Grand Avenue Masks Essay, Research Paper

Windows to the Soul

Many Characters in the novel Grand Avenue, by Greg Sarris, are wearing masks. Masks that conceal themselves and their culture in an attempt to fit into the world that has enveloped their history and stifled their heritage. The key to these masks is the eyes. The eyes of the characters in the novel tell stories.

The dispair of the Native Americans is first shown in The Magic Pony when Jasmine, the voice of the story, describes her Aunt Faye s eyes.

Her eyes looked dark and motionless, like she was seeing

something she didn t want to see and couldn t look away

from (p.4)

Faye, like many inhabitants of the novel, seems helplessly focused on the sordid history of her family and the poison that seems to infect their very souls. She is obsessed to the point of madness and this poison is best described by Jasmine when she comes upon Faye the morning of Faye s decision to create order out of the chaos that has been her life.

I realized talking about it was useless when I saw her eyes.

The fearful person I had seen behind her bright eyes the

past few weeks had come out now; she was that person.

She had told stories to save herself – now she was telling

them to excuse herself. Hatred. Jealousy. Anger. Evil.

All I had seen in my mother s and my aunt s eyes at

different times were here in Faye s. (p. 23-24)

After doing her best to fight the poison that curses her family, she finally succumbs.

Jasmine describes her cousin Ruby s eyes as being a million miles away (p.7). But when Ruby s mind is set on saving the pony, her determination comes shining brightly through.

Her eyes were like a pair of headlights on the highway,

staring straight ahead, zooming past me. (p.18)

Ruby has found a purpose, a cause. All of her will is focused on achieving this goal. For her, saving the pony from the slaughterhouse is a way to retake a part of her that was lost in the very same slaughterhouse when she went to work for Smokey, the local pimp.

In another story, Ruby s eyes still exhibit an innocence and exuberance of youth. Slaughterhouse is a story told by the voice of Frankie, Ruby s teenage boyfriend. The story begins with Frankie describing her eyes pretty as the nighttime sky . (p.51) But later in the story, Frankie notices a change in Ruby. The sun showed in her eyes, but I couldn t see her straight on. (p.63) At this point, it appears that Ruby has resigned herself to working for Smoke. Frankie s last glimpse of Ruby s soon-to-be-lost innocence comes on page 65.

I leaned over and kissed her. Her eyes was wide open

and holding the sun in little dots of light, and if I hadn t closed my eyes just then and kept looking I would ve

seen the mountain range, everything in her eyes clear to the ocean and back.

This passage underscores the Indian girls purity, which is about to be soiled. The images of mountains and ocean seem to symbolize the sanctity of the land, which was soiled by the White man.

While the eyes of Ruby and Faye reflect the hopelessness and dispair of the Indians, it is the eyes of Alice, as told by Nellie Copaz in the story The Water Place, that show the pride and honor of the Native American people.

There is nothing there, nothing in her eyes that gets between

me and that picture. No stories about Nellie Copaz. If she s heard the stories, the haven t clouded her vision. She sees only the old woman sitting across from her, just as she saw the

flowers in my front yard and the different baskets on my

kitchen table. She is a clear as water, as open as the bright blue sky. (p.222)

With all of the atrocities seen by the Native Americans, their lands raped and people systematically decimated by war and decease, it is no wonder that the Author uses his characters eyes to the reader the dispair felt by them. But the high note, the glimmer of hope that the novel ends on, shows that through traditions such as storytelling, basketweaving, and songs, the Native Americans can regain their pride and honor their heritage.