

“Soul Catcher” p. 135, Imprints 11

By Louis Owens

In the Mississippi swamps of the Yazoo River, a teenager learns about his Choctaw heritage – and the legend of nalusachito (the soul catcher).

Comment: I know that this won't be a pleasant place.

Comment: An aboriginal tribe – southern US I think

Comment: So it will be a cultural story ...probably meant to explain some natural happening that frightened a long-ago people. Or a lesson for the young.

Comment: Boy, that doesn't sound promising.

The old man held the rifle in one hand and walked bent over under the weight of the gunnysack on this back, as if studying the tangle of roots that was the trail.

Comment: Grandfather? Goes armed into the swamp – I would too.

Comment: He's looking for something on the ground.

Comment: He's planning to bring something back with him – or he's brought something along. Oh yes, it's heavy, so there's something in it.

Behind him three lanky brown-and-black-and-white hounds crowded close to his thin legs and threw nervous glances at the wet forest all around. The only

Comment: Probably blood hounds – trackers . These don't seem very brave They are nervous, whining.

sound was that of the old man's boots and the occasional whine of one of the

Comment: Crunch, crunch

dogs. The sliver of moon had set, and the trail was very dark. The light from the carbide lamp on his hat cast a phosphorescent glow around the group, so that the

Comment: That would be greenish and spooky

old man, with his long silver hair, might have been one of the Choctaw shadows on the bright path home.

Comment: Yes, probably a grandfather. Traditional – long hair..

Comment: I'd rather follow a bright path than the dark trail they're on

Out of the dark to the old man's right came a scream that cut through the swamp like a jagged tin and sent the hounds trembling against his legs.

Comment: Someone's in trouble

Comment: This sound would be grating, hurtful to the ears..

Comment: If it scares the dogs, I'm scared

Author's purpose: to set the stage

Theme/thesis: the author takes the reader by the hand and leads us into a tribal legend, one that promises thrills and chills. We won't just hear about it, we will experience it.

Elaboration of thesis: Like most legends, it appears that this one will explain a natural occurrence that frightens a people... legends are stories of a cultural group. Legends are transmitted orally. The storyteller is an elder, which is fitting for the situation.

Exemplification of thesis: (a "real-world example...")this situation is like the typical horror film scene – scary situation. Think of a movie set...be the director. What should happen next?

Illustration of thesis: (a "like" example—analogy or metaphor) Walking through a swamp is like sinking into a furball – but a wet one. Not only do your feet sink down into a fuzzy grey, but the Spanish moss hangs from the trees, brushing against your face, creepy, sometimes it gets into your mouth...yuck. If Owen wanted me scared he's doing a good job.

Reflection and evaluation: through this I try to enter into the piece wholeheartedly – if I want to be critical, I'll wait until I have more of a sense of what the author is trying to do. I bring some prejudices to this piece, but I am aware of them. I know what ghost-storytellers try to do, but I don't believe in ghosts. I am familiar with legends, but don't believe in the truth of them. I even know the common beliefs about dogs, but I'm not a believer. I need to keep these prejudices under check so that I am able to fully appreciate what the writer is trying to achieve. Just because I have these biases does not mean that I can't enjoy or evaluate, on its own merits, this piece of writing. Remember that when I am writing critically (essay) I am showing that I understand the author's point of view – not that I am trying to undermine his/her logic.

Like any good ghost story, Owens sets us up to accept the unlikely as likely and the implausible as truth. The old man has a presence of a storyteller, or even,

considering the native flavour of the piece, as a shaman – a ghostly character who is going to lead us past the natural world into the realm of the unnatural – after all we are seeking a soul catcher. We generally believe that dogs have a sixth sense that reaches into the unknown-to-humans territory, so these cringing dogs solidify the scariness of the situation. We know little of the environment, or the group so the suspense is real as there is nothing like the unknown to stir up a little fear.