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ENG 340 A: Native American Myths and Legends

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Topic #3

The Native American view of death is not unlike the views held by the Ancient Romans and Medieval Christians. While Native Americans vary in their views of death and what happens afterwards, they, like the Romans seem to emphasize the importance of remembrance, a fact which also connects them to the Medieval Catholic view of Purgatory. There are accounts of some tribes actually describing the afterlife, such as the accounts taken from the Choctaw tribe and there are others which attest to a purgatorial type of experience such as the Hopi legend "Journey to the Skeleton House" and there are also descriptions of journeys to the land of the dead which are not unlike the story Orpheus and Eurydice or of Medieval accounts such as Dante's Divine Comedy, and The Gast of Gye. By piecing together these myths, traditions, and doctrines, it becomes evident that in Native America, just as in Western tradition, the afterlife is not always certain. Such a universality points to a more unifying theme, beyond myths and doctrine: a theme of fear. *- god - explore even more*

In his book Hamlet in Purgatory, Stephen Greenblatt states that "[t]he brilliance of the doctrine of Purgatory—whatever its topographical implausibility, its scriptural belatedness, and its proness to cynical abuse—lay both in its institutional control over ineradicable folk beliefs and in its engagement with intimate, private feelings" (102). Greenblatt goes on to say that the doctrine of Purgatory with its suffrages, masses, and prayers for departed souls "gave mourners something constructive to do with their feelings of grief and confirmed those feeling of reciprocity that survived, at least for a limited time, the shock of death" and that "Purgatory forged a different kind of link between the living and the dead, or, rather, it enabled the dead to be not completely dead—not as utterly gone, finished, complete as those whose souls reside forever in Hell or Heaven" (102-103; 17). Similarly in Ancient Rome, at least during

the Augustan age, there is “abundant evidence of an urge to keep the dead ‘alive’ by offerings made to them of food and drink, oil, and even blood and by their share in the funerary meals partaken of at the tomb by the survivors” (Toynbee 37). Thus, the evidence in western thought, points to a need to remember the dead—to preserve their memory in some form or another. Native American, while not so specific in their remembrances, and some tribes tried to forget the departed souls as soon as they could, also have these underlying theme of remembrance. The oral tradition itself lends credence to this theme because it is tell and re-telling the legends of the past to help make sense of the future and to remember from whence they came. The Hopi legend, “Journey to Skeleton House” actually contains accounts of actively remembering the dead. When the boy makes his journey to see the land of the dead, they tell him that if he works for them back in the land of the living (i.e. remembers them), that they will send rain and crops to them. Thus just as the medieval Christians and ancient Romans worked for the dead by offering prayers, food, and sacrifices to either speed their way into heaven or to give them honor, the Hopi, at least, had the same concept.

“Journey to Skeleton House” also has the idea of Purgatory in it because some of the skeletons walk around with burdens of “mealing stone, which they carried by a thin string over the forehead that had cut deeply into the skin. Others carried bundles of cactus on their backs, and as they had no clothes on, the thorns of the cactus hurt them” (Erdoes and Ortiz 444-445). The visitor to the land of the dead is told they “had to submit to such punishment for a certain length of time, then were relieved of them and could live with the others” (Erdoes and Ortiz 445). Like in the medieval Catholic idea of Purgatory, these particular souls have to pay for the evil they have done in their lives before they can be with the others who have not done wrong. Unlike medieval Christianity, there is no concept of hell, where there is eternal punishment for wrongdoing. However, as aforementioned, each tribe is different in its beliefs. The Choctaw, for instance, do have the concept of heaven and hell, but they do not have a concept of Purgatory nor is there any sign of there being some sort of partnership between the living and the dead.

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 The Hopi, however, seem to ascribe to the same idea that the ancient Greeks had about the afterlife and was "the dead in the underworld [were] condemned to a shadowy and tenuous condition, as contrasted with the fullness of human life on earth" (Toynbee 35). As the skeletons tell their earthly visitor in "Skeleton House," "[i]t's not light here; it's not light as where you live. We actually live poorly here" (Erdoes and Ortiz 444). When the boy gets back and tells everyone what he saw, he reiterates that "[t]hey are living in the dark there. No one should desire to go there" (Erdoes and Ortiz 445). This view of the afterworld closely resembles that of the Greeks, a view which was later adopted by many of the Romans when Greek culture and mythology was imported. Purgatory likewise was a place, which Greenblatt mentions on more than one occasion in Hamlet in Purgatory, where the suffering there was little better than the suffering the damned souls in hell and thus caused enough fear. He cites the example of Henry V II of England who "provided for the establishment of two [...] hospitals along with other contributions clearly designed to generate suffrages [and] he saw to it that immediately after his death ten thousand masses would be said for the remission of his sins and the good of his soul. Ten thousand masses (22-23). Thus, the afterlife was not necessarily in any of these cultures a good place—a place where someone wanted to go. This provides a startling contrast to other cultures such as the Choctaw, Celtic, Nordic and early Christian where people actually wanted to die so that they could go to the happiness which awaited them in the next world.

This synergy between the pagan and medieval Christian west, and the Hopi points to a more universal uneasiness about death, not so much because of the act of dying itself, but because of what happens afterwards. Such a synergy thus proves that fears are universal, just as hopes for a better afterlife are. The diversity between the different Native American tribes also shows that they, like the different European ethnic groups, are not all the same nor can they be lumped into one general group. While this makes scholarship in this area more difficult because unifying myths do not necessarily exist, it does make scholars look at motivations and emotions as unifying factors in mythology and theological doctrine rather than the specific myths and doctrines themselves. Lastly, this universality concerning death the

afterlife also shows that Native American culture is not as unattainable as it may seem. True, there is less information on their culture, but as scholars have pointed out in Celtic myths, there are similar themes in other mythologies which can help fill in the gaps. Just as the ancient Roman and medieval Christian views of the afterlife provide further insight into the Hopi beliefs, so perhaps can this same principle be applied to other areas of Native American culture and perhaps thus, in part, save that which was lost.

insight

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