountain* expresses one American Indian's ability to establish his identity and art on many levels at once. It is a statement also of his people and of all peoples who desire to maintain ties with their cultural heritages."

William Oandasan  
"The Way to Rainy Mountain: Internal and External Structures"  
*Approaches*, 62-67

"*The Way to Rainy Mountain* is a compelling work, but one most difficult to talk about, for at every turn it reaches beyond its powerfully felt and meticulously observed world and invites the reader to participate in what is ultimately a visionary experience beyond the reach of language [ineffable]. The book challenges all readers: living as we do immersed in a continual racket, we may find it difficult to perceive, acknowledge, and respond to a demand for silence.... I maintain that *The Way to Rainy Mountain* is fundamentally a meditative work: it is much more like a lyric poem than like a chronologically ordered narrative. The demands it makes on the reader are those of lyric: a meditative recognition of parallels, symmetries, internal resonances—in short, of circularity and reflexivity rather than the forward thrust of motive-action-consequence typical of narrative. To be comprehensible, the book requires cultivation of silence and of visual as well as verbal attentiveness, and—paradoxically—it challenges us to participate in completing its meaning....

While the narrator's voice dominates the text, Momaday as character is never presented as talking. Rather, we perceive this boy, youth, and man again and again in attitudes of intense, silent, watchful contemplation: watching while his grandmother prays by the light of a kerosene lamp (a scene in which meaning transcends language), gazing reverently at the Tai-me bundle, observing a boy eating liver from a freshly butchered calf, looking into his grandmother's arbor, staring at hypnotically moving boughs appearing to sail overhead in a blue sky, walking alone in Rainy Mountain cemetery, listening to the story told by the aged Ko-sahn. The aggressive questioning we sometimes mistake for a search for meaning is absent here: instead, precise observation and 'devotion to important detail' characterize the way this man approaches the world. The birds he hears or watches are not undifferentiated creatures but the male pine grosbeak, the bobwhite, the meadowlark, the robin... The natural world is a world we make significant by paying attention....

The patterning in the second part of the book, the journey part that begins with the first poem, is more intricate. The divisions and subdivisions form a set of nested frames, like nested boxes—or like the sacred objects described within the text, the Talyi-da-i and, especially, the Tai-me. Medicine bundles such as

these contain precious and powerful objects carefully wrapped with sweet herbs in layers of special cloth and leather bindings. They are no longer opened; like the woman buried in the beautiful buckskin dress, they represent a buried beauty and power, and they are inaccessible to the modern viewer, who can no longer provide the context necessary for manifestation of their holiness. In a sense, *The Way to Rainy Mountain* is like a new kind of medicine bundle, made for a world in which writing turns words into physical objects....

The method of *The Way to Rainy Mountain* resembles that of collage. In collage, materials of different kinds from different sources come together to form the picture through their arrangement and variety. There is no attempt to hide or disguise the nature or origin of each contributing piece; on the contrary, it is essential that each piece retain its original identity as newspaper or cloth or dress pattern or nail or wood, so that the viewer sees the materials in their essential materiality, as well as participates in the picture by 'putting them together' with sight and imagination into a single image. So in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, the author's words and memories, the stories of his unnamed relatives, passages from the anthropologist James Mooney, Al Momaday's illustrations, Bruce Gentry's selection of typefaces and arrangement of text and white space on the page—all require recognition of their unique wholeness and identity, and all demand of the reader a participatory act in 'putting the story together'....

There is throughout *The Way to Rainy Mountain* a tension, a suspicion and wariness and conflict, between those opposing forces of earth and sky, Grandmother Spider and Sun, female and male. The conflict between Grandmother Spider and Sun Boy reflects the tension throughout the book: 'She saw that the ball was full of arrows, and she knew then that the child was a boy and that he would be hard to raise. Time and again the grandmother tried to capture the boy, but he always ran away. Then one day she made a snare out of rope.' The snare of rope, the hollow log, the storm cellar: from these must the proud hunter desperately escape. The golden age of the Kiowas, as Momaday depicts it, centers on and celebrates the works of males. It is a world in which 'the lives of women were hard,' where women are men's possessions, to be stolen, traded, given away, thrown away, or simply left to freeze, finally to serve men, having gossip as their compensation. Many feminists (students or not) dislike the book on first reading, finding little to admire in the vision of a people whose men appeared to leave all modest, nurturing qualities stuck with a pregnant woman in a hollow log, in order to make war 'their sacred business'."

Helen Jaskoski  
"Image and Silence"  
*Approaches*, 69-70, 72-77

"Momaday divides each section into three voices, providing students with the opportunity to become the fourth element, the audience, interpreters of the meaning of the oral tradition through time....The story of the Kiowas is an evolutionary process from the myth of the birth of the tribe through a mossy and weather-stained hollow log to the final poem about Rainy Mountain cemetery, which condenses all the periods of Kiowa history into two stanzas.... The structure of the sections in *The Way to Rainy Mountain* tells...of at least three ways of perceiving reality: mythologically, historically, and personally. But separation of mythology from the historical and personal proves to be untenable, for Mammedaty, a real person and Momaday's grandfather, is ultimately a part of all three voices. In section 21 the three voices become one, and in section 23 Aho too becomes a part of Kiowa myth....

Those who have never seen the Yellowstone River, Devil's Tower, or Rainy Mountain need visual images to help them 'see' what Momaday is describing. Al Momaday's illustration of Devil's Tower provides a skeletal view of the tree that grew into a rock, placing Big Dipper in the sky. Unless students have seen the movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* or visited Devil's Tower, they probably cannot project a visual image from the artistic rendering. Actual photographic prints or slides of the monolith force students to consider how and why stories were created to fulfill human need to explain the nature of the universe.... Momaday needed to experience the landscape, the terrain that his grandmother knew 'in the mind's eye' just as Ko-sahn knew of the falling stars. He traveled the fifteen hundred miles of that ancient migration of the Kiowa people and describes Devil's Tower, where 'the core of the earth had broken through its crust and the motion of the world was begun'....



The religious stories of the Kiowas incorporate American Indian symbolism and values, but they also reflect universal religious symbolism and important concepts of language. The story of Devil's Tower and the transformation of a boy to a bear and girls to stars link the Kiowas with the night sky; ultimately their destiny is determined by the falling stars. Mammedaty's grandmother Kau-au-oıntı was born the year after the stars fell, linking Momaday's family to a long history. The woman descending from the sky is killed with a gaming ring, the hoop of life but also the circle bringing death, for death too must be acknowledged as a part of life. The mysterious origin and powers of the Kiowa hero-god, the androgyny of this new hero, and the presence of the nurturing Grandmother Spider determine the mythic quality of their stories. The account of the two boys and other Kiowa stories reinforce Momaday's attitude about the relation between language and religion. For example, the boys learn early the power of language and use words to escape the smoke of the giant's cave....

For Momaday the word is sacred, it defines and gives shape to reality.... *The Way to Rainy Mountain* describes the Talyi-da-i, or boy medicine, and Momaday's awe of the objects of religious veneration. His experience seeing the Tai-me bundle evoked the holiness of birth and death, the complete cycle of life.... Momaday refers to traditional beliefs, peyotism, and Christianity as symbiotic in the lives of American Indian people. The universal religious symbolism of water is significant in Kiowa life from the beginnings at the headwaters of the Yellowstone River to the storms on the Plains. Momaday sees his own reflection in the pool of water, one of the boys disappears into the water, and water is a part of the peyote ceremony as well as of the sacred vision of Mammedaty. Momaday uses water imagery when he describes the 'water-like touch' of his great-grandmother's (Keahdinekeah's) hand and finally the deathlike silence of the dawn, which is 'cold and clear and deep like water'."

Gretchen M. Bataille  
"Momaday and the Evocation of Identity"  
*Approaches*, 79, 81-84

"Most of the Native American students at the University of South Dakota grew up on or near one of South Dakota's Indian reservations, and as a result they have had greater access to their culture than has Momaday. Yet they are not given to criticizing him for being an urban academic who writes as often about the Pueblos as about his own Kiowa people, probably because they so respect him for the respect his writing has brought to Indian people. Momaday's writing has demonstrated the subtlety and complexity of Indian circumstances and experiences, past and present. And he has written in language that has a grand, clear style.... Ten years have passed since my class traveled to Rainy Mountain and stood there on the top looking at the flat land all around—ten years since we listened to the stories told us by the Tsa-tokes. The experience had a lasting impact. We had touched the place and heard the voices. *The Way to Rainy Mountain* made us want to do that.... *The Way to Rainy Mountain* invites all its readers to discover their natural American resources in language and place."

Norma C. Wilson  
"Discovering Our Natural Resources in Language and Place"  
*Approaches*, 85, 88

"Lame Deer says, 'We Indians live in a world of symbols and images where the spiritual and the commonplace are one.... What to you seems commonplace to us appears wondrous through symbolism.' 'Symbols' from the natural world such as stars, bears, or rock formations unite ordinary and extraordinary reality and personal and collective visions, because these life forms have been continuous from the time of mythic creation. In *The Way to Rainy Mountain* Momaday draws on his knowledge of myth to present events that have either personal or tribal meaning or both. His grandfather Mammedaty's experiences reveal that a sacred moment 'is filled with an intangible but very real power or force, for good or bad.' Mammedaty learns to trust the medicine power of the natural world, and his stories of encounters with strange beings are teaching stories about receiving knowledge from unusual sources....

Although the Kiowas did not originate near Rainy Mountain, the Oklahoma plain is their sacred homeland.... The link between the beginnings of the tribe near the Yellowstone's headwaters and their transformed life in the southern Plains suggests that there can be multiple sacred centers of the world, even for one people.... When the sacred center of the Kiowa world shifted from the mountains to the plains over two centuries ago, the culture underwent many transformations as it adapted to new circumstances. One

dimension of Kiowa reality that continuously renews and integrates the culture is hierophany, or the manifestation of the sacred experienced through a personal or tribal vision at a power spot in the landscape. Hierophanies occur, for example, in the canyon where Tai-me first appears, at Devil's Tower when the Big Dipper is created, near the pecan grove when Mammedaty sees the alligators, and during the Sun Dance preparations when the old woman brings the bag of sandy earth into the medicine lodge. These appearances of the sacred in landforms, deities, animals, and celestial phenomena establish a pattern of revelation and transformation for the culture. The point of contact with a god or divine power creates sacred geography and sacred stories of the experiences for the Kiowas. Momaday has imagined *The Way to Rainy Mountain* as an extension of the process of events in sacred space giving rise to sacred stories that order and revitalize the world....

When I teach students about the sacred symbolic events in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, I use Mircea Eliade's model vision-sacred- space-center-integration to explain the dynamics of the full event of religious transformation.... Momaday retells portions of his people's sacred stories and finds his place in them. The journey that he undertakes is his means of achieving personal wholeness or spiritual balance. What interests Momaday is the process of coming to know the sacred, the ultimate source of knowledge. *The Way to Rainy Mountain* is not a sacred text, but it imparts the sacred."

Susan Scarberry-Garcia  
"Beneath the Stars: Images of the Sacred"  
*Approaches*, 89-92, 97

"Momaday entices us to read his text in a traditional manner, from the opening poems through the sequential historical development to the closing poem. A careful reader, however, eventually discovers that the concluding sections of the book cannot be fully appreciated without returning to the opening sections—that the text has no conventional beginning or ending but follows an intertwined or circular pattern.... The prologue and introduction contain many symbolic cyclical themes and images, such as the representation of life and death, or emergence and decline, by Aho and a baby; the changing seasons; and Momaday's ongoing journey and his containment of both the past and the present through memory, imagination, and stories. Learning to discern Momaday's development of cyclical themes and images was an important first step in recognizing the wider structural processes that he applies to the paragraphs, to the twenty-four sections and three major divisions of the text, and to the text as a whole.

The paragraphs in the prologue and introduction not only reveal an historical progression, often beginning in a past time and concluding in the present or near present, but also often end with new or different sorts of beginnings. The second paragraph of the prologue provides a typical example of this pattern. It first describes the origins of the Kiowa tribe, then mentions their demise, moves back to the historical events that led to that demise, and concludes on a note of continuance, as if a new story were about to begin. This circular structure is reemphasized when each section is read in its entirety; as each progresses through a sequence of stories, histories, and reflections, revealing the place of history, imagination, and memory in continuing and renewing their story and thus the life, of the Kiowa people. Furthermore, the prologue and introduction give a strong overview of the entire central story in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*."

David Hoehner  
"From Israel to Oklahoma:  
*The Way to Rainy Mountain*, Composition, and Cross-Cultural Awareness"  
*Approaches*, 104-05

"The whole journey and the whole memory are represented in *The Way to Rainy Mountain* in three entities that are separate yet connected: the origin of an idea in myth and legend (the mythos); historical episodes that bring the mythic reality to life or reasoned expositions that comment on the mythic reality (the logos); and, finally, autobiographical reflections on the first two (the ethos). The first two paragraphs in each of Momaday's twenty-four sections could only be retrieved through the verbal world, from other human beings or texts. The autobiographical paragraphs, however, demonstrate how Momaday makes personal meaning from the mythic and historic. The ethos, then, comes through Momaday's showing the traditions living within him—shaping, forming, and creating his sense of self. Momaday, after all, shows the values, the ethics, of his people and thereby establishes his own identity and value. Language becomes

a vehicle for recovery as well as discovery. Such a process of recovery and discovery has been called 'ethnographic thinking'."

Suzanne Evertsen Lundquist  
"College Composition: An Experience in Ethnographic Thinking"  
*Approaches*, 110-11

"In attempting to characterize a general American Indian response to the landscape, Momaday emphasizes the key role of animism, reciprocity, and tradition. He asserts that the relations between human beings and the landscape is 'a matter of reciprocal appropriation: appropriations in which man invests himself in the landscape, and at the same time incorporates the landscape into his own most fundamental experience.' In an essay entitled 'I Am Alive...', Momaday writes, 'In the case of the American Indian the idea of the self is based upon a number of equations.... The first of these relationships is a perception of the landscape.... Only in reference to the earth can he persist in his true identity.' For the Kiowa tribe and for Momaday, the central place of reference is Rainy Mountain.

Momaday's choice of this grassy knoll in the Wichita Mountains of Oklahoma is significant not only because it marks the geographical center of Kiowa land but also because it symbolizes the fruition of the Kiowa cultural identity as buffalo hunters of the southern Plains. His journey to Rainy Mountain is a search for individual identity within both the natural world and ancestral tradition. The introduction to *Rainy Mountain*, combining elements of legend and history unfolds from Momaday's personal experience of the landscape. It begins with an evocation of Rainy Mountain, in which the mountain becomes a place of origins, both personal and tribal: 'To look upon that landscape in the early morning, with the sun at your back, is to lose the sense of proportion. Your imagination comes to life, and this, you think, is where Creation was begun.'

The loss of the 'sense of proportion' that Momaday experiences, however, is less an isolated individual response than a personal response to a cultural landmark intimately connected to the traditions of a people. In the introduction, Momaday's grandmother, Aho, most clearly displays the synthesis of time, cultural imagination, and landscape that is crucial to *Rainy Mountain*. As Momaday notes, 'The journey is an evocation of three things in particular: a landscape that is incomparable, a time that is gone forever, and the human spirit, which endures.' Although Aho had never traveled far, had lived her many years 'in the shadow of Rainy Mountain, the immense landscape lay like memory in her blood. She could tell of the Crows, whom she had never seen, and of the Black Hills, where she had never been.' As a child, she had participated in the annual summer Sun Dances and had 'a reverence...a holy regard' for the sun, the greatest Kiowa spirit power. Born in the final years of Kiowa independence, she was a last link in a fragile inheritance that Momaday saw rapidly fading. By journeying along the Kiowa migration route back to Rainy Mountain, Momaday hoped 'to see in reality what she had seen more perfectly in the mind's eye....'

It is the nature of the journey to Rainy Mountain, though, that the integration of the individual with the cultural identity occurs only gradually through Momaday's imaginative experiencing of the landscape in terms of traditional culture. For instead of presenting a static example of the difference between Native American and non-Native American views of the natural world, the personal or third voice of *Rainy Mountain* undergoes a gradual shift away from an essentially separate sense of self and landscape to an integrated historical awareness of the traditional reciprocity between humanity and environment.... This shift can be traced through many individual sections...

The first section provides an overview of the shift. The perspective in this third voice moves from the details of the environment—the meadows of 'blue and yellow wildflowers'—to a general view of the distance—'the still sunlit plain...nothing but the land itself, whose and impenetrable.' Then there is a sudden change of perception. Details begin to coalesce into a whole of 'perfect being' in space and time. Set in the context of the legend of Kiowa emergence, this vision establishes the connection between individual and community.

The second division, 'The Going On,' focuses less on myth and origins than the first division does and more on the legends and events of a developing material culture. Here, the personal voice continues observing the landscape but moves through description toward a more abstract understanding of the wider

significance of the landscape. In section 13 the personal voice evokes the arrow maker of the legend by introducing Cheney, petitioner of the sun. Momaday believes that Cheney prayed to the sun 'because it was appropriate that he should'.... By this point, Momaday has come to share something of Cheney's knowledge. He sees Cheney 'in my mind...as if he were there now.' And as Momaday implies in this passage—"I know where he stands and where his voice goes on the rolling grasses and where the sun comes up on the land"—and reveals explicitly elsewhere—"there, in the early summer, I have seen the sun rise out of the ground an immense red-orange disc, scarcely brighter than the moon, beautiful and strange and health-giving"—he has both symbolically and literally 'stood where Cheney has stood.'

Cheney's perception of the landscape is an older example of what Momaday's becomes. Like Momaday's vision by the end of section I, Cheney's sight 'extended beyond the physical boundaries of his time and place. He perceived the wonder and meaning of Creation itself. In his mind's eye, he could integrate all the realities and illusions of the earth and sky...' Both men perceive the landscape with physical and spiritual reality in single focus as a result of the commingling of individual and cultural experience. For Momaday, this way of seeing is an important step on the way to Rainy Mountain. As Aho had seen 'perfectly in her mind's eye,' so her grandson has begun to see.

In the third part, 'The Closing In,' Momaday completes the shift away from description toward informed observation. The personal voice in each of the sections asserts knowledge, understanding, or the possession of 'powerful medicine.' Marking a culmination of the response to landscape in *Rainy Mountain*, the third voice of section 19 reiterates the connection not only between men and horses in the first and second voices but also between humankind and the landscape. Here Momaday links the enduring cultural tradition with an invigorated personal present by remembering his youth, his horse, and an intensely felt landscape. This section presents three distinct and essential experiences. Power, imaginative freedom, and enthusiasm for the cultural moment resound in the account of the legendary brothers, but they are cut off at the high point of tribal achievement by the destruction of the captured Kiowa horses. After the buffalo culture was destroyed, however, something remained. In Momaday's personal experience lies the reinvigoration of that something, a recognition of a personal and social self defined in terms of human interaction with a symbolic cultural landscape.

The personal voice of the final section, 24, summarizes Momaday's attitudes toward the natural world. This passage, similar in its confident tone to the personal voices of sections 13 and 19, begins with a variation of the first line of the legend: "East of my grandmother's house...there is buried a woman in a beautiful dress' becomes 'East of my grandmother's house the sun rises out of the plain.' The shift in the main clause from burial to sunrise, with its evocation of Cheney's ritual sunrise prayer, indicates a renewed vitality brought to the traditional ways—especially the ways of viewing the landscape—by a culturally significant act of the imagination. In the legend, Momaday sees the buried woman not in literal reality, as he had intended to see the 'immense landscape of the continental interior' at the beginning of his journey, but 'more perfectly in the mind's eye'—just as Aho had known the landscape of the Kiowa migration 'like memory in her blood.'

The voices of legend, history, and personal reminiscence gradually merge as Momaday completes the journey. And in the epilogue, the tribal memory of legend, history, and landscape is embodied in the person of Ko-sahn. Much as Aho had, Ko-sahn too had realized both cultural and individual experience 'in the one memory, and that was of the land.' She becomes a spiritual mentor for Momaday, for as she both carries traditional knowledge in her memory and is carried by that tradition into existence beyond her lifetime, she provides a resolution to the question of time's erosion of a material culture and the endurance of the spirit. Unlike the view in much of American literature, Momaday's understanding of his place in the world comes not through isolated meditation in a largely inanimate, esthetically distanced environment but through participation in a landscape teeming with profoundly significant life, with horses and buffalo and bear as well as with water and wind and star beings—of relatives like Aho and Cheney and Ko-sahn. They provide him, through their existence and their remembered stories, with an understanding of the people's relation to the landscape and of the transmission of that relation."

J. Frank Papovich  
"Journey into the Wilderness: American Literature and *The Way to Rainy Mountain*"  
*Approaches*, 120-23

“Momaday’s *Way to Rainy Mountain* and *House Made of Dawn* exemplify the theme of the pastoral, mythic quest as defined by Campbell and Eliade. Both these works are forms of rediscovery, attempts to return to the sacred through the art of storytelling and mythmaking that is part of the Indian oral tradition. They attempt to push the secular mode of modern fiction into the sacred mode, registering a faith in and a recognition of the power of the word that ‘comes from nothing into sound and meaning...[and] gives origin to all things.’ In the prologue to *Rainy Mountain* Momaday makes clear that his personal retracing of the Kiowas’ long migration to the Wichita Mountains, his actual journey, and his telling of the story are one. ‘In one sense, then, the way to Rainy Mountain is preeminently the history of an idea, man’s idea of himself, and it has old and essential being in language.’ Wichita

*The Way to Rainy Mountain* reflects Momaday’s early life, described by him in *The Names* as the ‘pastoral time of my growing up.’ Thus his journey is an effort to recapture this innocent childhood and to reaffirm the sacred within the secular, to find his personal identity in the mythic identity of his people.... Compare Tosamah’s two sermons (in the middle of *House Made of Dawn*) entitled ‘The Gospel According to John’ and ‘The Way to Rainy Mountain’ with Momaday’s actual and fictional journey in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. Many readers of *House Made of Dawn* have identified the Reverend J. B. B. Tosamah, pastor and priest of the sun, with the author N. Scott Momaday....

Both Tosamah and Momaday in *The Way to Rainy Mountain* identify with their grandmothers and that the ‘same’ grandmother in each work tells the story of how Tai-me came to be with the Kiowas. It was long ago when times were bad and children cried from hunger that Tai-me and the Sun Dance culture was discovered and the Kiowas found themselves as a people. ‘Take me with you,’ the voice said, ‘and I will give you whatever you want.’ This story, told in both works, is a repetition of creation, much as is the first sound heard by the biblical John; in this sound was the beginning. Ultimately, as Tosamah says, ‘It represents the oldest and best idea that man has of himself....’

Like the Kiowas, who at the beginning of their journey were uncertain of themselves as a ‘people,’ Momaday is confused about his personal identity and his relation to Kiowa culture. His grandmother Aho has died, and he has returned in the heart of July to visit her grave: it is a time and a return that reminds us of Campbell’s descriptions of the monomythic hero’s descent to hell.... In visiting his grandmother’s grave and then in retracing the history of his people, Momaday will find a unity of landscape and a unity of time and space. The first legend he remembers from his people’s journey is of the Devil’s Tower, a huge rock to which the Kiowas came two centuries ago and out of which they created a story of seven sisters who climbed a tree to escape a bear and were borne up into the sky to become the Big Dipper: ‘From that moment, and so long as the legend lives, the Kiowas have kinsmen in the night sky.... However tenuous their well-being, however much they had suffered and would suffer again, they had found a way out of the wilderness.’

*The Way to Rainy Mountain* begins with questions of identity and ends with a sense of oneness and wholeness suggested by this legend of the Devil’s Tower. Throughout the work Momaday fuses past and present, myth and history, his personal memories with the memories of the evolution of the Kiowa culture, ultimately fusing creation and death as part of one circle of existence. The thematic unity is reinforced by the tripartite structure of the work, with its three major divisions subdivided into twenty-four sections and its sections consisting of the mythic, the historical, and the personal voices.... These three voices reveal the different types of reality that are frames of reference for white and nonwhite cultures....

This fusion of theme and structure results in a re-creation of the pastoral and mythic unity found in the quest theme; the gods and heaven are a part of the total landscape, and the journey is all these. The journey and the telling of the journey are one. It is the Word that allows human beings to complete their quests and find unity with their world, for ‘By means of words can a man deal with the world on equal terms. And the word is sacred’.... Tosamah’s lecture ‘The Gospel According to John’ might seem to reveal the same truth as *The Way to Rainy Mountain* does. ‘In principio erat Verbum,’ quotes Tosamah as he starts his sermon to the Indians gathering inside the Holiness Pan-Indian Rescue Mission surrounded by white Los Angeles. Two forty-watt bulbs illuminate the cold and dreary basement where Tosamah speaks about the first sound that came from nothingness” ‘It was almost nothing in itself, a single sound, a word—a word broken off at

the darkest center of the night and let go in the awful void, forever and forever. And it was almost nothing in itself. It scarcely was; but it *was*, and everything began.'

However much this may sound like Aho or Momaday, the reality is that Tosamah cannot maintain his vision, his understanding. He is a caricature of the visionary—if you like, he is a parody of Momaday or of other Native Americans who could easily become such a personage: a hollow shell, full of words with unrealized meanings, un-lived truths. Perhaps he is N. Scott Momaday without the experience of *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. Tosamah represents the subtlest kind of religious confidence agent: he is both critic and supporter of the white way; he is both priest and medicine man; he is both friend and foe. Ultimately, he is a religious sham, speaking the truth but never the whole truth; he is John Big Bluff Tosamah. He is trapped between two selves, two realities: 'Conviction, caricature, callousness: the remainder of his sermon was a going back and forth among these.'

Tosamah's sermon on Jon is about John's failure to accept the Word, the truth as given to him. John's problem was that he was a white man, and 'the white man has his ways.... He talks about the Word. He talks through it and around it. He builds upon it with syllables, with prefixes and suffixes, and hyphens and accents. He adds and divides and multiplies the Word. And in all of this he subtracts the Truth.' John's approach is in contrast to that of the storyteller, Tosamah's grandmother, who had 'learned that in words and in language, and there only, she could have whole and consummate being.' So when Tosamah remembers his grandmother's stories from childhood, he remembers an imaginative experience... This same experience is related in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, where Momaday listens to his memories of his grandmother's memories. She could tell of the Crows, whom she had never seen, and Momaday 'wanted to see in reality what she had seen more perfectly in the mind's eye.'

Unfortunately, Tosamah is a false prophet, whether he is lecturing on John or conducting the peyote ritual. Despite his attractiveness to the reader, Tosamah clearly never fully understands sacred things, good or evil: everything to him is just a 'Jesus scheme' or a peyote scheme. Christianity is not real to him, and yet he cannot see fully his ancestors' mystic ways. He ends his religious play with the advice, 'Good night...and get yours.' The main character of the novel, Abel, should also be contrasted to Tosamah. Abel, who throughout the book is lost to the white world of war and peace, can emerge with a sacred vision at the end. He returns home to the reservation, and through his grandfather and his racial memory he rediscovers himself and his place in the landscape. Abel's quest takes him back to a reverence for all existence and for the land that supports this existence. In 'Man Made of Words' Momaday has written of modern Americans' need to come to accept the land, to develop an American land ethic, 'not only as it is revealed to us immediately through our senses, but also as it is perceived more truly in the long turn of seasons and of years. And we must come to moral terms.' This theme is repeated in both *House Made of Dawn* and *The Way to Rainy Mountain*."

Vernon E. Lattin  
"Momaday's Pastoral Vision  
in the Contexts of Modern Ethnic and Mainstream American Fiction"  
*Approaches*, 126-29

"The image of Indians as purveyors of the sacred earth, however accurate as a historical portrayal, can evoke a sort of romantic response in the reader, a nostalgia that must be addressed, disassembled, and reassembled in the light of Indian religious philosophies, history; and contemporary life. Momaday's individual literary voice, too, must be set against the collective voice rising up from contemporary Pan-American Indian movements—literary and extraliterary—which struggle to promote the cultural survival of Indian peoples....

Momaday's assertion of individual consciousness is, at least in part, a response to stereotypes of Indians.... That synthesis—'the Indian,' 'the Kiowa,' and so on, as Kenneth Lincoln notes, results when 'we predispose to noble savages, academic methodologies reflexive of our own epistemologies, or disciplinary blinders.' Yet Momaday's text, as innovative as it is in form, is curiously lacking in an anticipated anger, an anger necessary to offset the image of a people in dignified defeat, an anger indicative of a stubborn refusal to disappear. Thus, the work can evoke the sort of age-old moral flagellation for past 'sins' that eclipses 'contemporary "Indi'ns" [*sic*] in evolution within older cultural traditions.... In fact,

when Momaday's book was first published, reviewers remarked on how it 'nags eloquently at the white conscience' and 'is in its own way a conscience stabber'....

The historical moment (the late 1960s and early 1970s), when both Black Elk's and Momaday's texts became popular, was a time when mainstream Euramerica focused not only on its specific problems but also on its problematic expansionist philosophy. Although popular images of Indians changed considerably between the publication of the two works, the association of Indians with ecological concerns represented, in 1971, yet another 'creation' of Indians by Euramerican image-makers. [For example, Indians burned forests to increase grazing land for game and for other reasons, yet their "ecology" was invoked by environmentalists to stop all forest fires, then to close the forests to logging, resulting in no firebreaks, overcrowded national forests that have dried out, gotten infested by insects, and are burning up in raging wildfires more destructive than ever before, wiping out habitats and costing billions.]

Like Black Elk, Momaday mourns the loss of a way of life, roots his vision in relation to landscape, and believes in the power of dream and in the sacredness of the word. In a general sense, those aspects of Indian ways are 'familiar' to most readers—familiar to the point of being stereotypes.... Through memory and imagination, Momaday blends his awareness of 'a landscape that is incomparable,' his knowledge of 'a time that is gone forever,' and his appreciation for 'the human spirit, which endures,' creating a holistic vision of cultural loss, change, and continuance....

In section 18 Kiowa warriors decide to seek an answer to the question 'Where does the sun go?'; they head south, apparently to Central America. 'The small men with tails' convince them that they have achieved their goal; the tale of their adventure lives on in Kiowa lore. The historical sketch that follows indicates that the horse represented the acquisition of a new 'technology,' enabling the Kiowas to expand their known world and their mythologies. In contrast, when 'the animal representation of the sun'—the bison—was destroyed, the Plains Indian cultures experienced a great crisis in belief; yet, when Indians from far-reaching places caught news of Wovoka, the prophet of the Ghost Dance, and his vision, they availed themselves of the railroads to go to hear firsthand of Wovoka's vision. Gods do not die easily....

The language, worldview, and religious beliefs of the Lakotas reflect the significant change wrought by the tribe's encounter with [whites]. Momaday's physical and symbolic journey to Rainy Mountain reflects loss, change, and continuance, although its occasion is contemporary and its language modern English.... We must present his work in ways that will avoid tendencies to see only the romance, nostalgia, and guilt of the past."

Kathryn S. Vangen

"The Indian as the Purveyor of the Sacred Earth:  
Avoiding Nostalgic Readings of *The Way to Rainy Mountain*"  
*Approaches*, 132-37

"Momaday is seen as a role model who has successfully committed to writing the experience of what it is to be an Indian. Like many other readers, Canadian Native American students romanticize Plains Indians; hence they are eager to read Momaday's book. By way of introduction, I trace on a map the historic journey of the Kiowas. Students recall from their introductory courses what life was like for mountain-dwelling Indians—cramped underground homes or crude shelters, long dark winters, difficult land travel, and dangerous waterways. Environmental factors explain why Momaday would say, 'The Kiowas reckoned their stature by the distance they could see, and they were bent and blind in the wilderness'....

Momaday's grandmother could well be considered a prototype: 'There was a wariness in her, and an ancient awe. She was a Christian in her later years, but she had come a long way about, and she never forgot her birthright.' She never forgot despite the forceful encroachments on her religion, especially on the Kiowa Sun Dance, which was forbidden during her childhood: 'Without bitterness, and for as long as she lived, she bore a vision of deicide.' Her experiences were the experiences of most North American Indians and the students can identify with her."

Agnes Grant

"*The Way to Rainy Mountain* in a Community-Based Oral Narratives Course  
for Cree and Ojibway Students"

“As was the case with *House Made of Dawn*, the fictional/autobiographical *The Way to Rainy Mountain* represents Momaday’s attempt to express Indian myth and culture—indeed, the American Indian way of seeing—in white vocabulary without profaning that way of seeing in the process. The three sections of the book, the ‘Setting Out,’ ‘The Going On,’ and ‘The Closing In,’ are divided into passages of Kiowa myths, historical information, and autobiographical facts concerning Momaday’s personal attempt to rediscover his Indian roots. In an impressionistic style exhibiting a Hemingway-like directness that is nevertheless poetically flowing, the author weaves these three strands together in an imaginative unification of past and present, dream and fact. Thus, the book becomes a creative journey that reconciles ancient truths and Momaday’s personal instincts concerning them with the life he must live in the modern white world... He is convinced that American Indians and whites alike need such an experience if they are to be completely alive.”

Richard M. Leeson  
*Cyclopedia of World Authors II*, Vol. 3  
ed. Frank N. Magill  
(Salem 1989) 1060-62

“It is *The Way to Rainy Mountain*...that more than any other of his works demonstrates Momaday’s ability to break through generic boundaries. In his essay ‘The Man Made of Words’...Momaday describes the composition process that began with his desire to comprehend his Kiowa identity and the death of his grandmother Aho and the collecting from Kiowa elders of stories, several of which appeared in the privately printed book *The Journey of Tai-me*, 1967. To all but a few of these brief tribal and family stories he added short historical and personal ‘commentaries.’ Momaday then arranged twenty-four of these three-voice sections into three divisions (‘The Setting Out,’ ‘The Going On,’ ‘The Closing In’) to suggest several physical and spiritual journeys, the two most obvious being the migration and history of the Kiowa and the gradual development of his Kiowa identity. The three divisions were framed by two poems and three lyric essays (Prologue, Introduction, Epilogue) that combine mythic, historic, and personal perspectives.

Critics have called the form of *Rainy Mountain* ‘prose poem’ and ‘lyrical prose.’ Momaday calls the individual voices of the twenty-four sections ‘quintessential novels.’ The labels are less important than the unique effect of a work with the intensity and density of lyric poetry and the breadth of an epic poem. No series of excerpts can capture the impact of reading this brief and unique book.”

Kenneth M. Roemer  
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(D.C. Heath 1990) 2039

Michael Hollister (2014)