

Erinleigh Caughron

### A Struggle to Stay Alive: Preserving a Culture

As a native Chicagoan and a current member of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe, Susan Power has written an intricate novel that laces together the lives of several generations of Dakota Indians. In The Grass Dancer, Power illustrates the importance of maintaining traditional ways and culture. This pervasive theme ribbons through the stories of modern and former Indian lives. Preservation of tribal ideals has always been an imperative part of Native American existence. Many Indians today struggle to carry the old stories and values of their elders, and this conflict can lead to resisting change and adaptation. Power poignantly portrays this struggle in her description that the characters are “dancing a rebellion” (Power 332). While Power’s characters resist change, they do so in distinctively different ways: interfacing the old ways with the new, succumbing to the temptations of destructive behavior, and inspiring modern Indians to retain their culture.

In the novel, Pumpkin is a grass dancer and an outstanding student who is bound for Stanford in the fall. She is admired by all in the Indian community for her remarkable dancing ability and unconventional beauty. Dancing is her way of maintaining her Indian culture, but she feels that this community does not support her plans to go to school. Pumpkin wrote in her application essay to Stanford “I sometimes feel I am risking my soul by leaving the Indian community” (17). Pumpkin understands the importance of preserving Indian values but at the same time, she is willing to adapt to white customs to become successful in society. By going to college, Pumpkin will improve herself and be empowered to improve her Indian community. She sees and accepts flaws in both

systems, and in so doing, Pumpkin has the ability to bridge the gap between the two cultures. Tragically, she dies before she has the chance to do so, but even in death, she dances to preserve her culture.

Power uses Harley Wind Soldier to illustrate that obsession with maintaining culture can sometimes lead to destructive behavior. Harley was one of Pumpkin's admirers and after she died, he felt that part of his soul had died with her. Dancing is a big part of Harley's life, and he is very good at it. When Pumpkin dies, Harley picks up Grass Dancing to honor her. He feels that if he can dance and move like Pumpkin, he can keep her spirit alive which in turn will fill the hole in his soul. In a sense, Harley forgets the values of Indian culture in the dance because he ends up dancing solely to unsuccessfully ease his pain. After Harley finds his efforts futile, he begins to adopt some of the negative stereotypical Indian behaviors such as excessive drinking and reckless driving. When he shows up drunk at one of his mother's important powwows, his morality is challenged by one of the elders, Herod Small War. Harley agrees to go on a vision quest and in doing so, he finds the true importance of his dancing. He learns that through dancing, he is able to preserve his culture and the traditional Indian values, and begin healing the emptiness in his soul.

Red Dress, who lived a hundred years earlier, is the single unifying important character throughout the novel. Red Dress was a warrior. She charmed white soldiers into killing themselves because she felt it was her job to preserve Indian customs, and she feared the white community was killing the Indians' way of life. "I am at war, I told myself, knowing it was more complicated than that. I was also at war with myself" (269). After her bloody death, Red Dress comes to many other Indians in dreams and in visions

to remind them that the fight to retain their Indian culture is important. Red Dress is the carrier of the message throughout all of the generations. When Harley is on his vision quest, Red Dress comes to him and says ““So when you move through those old steps, remember that you are dancing a rebellion”” (331). She shows her people that traditional Indian values need preserving and living.

Pumpkin’s adaptation, Harley’s dancing, and Red Dress’s inspiration are all examples of how Indians are “dancing a rebellion” (332). While Red Dress proves that keeping traditional values and ways is important, it is also important to be able to adapt with other cultures as shown by Pumpkin. Native American’s lives are all connected through the customs that are passed through generations. Blindly embracing the preservation of one’s culture carries the potential for destructive behavior. Contemporary Indians struggle to live a balance between preserving their heritage and living constructively in a predominantly white culture. Susan Power shows there is good to be gained from both worlds. The Grass Dancer demands that the reader consider the serious commitment of maintaining a community’s cultural heritage. Although this novel deals with the issues of Native American life, the themes are relevant to all groups of people.