The End of Old Horse Study Guide

The End of Old Horse by Simon J. Ortiz

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

"The End of Old Horse" is an excellent example of the understated, precise verbal control that Simon J. Ortiz wields in his fiction. Principally known as a poet, Ortiz has worked in all forms of literature since the 1960s. His stories tend to illuminate the subtle emotional forces at play in brief, supposedly inconsequential moments.

Ortiz was raised on the Acoma Pueblo in New Mexico, and most of his writing reflects this fact without dwelling on it. In "The End of Old Horse," two boys growing up on a reservation spend a quiet, eventless summer day trying to catch fish in a creek before their neighbor approaches to tell them that his dog strangled himself by straining too hard against the rope that tied him to a pole. The younger boy, Gilly, who has a supposedly grownup liking for obscenity, tries unsuccessfully to suppress his anger; the older boy, who is the story's narrator, nearly convinces himself that he does not care. Their actions are minimal, but with masterful control Ortiz conveys the suffering and confusion of children facing grief alone apparently for the first time.

"The End of Old Horse" was included in *The Man to Send Rain Clouds: Contemporary Stories by American Indians*, edited by Kenneth Rosen and published in 1974. It has also been included in Ortiz's short story collection *Men on the Moon*, published in 1999.

Author Biography

Simon J. Ortiz was born on May 27, 1941, and raised on the Acoma Pueblo, near Albuquerque, New Mexico. His father was a stonemason and later a railroad worker, and his mother was a potter. As a child, he spoke the native Acoma language, Keresan. Early in his education, however, while attending a reservation school, he was forced to learn English, giving him a bicultural world-view that has characterized his writing.

In 1961 and 1962, Ortiz attended Fort Lewis College. He served in the army from 1962 through 1965, at the height of the Vietnam War. After his return, he attended the University of New Mexico, earning his bachelor of arts degree and then went on to earn a master's of fine arts from the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa. After graduating, he supported himself by working in public relations at Rough Rock Demonstration School in Arizona and as a newspaper editor at the National Indian Youth Council in Albuquerque. In 1974 and 1975 he was treated for alcoholism.

In 1969 Ortiz was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts Discovery Award, which gave him the motivation to keep writing. His first collection of poems, *Naked in the Wind*, was published in 1971. His first collection to be distributed by a major publisher was *Going for the Rain*, in 1976. Since that time, he has regularly published poetry, short fiction, and essays. His works have consistently focused on his identity as an Acoma American, and he has served on numerous Native American committees, as well as the editorial staffs of Native American publications. He has won several awards, including being named a White House Salute to Poetry Honored Poet in 1981 and the Lila Wallace Reader's Digest Writer's Award. Since the mid-1970s, Ortiz has held a variety of teaching positions, starting at the Institute of American Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico. As of 2005, he is a professor at the University of Toronto. His book *Out There Somewhere*, a collection of poetry, was published in 2002.

Plot Summary

"The End of Old Horse" begins with the narrator, an unnamed Native American boy, leaving home with his younger brother to go to the nearby creek to cool off on a hot summer day. They pass by Old Horse, a dog who is tied up with a rope, in front of the home of a neighbor, Tony. Old Horse jumps about wildly, chewing at his rope, trying to free himself. The boys tell Tony, who is fixing up an old horse stall so that he can park his truck in it, that the dog is overexcited, and Tony tells them to just ignore him. Gilly, the younger brother, curses about the dog, calling him stupid, awkwardly working the word "hell" into what he says.

The narrator muses about how boring life is. The only real excitement in the summer, he says, is when there are Grab Days during festivals for saints. Grab Days are a tradition of giving out candy and toys to children, similar to the practice of piñatas. It is here that he first points out the different perspectives of his mother and father: his father does not mind if the children hear graphic or explicit language, but his mother does.

At the creek, the boys chase trout into a trap that they made with some scrap tin. Gilly stops to wash some mud off of his jeans when Tony, the dog's owner, approaches, looking somber. Tony makes small talk about the cleaning that Gilly is doing before announcing that Old Horse, the dog who was straining against his leash, has strangled himself with the rope and is dead.

After a moment of silence, Gilly, trying to hold back his tears, eventually cries.

The narrator tells Tony that he should not have tied the dog up and is surprised that Tony's reaction is as emotional as it is: he reaches out and pushes the narrator, who falls into some bushes. But Tony immediately regrets having done this, and he reaches down and pulls the boy to his feet and brushes him off. He apologizes, tells the boys to go home, and then hops across the creek and walks off beside it.

On the way home, the boys glance mournfully over at the place where Old Horse had been tied up. Gilly curses, using a variety of words that he knows are offensive, and then cries openly. The narrator blames Tony for having tied the dog, when he could have let him roam freely or even asked the boys to take him to the creek with them. The narrator, angry and sad, tries to distract himself by asking Gilly to race him, but Gilly is not interested in running. The narrator swears at Gilly and takes off alone. He ends up running so hard that he makes himself sick and vomits on the side of the road. When Gilly catches up, the narrator apologizes for having sworn at him.

They arrive home after dark, and their mother is angry. She tells them to wash for supper. Their father seems to notice the mud on Gilly's jeans, but he does not point it out to their mother, instead changing the subject to an upcoming rabbit hunt.

When the subject of Tony comes up at the dinner table, the boys are silent. Gilly breaks the silence by saying that Tony choked the dog to death, immediately following his

summary with the curse word "hellfire." Their mother warns him about using such language, but the narrator and the father do not react because they both understand the seriousness of the young boy's emotions and feel that swearing is his way of putting his mind to rest over this traumatic event.

Characters

The Father

The father is a quiet, practical man who works for the railroad. The fact that his sons look up to him is clear from the way that the narrator refers to funny stories his father sometimes told as an example of something interesting that would happen in his otherwise boring day.

At times, the father seems to be in collusion with his sons against the moral strictness of their mother. He tells stories that might be inappropriate for children, a point that his wife has to interrupt to remind him of. He notices the mud on Gilly's pants but does not point it out to their mother, in order to keep them from getting into trouble: what is more, he has covered for them before. At the end of the story, the narrator assumes that his father feels the same way that he does that the best way to cope with the day's traumatic event is by putting it aside and not talking about it ever again.

Gilly

Gilly is the narrator's younger brother. Early in the story, he displays his penchant for using foul language, frequently with no particular context: he likes to say crude words but does not seem to understand their meaning. When he hears Tony refer to Old Horse as a "dumb dog," he repeats the idea, calling him a "stupid dog" and then adds the word "hell." "He used to like cuss words when he was a kid," the narrator explains. In doing this, Gilly is copying the speech of Tony, who is a neighbor and distant relative.

After finding out that Old Horse is dead, Gilly tries to repress his sorrow and hold his tears in, crying only silently. After awhile, when the narrator is trying to get him to run, he sobs and hiccups openly, overwhelmed by grief.

By the time they are at the dinner table, Gilly is still upset, but not as upset as he had been earlier. Rather than spewing a list of obscenities, he just lets one, "hellfire," slip out while explaining the dog's death. Since he spends most of the story trying to wash mud off of his pants, it is clear that he knows his parents can be strict, and so it can be assumed that Gilly would not have uttered this one blasphemy if he could have held it in.

The Mother

The boys' mother represents logic over emotion. The narrator explains how, faced with a situation, she will try to explain it in a way that they will understand. In the story, she becomes angry with the boys, but her anger is never severe. When they come home late for dinner, she is described as being "more or less mad at us." Later, when Gilly uses "hellfire" at the dinner table, the extent of her anger is that she tells him to never

do it again. She is not certain whether to respect his emotions, looking to her husband and other son for some sign of the right way to respond to what Gilly has done.

The Narrator

The story does not say how old the narrator is. He is a boy who is old enough to be cursing as a means of expression but too old to be fascinated with it, as his brother is. He has a philosophical bent, wondering, even before finding out about the death of Old Horse, about the nature of the world and in particular the fact that events happen that are out of human control. He thinks that the way to deal with important events is to not think about them, dismissing his mother's way of coping, which is to analyze and understand.

The news of Old Horse's death creates conflicting emotions in the narrator. He tries to remain dispassionate, but his emotions well up within him. He wants to run, and when his brother Gilly is not willing to let him channel his desire to run into a race he curses him and then runs as fast as he can anyway, to the point of exhaustion. Rather than accept the dog's death as a tragedy, he focuses on the ways his owner could have prevented it by letting Old Horse free from his rope. Though he did not offer to take the dog with them to the creek, he blames Tony for not asking him to take him.

In the end, the narrator copes with the sad news by adapting the indifference that he has seen in his father and in Tony, the "stoic Indian" stance that he has heard his father mock before.

Tony

Tony is related to the boys in the story in some undefined way: the story specifically does not say that they are unrelated, only that Tony "wasn't close family kinfolk." He is, however, familiar with the boys. Early in the story, when discussing Gilly's habit of swearing, the narrator points out that he did it in an attempt to copy Tony. Later, at the dinner table, their father asks what Tony has been doing lately, which indicates that the father knows Tony is an important part of their daily lives.

As a role model, Tony exudes a cool demeanor. When the boys tell him that his dog, tied to a clothesline pole, is acting crazy, he just laughs it off. His general calm is why his appearance by the creek where the boys are chasing fish is so frightening to the narrator, who is not used to seeing Tony behave seriously.

Tony seems to understand his responsibility as a role model. He loses his temper when the narrator blames him for Old Horse's death, shoving the boy into a bush, but he immediately reaches out to him and apologizes. The very fact that he sought the boys out after finding the dog dead suggests his need to talk to someone: when he finds that he cannot talk to them, that it just is not in his nature, he crosses over to the other side of the stream and walks away.

Themes

Language and Meaning

Ortiz uses language, and in particular obscene language, to represent the confused emotions that his characters are feeling. The narrator of this story shows his awareness of the special power of obscene language in the beginning of the story, when he notes that his younger brother Gilly liked to swear and that he did too, only not as much. At that point in the story, the use of obscenity just seems like a way for a younger boy to act older, like Gilly imitating Tony.

As the story progresses, though, it becomes clear that obscene language is not so much a posture, a way of acting cool, as it is an act of desperation, of venting emotions that one cannot show in any other way. When he first learns of Old Horse's death, Gilly does not swear, but instead becomes silent, in an attempt to stop all emotion: he does not let out a torrent of curse words until he passes Tony's house and is overcome with thoughts of the dog's death. His obscenities correspond with open sobbing. Later, when he uses the word "hellfire" at the supper table, it is clear that he does not do it consciously but that it has slipped out of him in his sorrow while talking about what happened to Old Horse. The words that the boys use are powerful, but the story makes it clear that they use the power of these words, not as expressions of emotions, but as substitutes for them.

Stoicism

The central theme of stoicism is examined in this story when the narrator compares Tony, whose dog has just died, with a joke that his father often made about people being "blank as a stoic Indian." The characters here are in fact Indians, and they are struggling to remain stoic in the face of a terribly emotional experience.

The fact that Tony has to struggle to keep his stoic demeanor is obvious from the fact that he loses his composure temporarily and apologizes for it immediately. He is trying to be emotionless, but when the narrator angers him he responds angrily. He has every right to be angry, but anger is too emotional, and so he tries to bury his feelings, helping the boy to his feet almost the same moment that he reached out to shove him.

The narrator uses physical motion to put forth a stoic attitude. When he feels that he is about to cry, he runs instead, burying his feelings under the stress to his body. Just before he runs, he curses Tony and his brother Gilly: after he has run, those angry feelings are gone.

The end of the story shows how much stoicism is a preferred way of life for the grownups in general□the males, at least. When they hear Gilly curse out loud, the narrator and his father are not shocked, nor are they angry. They both recognize his cursing as being all that he can do, and they expect Gilly to quit grieving once he has

gotten it out of his system. The story ends with the expectation that this emotional incident can now be forgotten: the narrator thinks that Gilly's use of a forbidden word will be "the end of everything that happened that day."

Gender Roles

In this story, the boys, their father, and Tony all share a similar outlook, trying to repress their emotions and forget about the problems that are upsetting them. The mother, on the other hand, is more inclined to examine problems, to encourage her sons to face up to what is upsetting them in order to understand it. These two different approaches to life might just reflect their different philosophies, but they come to indicate the parents' places in traditional gender roles. In this family, the mother is more upset than the father about appearance (she is the one they expect to raise a fuss about the dirt on Gilly's jeans, even though it is the father who notices it) and about obscenity. That she values such matters and the males do not divides the family along gender lines.

Poverty

The narrator of this story does not dwell upon the financial situation of the pueblo where he lives, but the story gives enough hints for discerning readers to understand it. For instance, when the boys first talk to Tony, he is working on an old horse stall, trying to nail it together so that it will cover his truck securely. He does not have a garage or the money to build a new structure or have one built but has to make do with fixing what is already old. Later, Gilly spends much time while they are at the creek trying to wash a smudge of mud off of his jeans. Insisting that they care for the condition of their clothes might reflect their parents' interest in having the boys look good in public, but since they are just going home at the end of the day, it is more likely that the parents are concerned that the clothes will not wear out from excessive washing and that he does not have many extra pairs of jeans to wear while these are being laundered. The boys' plan to catch trout in the creek and fatten them up indicates that they do not have much spending money and are conscious of finding the way to turn their playtime activity into cash.

Style

Conflict

One aspect that is particularly notable about "The End of Old Horse" is the story's lack of a general conflict. There are times when tension is raised, as when the narrator accuses Tony of being negligent and Tony shoves him or when Gilly curses at the family supper table and readers expect trouble to ensue. None of these problems develop into conflict, however: the story cannot be said to be "about" the conflict between Tony and the narrator or Gilly and his parents. Instead, Ortiz uses these tense moments to hold the reader's interest while pursuing a larger, less explicitly defined idea. The story is more about the characters' attitudes than it is about their interactions with each other: if one were intent on defining it in terms of conflict, it would be more accurate to say that it is about a series of internal conflicts.

Symbolism

Describing what the boys do at the creek, the narrator gives more attention to Gilly scrubbing his jeans than he does to their fishing project, which is supposedly their reason for being there. He mentions the mud on Gilly's jeans several times over the course of three paragraphs then returns to the matter again when they arrive home. The mud is given almost as much focus as the obscene language that Gilly uses, and, in fact, can be seen as a symbol of Gilly's language: he fears his parents' reaction to seeing his Levis muddied just as much as he fears their reaction to hearing words like "hell." By focusing attention on the jeans and the fear of what the parents will think of them, Ortiz raises the expectation that the parents will be severe about language without having to call too much attention to what they will think of hearing Gilly say "hellfire": the story commands attention for its climactic moment without being too heavy handed about where it is going.

Narrator

The character in this story who draws the most attention is Gilly, the younger brother. Gilly is the one who is going through a phase of using colorful language. He is the one who has the greatest struggle with his emotions concerning Old Horse's death. And he is the one who is openly in trouble at the climactic moment at the supper table.

Still, it is the narrator who is the main character, as first person narrators of stories often are. Though readers know less about the narrator (for instance, his name), his complex emotions are important. While Gilly tries to be as dispassionate and stoic as his hero Tony is, he is unsuccessful and cries several times; the narrator, on the other hand, is much better at suppressing his sorrow. This is a story about a culture where people are expected to shrug off grief, the narrator is a much more sublime study of that state of mind than his younger brother is.

Historical Context

Ortiz was born and raised in the Acoma Pueblo in New Mexico, about 65 miles west of Albuquerque. For centuries, the Acoma Pueblo existed at the top of a mesa, 7000 feet above sea level, in what is now referred to as "Sky City." The Acoma people first came to the attention of Europeans in 1598, when the Spanish governor of New Mexico, Juan de Onate, sent troops to conquer the indigenous people of the area. Because of their location at the top of the mesa, the Acoma were able to hold off against the Spanish for a while, but a returning force the following year wiped out much of the population and burned many of the buildings. A truce with the Spanish was achieved in 1628, when the construction of the Catholic San Esteban del Rey mission was begun in Sky City. The church, a national landmark, remains to this day, making it the oldest Spanish mission in the United States.

As of 2005, only about fifty members of the Acoma tribe live at the ancestral location in Sky City, on top of the mesa. The rest live in the surrounding areas and only go to Sky City on holidays. The Acoma reservation consists of 378,114 acres around Sky City: the tribe owns most of that area, with 320 acres owned by individual tribal members.

Commerce has never been easy for the Acoma, since they are situated in the desert with just the barest hope of sustainable agriculture. Starting in the early 1900s, the chief commercial enterprise has been the tourist trade. For one thing, the reservation has the marvel of Sky City, which archeologists guess dates back to the middle of the eighth century. Early on, the tourist trade focused on the mission, with people of European descent ignoring the cultural significance of pueblo history. The city had no water or electricity and was difficult to reach until the 1950s or early 1960s, when a motion picture company making a John Wayne film restored the road up the side of the mesa, making Sky City accessible to travelers.

Throughout the sixties, seventies, and eighties, interest in Native American culture grew, and the Acoma made use of the opportunity to make money while spreading awareness of their history. A tourism center was built at the base of the mesa, with water and electricity run in from the village of Acomita eleven miles away; this improvement gave the tribe the opportunity to control access to the ancient city via an old school bus that made the trip up and back throughout the day and offered visitors toilets and cold refreshments. This interest has put a premium on traditional Native American arts and crafts: the Acoma are especially known for their delicate clay pottery and beautiful weaving patterns, and the tourist trade provided a stream of interested buyers.

The citizens of the Acoma Pueblo are unique among the 29 pueblos that are scattered from Colorado to the Mexican border in that they have retained their own language. Many of the Acoma traditions and legends have remained intact, most likely because their isolation at the top of the mesa kept the Acoma from mixing with Spaniards and Americans for most of their history. Ortiz was raised in McCartys, the second largest city on the Acoma reservation after Acomita.

Critical Overview

Men on the Moon, that includes "The End of Old Horse" is Simon J. Ortiz's first collection of short stories: Ortiz has published children's literature, non-fiction, and memoirs, but he is best known as one of the preeminent voices in Native American poetry. When this book was published, Matt Pifer, reviewing the book in *World Literature Today*, observed that the stories in it "illustrate the sense Simon Ortiz has of the subtleties and power inherent in language, a sense he developed, in part, from the tradition of storytelling so deeply rooted in the culture of his Acoma people."

Ortiz's Acoma background is such an important part of his identity and the stories that he tells that few reviewers neglect to mention it. This is not to say that he has been pigeonholed by the reviewers: his heritage is a fact of Ortiz's life and has been a central frame of reference throughout his long publishing career. In an unsigned *Publishers Weekly* review of *Men on the Moon*, for instance, his background is acknowledged in the fact that the stories in the collection "demonstrate the diversity of Native experience in modern America." That review goes on to emphasize the fact that Ortiz is proud of his heritage and the fact that he is a gifted writer, as many reviewers of the book have done: "The language of these rich narratives reflect [sic] both Ortiz's poetic gift and his intimate knowledge of oral storytelling."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Kelly is an instructor of literature and creative writing at College of Lake County and Oakton Community College in Des Plaines, Illinois. In this essay, Kelly looks at the story as a "coming-of-age" tale, questioning just who would be considered to have come of age.

Simon J. Ortiz's short story "The End of Old Horse" is clearly a coming-of-age story. It tells of two boys of indeterminate age who go fishing one hot, boring summer afternoon. They pass by the home of an older friend, Tony, and point out to him what he surely must already know: that his dog, Old Horse, is barking and straining at his rope. Later, Tony tells them that Old Horse has strangled himself, and the boys are filled with anger and sorrow. The younger brother uses the word "hellfire" at the dinner table, and his parents, who do not approve of such language, respect his sorrow and do not punish him. As with all coming- of-age stories, the focus here is on a young person having a realization that will change the way he looks at life.

The significance of the story's events, their unchangeable finality, is made clear in the story's two uses of the word "end." First of all, Ortiz uses it in the title, where it draws attention to itself by taking the place of the word "death." It would be more specific to say that Old Horse died: to say that he ended is not incorrect, but it is notably vague. Ortiz brings the word "end" back in the story's final line, when he writes that the boys' father decided "that what my little brother Gilly said was the end of everything that happened that day." This is a story about change, about a way of life that it is over for someone. Like any coming-of-age story, it represents the time when the old reality of childhood ends, and the reality of adulthood kicks in.

The question that arises, though, is just who is coming of age here. In many stories told in first-person point of view, the answer to this question is simple: traditionally, the story is about the narrator, who is the one most affected by the events. In "The End of Old Horse," though, there are plenty of reasons to see how the story works by understanding characters other than the narrator as being recipients of the story's lessons.

Immediately upon reading it, one might assume that Ortiz means the story to focus on the younger brother, Gilly. Gilly is the one who is most clearly traumatized by the day's events. He cries twice, and at the story's climactic moment he clearly is unable to keep himself from using the kind of language at the dinner table that Ortiz has already shown to be forbidden in this household. The narrator, by contrast, acts as a silent observer: he has one emotional moment, when he wishes to drown his sorrow by running as fast as he can and he curses his little brother for refusing to run with him, but after exerting himself to the point of sickness he says that he "was okay" and he apologizes to Gilly.

If this really is a story about Gilly coming of age, it might not necessarily be about his realization of death. It might just fall into that sub-category of the coming-of-age story called the "fallen idol" story. From the third paragraph Ortiz makes it clear that Tony is a

hero to Gilly; here, he likens the boy's use of obscenities to the way Tony uses them. When the boys arrive home, their father asks how Tony is, implying that he would naturally have expected them to have spent at least part of their time at his house.

Gilly's fascination with Tony might be exactly the innocence that he loses. As events transpire, the older boy focuses on ways in which Tony is responsible for the dog's death: he offends Tony by suggesting such, and later, when Gilly expresses his emotions with a string of random obscenities, the narrator focuses his own rage on Tony and the things that Tony could have done that would have kept Old Horse alive. In the end, Gilly's line, which is most noteworthy for its use of obscenity, is "Tony choked Old Horse to death, hellfire." If he believes this, after struggling with it over the course of the story, then he has lost faith in a person he looked up to, possibly the person he esteemed most. His understanding of the world is changed permanently.

It is also possible, though less likely, that it is Tony who is coming of age in this story. This would be unusual, because traditional coming of age stories occur when their subject is young and most impressionable: Tony is older than the brothers. Still, he is able to be affected by the event.

The story does not say how old Tony is. Obviously, he is old enough to own a truck, which he is in the process of building a shelter for, but there is no indication that he is building that shelter on his own land, and not on, say, his parents'. What is presented clearly enough is that the death of Old Horse is an event that affects Tony.

Tony struggles with his emotions after the death of his dog. When he first tells the boys about it, he is described as "stoic" and "blank." Ortiz refers to the cliché, "a stoic Indian," to show that this might be just the posture that Tony is trying to consciously adopt, a rôle that he is playing. When the narrator implies that Old Horse's death might be Tony's fault, his emotions flare, and he strikes out at the boy, though his rational mind regrets it and he immediately apologizes.

Reading this as a coming-of-age story makes apparent that Tony is awakening to adult responsibilities, realizing that his actions have consequences. The story starts with Tony ignoring his yelping dog, having tied Old Horse up with rope, unaware that an excited dog on a poorly designed restraint can die. It ends with Tony's remorse. Ortiz does not go into detail about the lasting effect on Tony, but readers are led to infer it. He jumps the creek, crossing to the other side of the water, a movement that many cultures use to symbolize someone leaving their past behind. In addition, Tony is headed west: there is a tradition in white American literature of people abandoning the lives they knew and going westward, a tradition that dates back to the Europeans' arrival on the continent, when the west was considered unexplored, virgin territory (the most famous literary example of this is the way Mark Twain has Huckleberry Finn simply "light out" for the west at the end of his adventures). Ortiz, a native of the Acoma Pueblo, whose people have been in "the west" for nearly a thousand years, incorporates this Eurocentric literary tradition to imply that Tony, in his sorrow, is leaving his past behind.

Even though his reaction is the most understated of all those in the book, it could well be the narrator who is coming of age in "The End of Old Horse." As mentioned before, stories with a first-person narrator are often about that narrator. This narrator does not seem much changed by the events of the story but that may be the point: given these extreme circumstances (the sudden death of a helpless animal), readers expect some dramatic transformation. Instead, we see the narrator shaping into the sort of man his father is. Old Horse's death shows him that suppressed emotion is the way to act like a grownup.

The narrator does have his moment of excitement when he reacts to the death of Old Horse by cursing Gilly and cursing Tony and running as fast as he can, but this is an exception. His ordinary life is defined in the fourth paragraph, in which he explains that "nothing ever [happened] in summer." His life is boring at the beginning of the story and by the last line he is already looking forward to burying the events of the day, pretending like they are ended. Perhaps it would be possible to truly "end" them, but the fact that he is telling this story indicates that what happened before and after Old Horse's death continues. If the narrator seems unchanged, he is at least more aware of what goes unsaid at his house than he was before. Gilly may take a chance by letting a curse word slip out, but the narrator, who curses less often, understands that suppressing the emotion behind cursing can sometimes be as potent as cursing itself.

It is difficult for writers to include children in their stories without critics assuming that they are writing coming of age stories: just about anything that happens to children in literature can be considered potent enough to redirect the course of their lives. Ortiz's style, though, gives fair weight to all of the characters, raising the question of who might be most affected. Reading it as the narrator's story, "The End of Old Horse" is a story about a boy's induction into the stoic Indian posture that his father recognizes, mocks, but adopts when faced with uncomfortable circumstances. If it's Gilly's story, it is a story of a boy who is so outraged about the death of an innocent animal, and so hurt to believe that his role model might be responsible that he can no longer abide by his parents' rules about obscene language. Seen as a story about Tony, it tells of a young man who is careless and causes his dog's death, driving him into isolation. A lesser writer would be lucky to make one of these interpretations viable, not to mention all three.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on "The End of Old Horse," in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Adaptations

Ortiz discusses American Indian identity in literature with David Barsamian in an interview titled *Simon Ortiz*, available on audiocassette from Pacifica Radio Archives, 1986.

Ortiz and five other writers from the American southwest are included on *Voices of the Southwest, 2003*, a six-disc recording of a conference that took place at University of New Mexico from June 9 to July 24, 2003. The recording is available from University of New Mexico Press.

Ortiz's home page at www.uta.edu/english/tim/poetry/so/ortizmain.htm is rich with information about his life and his writings.

Topics for Further Study

Research the newest technological restraining devices for dogs, and explain why they are safe.

The narrator mentions gathering good presents at the tribe's "Grab Days" festivity. Research Grab Days and their significance to Indian culture.

The obscenities that Gilly uses in this story are mild compared to things that are considered acceptable for television in the early 2000s. Do you think that his language is obscene if he thinks it is? Explain what you think the rules should be for standards of obscenity.

Tony performs the function of a big brother to the boys in this story. Look through other stories that you have read for similar big brother figures, and compare them to Ortiz's portrait of Tony.

Ortiz is strongly associated with his Acoma heritage. Explore what religious significance the Pueblo Indians give to dogs and animals in general. Then decide what lasting effect the death of Old Horse may have on Gilly and his brother.

Compare and Contrast

1970s: The Indian unemployment rate is 10 times the national average, and 40 percent of the Native-American population live below the poverty line.

Today: Half the total Native-American workforce remains unemployed, and nearly one-third live in poverty compared to 13 percent of the total U.S. population.

1970s: Native-American life expectancy is just 44 years, a third less than that of the average American.

Today: Life expectancy for Native Americans remains virtually unchanged.

1970s: The American Indian Movement leads urban Indians, traditionalists, and young Indians along the "Trail of Broken Treaties" to Washington, D.C., seizes the offices of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington, D.C., and occupies them for a week in order to dramatize Indian grievances.

Today: Most Native Americans maintain an uneasy relationship with the BIA, which is responsible for managing Indian affairs, claiming that the BIA restricts their freedom and continues to demonstrate a paternalistic attitude towards Native Americans.

What Do I Read Next?

Ortiz's short story "To Change in a Good Way" is about a suburban Indian man coping with the death of his youngest brother. The story is included in *Growing Up Ethnic in America*, a collection of contemporary fiction, edited by Maria Mazziotti Gillan and Jennifer Gillan.

Ortiz is just one of fourteen writers included in *Writing the Southwest* by David King Dunaway. The book profiles each writer with a brief biography, bibliography, interview, and sample works.

Leslie Marmon Silko is a writer from the Laguna Pueblo, born and raised in Albuquerque, not far from Ortiz's home territory. Her collection *Storyteller* is considered groundbreaking for the way that its pieces weave poetry, fiction, and autobiography. Of the stories in the book, "Ceremony" is the one that has brought her the most widespread fame.

The Antelope Wife, by Louise Erdich, has been commended for its sublime way of capturing the mood of contemporary Native Americans. Set in modern-day Minneapolis, the novel concerns two related Indian couples and their travails.

Speaking for the Generations: Native Writers on Writing, edited by Ortiz, is an anthology containing essays from leading literary figures responding to the problem of living the dual life of being part of the Indian world as well as part of American culture. Included are essays by Roberta J. Hill, Gloria Bird, and Daniel David Moses.

Navajo poet and short story writer Luci Tapahonso has written about modern Indian life with a sensibility that resembles Ortiz's. Readers can sample her works in her collection *Blue Horse Rush In: Poems and Stories* (1997), published by University of Arizona Press.

Further Study

Bruchac, Joseph, "The Story Never Ends: An Interview with Simon Oritz," in *Survival This Way*, University of Arizona Press, 1987, pp. 211—29.

Bruchac focuses on the tension between tradition and Western culture in Ortiz's work.

Ortiz, Simon J., "The Historical Matrix towards a National Indian Literature: Cultural Authenticity in Nationalism," in *Critical Perspectives on Native American Fiction*, edited by Richard F. Fleck, Three Continents Press, 1993, pp. 64—68; originally published in *MELUS*, Summer 1981.

The title of Ortiz's essay makes it sound difficult to understand, but he approaches his subject with the same personal tone that he uses in his fiction, drawing from famous examples to make his point that the oral traditions and literary traditions of many tribes converge.

Sando, Joe S., *Pueblo Profiles: Cultural Identity through Centuries of Change*, Clear Light Books, 1999.

Sando, a member of the Jemez Pueblo, is an historian and archivist at the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center in New Mexico. His book highlights the major events in the history of the Pueblo tribes and also discusses the state of Pueblo life at the end of the twentieth century.

Wiget, Andrew, *Simon Ortiz*, Boise State University Western Writers Series, No. 74, Boise State University, 1986.

What is most interesting about this early 50-page overview of Ortiz's work is the way that Wiget places him as a Western, but not specifically Indian, writer.

Bibliography

Pifer, Matt, Review of *Men on the Moon: Collected Short Stories*, in *World Literature Today*, Vol. 74, No. 1, Winter 2000, pp. 215—16.

Review of *Men on the Moon: Collected Short Stories*, in *Publishers Weekly*, Vol. 246, No. 32, August 9, 1999, p. 345.