



from *The Way to Rainy Mountain*

Memoir by N. Scott Momaday

NOTABLE QUOTE

“Ask yourself how you would like to be known. Don’t let yourself be determined by others.”

FYI

Did you know that N. Scott Momaday ...

- rode the bus 28 miles to and from school as a teenager?
- taught both middle school and high school on the Jicarilla reservation in New Mexico before becoming a professional writer?
- won the Pulitzer Prize, the most prestigious U.S. literary award, for his very first novel?

AuthorOnline

For more on N. Scott Momaday, visit the [Literature Center at ClassZone.com](http://LiteratureCenteratClassZone.com).



N. Scott Momaday

born 1934

“The most important question one can ask is ‘Who am I?’” N. Scott Momaday (mōm’ə-dā’) has asserted. “People tend to define you. As a child, you can’t help that, but as you grow older, the goal is to garner enough strength to insist on your own definition of yourself.” In his writing, Momaday focuses on the search for identity, and he locates the key to self-understanding in awareness of the past.

Native American Roots Momaday developed a deep sense of his own roots early on. His father, a successful artist and a member of the Kiowa (kī’ə-wō’) tribe, routinely told him Kiowa folk tales. His mother, an accomplished writer of French, English, and Cherokee ancestry, instructed him in traditional ways. Momaday grew up on reservations in the Southwest and often spent his summers with his grandparents and other Kiowa relatives in Oklahoma.

The Making of a Writer Growing up on reservations, Momaday developed a reverence for the land and a strong Native American identity. “I saw people,” he recalls, “who were deeply involved in their traditional life, in the memories of their blood. They had, as far as I could see, a certain strength and beauty that I find missing in the modern world at large.” The lives of these people, together with the Southwestern landscape, inspired Momaday to begin writing at an early age. With the encouragement of his parents, Momaday began composing poetry. Years of hard work and determination paid off when he was awarded a poetry fellowship by Stanford University in 1959.

Voice of the Kiowa In both his poetry and prose, Momaday pays tribute to Native American storytelling traditions and culture. His first novel, *House Made of Dawn*, tells the story of one man’s struggle to recover his identity after a stint in the U.S. Army. Original in both theme and structure, the novel was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1969. In one of his most popular works, *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, Momaday mixes Kiowa myths, legends, and history with autobiographical details. In addition to his poetry and fiction, Momaday has published essays and articles on preserving the environment. He says, “Writing is a way of expressing your spirit. So there’s much more to it than the question of material success. You are out to save your soul after all, and be the best thing that you can be.”

LITERARY ANALYSIS: MEMOIR

A **memoir** is a form of autobiographical writing in which a person shares personal experiences along with observations of significant events or people. Memoirs give readers insight into the impact of historical events on people's lives. They can also be elegantly written texts containing elements such as a distinctive tone, rich sensory details, and symbols.

As you read M. Scott Momaday's memoir, note passages in which he shares strictly personal experiences as well as sections in which he comments on larger historical events.

READING SKILL: ANALYZE STRUCTURE

Writers usually arrange their information using a **structure** that helps the reader see how the ideas are related. Momaday interweaves three distinct strands throughout his memoir:

- geographical details about the landscape
- historical details about the rise and fall of the Kiowa
- personal details about his grandmother, Aho

As you read, use a chart like the one shown to record details about each topic. Jot down what you learn about each topic, and consider how the three separate strands are related.

<i>The Landscape</i>	<i>The Kiowa</i>	<i>Momaday's Grandmother</i>

VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT

Momaday used the following words in this exploration of his heritage. To test your knowledge, substitute one vocabulary word for the boldfaced word or phrase in each sentence.

WORD LIST	enmity	opaque	solstice
	inherently	pillage	tenuous
	luxuriant	preeminently	
	nocturnal	profusion	

1. My mother's garden yields an **abundance** of flowers.
2. The feuding brothers eyed each other with **hostility**.
3. There is something **intrinsically** funny about seeing pictures of my father as a teenager.
4. The summer reunion is held on the **longest day of the year**.

Explore the Key Idea

What is your HERITAGE?

KEY IDEA What makes you who you are? Part of the answer lies in your **heritage**, or the beliefs, traditions, and culture passed down to you from preceding generations. Think of the things you have gained or learned from older relatives—the recipe for your favorite meal, perhaps, or a sense of humor, or an attitude toward hardship. How have the things you've learned helped shape who you are today? In the selection that follows, N. Scott Momaday offers his own perspective on the importance of heritage.

INTERVIEW Interview one of your classmates about his or her heritage. Ask your subject about a family tradition, an important belief or value, or a story about his or her family's roots. Find out if your classmate thinks heritage has affected his or her identity.



THE WAY TO *Rainy Mountain*

N. Scott Momaday

BACKGROUND In the 1600s, after a bitter dispute between two chiefs, a band of Kiowa moved from what is now Montana to South Dakota's Black Hills. In around 1785, the Kiowa migrated farther south to escape attacks by neighboring tribes, settling in what is now western Kansas and Oklahoma. With their Comanche allies, the Kiowa ruled the southern Great Plains for a century. One of the last tribes to be defeated by the U.S. government, the Kiowa surrendered in 1875 and were forced onto a reservation in Oklahoma, where members of the tribe still live today.

ANALYZE VISUALS

Examine the portrait on page 53, and consider the photographer's use of high-contrast lighting. What **traits** are suggested by this emphasis of light and shadow? Do you think the subject might look stronger or more vulnerable in a different kind of light? Explain your answer.

A MEMOIR

Note the **descriptive language** in the opening paragraph. How might a reader respond differently to this type of writing than to a more scientific description of the Oklahoma plains?

A single knoll¹ rises out of the plain in Oklahoma, north and west of the Wichita Range. For my people, the Kiowas, it is an old landmark, and they gave it the name Rainy Mountain. The hardest weather in the world is there. Winter brings blizzards, hot tornadic winds arise in the spring, and in summer the prairie is an anvil's edge. The grass turns brittle and brown, and it cracks beneath your feet. There are green belts along the rivers and creeks, linear groves of hickory and pecan, willow and witch hazel. At a distance in July or August the steaming foliage seems almost to writhe in fire. Great green and yellow grasshoppers are everywhere in the tall grass, popping up like corn to sting the flesh, and tortoises crawl about
10 on the red earth, going nowhere in the plenty of time. Loneliness is an aspect of the land. All things in the plain are isolate; there is no confusion of objects in the eye, but one hill or one tree or one man. 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. **A**

I returned to Rainy Mountain in July. My grandmother had died in the spring, and I wanted to be at her grave. She had lived to be very old and at last infirm.

1. **knoll** (nōl): a small round hill.



Her only living daughter was with her when she died, and I was told that in death her face was that of a child.

I like to think of her as a child. When she was born, the Kiowas were living
20 the last great moment of their history. For more than a hundred years they had controlled the open range from the Smoky Hill River to the Red, from the headwaters of the Canadian to the fork of the Arkansas and Cimarron. In alliance with the Comanches, they had ruled the whole of the southern Plains. War was their sacred business, and they were among the finest horsemen the world has ever known. But warfare for the Kiowas was **preeminently** a matter of disposition rather than of survival, and they never understood the grim, unrelenting advance of the U.S. Cavalry. When at last, divided and ill-provisioned, they were driven onto the Staked Plains in the cold rains of autumn, they fell into panic. In Palo Duro Canyon they abandoned their crucial stores to **pillage** and had nothing then
30 but their lives. In order to save themselves, they surrendered to the soldiers at Fort Sill² and were imprisoned in the old stone corral that now stands as a military museum. My grandmother was spared the humiliation of those high gray walls by eight or ten years, but she must have known from birth the affliction of defeat, the dark brooding of old warriors.

Her name was Aho, and she belonged to the last culture to evolve in North America. Her forebears came down from the high country in western Montana nearly three centuries ago. They were a mountain people, a mysterious tribe of hunters whose language has never been positively classified in any major group. In the late seventeenth century they began a long migration to the south and east.
40 It was a journey toward the dawn, and it led to a golden age. Along the way the Kiowas were befriended by the Crows,³ who gave them the culture and religion of the Plains. They acquired horses, and their ancient nomadic spirit was suddenly free of the ground. They acquired Tai-me, the sacred Sun Dance doll, from that moment the object and symbol of their worship, and so shared in the divinity of the sun. Not least, they acquired the sense of destiny, therefore courage and pride. When they entered upon the southern Plains they had been transformed. No longer were they slaves to the simple necessity of survival; they were a lordly and dangerous society of fighters and thieves, hunters and priests of the sun. According to their origin myth, they entered the world through a hollow log. From one point
50 of view, their migration was the fruit of an old prophecy, for indeed they emerged from a sunless world.

Although my grandmother lived out her long life in the shadow of Rainy Mountain, the immense landscape of the continental interior 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. I wanted to see in reality what she had seen more perfectly in the mind's eye, and traveled fifteen hundred miles to begin my pilgrimage. **B**

preeminently

(prē-ēm'ə-nnēt-lē)

adv. above all; most importantly

pillage (pīl'ij) *n.* the act of looting or plundering by force

B ANALYZE STRUCTURE

Reread lines 35–57. Which lines convey historical information? Which offer more personal details? Identify the key words or phrases that allowed you to distinguish between the two types of information.

2. **Fort Sill:** a U.S. army post established in 1869 in the Indian Territory (now Oklahoma).

3. **Crows:** a group of Native Americans who once inhabited the region between the Platte and Yellowstone rivers in the northern Great Plains. The Crows are now settled in Montana.

Yellowstone, it seemed to me, was the top of the world, a region of deep lakes and dark timber, canyons and waterfalls. But, beautiful as it is, one might have the
60 sense of confinement there. The skyline in all directions is close at hand, the high wall of the woods and deep cleavages of shade. There is a perfect freedom in the mountains, but it belongs to the eagle and the elk, the badger and the bear. The Kiowas reckoned their stature by the distance they could see, and they were bent and blind in the wilderness.

Descending eastward, the highland meadows are a stairway to the plain. In July the inland slope of the Rockies is **luxuriant** with flax and buckwheat, stonecrop and larkspur. The earth unfolds and the limit of the land recedes. Clusters of trees, and animals grazing far in the distance, cause the vision to reach away and wonder to build upon the mind. The sun follows a longer course in the day, and the sky is
70 immense beyond all comparison. The great billowing clouds that sail upon it are shadows that move upon the grain like water, dividing light. Farther down, in the land of the Crows and Blackfeet,⁴ the plain is yellow. Sweet clover takes hold of the hills and bends upon itself to cover and seal the soil. There the Kiowas paused on their way; they had come to the place where they must change their lives. The sun is at home on the plains. Precisely there does it have the certain character of a god. When the Kiowas came to the land of the Crows, they could see the dark lees of the hills at dawn across the Bighorn River, the **profusion** of light on the grain shelves, the oldest deity ranging after the **solstices**. Not yet would they veer southward to the caldron of the land that lay below; they must wean their blood
80 from the northern winter and hold the mountains a while longer in their view. They bore Tai-me in procession to the east.

A dark mist lay over the Black Hills, and the land was like iron. At the top of a ridge I caught sight of Devil's Tower upthrust against the gray sky as if in the birth of time the core of the earth had broken through its crust and the motion of the world was begun. There are things in nature that engender an awful quiet in the heart of man; Devil's Tower is one of them. Two centuries ago, because they could not do otherwise, the Kiowas made a legend at the base of the rock. My grandmother said:

*Eight children were there at play, seven sisters and their brother. Suddenly the boy
90 was struck dumb; he trembled and began to run upon his hands and feet. His fingers became claws, and his body was covered with fur. Directly there was a bear where the boy had been. The sisters were terrified; they ran, and the bear after them. They came to the stump of a great tree, and the tree spoke to them. It bade them climb upon it, and as they did so it began to rise into the air. The bear came to kill them, but they were just beyond its reach. It reared against the tree and scored the bark all around with its claws. The seven sisters were borne into the sky, and they became the stars of the Big Dipper.*

luxuriant (lūg-zhōōr'ē-ant)
adj. characterized by abundant growth

profusion (prə-fyōō'zhən)
n. abundance; lavishness

solstice (sōl'stī's) *n.* either of two days of the year when the sun is farthest from the celestial equator; the summer solstice is the longest day of the year, and the winter solstice is the shortest.

4. **Blackfeet:** a group of Native Americans who once inhabited a region now occupied by parts of Montana and the Canadian provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan.

From that moment, and so long as the legend lives, the Kiowas have kinsmen in the night sky. Whatever they were in the mountains, they could be no more.
100 However **tenuous** their well-being, however much they had suffered and would suffer again, they had found a way out of the wilderness. **C**

My grandmother had a reverence for the sun, a holy regard that now is all but gone out of mankind. 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. As a child she had been to the Sun Dances; she had taken part in those annual rites, and by them she had learned the restoration of her people in the presence of Tai-me. She was about seven when the last Kiowa Sun Dance was held in 1887 on the Washita River above Rainy Mountain Creek. The buffalo were gone. In order to consummate the ancient sacrifice—to impale the
110 head of a buffalo bull upon the medicine tree—a delegation of old men journeyed into Texas, there to beg and barter for an animal from the Goodnight herd.⁵ She was ten when the Kiowas came together for the last time as a living Sun Dance culture. They could find no buffalo; they had to hang an old hide from the sacred tree. Before the dance could begin, a company of soldiers rode out from Fort Sill under orders to disperse the tribe. Forbidden without cause the essential act of their faith, having seen the wild herds slaughtered and left to rot upon the ground, the Kiowas backed away forever from the medicine tree. That was July 20, 1890, at the great bend of the Washita. My grandmother was there. Without bitterness, and for as long as she lived, she bore a vision of deicide.⁶

120 Now that I can have her only in memory, I see my grandmother in the several postures that were peculiar to her: standing at the wood stove on a winter morning and turning meat in a great iron skillet; sitting at the south window, bent above her beadwork, and afterwards, when her vision failed, looking down for a long time into the fold of her hands; going out upon a cane, very slowly as she did when the weight of age came upon her; praying. I remember her most often at prayer. She made long, rambling prayers out of suffering and hope, having seen many things. I was never sure that I had the right to hear, so exclusive were they of all mere custom and company. The last time I saw her she prayed standing by the side of her bed at night, naked to the waist, the light of a kerosene lamp moving
130 upon her dark skin. Her long, black hair, always drawn and braided in the day, lay upon her shoulders and against her breasts like a shawl. I do not speak Kiowa, and I never understood her prayers, but there was something **inherently** sad in the sound, some merest hesitation upon the syllables of sorrow. She began in a high and descending pitch, exhausting her breath to silence; then again and again—and always the same intensity of effort, of something that is, and is not, like urgency in the human voice. Transported so in the dancing light among the shadows of her room, she seemed beyond the reach of time. But that was illusion; I think I knew then that I should not see her again.

tenuous (tĕn'yŭō-əs) *adj.*
having little substance or strength; flimsy

C ANALYZE STRUCTURE

Reread lines 98–101. What does Momaday mean when he says that “the Kiowas have kinsmen in the night sky”? How does the inclusion of this legend add depth to the personal elements of this memoir?

inherently (ĩn-hĩr'ent-lĕ')
adv. related to part of something's inmost nature

5. **Goodnight herd:** a herd of Southern Plains bison established in the 1870s by Charles and Molly Goodnight for the purpose of preserving the animals from extinction.

6. **a vision of deicide** (dĕ'ē-sĩd'): a picture in her mind of the killing of a god.

**ANALYZE VISUALS**

In your opinion, does this photograph convey the same **mood** that Momaday evokes in his autobiography? Explain your answer, citing details from both the photograph and the text.

Mandan Offering the Buffalo Skull, Edward S. Curtis, photographer. McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University Library.

Houses are like sentinels in the plain, old keepers of the weather watch. There, in a very little while, wood takes on the appearance of great age. All colors wear soon away in the wind and rain, and then the wood is burned gray and the grain appears and the nails turn red with rust. The windowpanes are black and **opaque**; you imagine there is nothing within, and indeed there are many ghosts, bones given up to the land. They stand here and there against the sky, and you approach them for a longer time than you expect. They belong in the distance; it is their domain. **D**

Once there was a lot of sound in my grandmother's house, a lot of coming and going, feasting and talk. The summers there were full of excitement and reunion. The Kiowas are a summer people; they abide the cold and keep to themselves, but when the season turns and the land becomes warm and vital they cannot hold still; an old love of going returns upon them. The aged visitors who came to my grandmother's house when I was a child were made of lean and leather, and they bore themselves upright. They wore great black hats and bright ample shirts

opaque (ō-pāk') *adj.* not allowing light to pass through

D MEMOIR

Reread lines 120–145. What words and phrases give you an indication of Momaday's **tone**, or attitude toward his subject matter?

that shook in the wind. They rubbed fat upon their hair and wound their braids with strips of colored cloth. Some of them painted their faces and carried the scars of old and cherished **enmities**. They were an old council of warlords, come to remind and be reminded of who they were. Their wives and daughters served them well. The women might indulge themselves; gossip was at once the mark and compensation of their servitude. They made loud and elaborate talk among themselves, full of jest and gesture, fright and false alarm. They went abroad in
160 fringed and flowered shawls, bright beadwork and German silver. They were at home in the kitchen, and they prepared meals that were banquets.

There were frequent prayer meetings, and great **nocturnal** feasts. When I was a child I played with my cousins outside, where the lamplight fell upon the ground and the singing of the old people rose up around us and carried away into the darkness. There were a lot of good things to eat, a lot of laughter and surprise. And afterwards, when the quiet returned, I lay down with my grandmother and could hear the frogs away by the river and feel the motion of the air.

Now there is a funeral silence in the rooms, the endless wake of some final word. The walls have closed in upon my grandmother's house. When I returned
170 to it in mourning, I saw for the first time in my life how small it was. It was late at night, and there was a white moon, nearly full. I sat for a long time on the stone steps by the kitchen door. From there I could see out across the land; I could see the long row of trees by the creek, the low light upon the rolling plains, and the stars of the Big Dipper. Once I looked at the moon and caught sight of a strange thing. A cricket had perched upon the handrail, only a few inches away from me. My line of vision was such that the creature filled the moon like a fossil. It had gone there, I thought, to live and die, for there, of all places, was its small definition made whole and eternal. A warm wind rose up and purred like the longing within me. **E**

180 The next morning I awoke at dawn and went out on the dirt road to Rainy Mountain. It was already hot, and the grasshoppers began to fill the air. Still, it was early in the morning, and the birds sang out of the shadows. The long yellow grass on the mountain shone in the bright light, and a scissortail hied⁷ above the land. There, where it ought to be, at the end of a long and legendary way, was my grandmother's grave. Here and there on the dark stones were ancestral names. Looking back once, I saw the mountain and came away. 

enmity (ĕn'mĭ-tē) *n.*
hostility; hatred

nocturnal (nŏk-tŭr'nəl)
adj. occurring at night

E MEMOIR

Think about how Momaday contrasts his grandmother's house as it was during his childhood visits with how it is now. What might this house symbolize?

7. a scissortail hied: a fork-tailed bird of the Southwest hied, or hurried.

Comprehension

1. **Recall** Where is Rainy Mountain, and why does Momaday return there?
2. **Clarify** What two natural phenomena are explained by the Kiowa legend about the seven sisters and their brother?
3. **Summarize** What important events in Kiowa history does Momaday recount?

Literary Analysis

4. **Draw Conclusions** In your opinion, what is the most important insight Momaday gains about his **heritage** during his pilgrimage from Yellowstone to his grandmother's grave at Rainy Mountain? Support your opinion with evidence from the text.
5. **Understand Memoirs** Reread lines 52–101. What does Momaday's account of the Kiowa's migration offer you that a description in a history book might not? Explain, citing specific lines of the selection that support your answer.
6. **Analyze Structure** Review the chart you created as you read, and summarize the geographical, historical, and personal details that Momaday includes in each of the three strands. How are they related? Describe the impact of Momaday's technique of weaving the three strands together.
7. **Examine Author's Style** Although best known as a novelist, Momaday is also an accomplished poet. In what way might this selection be described as poetic? In a chart like the one shown, record examples of the poetic elements Momaday uses in his memoir. Use your completed chart to explain what you think these stylistic choices add to the selection. (Refer to the **Glossary of Literary Terms** on page Roo if needed.)

Poetic Elements		
Alliteration	Consonance	Imagery
"The grass turns brittle and brown ..."		

Literary Criticism

8. **Critical Interpretations** Teacher and scholar Kenneth M. Roemer has argued that "in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, M. Scott Momaday links the survival of his people to their ability to remember, preserve and pass on stories." Do you agree that a culture's survival rests on this ability? Explain, using evidence from this selection to support your opinion.

Vocabulary in Context

VOCABULARY PRACTICE

Choose the vocabulary word that answers each riddle.

1. I refer to things that do not happen in daylight.
2. I represent extremes of time, both shortest and longest.
3. I am the opposite of friendship.
4. I describe something uncertain or insubstantial.
5. I mean the same thing as *chiefly*.
6. I am the act of looting by force.
7. I am an adjective that could describe a field filled with wildflowers.
8. I am a noun indicating an abundance of wildflowers.
9. Air filled with dense fog is one example of what I am.
10. One of my meanings is “essentially.”

WORD LIST

enmity
inherently
luxuriant
nocturnal
opaque
pillage
preeminently
profusion
solstice
tenuous

VOCABULARY IN WRITING

Which location, event, or person in this account do you find most memorable? Using three or more vocabulary words, write a brief description of the person, place, or event, including your own response to it. You might start this way.

EXAMPLE SENTENCE

The final Sun Dance of the Kiowa had only a tenuous connection with earlier rituals.

VOCABULARY STRATEGY: SPECIALIZED VOCABULARY

The Kiowa recognize the importance of seasonal events such as the solstices. There are a number of terms that describe other natural phenomena relating Earth to the sun and the moon. Some of these terms have only technical meanings, but others are also used in more general ways.

PRACTICE Match each term with its definition. Use a dictionary if you need help. Then choose the term that also has a nontechnical meaning, and write a definition for it.

- | | |
|--------------|---|
| 1. apogee | a. two dates each year when day and night are of equal length |
| 2. equinox | b. having a noncircular planetary orbits such as Earth's |
| 3. diurnal | c. point when the moon is farthest from Earth |
| 4. perigee | d. relating to the daily rotation of Earth |
| 5. eccentric | e. point when the moon is closest to Earth |



VOCABULARY PRACTICE

For more practice, go to the **Vocabulary Center** at ClassZone.com.