

Navajo Poetry

An Honors Thesis (ID 499)

By

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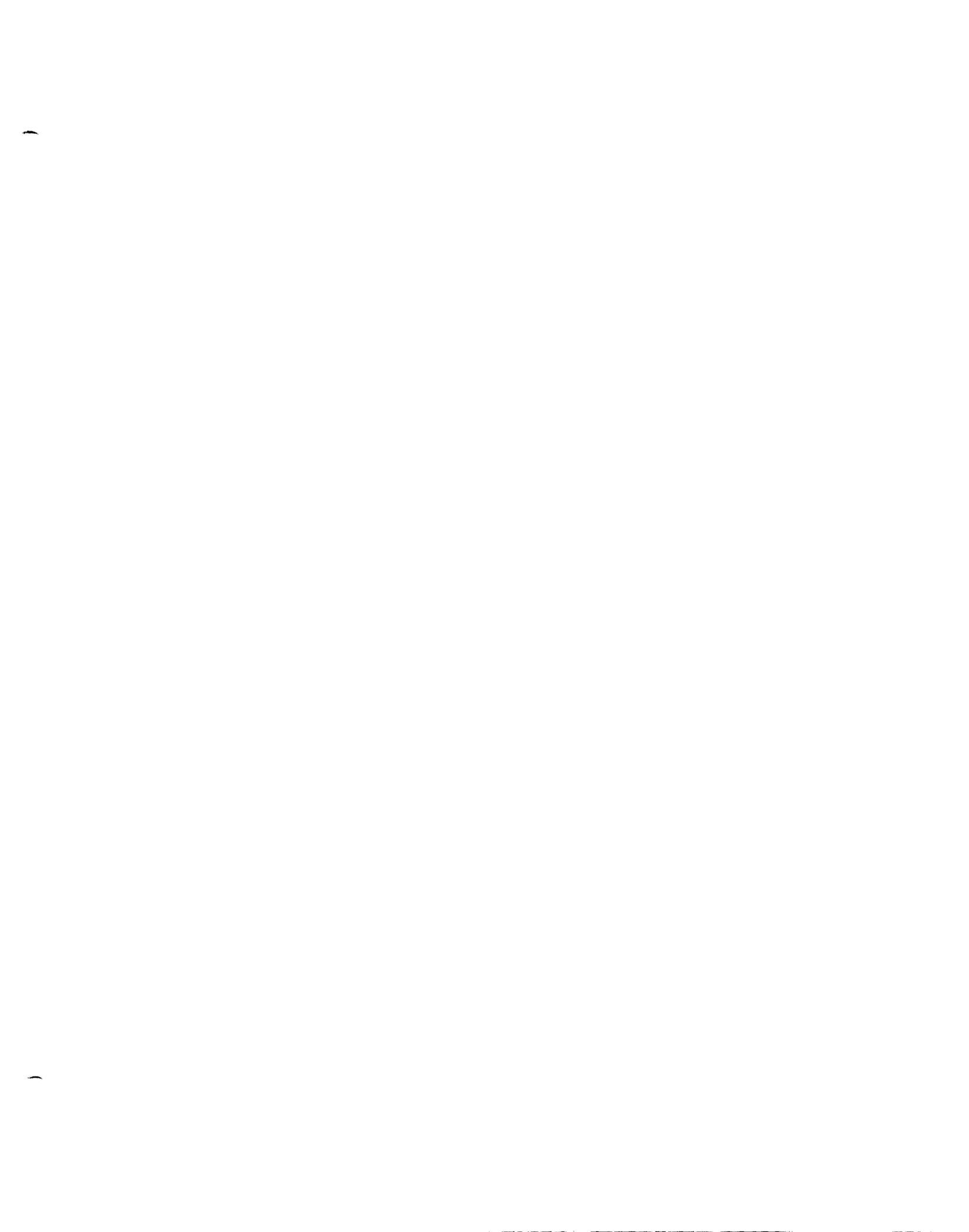
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The purpose of this paper is to provide background information for a two week unit of study to acquaint high school students with America's first poets, the American Indians. I have selected the writings of the people who call themselves the Diné; they are known as the Navajo to the white man. The spelling of the official name for this tribe varies from Navaho to Navajo. To avoid confusion, the word will be spelled as Navajo. This is the form that the majority of North American Indian publications have adopted.

The Navajos lend themselves to a comprehensive study of poetry due to their interesting culture, beautiful songs and verses, and their large population in the Southwest. There are many possibilities for this topic to be integrated with the history and/or art programs in the high school. It is my hope that each student will be able to identify with several universal truths found within Mankind by studying one specific tribe of North American Indians.

I have developed long term goals for the study of Navajo poetry. After I teach this unit for a few years and continue my research, I would like to develop a teaching packet for school systems across the country to employ. I will attempt to work with organizations such as The National Geographic or the Navajo Community College Press to produce films, filmstrips, books, and pamphlets to convey the magic of Navajo poetry. It is my firm conviction to give American high school students at least a glimpse of the literature and artistic genius of America's first poets. The American Indian deserves recognition in this area.

The biggest obstacle in teaching the poetry of the Navajo will be the language barrier. It would be an understatement to classify the Navajo language system as complex. A good illustration of the complexity of this speech comes from the United States Navy during World War II. The Japanese had cracked almost every code developed by the Navy. Therefore, the Navy installed Navajos as radio operators and used their language as a primary code. This was one system the Japanese could not decipher!<sup>1</sup> Consequently, it is difficult to locate good translations of the Navajo song-poems. Natalie Curtis, H. A. Howard, Mary Austin, and Marcia Keegan offered excellent translations in their books. The Navajos have an Athapascan basis for their language. This is the same root language for the Apache tribes. Actually, Navajos never developed the sound "v"; therefore, many Navajos could not pronounce the name given to them at first. Their own name for their tribe is Diné, meaning The People.<sup>2</sup>

The origin of the name, Navajo, is uncertain; however, it could have come from the similar Pueblo word meaning "large area of uncultivated lands" or "to take from the fields." The direct Spanish meaning of the word means either "to clasp a sharp object" or "to clasp a large, worthless, flat piece of land."<sup>3</sup> According to researchers, Alice Marriott and Carol Rachlin, the Navajos began migrating into Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, and Utah during the twelfth century, A.D. They were simple hunting nomads living without pottery, weaving, farming, or permanent homes. All of this changed when the Navajos began raiding the neighboring Pueblo Indians. These researchers claim that the Navajos "captured" the arts and crafts of the Pueblos along with their Pueblo slaves.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the Navajos borrowed sheep from the Spaniards and learned the skills of sheepherding. On the other hand, there is a second version of this historical process

written by author, Gerald Hausman. His account does not mention violence or raids. Perhaps Hausman did not want to taint the Navajo's heritage. Therefore, a moderation of the two accounts is probably closer to the actual truth.

However, both versions state that although the Navajos borrowed and copied several aspects of other cultures, their interpretations of all ideas are definitely Navajo.<sup>5</sup> For example, the weavings made by a Navajo woman are uniquely hers and not Pueblo. Extending this idea, the Navajo religion basically revolves around their ancient days of hunting and traveling.

Several recent books have called Native American verse as "neglected literature."<sup>6</sup> Besides the language barrier, the words of several Navajo song-poems should be accompanied with music, drums, and dancers. In the future, I plan to use audio-visual aids to convey these integral aspects. Furthermore, the reader of this literature should have a basic understanding of the myths, legends, customs, and lifestyles that mold the background for the words and music. This is a section of the poetry unit where the social studies department would be beneficial in teaching a general unit on American Indians of the West.

Five major song-poems will be examined within this paper along with their accompanying myths. First of all, it is vital to understand that the Navajo thinks and expresses himself in symbols. A single word may stand for an entire idea, feeling, or thought. Specific words and phrases in the poetry are few, fragmentary, and often repetitive. Therefore, these Indian lyrics may sound crude and uncivilized to those familiar with the poetry of Western Civilization.

The Creation myth is the Diné's most basic and most contradictory story. It explains exactly who, what, and why The People exist using a multitude of interchangeable characters and creatures. This contradiction can be explained because the Navajos never formed villages. Their houses, known as hogans, are

sometimes gathered in family clusters. Therefore, communication between members of the Navajo nation has always been sparse. Furthermore, each individual medicine man and storyteller will unfold the myth in his or her unique manner. The central ideas of these expositions are consistent in all of the separate versions of the Creation myth. Throughout my research, I have found that although the myths are not identical, all of the rituals, dances, and healing ceremonies of the Navajo are profoundly identical.

The Creation myth tells The People that even from the very beginning, the world has been a very dangerous place to live. It is full of people and creatures who are untrustworthy and evil. Changing Woman is the only god who is consistently good and kind. The other immortal beings are undependable. For example, First Man is a witch; Coyote is a trickster; the Hero Twins have no pity; the Sun and Moon demanded a human life each day.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, the Navajo must learn to cope with constant threats in his environment. The Creation myth gives the Diné a purpose and some guidance. However, not all is grim and threatening. Kluckhorn and Leighton have noted in their published anthropological study, The Navaho, that the oral literature of The People contains "humor, puns, detail in places, and great imaginative power."<sup>8</sup> Humor might be one aspect of survival in the Navajo's world.

Some of the most powerful divinities in the Diné's Creation myth are female. Changing Woman is actually the Navajo's main god. Turquoise Woman, otherwise known as Salt Woman, is the mother of the all important Hero Twins in some versions. The women in the Navajo culture, consequently, possess extremely powerful roles. Furthermore, lineage is traced through the female, women may own property, and the mother is "supreme" in her hogan.<sup>9</sup>

Land is sacred to the Navajo and important in their poetry. Every

mountain peak, river, and canyon holds a place in their mythology. The People settled in a harsh environment offering little rain, endless deserts, and strong winds that control grit, dust, and tumbleweed.<sup>10</sup> Without the Diné's strong belief that they were the chosen ones and that their land was holy, they might not have survived. Moreover, their natural world is divided into genders. Male rains are heavy, violent thunderstorms; female rains release soft gentle showers. Earth and sheep have the suffix, "mah," which translates to "mother." Changing Woman endows the female qualities on the world. The Sun is responsible for male attributes. Furthermore, lakes, rivers, and mountains contain the beauty given to them by Changing Woman.<sup>11</sup>

H. A. Howard's book, American Indian Poetry, presents an excellent critique of Navajo poetry. Howard notes that Navajo verse makes use of some of the general stylistic devices found in Greek poetry. One of the strongest similarities is the definite repetitive rhythmic pattern. However, Greek poets place importance on the development of a mood or an explanation of a feeling. On the opposite end of the poetic spectrum, the Navajo poet simply voices his image and expects his listeners to understand mood and emotion.<sup>12</sup> An excerpt from the "Song of the Rain Chant" is a good example of this Navajo technique:

Far as man can see,  
Comes the rain,  
Comes the rain with me.

From the Rain-Mount,  
Rain-Mount far away,  
Comes the rain,  
Comes the rain with me.<sup>13</sup>

The idea behind these few words concerns a Navajo myth about the Rain-Youth. Rain songs were given to The People by the god Rain-Youth. As the Youth travels down his particular mountain, he brings the rain and these holy songs. In the extremely dry desert where the Diné make their homes, these songs of rain are most sacred. Although these seven lines are simple and repetitive, they possess strong feeling and praise.<sup>14</sup>

Professor Nellie Barnes, one of the first specialists in American Indian poetry, has listed general characteristics for Native American poetry. Navajo literature usually follows these basic patterns. Commenting on the formal aspect of Indian poetry, the professor has located three outstanding factors. First, the Native Americans use "brilliant execution" of other repetitional forms instead of a general use of rhyme as an aid to rhythm. Secondly, the poetry contains an extensive use of "sense" imagery and imagery by comparison. Thirdly, there is an "extreme economy of expression" in the lines of the poems.<sup>15</sup>

Professor Barnes recorded other minor qualities of Indian verse as humor, satire, and sorrow. The overall characteristic qualities found by Barnes are imagination, aesthetic, and emotional. The dominant ideas expressed are typified by concreteness, rhythm, beauty, compactness, and sincerity. Religious ideals are interwoven throughout all forms of Indian song-poems, as well. According to Barnes, the Indians use of symbolism reveals penetration of thought. Their effective use of conciseness conveys a sense of beauty and natural strength. Professor Nellie Barnes wrote, "Indian poetry has beauty in thought and image; it possesses graceful phrasing and symmetry of form."<sup>16</sup> Above all, Professor Barnes added to the observations that repetition rather than rhyme was the Indian's aid to rhythm. In Mary Austin's collection of Nellie Barnes' translations of Indian poems, Professor Barnes mentions that the Navajos have internal

rhyme when the poems are spoken in their native tongue. However, many Navajo words have internal rhyme. Barnes also points out that assonance is important in the native language.<sup>17</sup>

Yet, what does all of this critical exposition mean? By examining four song-poems of the Navajo collection, one can relate the observations made by Professor Barnes to actual Indian compositions.

### Song of the Horse

How joyous his neigh!  
Lo, the Turquoise Horse of Johano-ai,  
How joyous his neigh,  
There on precious hides outspread standeth he;  
How joyous his neigh,  
There on tips of fair fresh flowers feedeth he;  
How joyous his neigh,  
There of mingled waters holy drinketh he;  
How joyous his neigh.

There he sourneth dust of glittering grains,  
How joyous his neigh,  
There in midst of sacred pollen hidden, all  
hidden he;  
How joyous his neigh,  
There his offspring many grow and thrive,  
for evermore,

How joyous his neigh!<sup>18</sup>

One could paint a very accurate picture of the horse in praise in this song-poem due to the striking use of imagery. A mythical story, also known as an inside song, explains this poem. "Song of the Horse" is sung to the Navajo Sun-God. This deity is the owner of five horses; one of turquoise, one of white shell, one of pearl shell, one of red shell, one of coal. On different days, the Sun-God, Johano-ai, rides different horses to move the sun-disc from east to west. As the poem explains, several "precious hides"(l. 4) are spread

beneath the hooves of the horses. Howard notes that this imagery may symbolize the colors of the sky and clouds. According to mythology, the Sun-God feeds his horses on flower blossoms, and he gives them "mingled waters" to drink (l. 8). This liquid is considered holy by the Navajos, and it is used in several religious ceremonies. The water comes from the four corners of the world "mingled" from springs, snow, and hail. As the horses race across the sky, they "spurneth dust of glittering grains" (l. 10). This uncommon dust is composed of tiny pieces of turquoise and other precious stones. This aspect of the Sun-God's myth exemplifies the Navajos' love of detail. During religious ceremonies, Navajos offer sacred pollen to their Sun-God. This pollen surrounds the horses like a mist during their travels throughout the day.<sup>19</sup>

A Navajo will sing this song as a prayer to Johano-ai while he scatters holy pollen. This song carries the hope that his horses will be like those who race across the sky with the sun. The speaker adds the mood and tone to the poem by varying the pitch of his voice. Unfortunately, this simple explication of "Song of the Horse" barely skims the surface of the myth surrounding the Sun-God and the importance of animals to the Navajo culture.<sup>20</sup> The ritual chant is used for blessing and protection of horses. The influence of man, here the Spaniards, introduced horses into the Navajo culture. But, the readily adaptable Diné found a place for these creatures in their mythology. Horses actually formed the basis of tribal wealth for the Navajos.<sup>21</sup>

"Song of the Horse" offers a good example of Professor Barnes' observations. Virtually every other line is repeated in the piece. Furthermore, six of the seventeen lines began in the same manner. Religion is a major ideal within the poem along with rhythm, beauty, compactness, and sincerity. The phrasing is graceful and rather symmetrical. This poem is a studied

picture filled with detail and repetitions.

Another interesting Navajo poem is an excerpt from the "Mountain Chant."

"Song from the Mountain Chant"

Thereof he telleth.  
 Now of the Holy Youth,  
 Thereof he telleth.  
 Moccasins decked with black,  
 Thereof he telleth.  
 And richly broidered dress,  
 Thereof he telleth.  
 Arm-bands of eagle feathers,  
 Thereof he telleth.  
 And now the rain-plumes,  
 Thereof he telleth.<sup>22</sup>

The myth accompanying this poem surrounds the Holy Youth who loved a mortal maiden. To make her divine, he sang holy songs over her. After this long and strenuous process, she became the Holy Woman. Consequently, Holy Youth and Holy Woman married. Together, they gave the chants to the Diné to use in healing ceremonies. Medicine men use this song and many others during a Sing. This particular part of the song-poem describes in detail the attire of the Holy Youth as he prepared to sing over his beloved maiden. In specific healing ceremonies, medicine men dress in this manner.<sup>23</sup>

The entire "Mountain Chant" is actually an elaborate, intense, and lengthy collection of chants. One of the Navajo's basic beliefs is that a person who is ill, either mentally or physically, is out of harmony with nature. The purpose of a Sing or a healing ceremony is to restore the individual to his previous state of harmony and "being at one with all parts of creation and the universe."<sup>24</sup> Navajos are very superstitious people; therefore, these ceremonies must be performed to exact specifications.<sup>25</sup> The function of the medicine man, then, is to visit the hogan of the ill one and hold a Sing. A Sing is an

intricate series of ceremonies that can last from one to nine nights. During these ceremonies, the medicine man will use chants, songs, prayers, dances, prayer sticks, herbs, sweat baths, and sand paintings.<sup>26</sup>

Another section of the "Mountain Chant" demonstrates the high religious and spiritual quality of their poetry. The interlacing of repetition from one stanza to another carries the thought forward. Barnes notes that this device is similar to the use of repetition in the ballad.<sup>27</sup>

"Song from the Mountain Chant"

Swift and far I journey,  
 Swift upon the rainbow.  
 Swift and far I journey,  
 Lo, yonder, the Holy Place!  
     Yea, swift and far I journey.  
 To Sisnajinni\*, and beyond it,  
     Yea, swift and far I journey;  
 The Chief of Mountains and beyond it,  
     Yea, swift and far I journey;  
 To Life Unending, and beyond it,  
     Yea, swift and far I journey;  
 To Joy Unchanging, and beyond it,  
     Yea, swift and far I journey.<sup>28</sup>

\*Sisnajinni in Navajo mythology is a sacred mountain located to the east. This is an example of the Navajo's sense of place and detail in their literature.

These two selections taken from the "Mountain Chant" exhibit the Diné's use of repetition, rhythm, and conciseness. Nature images abound in both lyrics with traveling on "rainbows"(p. 10, l. 2) and dressing in "eagle feathers" (p. 9, l. 8) and "rain-plumes"(p. 9, l. 10). "Life" and "Joy"(p. 10, l. 11, l. 12) seem to be in balance and harmony. The second piece shows the Diné's human quest for a higher law, a higher power. Much of the poetry of the Navajo conveys a natural awe and reverence for nature and its power.

"Hunting Song"

Comes the deer to my singing,  
Comes the deer to my song,  
Comes the deer to my singing.

He, the blackbird, he and I,  
Bird beloved of the wild deer.  
Comes the deer to my singing.

From the Mountain Black  
From the summit,  
Down the trail, coming, coming now,  
Comes the deer to my singing.

Through the pollen, flower pollen,  
Coming, coming now  
Comes the deer to my singing.

Starting with his left fore-foot,  
Stamping, turns the frightened deer,  
Comes the deer to my singing.

Quarry mine, blessed am I  
In the luck of the chase,  
Comes the deer to my singing.

Comes the deer to my singing,  
Comes the deer to my song,  
Comes the deer to my singing.<sup>29</sup>

The "Hunting Song" is an ancient chant dating back to the Diné's days of hunting and traveling. A Navajo hunter sings the song after praying to Hasteyeyalti, the god of sunrise and of game. As legend states, if the hunter remained still and chanted the song (of which there are many verses) without error, the deer would be charmed and quite easy to capture.<sup>30</sup>

Sense imagery combined with nature images set the tone for this piece. This is one of the Navajo's more personal poems placing man silently and gently combatting nature. The Navajos definitely knew animals, landscape, and hunting. This song-poem is a beautiful portrayal of the Indian's attitudes toward the earth and all creatures.

Hogan is the Diné's word for dwelling. Most of the Navajo children gain their early education within this dome-shaped house. Books have been published explaining the importance of the hogan to the Navajos. For example, only within the hogan can a ceremonial healing rite be performed. The hogan is the Navajo's home and temple.<sup>31</sup> It is of no surprise that these sacred dwellings have their own song-poem for blessing the structure and all it symbolizes:

"Song of the Hogan"

Lo, yonder the hogan,  
 The hogan blessed!  
 There beneath the sunrise  
 Standeth the hogan,  
 The hogan blessed.

Of Hasteyeyalti-ye\*  
 The hogan,  
 The hogan blessed.

Built of dawn's first light  
 Standeth his hogan,  
 The hogan blessed.  
 Built of fair white corn  
 Standeth his hogan,  
 The hogan blessed.  
 Built of broidered robes and hides  
 Standeth his hogan,  
 The hogan blessed.  
 Built of mixed All-Waters pure  
 Standeth his hogan,  
 The hogan blessed.  
 Built of holy pollen  
 Standeth his hogan,  
 The hogan blessed.

Evermore enduring,  
 Happy evermore,  
 His hogan,  
 The hogan blessed.<sup>32</sup>

\*Hasteyeyalti-ye and Johano-ai are two different names for the Sun-God.

According to Howard, "Song of the Hogan" is one of the oldest Hozhonji or holy songs. The sacred dwellings of the Sun-God, Hasteyeyalti, in the east, and Hasteyhogan, god of the Sunset, in the west, are portrayed. The total song-poem illustrates a series of pictures of Navajo life. The song is sung very quietly and evenly so as to not disrupt the balance and harmony of the hogan. The Navajo believe these peaceful chants were given to them by the gods to protect their people against evil.<sup>33</sup> The hogan itself has been described as a round structure symbolizing the "earth and the womb."<sup>34</sup>

Like all other Navajo myths, the myth surrounding the first hogan is confusing, lengthy, and contradictory if one researches more than one version. However, most accounts agree that the first hogans were built by the Holy People. Instead of constructed out of desert dirt, they were made out of turquoise, white shell, jet, and abalone shell. Navajo myth explains the correct position of people and objects within the hogan. Most importantly, the door must always face the rising sun.<sup>35</sup>

Natalie Curtis, a major translator of Navajo poetry, relates that repetition has a "distinct significance" to the mind of America's first poets. Actually, Curtis and Mary Austin, another translator, are of the opinion that the North American Indians originated the free-verse form of poetry.<sup>36</sup> The Navajos say that their words and music came together at the same moment of oral expression.<sup>37</sup>

Kluckhorn and Leighton, during their anthropological study of the Navajos, found that myths serve as statements of the correct way to behave. The myths are, in part, codes of manners and morals. They are also the literature of the Diné that serves as both "intellectual stimulation and entertainment."<sup>38</sup>

The myths and rites cure individual members thus helping to stabilize the entire Navajo society. Kluckhorn and Leighton discovered exceptional ritual poetry in the ceremonial myths, and they noted the intense emotional feelings contained in these works.<sup>39</sup>

Although much of the impact of the poetry is lost in translation, we can capture a glimpse of the beauty and philosophy of the Navajo by studying their translated myths and song-poems.

It is difficult to write about any group of people without making generalizations and without excluding important information. In my Senior Honors Thesis, I have barely skimmed over such topics as the superstitions of the Navajo, the Sing or healing ceremonies, the education of the medicine men, the importance of sand paintings, and much, much more. However, I needed to select the material I would like to teach to high school students in a Native American Poets unit. Furthermore, if anyone was interested in learning more about a certain topic, I would not hesitate to refer them to useful books and authors.

There are a multitude of ways this literature could be presented. For example, if Walt Whitman's poetry and free-verse form are to be studied, a unit on Indian poetry could be used to introduce the free-verse style. No matter how it is adapted to the curriculum, I think it is important to give credit honestly and accurately to America's first poets.

In closing, I would like to leave you with a selection from the Navajo's sacred "Blessing Way":

"Blessing Way"

May my house be in harmony,  
From my head, may it be happy,  
To my feet, may it be happy,  
Where I lie, may it be happy,  
All above me, may it be happy,  
All around me, may it be happy.

All is beautiful before me,  
All is beautiful behind me,  
All is beautiful above me,  
All is beautiful around me.

In the house of long life, there I wander  
In the house of happiness, there I wander.  
Beauty before me, with it I wander.  
Beauty behind me, with it I wander.  
Beauty above me, with it I wander.  
Beauty all around me, with it I wander.  
In old age traveling, with it I wander.  
On the beautiful trail I am, with it I wander.<sup>40</sup>

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Alvin M. Josephy, ed., The American Heritage Book of Indians (n.p.: American Heritage Publishing Co., 1961), p. 380.
- <sup>2</sup> Josephy, p. 382.
- <sup>3</sup> Gerald Hausman, Sitting on the Blue-Eyed Bear (New York: Lawrence Hill & Co., 1975), p. 23.
- <sup>4</sup> Alice Marriott and Carol Rachlin, American Indian Mythology (New York: Thomas Crowell Co., 1968), p. 90.
- <sup>5</sup> Marriott and Rachlin, p. 91.
- <sup>6</sup> Helen A. Howard, American Indian Poetry (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979), p. 21.
- <sup>7</sup> Clyde Kluckhorn and Dorothea Leighton, The Navaho (Garden City, N.Y.: Natural History Library, 1962), p. 187.
- <sup>8</sup> Kluckhorn and Leighton, p. 183.
- <sup>9</sup> Kluckhorn and Leighton, p. 187.
- <sup>10</sup> Hausman, p. 15.
- <sup>11</sup> Hausman, p. 22.
- <sup>12</sup> Howard, p. 30.
- <sup>13</sup> Helen A. Howard, trans., American Indian Poetry (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979), p. 30.
- <sup>14</sup> Howard, p. 30.

- 15 Howard, p. 39.
- 16 Howard, p. 39.
- 17 Nellie Barnes, ed., American Indian Love Lyrics and Other Verse  
(New York: The MacMillian Co., 1925), p. 163.
- 18 Natalie Curtis, trans., American Indian Poetry, Helen A. Howard  
(Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979), p. 25.
- 19 Howard, p. 26-27.
- 20 Howard, p. 28.
- 21 Gloria Levitas, Frank R. Vivelto, and Jacqueline J. Vivelto, eds.,  
American Indian Prose and Poetry (New York: Capricorn Books, 1974), p. 56.
- 22 Natalie Curtis, trans., American Indian Poetry, Helen A. Howard  
(Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979), p. 81.
- 23 Howard, p. 83-85.
- 24 John A. Warner, The Life & Art of the North American Indian (New York:  
Crescent Books, 1975), p. 64.
- 25 Kluckhorn and Leighton, p. 239.
- 26 Warner, p. 164.
- 27 Barnes, 162.
- 28 Natalie Curtis, trans., American Indian Poetry, Helen A. Howard  
(Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979), p. 90.
- 29 Mary Austin, trans., American Indian Prose and Poetry, eds. Gloria  
Levitas, Frank R. Vivelto, and Jacqueline J. Vivelto (New York: Capricorn Books,  
1974), p. 73.
- 30 Howard, p. 103.

31 John Collier, American Indian Ceremonial Dances (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1972), p. 50.

32 Natalie Curits, trans., American Indian Poetry, Helen A. Howard (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979), p. 105.

33 Howard, p. 104.

34 Hausman, p. 82.

35 Collier, p. 50.

36 Howard, p. 97.

37 Barnes, p. 164.

38 Kluckhorn and Leighton, p. 194.

39 Kluckhorn and Leighton, p. 194.

40 Marcia Keegan, trans., Mother Earth, Father Sky (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1974), p. 21-24.

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