Four Mountain Wolves Study Guide

Four Mountain Wolves by Leslie Marmon Silko

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Introduction

"Four Mountain Wolves" by Leslie Marmon Silko is an excellent example of the work that has emerged from the recent "Native American Literary Renaissance." Silko, along with Louise Erdrich, N. Scott Momaday, Gerald Vizenor, and others, is a representative figure of this renaissance, in which the writers meld Western and Native American literary techniques, themes, and subject matter. Silko's poem, which originally appeared in the anthology *Voices of the Rainbow: Contemporary Native American Poetry* (1975), immerses the reader into nature. In the wintry mountains of New Mexico, the narrator of the poem watches four different wolves, each representing different aspects of the natural and spiritual world, travel from the northeast. The poem combines a modernist-influenced free verse structure with a quiet, almost chant-like feel. Silko's Laguna Pueblo heritage comes out both in the form and the content of the poem, but the poem is not only interesting for its "Native Americanness": it is a poem that beautifully evokes a natural setting and gives us a close, almost frightening, but still respectful perspective on an animal that has always represented fear and threat to humans.

Author Biography

Leslie Marmon Silko was born in Albuquerque, New Mexico in 1948, to a family of mixed white and native blood. Soon afterward she moved to the Laguna Pueblo of northern New Mexico. Her great-grandfather Robert G. Marmon had come to the pueblo in 1872, and took as his wife a Laguna woman, Marie Anaya. Silko's Marmon ancestors, Protestants from Ohio, had served terms as pueblo governors, and had had some part in undermining traditional ways in the Laguna pueblo. As a child, Silko grew up speaking Keresan, but her formal education□first at a Bureau of Indian Affairs school on the pueblo and then at Catholic schools in Albuquerque□immersed her in Anglophone culture and the English language. She attended the University ofNew Mexico, graduated in 1969, attended law school, and began teaching atNavajo Community College in Tsaile, Arizona.

In 1969 Silko published her first story, "The Man To Send Rain Clouds," in the *New Mexico Quarterly.* Through the 1970s she continued to teach and write, living for two years in Ketchikan, Alaska, and then moving to Tucson, Arizona, where she lives today. Readers and critics began to notice her stories and poems in the early 1970s, and today she is considered perhaps the central figure of the "Native American Renaissance" of that period. In 1974, Silko's stories appeared in the first important Native American anthology, and also that year, she published *Laguna Woman,* a collection of poetry. In 1977 *Ceremony* appeared, a novel about a Native American veteran's return from World War II. Silko's *Storyteller* was published in 1981. This book, a hard-to-categorize combination of Native American storytelling, traditional Western fiction, nonfiction, poems, and photographs. Also that year, Silko received a prestigious MacArthur Foundation "genius" grant, which she used to work on her next book, *Almanac of the Dead,* which came out in 1991. Recently, she has produced a collection of reminiscences entitled *Sacred Water,* a book that she binds by hand, and a collection of essays entitled *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit: Essays on Native American Life Today.*

Poem Text

(Chinle, late winter, 1973, when the wolves came)

Gray mist wolf

from mountain frozen lake

traveling southwest

over deep snow crust singing

Ah ouoo

Ah ouoo

the fog hangs belly high

and the deer have all gone.

Ah ouoo

Ah ouoo

Gray mist wolf

following the edge of the Sun.

wirling snow wolf

spill the yellow-eyed wind

on blue lake stars

Orion

Saturn.

Swirling snow wolf

tear the heart from the silence

rip the tongue from the darkness

Shake the earth with your breathing

and explode gray ice dreams of eternity.

Mountain white mist wolf

frozen crystals on silver hair

icy whiskers

steaming silver mist from his mouth

Gray fog wolf

silent

swift and wet

howling along cliffs of midnight sky,

you have traveled the years

on your way toBlack Mountain.

Call to the centuries as you pass

howling wolf wind

their fear is your triumph

they huddle in the distances weak.

Lean wolf running

where miles become faded in time.

the urge the desire is always with me

the dream of green eyes wolf

as she reached the swollen belly elk

softly

her pale lavender outline

startled into eternity.

Plot Summary

Section 1

In the first section of the poem the narrator is observing a "gray mist wolf who is traveling to the southwest "over deep snow crust." We hear a howl, "Ah ouoo," but are not sure whether it is the howl of the wolf or of the narrator. The wolf treks through the fog and the cold. "All the deer have gone," the narrator tells us, and the "wild turkey" are "all flown away." This wolf is looking for food.

Section 2

The second section of the poem shows us a "swirling snow wolf." This wolf is not hungry like its predecessor; rather, he is an image of cosmic violence, "spill[ing] the yellow-eyed wind / on blue lake stars / Orion / Saturn." The narrator characterizes this wolf with very violent imagery, commanding it to "tear the heart from the silence / rip the tongue from the darkness." This wolf seems to represent the violence and power of nature and the ways that nature has to remind us of the real, physical world when we are contemplating the infinite.

Section 3

The third section presents us with two wolves: one, "mountain white mist wolf," is described only in terms of his snowy, frozen fur and the steam rising from his panting mouth, while the second, a "gray fog wolf," is simply "silent / swift and wet." This wolf has come a long way, and has traveled for years on its way toBlack Mountain. The gray fog wolf becomes a symbol of the passing of time when the narrator tells it to "call to the centuries." This wolf is similar to the wolf in the second stanza in that both are described in abstract, spatial, and temporal terms, while the first wolf and the mountain white wolf are both purely physical, realistic beings.

Final Stanza

The final stanza of the third section brings these two different embodiments of the wolf□the physical and realistic, and the cosmic or temporal□together. In this last stanza, the "lean wolf running" combines the physical□"green eyes," "lean"□with the abstract□"miles become faded in time." This last wolf, the one that brings together all of the aspects of the wolf of the poem, becomes a representation of the eternal physicality of nature as it kills a "swollen belly elk" and startles that animal "into eternity."

Themes

Nature

The natural world dominates the poem. Most of the descriptive words used in the poem draw the reader's attention to qualities in the landscape. Words such as "frozen," "deep," "belly high," "swirling," "icy," and "howling" all call attention to the wintry scenes through which the wolves travel. The wolves are driven to leave their native habitat by the particular harshness of the winter of 1973, when their usual prey□turkeys, deer, even elk□become scarce. The poem asks the reader to think about the vicissitudes of nature and especially about the cruelty of nature. Can one consider any natural process cruel? What is more cruel□the weather that forces the wolves from their homes, or the wolf that kills the pregnant elk?

Time

In the Euro-American tradition, time is something that is measured, parceled out, and used to precisely pinpoint events and occurrences. In much Native American thought and literature time is a much more amorphous, fluid entity. This is largely because of the much greater importance that is given to nature. As Silko herself said in an interview with Laura Coltelli, "I grew up with people who followed, or whose world vision was based on a different way of organizing human experience, natural cycles." Time, in nature, is not measured with the regularity of hours, minutes, and seconds; rather, it is changing, contingent, dependent upon the seasons.

However, in "Four Mountain Wolves" time is not measured in terms of days. Instead, time here is seen in a much broader context. The wolves represent what has always been, what time does not change. The second wolf "explode [s] gray ice dreams of eternity," while the gray fog wolf has "traveled for years" and calls "to the centuries." These wolves remind the narrator of what does not change. Native American storytelling generally takes place in an unspecified time period very similar to the Euro-American concept of "once upon a time." These wolves are representatives of that mythic time, but the poet reminds us of how she exists in both specific and unspecified time by telling us that this poem takes place exactly in the winter of 1973. The tension between the unspecified mythic time of the wolves and the precise time of the modern American world mirrors the Native American writer's predicament, suspended between two worlds with profoundly different ideas of knowledge and reckoning.

Cruelty/Violence

This theme is closely related to the theme of nature discussed above, but this theme can be more specific. The wolf has been almost throughout human history the embodiment of human fears in regions in which the two species have come into contact. The wolf is a fearsome animal, resembling both the annoying but rarely dangerous coyote and the friendly dog, but can be an implacable foe of man.

The wolf represents the ferocity of nature and the cruelty and violence inherent in the natural world. Like all animals, the wolf must consume life to survive, but unlike most other animals, the wolf will stalk and attack humans. Especially among groups of humans who live in close contact to nature or in small, isolated societies, the wolf is the most dangerous face of nature. But the wolf also forces people to confront their own cruelty, for like the wolf humans, too, stalk and kill prey and eat almost any living creature. And whereas some other predatory animals who occasionally confront humans□the lion or the bear, for instance□might overawe humans, the wolf is very similar to a human. It is approximately human size and is almost a match in a fair fight. In the poem, the narrator melds with the wolf near the end: "the urge the dream is always with me," says the narrator, telling the reader that the same violent predatory needs that drive the wolf also drive the human.

Style

"Four Mountain Wolves" makes use of an innovative combination of modernist free verse and traditional American Indian chant forms. Free verse, which was developed as a poetic style in the 1800s and pioneered by such figures as Walt Whitman, was an attempt to allow the poet's emotions to drive the length and form of a line of poetry. For almost all of human history and in almost every human society, poetry was characterized by regularity in its lines. As an oral form, poetry needed to have such regularity in order for performers to more easily memorize the poems and for audiences to be drawn in by the rhythm and sound of the words. But largely because of the Romantic movement of the late 1700s and early 1800s, poets began to believe that they should be allowed to use any form, or even no form, to express themselves, because purity of self-expression was the ultimate goal.

Free verse caught on quickly, and by the 1920s became the most popular form of verse among the leading innovators of the day, especially among English-language poets. Such poets as Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and William Carlos Williams allowed the mood and the subject matter to determine the length and rhythm of lines. This does not mean that traditional verse structures were abandoned; on the contrary, poets continue to employ them today. Even Eliot and Pound wrote poems using verse structure. But this group□known as the "modernists"□demanded the right to use them at will, and even to move in and out of them in the same poem.

Silko's poem is a perfect example of free verse. The subject matter determines the length of the line; she generally gives one complete thought in each line. In addition, the poem, read aloud, bears a distinct resemblance to the kinds of chants used in traditional Native American ceremonies. We do not have here the short lines of a poet like Williams, nor do we have the lengthy, declamatory lines of Whitman or Pound. These lines are quiet, respectful. They give equal weight to a long description with many adjectives as they do to the representation of the wolf's howl. They demand a pause at the beginning and the end, but at the same time they have a singsong quality that helps them interlock.

Historical Context

Silko's writing is saturated with the facts and traditions of her Laguna Pueblo heritage. As well, Silko's writing also exhibits the influences of contemporary American society. She does not live separated from the world; rather, even as she has delved mentally and spiritually into the roots of her native heritage, she remains deeply involved with the outside world, and currently teaches at the University ofArizona in Tucson.

But to understand Silko's writing it is necessary to briefly outline the historical place of the New Mexico pueblo tribes. The groups of American Indians collectively known as the Pueblo groups inhabit the Southwest, particularly the present-day states of New Mexico and Arizona. These tribes built permanent structures as their community dwellings. These "pueblos" are in essence apartment buildings in which tribe members live. In addition, each pueblo had at least one "kiva," an underground room in which religious ceremonies and tribal governance took place.

These pueblo groups have been in close contact with Europeans for much longer than many other American Indian tribes. The New Mexico and Arizona territory was once part of Mexico, and Spanish explorers and Franciscan missionaries were familiar with these peoples before the American Revolution. Mexico encouraged settlement in these lands, and so before these tribes knew the Anglo settlers of the United States they were living in close proximity to Mexican citizens.

The United States took over this land as a result of the Mexican-American War of the 1830s, but for a long time it remained simply territory. New Mexico did not become a state until after World War II. When the United States took over the New Mexico territory, it recognized the independence of these pueblos. Today, small independent pueblos can be found all over the state. Silko' s home, the Laguna Pueblo, is one of these. These pueblos are officially reservations, yet they are dwarfed by the vast Navajo Reservation that stretches over much of New Mexico and Arizona. The pueblos are self-governing entities with their own police forces and social services. Tourism has begun to encroach on some of the pueblos□the Taos Pueblo, located as it is next to a very popular ski resort town, is a particular example□but the pueblo dwellers (the pueblo structures themselves do not house the majority of the residents, who live on the reservation's territory) maintain their independence and distinctiveness even as they occasionally encourage tourists to view the pueblo and some of their ceremonies.

Like other Native American peoples, the pueblo tribes have a close and intertwined relationship with the natural world. In her essay on "The Psychological Landscape of [Silko's novel] *Ceremony,*" Paula Gunn Allen writes that "the fundamental idea of Native American life [is that] the land and the People are the same." The landscape, the seasons, and the animals that inhabit the world are all integral parts of Native American life. "Four Mountain Wolves" is a description of wolves migrating south in search of food, certainly, but the animals represent more than just predation. Wolves were important to many tribes. The Pawnee, when on the warpath, would simulate wolves and wear wolf

skins. A Cheyenne war song speaks of leaving the tribe's opponents for the wolves to eat, but also talks about how warriors must be as the wolf.

One northern Mexican tribe continues to protect the wolf even as ranchers in the area seek to make the animal extinct.

If Native American tribes rhetorically constructed their closeness to nature in general and the wolf in particular, the U.S. government, in its drive to "tame" and settle the vast Western territories, argued the opposite. In the United States during the late 1800s and early 1900s, government-organized campaigns to wipe out the wolf□using poison, especially strychnine□in recently-settled areas were largely successful, and at the same time wolf-hunters rhetorically portrayed wolves as evil, cowardly, treacherous beasts that must be exterminated. Ironically, much the same rhetoric was being used at the same time to argue for one solution to the "Indian problem." Today, the U.S. Department of the Interior seeks to reintroduce the wolf to the West□with mixed results.

Critical Overview

Appearing in one of the first books that presented the work of the burgeoning Native American Renaissance, "Four Mountain Wolves" received almost no attention when it initially was published, and has, in fact, almost never been mentioned in any discussion of Silko's work as a whole. Although her first published book, *Laguna Woman,* was a collection of poetry, Silko is best known as a prose writer. Her novel *Ceremony* and her two later books *Storyteller* and *Almanac of the Dead* are the cornerstones on which her considerable literary reputation rest. Criticism of those works often focuses on how Silko melds Euro-American literary traditions with traditional Native American and specifically Laguna forms.

But this is not to say that no critic has written about Silko's poetry. William Clements remarks, in an overview of Silko's career that appeared in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* that "Silko's poems reflect her roots in Laguna culture and the landscape of the Southwest. They also reiterate her theme of the adaptability and dynamism of Native American traditions." Elsewhere, Clements also notes that "The brevity of the poems [of the *Laguna Woman* collection], the visual effects of short stanzas and indentations of individual words or short phrases that often trail across the page, and the avoidance of conventional stanza length, meter, and rhyme all suggest the influences of the modernist lyric poem expressed in free verse. Silko does, however, use repetition occasionally in combination with indentation and separation of words and phrases to create a chant like drive and urgency in her poems."

Silko herself perhaps provides the most telling explanation of her techniques and her location at the crossroads of cultures in the biographical note she provided for *Voices from the Rainbow,* the anthology in which "Four Mountain Wolves" appears. "My family are the Marmons at Old Laguna on the Laguna Pueblo Reservation where I grew up. We are mixed bloods□Laguna, Mexican, white□but the way we live is like Marmons, and if you are from Laguna Pueblo you will understand what I mean. All those languages, all those ways of living are combined, and we live somewhere on the fringes of all three. But I don't apologize for this any more□not to whites, not to full bloods□ our origin is unlike any other. My poetry, my storytelling rise out of this source."

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

Barnhisel holds a Ph.D in American literature. In this essay, he discusses the mythical and symbolic underpinnings of "Four Mountain Wolves" and about its themes of melding and combination.

Leslie Marmon Silko's poem "Four Mountain Wolves" is at first glance a simple poem. It appears to be merely a description of a number of wolves who travel from the northeast to the southwest during a particularly harsh winter. But the poem is much more than this. The poem represents the close relationship with nature characteristic of Native American cultures. The wolf is violent, threatening, but portrayed almost flatly. Its threat is represented as something profoundly natural and normal. Rather than representing an imminent threat to humans, these hungry wolves are simply manifestations of the primal drives of nature.

The poem is also deeply involved with the symbolic geography and the cosmology of the Laguna people. Silko, of mixed heritage (white, Native American, and Mexican) grew up in the Laguna pueblo. Her grandmother Lillie and her "Aunt Susie" (another relative) knew the old stories, and passed them on to Silko at an early age. In *Storyteller,* Silko says that they gave her "an entire culture by word of mouth." The wolves in the poem and the narrator's attitude toward them represent Native Americans' relation to nature, certainly, but they also represent much deeper and more specific elements of Laguna thought and spirituality.

Just who these wolves are, and even how many wolves there are, can be confusing. The poet muddles the numerology of the poem: although the title is "Four Mountain Wolves," five wolves are described. Moreover, there are three sections to the poem. The poem begins simply enough, with the first numbered section entirely devoted to a description of one animal, the "gray mist wolf." This leads readers to expect there to be four sections, each devoted to a description of one discrete wolf. And the second section, entirely devoted to the "swirling snow wolf," continues with this structure.

But Silko confounds our expectations. The third and final section of the poem describes three distinct wolves: the "mountain white mist wolf," the "gray fog wolf," and a "lean wolf running." How many wolves are there? Are there five□these three and the two from the previous stanzas? Or perhaps is the "mountain white mist wolf' and the "swirling snow wolf the same animal, the "gray mist wolf' and the "gray fog wolf' the same, and the "lean wolf running" a different wolf? In that case, there are only three. Silko is apparently blurring the easy distinction between the wolves on purpose, perhaps in a way that mirrors her melding of the Western and native traditions.

But in one way of reading the poem, there are indeed four wolves. To arrive at this conclusion we must start by looking at the specific attributes of the wolves as Silko describes them. We learn the most specific information about the first wolf. It is traveling over the wintry landscape from the northeast□the poem takes place in Chinle, Arizona, a town in the middle of the Navajo reservation near the Canyon de Chelly, so the wolves

are most likely coining from southern Utah or southwestern Colorado□and is journeying over "deep snow crust" because of hunger. This wolf is described in terms of specific, physical details. The next wolf, though, is characterized much more in symbolic, metaphorical terms. The narrator calls to the swirling snow wolf to "tear the heart from the silence / rip the tongue from the darkness / Shake the earth with your dreaming / and explode gray ice dreams of eternity." This wolf's attributes are cosmic; the narrator sees it as the manifestation of nature's power, threat, and potential violence.

The final stanza combines the two types of wolf□the real and the metaphorical. The "mountain white mist wolf' is purely physical, pictured with "frozen crystals on silver hair" and "icy whiskers," while the "gray fog wolf' has been "traveling the years." Finally, the "lean wolf running" combines the two□it is physical in that it eyes a pregnant elk, but it also runs "where miles become faded in time." The poem's four wolves□ two physical, two metaphorical□become one.

But it is not only the wolves that meld in the final stanza. The last section of the final stanza brings all of the elements of the poem□the narrator, the wolves, the physical world, the metaphorical world, the cosmos, and even the elk□together. The narrator addresses the wolf but also becomes it□"the urge the desire is always with me," the narrator says, referring to the wolf's predatory urges and its need to migrate. As the physical world and the cosmic world are combined in the "lean wolf running," the elk also takes part in this: it is "startled into eternity." The poem even suggests the Einsteinian impossibility of separating time and space when the narrator says that the wolf is running "where miles become faded in time."

The poem is about the melding of things. It also melds elements even in its structure. The poem is clearly influenced by the technique of free verse that was developed by nineteenth century poets such as Walt Whitman and that gained great popularity with the writings of the modernist poets of the 1910s and 1920s. Free verse allows the subject matter of a line to dictate its length and rhythm, and in "Four Mountain Wolves" Silko uses this to imitate the rhythm of a traditional Native American chant and the sounds of a wolf howl. In the way that its sound attempts to arrive at a place somewhere between animal and human, "Four Mountain Wolves" is reminiscent of poems like Ezra Pound's well-known "The Return," a poem about the tentative steps taken by the Greek demigods as they come back to life. In its quiet, respectful, yet encouraging tone, Silko's poem echoes Pound's.

Silko uses these Western techniques in order to describe a scene that is profoundly American Indian in spiritual resonance. The details of the poem derive from Silko's deep understanding of the cosmology of her people. The literary critic Edith Swan, writing in *American Indian Quarterly,* describes in detail the symbolic geography of the Laguna world. For the Laguna, the four cardinal directions each represent a color, and these equivalencies come from the mythology of the underworld. "Folklore," Swan writes, "depicts the gradual upward progress of the people who still appear in their supernatural form. They climb from one world to the next, successively going from the white to the red, blue, and yellow worlds ... This sequence of colors provides a code synonymous with the cardinal directions of east, south, west, and north; both series signify upward

movement." The world moves, according to Laguna cosmology, counterclockwise: from north to west, and this first movement is the same path that the gray mist wolf travels. The northeast represents the winter solstice. In this cosmology, things will then move to the south and then back up to the east, which is the direction that also represents the wolf and the coyote.

Although this system is complicated and applying it to this poem is difficult, Silko seems to be using it. Her wolves travel from the north (the winter, the beginning of things) in a southwesterly direction, toward the Laguna people and toward the warmer seasons. They will return to the east, the direction whose attributes include the autumn and the color white. Her wolves' journeys mirror the cosmic organization of the Laguna world.

The colors of the poem also drive the meaning. Swan notes the way that colors are connected with the cardinal directions and with particular animals, seasons, and natural elements. In her interview with Laura Coltelli, collected in *Winged Words,* Silko discusses the importance of color to her novel *Ceremony,* a discussion that also applies to this poem. White and gray dominate the poem. Frost, snow, ice, the fur on a snow wolf, all suggest whiteness. Referring to *Ceremony,* Silko said that "the key figure is the field of white, if you want to talk about the field of white like a painter, the blank or whatever." And in this poem, white dominates both the animals and the snowy landscape.

But in the second section the narrator describes the wind as "yellow-eyed." Yellow, Silko has stated, "in the Pueblo culture is an important color. It's a color connected with the East, and corn, and corn pollen, and dawn. So I don't think we can go too far in a traditional direction, with what yellow means." In the poem, the wolf, characterized by the wintry, northern color white, travels to the southwest (as the sun does in the winter). But it is not only associated with cold, winter, bleakness, and death, as it would be if it were only characterized by whiteness. The "yellow-eyed wind" that blows around the wolf gives it attributes of life. How can a creature that brings death and violence represent life and regeneration? It is here that the Native American belief structures about nature come into play. Death does not only represent death in this poem: as an integral part of nature, it also brings life, keeps life going. Things are circular. Even the wolf's journey is circular; the Laguna mythic structure suggests that it will eventually return to the east, where journeys end.

Source: Greg Barnhisel, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

Dean Rader is Assistant Professor of English at Texas Lutheran Univerity in Seguin, Texas. In the following essay, Rader uses the importance of the number 4 in Navajo culture to offer four different interpretations of Silko 's "Four Mountain Wolves."

In "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," Wallace Stevens suggests there are numerous ways (in this case thirteen) of looking at the world around us. In the poem, he creates a kind of trinity among the speaker, the landscape, and a blackbird to show the multiple options for interpreting one's relationship to nature, the imagination, and the self. The number thirteen is a somewhat random number for Stevens□the poem could just as easily have been about twenty-two or seven ways of looking at a blackbird□but that's not the case for the number four with Leslie Marmon Silko. In her poem "Four Mountain Wolves," Silko grounds her poem around the number four, a sacred number for the Navajo and in so doing, raises her poem above mere randomness. Just as Stevens uses the number thirteen to suggest that there are at least thirteen different ways of reading the world, I would like to use the number four to suggest four possible readings of Silko's "Four Mountain Wolves," the combination of which offers important insight into the world view of American Indian cultures of the Southwest.

Critical Essay #3

"Four Mountain Wolves" is set in Chinle, Arizona, in the middle of the Navajo reservation. Although Silko is not Navajo, (she is from the Laguna Pueblo in New Mexico), she is intimately familiar with the Navajo nation, or Dine, as they call themselves, which means "The People." Navajo lies about 200 miles northwest of Laguna and is the largest Native American nation in terms of sheer geographical space. One could also argue that Navajos take up the most cultural space in Native American imaginations, as they enjoy a distinguished reputation as warriors, survivors, farmers, and artisans. Additionally, Chinle is the sight of one of the most famous American Indian ruins, Canyon de Chelly, a gorgeous labyrinth of red rock and steep sedimented walls. This canyon was the home of the Anasazi, and most anthropologists believe that the Navajo and Pueblo people, of which Laguna belongs, are descendants of the Anasazi. So, the wolves in Silko's poem move through one of the most sacred spaces in one of the most important Native American nations in the world. In other words, this setting is not coincidental.

Neither is the number of wolves. As was stated earlier, the number four is a holy number for the Navajo: their nation is defined by four sacred mountains; they have four major colors; and both are associated with the four cardinal directions, the four seasons, and what the Dine believe are four different worlds. For the Dine, as for most Native Americans, there exists a strong and intrinsic relationship between humans, animals, and the natural world. All are alive; all have spirits; all need each other for survival. In her article about Silko, "The Psychological Landscape of Ceremony," fellow Laguna poet Paula Gunn Allen underscores this view: "We are the land. To the best of my understanding, that is the fundamental idea of Native American life; the land and the People are the same." Indeed, in "Four Mountain Wolves," the land takes on human and animal characteristics, for instance, "yellow-eyed wind" and "howling wind." In section two of the poem, it seems as though the wolf hunts and kills nature as though it were its prey:

tear the heart from the silence

rip the tongue from the darkness

Shake the earth with your breathing

and explode the gray ice dreams of eternity.

Note the similarities in this stanza and in the entire poem with another early poem by Silko, "In Cold Storm":

Out of the thick ice sky

running swiftly

pounding

swirling above the treetops

The snow elk come.

Moving, moving

white song

storm wind in the branches.

In both texts, we see animals moving among a snowy landscape; yet these are no ordinary animals and this no ordinary landscape. The urgency of both poems creates a sense of motion and turbulence. The landscape is alive, like the animals, and is moving, changing, growing, thriving. The landscape is not static and is not a backdrop for human epiphanies as one might find in much Romantic poetry. On the contrary, the environment is energy and life itself.

Thus, the poem serves as a kind of holy text it canonizes the vitality and sanctity of the Navajo world and consecrates the exchange of animal and nature.

Critical Essay #4

If, as Allen claims, the people are the land and the land are the people, we should assume the same kind of symbiotic relationship regarding animals and people. In fact, there are long traditions in Native American mythology of animals turning into people and vice versa. Sometimes, animals are people, though they are masking as animals. Traditionally, wolves are not major players in Navajo mythology and religion. Wolf's younger brother, Coyote, is the more popular canine mammal. However, wolves do carry important characteristics. For instance, in the Paiute story "Wolf Creates the Earth" Wolf possesses god-like abilities to create, an ability that might seem an attractive power for a writer who sees her role in life as creating worlds on the page. Similarly, Wolf is perceived to be more stable, more dependable than Coyote, who carries an infamous reputation as a trickster. In Navajo country, though, it is always possible that Wolf is a skinwalker, or in Navajo, *a yenaldlooshi.* Literally, *"yenaldlooshf* means "he who trots along here and there on all fours" but culturally, a *yenaldlooshi* is a human that wears the skin of a coyote or wolf and travels at night. Skinwalkers, or shapeshifters as they are sometimes called, have the ability to turn from animal to human; thus, they inhabit both worlds.

Given this information, how could this seemingly innocuous poem about four wolves also be about Silko herself? There are several likely responses to this question, all of which presuppose a connection between the wolves and Silko herself; in fact, one might argue that the wolves are Silko. One way in which Silko might identify with the wolf is in terms of solitude. Writers often feel as though they live on the margins of society, alienated from mainstream society. In the poem, the "lone wolf' is indeed alone. It can rely on no one and must sustain itself. Its only trace is its voice, a realization a writer might also share. No doubt Silko is aware of Wolf's ability to shout the world into being, as in the Paiute story. And, as a writer and as a storyteller, she appreciates and reveres the primal power of words to make worlds. In this sense, the wolf's singing in stanza one might be her own.

Perhaps Silko relates to the *yenaldlooshi* aspect of the wolf. For her, the wolf could function as a powerful embodiment of the belief that we share the *spiritus mundi* with animals, that on some level, there is no distinction between human and animal.

On a more literal level, the poem might also be about the concerns of aging. The Navajo peak to the North, which is most likelyBlack Mountain, is associated with both old age and death. Similarly, the four different wolves might suggest, for Silko, four different stages of life. The energetic violent wolf of section two evokes the volatility of youth, whereas the "silver hair[ed]" and "icy whisker[ed]" wolf that has "traveled the years" and "Call[ed] to the centuries" intimates a feeling of age. The "Lean wolf running" in the final stanza might suggest a kind of spirit wolf, a timeless being for whom miles and years fall at the feet of "urge" and "desire." Perhaps like this wolf, Silko's words will themselves endure "into eternity."

Critical Essay #5

In *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions,* Paula Gunn Allen correctly notes that many Indian writers "derive many of their structural and symbolic elements from certain rituals." While "Four Mountain Wolves" could very easily be a poem describing four different wolves among four different landscapes, it could just as easily be a creative play on a Native American ritual in which a shaman embodies or becomes a wolf in a ceremony. In a Native American ceremony, and in particular, a Navajo chant, a singer not only narrates a story but in so doing, actually becomes that which he is ritualizing. In her important book *Navajo Religion: A Study of Symbolism,* G. A. Reichard, a scholar of Navajo folklore and mythology, claims that Wolf plays an important role in the Flint chant, a ritual for healing in which "Dark wolf represents Bear; White Wolf, Wolf himself; Yellow Wolf, Mountain Lion; Pink Wolf represents all these ... as well as Otter." Though the wolves in Silko's poem do not, by color, correspond to the wolves in the Flint chant, it is possible that the various wolves are not wolves at all but other animals, such as the mountain lion, bear and otter.

Just as the poem articulates an interchange between human and animal, so might it engender an interchange between animal and animal.

Furthermore, return to the singing in lines 4-6:

over the deep snow crust singing Ah ouoo Ah ouoo

Silko does not tell us who is singing. Is it a wolf? Is it Wolf himself? Is it a singer in a chant, mimicking the wolf, ritualizing his voice through ceremony?

Rituals also move in a cycle in that they contain circular structures that suggest a wholeness, unity. Silko's poem possesses similar circularity. Notice how the words used to describe the wolves suggest a kind of incantation, a repetition befitting a ritual. Also, the poem ends with the wolf moving again, a gesture that reinscribes him into the flux of nature and positions him among the sacred mountain.

Finally, if the poem is a sort of ritual, then the purpose of the poem would be to heal or to restore the wolf. This happens. The lonely, hungry wolf, driven by wind and hunger, ultimately finds a "swollen belly elk" that will provide him nourishment and sustenance that initiates both the elk and the wolf back into the cycles of life.

Critical Essay #6

Though each of the above readings offer tenable access to Silko's text, the reading that may be the most useful and the most provocative is a reading that acknowledges the ever-important motif of survival. Over the past 40 years, one of the most pervasive and most critical themes of American Indian expression is the ability of Native American peoples to survive. Despite government orders of removal, the Trail of Tears, the smallpox blankets that killed thousands, the massacres of women and children, and the government bounty on Native American heads, American Indians have managed not only to endure but to endure with dignity, authenticity and cultural relevancy. It might be suggested that in "Four Mountain Wolves" Silko aligns the wolves with the station of contemporary American Indians. Like the wolf, Native Americans often find themselves cut off from the "America," yet, through spiritual and natural renewal and through cultural practice and preservation, they manage not only to survive, but to keep moving with power and authority.

In her poem "Indian Song: Survival," written about the same time as "Four Mountain Wolves," Silko uses the journey motif to connect Indian survival with landscape and progress:

Mountain forest wind travels east and I answer:

taste me.

I am the wind

touch me.

I am the lean gray deer

running on the edge of the rainbow.

The technique of locating the serf and a culture in an individual animal occurs not only in this poem but also in "Four Mountain Wolves." Just as the deer follows the edge of the rainbow, so does the wolf "follow the edge of the sun." For Native Americans, cultural survival is incumbent upon reclaiming and rejuvenating their connection to nature.

If we think of the origination of the poem at Canyon de Chelly, at the site of the Anasazi, whose name means, "Ancient Ones," then the poem functions as an allegory, and the wolf represents the Native American journey from the past through the centuries to the present. The fact that time (and perhaps white people) are rendered frozen, afraid (their fear is your triumph / they huddle in the distances / weak), is a testament to the ability of Native American people to persist.

The final stanza might symbolize a union between Native American visions of the future and the simple abundance of the American dream. American Indians want not merely to

survive but to live well. Silko dreams of the green-eyed wolf who eats the swollen elk, who, well fed, well nourished, and reinserted into the forces of nature runs wild, free, into eternity.

Critical Essay #7

By themselves, the above readings are a bit reductive. However, if one sees them as interrelated, as part and parcel of each other, then they open up Silko's text and Native American expression to possibility and interpretation in interesting ways. In fact, because Laguna and Dine, people cannot separate the self from animals from nature from cultural history, neither should the reader. Perhaps like the sacred Navajo mountains, the four peaks of this essay will outline a matrix of interpretive interchange between you, Silko, and everything in between.

Source: Dean Rader, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale, 2000.

Topics for Further Study

Landscape is an important element of Silko's poem, and the specific landscape of the New Mexico mountains is a fundamental part of the tribal lives of the pueblo Indians. Research the natural environment of such New Mexico peoples as the Taos, Jemez, and Laguna pueblos. What is the land like? What natural resources did the people use to survive? What animals did they use, and which did they fear?

The wolf is an animal that figures in much of Native American writing, both contemporary and traditional. Research the importance of the wolf as a metaphorical, mythical, and actual figure in the literatures of the Indians of North America. How does the wolfs role differ in the literatures of peoples from different areas? You might want to look at such tribes and groups as the Sioux, the Iroquois and Algonquins, the Indians of the northwest coast, and the pueblo peoples of the Southwest.

Do some research on Native American literature, especially the oral literature of traditional storytelling and chants. What purposes do these stories and chants serve? What forms do they take? What are some recurring characters and figures in these stories? How do the stories differ from tribe to tribe and region to region?

Compare and Contrast

1973: President Richard Nixon, just re-elected in November 1972, comes under fire for his possible involvement in the Watergate scandal. In the following year, Nixon's impeachment is recommended and he resigns from office.

1998-1999: President Bill Clinton comes under fire for lying under oath and covering up his sexual relationship with a White House intern, Monica Lewinsky. The Senate does not find him guilty of the "high crimes and misdemeanors" necessary to remove him from office.

1973: The social movements for civil rights and against the war in Vietnam engender other related movements. One is the feminist movement. Another is the environmental movement. For the first time in U.S. history, Congress debates laws intended to protect natural resources such as clean air and water from corporate and individual polluters. President Nixon supports some of these ideas.

2000: Both Democratic candidates for President, Al Gore and Bill Bradley, wholeheartedly endorse an environmental agenda. The leading Republican candidates, George W. Bush and John McCain, pay their respects to the environmental movement but are criticized by environmental groups.

1973: Pressure from the oil-producing countries of the Middle East, political instability in the region, and (many suspect) machinations by American oil companies cause oil and gasoline prices to skyrocket. In response, Americans begin demanding smaller, more fuel-efficient cars.

2000: Lasting economic good times and steadily low gas prices cause many Americans to buy large "sport-utility vehicles" that consume a great deal of gasoline. The Japanese companies that produced small, fuel-efficient cars in the leaner 1970s and 1980s join in the rush to make the popular "SUV's. But in early 2000, the highest gasoline prices in ten years cause many Americans to think about buying smaller cars again.

1973: The "Cold War" between the United States and the Soviet Union has begun to thaw slightly because of Nixon's policy of "detente." Still, the countries eye each other suspiciously.

2000: More than ten years after the Soviet "empire" fell, Russia is unstable. Its transition to a capitalist economy has primarily enriched corrupt officials and organized-crime figures; it is engaged in brutal war against Chechnya, a breakaway territory; and its constitutional system of government seems susceptible to a charismatic dictator. Moreover, the poverty that has Russia in its grip is also affecting the scientists and officials with control over the old Soviet weapons of mass destruction, and Western diplomats and politicians fear that these impoverished scientists and bureaucrats might sell those weapons to terrorists.

What Do I Read Next?

Barry Lopez's 1978 study *Of Wolves and Men* is an eloquent, lyrical study of the animal that inspires a primitive fear in humans. Lopez's book is not quite a monograph, not quite an expressive essay, and not quite a scientific study; rather, it is a meditation on this animal, both its real and mythical characteristics.

Native American Renaissance by Kenneth Lincoln was one of the first, and remains one of the most important, studies of the flowering of writing by Native American authors in the late 1960s and the 1970s. Lincoln looks at large themes and specific authors, and spends much time discussing Silko's work.

The Crossing by El Paso-based novelist Cormac McCarthy is primarily a story of a young New Mexico cowboy who travels back and forth across the Mexican-U.S. border. However, the novel begins with an unforgettable story of how this main character traps a female wolf that has come onto his family's land from Mexico. After trapping the wolf, the protagonist frees her and takes her back to her home in Mexico. Especially memorable is a passage early in the book told from the wolfs point of view.

Silko's best-known work is her 1977 novel *Ceremony,* the story of a Native American World War II veteran who returns to his homeland only to feel out of place. The character, Tayo, must rediscover the spiritual and mythical roots of his people in order to reorient himself. Another important work by Silko is her encyclopedic *Storyteller,* a combination of a novel, a compilation of traditional stories, a poetry collection, and a book of photographs.

Further Study

Allen, Paula Gunn, "The Feminine Landscape of Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony,* in *Studies in American Indian Literature,* edited by Paula Gunn Allen, New York: Modern Language Association, 1983, pp. 127-33.

Allen looks at the close relationship between Native American ideas of nature and Silko's writing. She particularly focuses on how Silko uses feminine attributes of landscape.

Manley, Kathleen, "Leslie Marmon Silko's Use of Color in *Ceremony,* in *Southern Folklore,* Vol. 46, No. 2, 1989, pp. 133-146.

Manley looks at the symbolic value of various colors in Silko's most famous novel. Her insights about the importance of colors in Laguna mythology, though, apply to Silko's poetry, as well.

Nelson, Robert M., *Place andVision: The Function of Landscape in Native American Fiction,* New York: Peter Lang, 1993.

Nelson examines the uses that Native American writers have for landscape and nature. Although Nelson's subject is specifically fiction, the importance of nature and landscape is perhaps even greater in American Indian poetry.

Swan, Edith, "Laguna Symbolic Geography and Silko's *Ceremony, "* in *American Indian Quarterly,* Vol. 12, No. 3, 1988, pp. 229-249.

This discussion of the symbolic geography of Laguna mythology is crucial to any understanding of the philosophical underpinnings of the symbols in Silko's writing.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

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Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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