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The Night Chant as Evidence of Abel's Death in *House Made of Dawn*

N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* has arguably one of the more controversial endings of classic novels, there's no secret there. Literary critics everywhere have battled over whether the main character, Abel, dies in the end or lives, among other things. I have read several sources explaining their opinion on whether he lives or dies without backing it up with a reason, like Paula Gunn Allen in "All the Good Indians,"

The only Indian book I read in the sixties was *House Made of Dawn*. At the time, I didn't realize what the end of it meant. I thought Abel ran into life, into tradition, into strength. It was not until the late seventies, when I saw a film rendition of the book made by a group of Indian filmmakers, that I realized that in the end Abel ran into another world; that he reclaimed himself as a long-hair Pueblo Indian man by running out of this particular world-frame, this particular universe, this reality. In other words, he died. Abel was a good Indian (Allen 39).

There are also sources that do not pick a side at all and simply say it doesn't matter whether he lives or dies, because either way he is still "purged of the contamination of the white world" (Clements 62). N. Scott Momaday himself said that he really didn't know what happened in the end. In an interview with Daniele Fiorentino from the University of Nebraska, he explains that he didn't write the next page and that it's up to us to decide what happens to him (Fiorentino 64).

What I didn't find, however, is the importance of the Night Chant and how the book ends with "There was no sound, and he had no voice; he had only the words of a song. And he went running on the rise of the song. *House made of pollen, house made of dawn. Qtsedaba*" (Momaday ch. 4).

Other than the obvious clues in the last few paragraphs, such as, "There was only the clear pool of eternity. They held their eyes upon it, waiting, and, too slow and various to see, the void began to deepen and to change: pumice, and pearl, and mother-of-pearl, and the pale and brilliant blush of orange and of rose" (Momaday ch. 4), and

He was running and a cold sweat broke out upon him and his breath heaved with the pain of running. His legs buckled and he fell in the snow. And he got up and ran on. He was alone and running on/ All of his being was concentrated in the sheer motion of running one, and he was past caring about the pain. Pure exhaustion laid hold of his mind, and he could see at last without having to think (Momaday ch. 4),

I think a big indication of Abel's death is the significance of the Night Chant and the meaning of "Qtsedaba."

Based on our class notes, the Navajos chant to cure diseases and keep balance. The Night Chant is meant to cure nervous disorders. After examining the full length of the song rather than the small portion presented in "The Night Chanter," I have reason to believe that while the song may cure nervous disorders, the only way of doing that is by causing the person's death. The entire song speaks of doing things with God, being immersed into His world, and being restored (Herzog). While it could simply be taken as a restoration of Faith, I think that for Abel, who is the one with the nervous (and slightly mental) disorder, to be referring to it would suggest that he could be having an out-of-body experience, which is common before death by exhaustion.

“Qtsedaba,” according to Katherine LaFevers Evans, is part of a two-word “ritual sacrifice as transformative act” (Evans 3). “This is a Jemez Pueblo invocation signaling a transformative act...The invocation is split into two words, which together encircle the whole text centered between, containing a holistic world within cyclic time” (Evans 3). The story begins with “Dypaloh,” and ends with “Qtsedaba,” making the book an example of this ritual sacrifice. The entire book is a transformative act because Abel is constantly being forced into change that he doesn’t want to adapt to. He’s thrown into a war and is then expected to just go back to being a normal Indian who adapts to society, but he can’t do that and it causes his alcoholism and other problems. The ending is a transformative act as well because whether he lives or dies, as William M. Clements says, he is still “purged of the contamination of the white world”(Clements 62). What makes this an indication of Abel’s death, however, is the notion of ritual sacrifice. When Benally sings the Night Chant to Abel in “The Night Chanter,” I believe he was sacrificing Abel’s life for the sake of Abel’s own sanity and so that he can experience that purging that death would bring him. Essentially, he was putting him out of his misery.

My theory of what happens at the end of *House Made of Dawn* is like many others in that I believe Abel dies. However, I have good reason to believe that not only did he die, but his friend and roommate, Benally, essentially killed him to save him using the Navajo practice of the Night Chant. While others believe the Night Chant was meant to take away Abel’s alcoholism, I believe it was also meant to take away all insanity and all aspects of his life that cause him to be “nervous,” or awkward. Abel dies in the end. Forgetting the obvious reasons, The Night Chant and the “ritual sacrifice as transformative act” of the words “Dypaloh” in the beginning and “Qtsedaba” in the end are further explanations of why one might believe such a thing.

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