The History of American Literature ~ S16

DongA University Humanities

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Lecture Notes: **Native American Literature**

1. A Brief Historical Timeline
   1. 1492: Christopher Columbus lands in what are now the Bahamas and makes first contact with native people, capturing some as slaves to take back to Europe.
   2. 1607: First permanent English settlement in America at Jamestown.
   3. 1622: First armed conflict between native peoples and Europeans (at Jamestown).
   4. 1670s: “King Philip’s War” kills many native people and gives control of New England to colonial settlers.
   5. 1830s: The United States congress passes the Indian Removal Act, forcing most native tribes to lands west of the Mississippi.
   6. 1850’s: The discovery of gold in what is now South Dakota leads to a series of wars against the plains Indians. These tribes are finally controlled through systematic starvation after hunters killed millions of buffalo, leading nearly to their extinction.
   7. 1870s through the 1890s: A series of wars with western tribes end with the Massacre at Wounded Knee, where over 300 Native Americans (including many women and children) were killed by American troops.
2. Native American Texts and the “Oral Tradition”
   1. Although there were over 350 distinct language groups in the Americas prior to European contact Native American people had no writing systems with which to record their stories.
   2. Despite this fact, these cultures had a very rich literary tradition in the form of stories that were passed from generation to generation in what is called an “oral tradition.” Old people passed the stories on to their children and grandchildren, who passed them on to their own children.
   3. Native American cultures often used music, dances, costumes, paintings, and other forms of artistic expression to present and preserve their traditional stories.
   4. The texts of the Native American Oral Tradition are tied very closely to the place where the people lived. All of the animals, the geography (for example, mountains, plains, rivers, deserts, or seashore), the plant life (trees or flowers), and even the stars and moon and rocks and dirt of a place are very important characters in the stories and become living personalities.
3. Subjects of Native American Stories
   1. Trickster Tales: The trickster is a common character in Native American tales, often represented by the Coyote, a type of wild dog common to the Americas. The trickster may be helpful or harmful to humans, but most often just wants to cause some type of chaos. Native Americans believe that the trickster, or chaotic force in the universe, is neither good nor bad. It is simply a way of explaining the unpredictable nature of human existence.
   2. Gambler Tales are also common and are similar to Trickster tales in that they attempt to explain the unpredictable nature of human life. In one story, the Sky Coyote gambles with the Sun to determine what will happen to humans on earth for the following year: will they be healthy and safe and happy or will some horrible thing happen to them.
   3. Creation Stories: Like most cultures, Native American literature includes tales about how the world was formed. There are many versions of these stories, but many involve an Earth Mother who comes into the world and survives with the help of animals.
   4. Tales of Abduction: There are many tales of people, especially women and children, who are taken away from their loved ones during wars or other social upheavals. Sometimes they endure many hardships before they finally find their way back to their family.
   5. Tales of Migration: Sometimes entire tribes or cultures are forced to leave the land that they know and travel to unknown places because of war or food shortages. They endure many hardships before they find a new place where they can be safe.
4. Style
   1. Emphatic: The stories tend to be very emotional and personal in nature.
   2. Participatory: They invite the listener to participate in the story, both as a speaker (by repeating the lines of the songs back to the leader) and as a listener: the stories often invite a strong emotional response.
   3. Repetitive: Many texts are presented as chants or songs, where the audience members are expected to repeat the lines of the song back to the leader. In this way, the stories can be remembered from generation to generation.

“Letter from Chief Seattle to President Franklin Pierce”

The President in Washington sends word that he wishes to buy our land. But how can you buy or sell the sky? The land? The idea is strange to us. If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them?

Every part of the earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every meadow, every humming insect. All are holy in the memory and experience of my people.

We know the sap which courses through the trees as we know the blood that courses through our veins. We are part of the earth and it is part of us. The perfumed flowers are our sisters. The bear, the deer, the great eagle, these are our brothers. The rocky crests, the dew in the meadow, the body heat of the pony, and man all belong to the same family.

The shining water that moves in the streams and rivers is not just water, but the blood of our ancestors. If we sell you our land, you must remember that it is sacred. Each glossy reflection in the clear waters of the lakes tells of events and memories in the life of my people. The water's murmur is the voice of my father's father.

The rivers are our brothers. They quench our thirst. They carry our canoes and feed our children. So you must give the rivers the kindness that you would give any brother.

If we sell you our land, remember that the air is precious to us, that the air shares its spirit with all the life that it supports. The wind that gave our grandfather his first breath also received his last sigh. The wind also gives our children the spirit of life. So if we sell our land, you must keep it apart and sacred, as a place where man can go to taste the wind that is sweetened by the meadow flowers.

Will you teach your children what we have taught our children? That the earth is our mother? What befalls the earth befalls all the sons of the earth.

This we know: The earth does not belong to man, man belongs to the earth. All things are connected like the blood that unites us all. Man did not weave the web of life; he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.

One thing we know: our God is also your God. The earth is precious to him and to harm the earth is to heap contempt on its creator.

Your destiny is a mystery to us. What will happen when the buffalo are all slaughtered? The wild horses tamed? What will happen when the secret corners of the forest are heavy with the scent of many men and the view of the ripe hills is blotted with talking wires? Where will the thicket be? Gone! Where will the eagle be? Gone! And what is it to say goodbye to the swift pony and then hunt? It is the end of living and the beginning of survival.

When the last red man has vanished with this wilderness, and his memory is only the shadow of a cloud moving across the prairie, will these shores and forests still be here? Will there be any of the spirit of my people left?

We love this earth as a newborn loves its mother's heartbeat. So, if we sell you our land, love it as we have loved it. Care for it, as we have cared for it. Hold in your mind the memory of the land as it is when you receive it. Preserve the land for all children, and love it, as God loves us.

As we are part of the land, you too are part of the land. This earth is precious to us. It is also precious to you.

One thing we know - there is only one God. No man, be he Red man or White man, can be apart. We ARE all brothers after all."