

## Natural Symbolic Imagery in “Four Strange Summers”

“Four Strange Summers” tells the story of Zitkala-Ša’s annual summer return to her childhood home on the Yankton reservation after she spends the school year at a residential school in Indiana. These summers on the reservation may provide physical escape from the active assimilation occurring at school, but the psychological effects remain a part of her and her family’s day to day life. This chapter seems to serve as an examination of those psychological effects and narrate her experiences of emotional limbo. Zitkala-Ša transposes her emotional state of limbo and stagnation onto the exterior world through extensive symbolic natural imagery. This essay will focus on her use of symbolic imagery, specifically the wind and the prairieland.

In this chapter, Zitkala-Ša describes feeling isolated from her environment upon her return home to the reservation. She represents her emotional state after her return home from the residential school as “the heart of chaos, beyond the touch or voice of human aid” and she even goes as far as to say “even nature seemed to have no place for me” (97). Yet, despite this initial feeling of disassociation from nature, she reveals through symbolic use of natural imagery that it’s nature that brings her back to herself and helps her to connect with her home on the Dakota reservation.

One way this idea of connection with the land is conveyed is through the allegorical use of wind. At first, this natural imagery of the wind has a foreboding element and reflects Zitkala-Ša’s insecurity about her place in a complex, frightening and violent world. In her words, “A strong wind blew against my cheeks and fluttered my sleeves. There was nothing moving within the great circular horizon of the Dakota prairies save the tall grasses, over which the wind blew and rolled off in long, shadowy waves” (98). The imagery of the wind here is an allegory evoking contrasting emotions of hope and fear reawakening in Zitkala-Ša after her period of

emotional stagnation and numbness after returning from the trauma of the residential school. This contrast of complex emotion is created through seemingly incongruous adjectives that are being used to describe the same force— the wind. In this context, the wind is “fluttering” around her but also creating “shadowy” movements in the tall grass; with these contrasting descriptors, she transposes the emotional chaos she feels inside onto her exterior world.

The stakes of these contrasting descriptors are only heightened with the added imagery of “nothing moving” in the prairies except for the wind— gusts “fluttering” her sleeves and lifting her like wings as she rides headfirst into the dark, “shadowy” waves of grain flowing towards her. With this description, the landscape becomes an extended allegory for her mental state, and expands upon the idea of her being within the “heart of chaos”— the stagnation she feels being in this emotional liminal space between her home and the residential school is reflected here by the stillness of the prairie. But the wind specifically signifies the importance of this episode because it illustrates Zitkala-Ša’s emotional reawakening in terms of her connection to her homeland and the emotions, both good and bad, flowing back into her.

Her literary attention to the landscape itself also illustrates the aforementioned deep connection to the nature of her home, what she even calls her later “wigwam of blue and green” (98) later on. The imagery of the wind is essential to understanding this chapter because it symbolizes Zitkala-Ša coming back to herself and her homeland after a period of emotional limbo and stagnation, and realizing that even when nature “seems to have to place for her,” the landscape will bring emotional reawakening regardless.

