Lullaby Study Guide

Lullaby by Leslie Marmon Silko

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Leslie Marmon Silko is one of the most celebrated Native American writers of her generation. Her short story "Lullaby" first appeared in *Storyteller* (1981), a book in which she interweaves autobiographical reminiscences, short stories, poetry, photographs of her family (taken by her father) and traditional songs. The book as a whole is concerned with the oral tradition of storytelling in Native American culture. Through a variety of formats, Silko attempts to reproduce the effect of oral storytelling in a written English form. She is also concerned with the transformative power of storytelling in the lives of her characters and the role of storytelling in maintaining cultural traditions and intergenerational ties, particularly in a matrilinear line from grandmother to granddaughter.

"Lullaby" is one of the most noted pieces in *Storyteller.* It is told from the perspective of an old woman reminiscing about some of the most tragic events of her life, all of which seem to be precipitated by the intrusions of white authority figures into her home. She recalls being informed of the death of her son in war, the loss of her children taken by white doctors, and the exploitative treatment of her husband by the white rancher who employs him. Furthermore, these events seem to have led to a long-term alienation between the old woman and her husband. Yet she also recalls strong ties with her own grandmother and mother.

While much of the story is told in terms of these reminiscences, the present tense of the story finds the old woman searching for her husband at the local bar. The lullaby she sings to her husband at the end of the story, as he lies dying in the snow, brings the oral tradition full circle, as she recalls this song that her grandmother sang to her as a child. In addition to appearing in the *Chicago Review* and *Yardbird Reader*, "Lullaby" has been anthologized in *The Best American Short Stories* of 1975, edited by Martha Foley.

Author Biography

Leslie Marmon Silko was born on March 5, 1948, in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Silko was raised on the Laguna Pueblo Reservation in northern New Mexico, her cultural and ethnic heritage a mix of Laguna Pueblo, Plains Indian, Mexican, and Anglo-American. She attended schools run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and Catholic schools in Albuquerque. Also central to her education were several generations of women in her family, such as her grandmother and aunt, from whom she learned much about her cultural traditions. In 1969, she received her B.A. from the University of New Mexico, where she graduated summa cum laude. Her short story "The Man to Send Rain Clouds" was first published while she was still in college, and has since been reprinted in several anthologies. She briefly attended law school, but left in order to pursue a career in writing. Silko has taught at Navajo Community College in Tsaile, Arizona; the University of New Mexico; and the department of English at the University of Arizona, Tucson. She spent two years living in Alaska, where she wrote her first novel, *Ceremony* (1977).

Silko's writing emerged from the revival of Native American literature in the 1970s referred to as the Native American Renaissance. It was the positive critical response to *Ceremony* which first established Silko's place as one of the most celebrated Native American writers of her generation. *Ceremony* established her characteristic literary style of incorporating the oral tradition of storytelling in Native American culture into the novelistic, poetic, and short story form. As a result, some of Silko's earlier short stories garnered renewed attention, and many of them have since been anthologized in collections of Native American literature. Her collection *Storyteller,* in which "Lullaby" appears, combines fiction and non-fiction stories with poetry and photographs taken by her father, a professional photographer.

Upon receiving a distinguished MacArthur Foundation grant in 1981, Silko was able to use her time working on her epic-scale novel *Almanac of the Dead* (1992). *Almanac of the Dead* focuses on a mixed-race family over five centuries of struggle between Native American and European American cultures. The work took her ten years to write, and has received mixed critical response. Her series of films based on Laguna oral traditions was made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Silko has since taken up the production of books made by her own hands, under her own imprint Flood Plains Press, in addition to publishing a collection of essays on contemporary Native American life. Her novel *Gardens in the Dunes* was published in 1999.

Plot Summary

"Lullaby" begins with Ayah, an old Native American woman, leaning against a tree near a stream, reminiscing about some of the most tragic events of her life, as well as about the role of her grandmother in some of the most happy events of her life: "She was an old woman now, and her life had become memories." She recalls watching her mother weaving outside on a big loom, while her grandmother spun wool into yarn. She remembers her mother and the old woman who helped her give birth to her first child, Jimmie. Yet she also recalls the time the white man came to her door to announce that Jimmie had died in a helicopter crash in the war. Because Ayah could not speak English, her husband, Chato, had to translate the tragic news to her.

Even more devastating, however, is her memory of the time her two young children, Danny and Ella, were taken away from her. White doctors came to her house, trying to get her to sign some piece of paper. Because she did not know English, and could not read, she signed the paper simply out of fear, in hopes that they would go away. After she signed it, however, they attempted to take her children away with them. She grabbed the two children and ran up into the hills. She waited there all day, until Chato came home. The doctors had chased her at first, but gave up and left. When the doctors came back the next day, with a policeman from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Chato spoke to them, and then explained to her that the paper she had signed gave them permission to take the children away. Their grandmother had died of tuberculosis, and they claimed the children had contracted it as well. After this, Ayah blamed Chato for the loss of the children, because he had taught her how to sign her name. This created a rift in their relationship, and they began to sleep apart.

The first time the children were brought back to visit, they are accompanied by two white women. Ayah recalls that the white women were nervous and anxious in her home, were perturbed when the children spoke to her in their native language, and judged her to be an unfit mother for them. The last time the children were brought to visit, they could no longer even speak to their mother in her own language, and Ella, who was taken away as an infant, did not seem to recognize her.

She also remembers when, years later, the white rancher said Chato was too old to work any more, and threatened to evict them. After the couple began receiving federal assistance checks in order to survive, Chato would cash the check and immediately go spend it at the bar. In the present tense of the story, Ayah goes there to look for him. When she does not find him there, she goes out in the snow to search for him, and comes upon him walking toward home. When they stop to rest, he lies down in the snow, and she realizes that he is dying. She tucks a blanket around him and begins to sing a lullaby her grandmother had sung when she was little: "And she sang the only song she knew how to sing for babies. She could not remember if she had ever sung it to her children, but she knew that her grandmother had sung it and her mother had sung it."

Section 1

Section 1 Summary

The story begins in the middle of winter with the main character, Ayah, standing outside in the snow, wrapped in her son's blanket. She is in Navajo country, reflecting on her life and losses. She is aware of the forces of nature - the sun, the wind and the snow - and this awareness triggers memories of her past.

She remembers that she had been proud when her husband Chato first taught her to sign her name in English. She remembers that it was only later that she realized learning to sign her name meant losing her children, Ella and Danny. A white doctor and policeman had come to her home and told her that her children were sick and that they had to take them away. Ayah had not believed that her children were sick but the white men told her that, because she had signed their papers, they had the right to take her children. Then, she hated her husband for learning the white man's language and for doing nothing to stop the white policemen from taking their children. She remembers that when her son Jimmie was killed in World War II, it was another government white man who had come to tell her of her loss.

Ayah reflects on how safe she felt as a little girl when she watched her mother weave blankets and how connected her people used to be to their environment. She remembers when her people wore their traditional clothing instead of the white man's clothing that they wear now. She ponders what she has lost as a Navajo Indian living and working on a white man's ranch.

Ayah recalls the day Jimmie was born, and how her mother had led her to the birthing stone while everyone else slept. She tries to remember all the details of his birth but realizes that the memories of all her children's births have merged into one.

She remembers when she and her husband were forced to move away from the white man's ranch because they were too old to work any longer, and how surprised her husband was at how quickly they were replaced with a younger couple.

Section 1 Analysis

In this part, Ayah reflects on the past and the negative effect the white man had on her life as a Navajo Indian. In the following sections, Ayah's past will serve as the backdrop against which her present will contract.

Ayah is not only wrapped in her son Jimmie's blanket, she is also wrapped in sorrow. She finds comfort through her memories. Her memories of blanket weaving, the traditional birthing ceremony and her mother represent the traditional ways of the Navajo people. Ayah's memories of her mother connect the feelings of peace and safety

to the Navajo way of life, while her memories of the white man are linked to sorrow and loss.

This section also introduces the strength with which Ayah feels love and fear for the stolen children and betrayed by her husband who taught her to sign her name.

Section 2

Section 2 Summary

Ayah, still wrapped in Jimmie's blanket, is searching for her husband who has taken their government check into town. Every month he cashes their check and spends the money on alcohol. Because Chato acts like a white man, he is permitted to enter the bars where other Indians are not welcome. Ayah resents having to look for him but she does so because she believes it is her duty as a Navajo wife.

She looks for him in the usual bars he frequents and, because she is an old woman, the white people do not prevent her from entering. Years ago, they would have thrown her out for being an Indian, but now they just watch her.

As she searches for her husband, she remembers a time she saw her children after they had been taken away: she had realized then that they were being made into white children, divorced from their Navajo heritage.

Section 2 Analysis

This section focuses on the result of the white man's intervention with the Navajo people in general, and Ayah's family specifically: a once proud Navajo man, Ayah's husband, becomes a shell, and Ayah's children lose the history and connection to their heritage. It also touches on the fact that, while some things have changed, many other things have remained the same. For example, she is allowed into a bar that she previously was not allowed to enter, yet the patrons in the bar still stare at her.

Throughout the story, Jimmie's blanket is wrapped around Ayah. It is a representation of her connection with her immediate family and her Navajo traditions.

Section 3

Section 3 Summary

Ayah really does not care about the money that her husband is spending: she is concerned for his well-being. She actually hopes that the money is gone so she can find him and take him home. The only reason why Ayah and her husband accept the government money is because their farm is too dry to grow anything and it is the only way they have to survive. Out of respect for their traditional ways, Ayah and her husband still plant their garden every year; though they know, nothing will grow.

Ayah understands that the people staring at her are doing so out of fear. She does not understand why they would be afraid, but she walks proudly as they watch her. She has pride in herself for not changing into what the white man wanted, and pride in the fact that she was born a Navajo Indian.

Section 3 Analysis

Ayah understands that her husband drinks because he is ashamed. Ayah has no pity for him because she believes the life they are living is due to his choices to learn English and to live and work on the white man's ranch. She knows that, though he thinks he has, Chato has never understood the white man's way. He did not realize that they would be made to leave the ranch when they became too old to be useful because, among the Navajo, elders are not discarded when they can no longer work.

Even though the white man has destroyed the old way of living, Ayah has not changed. The white man has failed to take away her identity and her awareness of being Navajo.

Section 4

Section 4 Summary

Ayah finds her husband drunk, shuffling down the road. She realizes that he is old and that his mind is slipping: sometimes he forgets who she is, or where he is. Sometimes he thinks he is still supposed to be working at the white man's ranch.

As they walk toward home, Ayah and her husband stop to rest. They huddle together among the black rocks of Navajo country, wrapped in Jimmie's blanket. Ayah gazes up into the night sky and remembers the old ways as her husband falls asleep beside her. It is very cold and she realizes that he would not feel anything if he were to stay asleep in the cold. She remembers an old Indian lullaby that her grandmother sang to her mother and her mother sang to her. Though Ayah cannot remember singing it to her children, she sings it now, to her peacefully sleeping husband.

Section 4 Analysis

This section indicates that Ayah has found peace. The blanket is still present and represents both her children and her Navajo traditions. The fact that she and her husband are wrapped together in the blanket implies that she now feels connected to her husband, her children and her Navajo traditions. The child's lullaby she sings represents the climax of two of the story's main themes: it acknowledges the significance of her family (her grandmother and her mother both had sung this lullaby) and it celebrates the Navajo belief in the interconnectedness of nature and life. While Ayah understands that the peace she feels comes from the acceptance of her and her husband's deaths as they freeze, it is clear through the words in the lullaby that Ayah does not believe that they are dying. Instead, Ayah believes that they are completing the circle of life.

Characters

Ayah

Ayah is the main character and narrator. In the present tense of the story, Ayah is an old woman reflecting on her personal history: memories of her grandmother weaving outside, the birth of her first child, the death of her child Jimmie in war, and the loss of her two young children, who were taken away by white doctors. Ayah also recalls her husband, Chato, who, because he could speak English, served as the go-between in many of her significant interactions with white authorities. In the present time of the story, Ayah goes out to look for Chato, who has not yet come home for the evening. She looks for him at the bar, where he can usually be found on the days he receives and cashes their small assistance check, but he is not there. Leaving the bar, she eventually comes upon him walking home. They stop to rest, and Chato lies down in the snow. Seeing that he is about to die, Ayah wraps a blanket around him and sings him a lullaby she learned from her grandmother.

Chato

Chato is the husband of the story's narrator, Ayah. Because he speaks English and she does not, Chato serves the role of go-between in the family's interactions with white authority figures. When white people come to the door to inform them that their son, Jimmie, has died in the war, it is Chato who must translate the devastating news to Ayah. Chato works for the white rancher, who shows no sympathy when his leg is injured on the job. When the white doctors, and then the BIA police, come to take their two young children away from them, it is again Chato who must communicate to Ayah that she has unknowingly signed the children away to the white people. Because she blames him for the loss of their children, Ayah no longer sleeps with her husband after that point. As an old man, during the present tense of the story, Chato sometimes becomes confused, and she finds him walking toward the ranch, as if they still needed him to work there. On the days when their assistance check arrives, Chato cashes it and heads straight for the bar. After Ayah finds him walking in the snow, Chato lays down to rest. He dies, as Ayah sings him a lullaby.

Danny

Danny is Ayah and Chato's young son who is taken away from them by the white doctors.

The Doctors

The white doctors come to take Ayah and Chato's children away from them, because they have contracted tuberculosis from their grandmother. The doctors intimidate Ayah into signing a piece of paper which gives them permission to take the children away forever. Although she has no idea what she is signing, she does so because she is afraid of them and wants them to go away. When they try to take the children, she grabs

them and runs for the hills. They give up on chasing her, but come back later with a police officer and take the children, after which she rarely sees them again.

Ella

Ella is Ayah and Chato's young daughter who is taken away from them by the white doctors.

Grandmother

Ayah's grandmother does not appear in the present time of the story, but only in Ayah's reminiscences. Ayah recalls her grandmother spinning yarn from wool and passing on traditional songs. The grandmother is significant as the generational link in the matrilinear culture whereby women pass on tradition in the form of stories. When Chato is dying, Ayah sings him a lullaby her grandmother had sung to her.

Jimmie

Jimmie was Ayah's first-born child. When he died in a helicopter crash in the war, a white man came to the door to inform the family. The army blanket Ayah wraps around herself at the beginning of the story, and her dying husband Chato at the end of the story, had been sent to her by Jimmie while he was in combat.

The Policeman

The B.I.A. (Bureau of Indian Affairs) policeman appears the second time the white doctors come to claim Ayah and Chato's children. This character is significant in that he represents the Native American who helps the white authorities in the oppression and exploitation of other Native Americans.

The Rancher

The white rancher is Chato's employer. The rancher is another figure of white authority who contributes to the most tragic events in Ayah's life. When Chato injures his leg on the job, the rancher does not pay him. When he determines that Chato is too old to work, he evicts them from their house.

White Women

On the few occasions when Ayah's children are brought back to visit her, they are accompanied by white women, presumably teachers or social-worker- type figures. On the first visit, there is a blonde white woman and a thin white woman. They both seem to Ayah to be anxious and nervous in her home, and appear to be judging it as an unfit environment for raising the children. The white women also seem perturbed when Ayah's children speak to her in their native language.

Themes

Storytelling

The role of storytelling in Native American culture is a theme central to all of Silko's work. "Lullaby"appears in a collection entitled *Storyteller,* which is especially concerned with ways of translating the oral tradition of storytelling into a written English format. Ayah, the old woman who is the main character, does not tell a story directly to another person; however, the story is comprised of her reminiscences, which function as a form of internal storytelling. This written story captures the structure of an oral story, in that it weaves past memories and present occurrences through a series of associations, rather than in a set chronological order.

Tradition and Change

In all of her writing, Silko is concerned with the ways in which Native American traditions can be adapted to the contemporary circumstances of Native American life. Her characters are often caught between a traditional and a modern way of life. In this story, Ayah recalls such traditions as her mother weaving blankets on a loom set outside, while her grandmother spun the yarn from wool. This memory is evoked by Ayah's use of the old army blanket her son Jimmie had sent home from the war. Looking down at her worn shoes in the snow, she recalls the warm buckskin moccasins Native Americans had once worn. At the point of her husband's death, Ayah falls back on the singing of a traditional lullaby sung by her grandmother. The story suggests that, at such a profound event as the death of a loved one, such traditions such serve an important purpose, even in modern life.

Matrilinear Relationships

Silko's stories are often concerned with the granddaughter-grandmother relationship as a link between modern and traditional Native American culture. Silko herself learned much about her own tribal traditions from her grandmother and older female relatives. In this story, Ayah, as an old woman, recalls traditional forms of blanket-weaving, as practiced by her mother and grandmother. She also recalls giving birth to her first child with the aid of her mother. When her husband is dying, she turns to a traditional lullaby sung by her grandmother in order to comfort him through the process of death.

Death and Loss

Ayah's reminiscences focus mainly on the major losses in her life. The strong sense of nostalgia in the story expresses a sadness over the loss of traditional culture and ways of life, as well as pain and bitterness over the loss of all three of her children. Ayah had lost two infants already, but only to natural causes, and was comforted by burying them

in the land surrounding her home. The loss of her other children to white authorities, however, she finds more traumatizing. Her first child, Jimmie, dies in a helicopter crash during the war. She learns that his body may have been burned, so she does not have the opportunity to mourn his loss in a more traditional way. She later loses her two young children, Danny and Ella, to the white doctors who intimidate her into signing an agreement allowing them to take the children to a sanitarium. Ayah's final loss comes at the end of the story, when her husband Chato lies down in the snow, and she realizes that he is dying. In this story, Silko is concerned with the ways in which storytelling can heal and transform the experience of loss—both personal and cultural.

Racial and Cultural Oppression

All of the major tragedies of Ayah's life are precipitated by the intrusion of white authorities into her home. The cultural oppression of Native Americans in general is indicated through the personal losses Ayah has suffered at the hands of white culture. It is a white man who informs Ayah and Chato of this loss, symbolizing the larger racial issue of Native Americans dying in service to a nation that has oppressed them. Ayah's coercion into signing away her children also has much deeper implications in the context of Native American history. The near-genocide of Native Americans by the U.S. government in the nineteenth century was in part characterized by the practice of tricking Native Americans into signing "treaties" that worked to their disadvantage. Finally, the rancher who employs Chato is another symbol of oppressive white authority. When Chato breaks his leg on the job from falling off a horse, the rancher refuses to pay him until he is able to work again. And when he determines that Chato is too old to work, he fires him and kicks the old couple out of their home to make room for new workers. These actions add class oppression onto the conditions of racial oppression from which Ayah and her family suffer.

Language Barriers

The language barrier caused by her inability to understand the English- or Spanish-speaking white people adds to Ayah's experience of being taken advantage of by white people. When a white man comes to the door to inform them that their son Jimmie has died in the war, Ayah is unable to understand him; her husband Chato has to translate for her. The white doctors take advantage of Ayah's inability to understand English by bullying her into signing a piece of paper that gives them permission to take her children away. Although the children are occasionally brought back to visit Ayah, they eventually forget their native language, and can only speak English. The loss of their native language signifies the complete alienation of the children from their traditional Native American culture, as well as from their family.

Style

Narrative

"Lullaby" is told from the third-person-restricted point of view. That means that, although the narrator is not a character in the story, the perspective of the story is entirely from that of the main character, Ayah. An old woman in the present tense of the story, Ayah thinks back on key events in her life. The story thus interweaves the present time of the old woman sitting outside, then going to look for her husband at the local bar, with her memories from childhood through old age. The story is told in non-chronological order, jumping from one time period or incident to another and back again, reproducing the old woman's thought patterns rather than a standard narrative flow of events from beginning to end.

The Oral Tradition

In all of her work, Silko is interested in representing the storytelling style of the Native American oral tradition in the form of written English. Silko's narrative style of interweaving the old woman's memories of the past with her present circumstances creates a non-linear narrative, in which thoughts and memories circle back on one another. Silko also represents elements of the oral tradition in the story's ending; when she perceives that her husband Chato, lying curled up in the snow, is dying, Ayah sings a lullaby that her grandmother used to sing to her. This is an important element of the story, because Silko is particularly interested in the ways in which the oral tradition is passed on from grandmother to granddaughter.

Recurring Motif

A motif is a minor theme or element that recurs throughout the story, gathering significance with each new appearance. The blanket is a key motif in this story, as it links Ayah with her grandmother and her dead son Jimmie, in addition to associations with both life and death throughout her life. The blanket also reminds Ayah of happier times, sitting outside while her mother wove blankets on a big loom and her grandmother spun the yarn from raw wool. Here, the traditional handwoven blanket made from scratch by the women in the family serves as a metaphor for the passing of the oral tradition between generations of women—just as her mother and grandmother wove blankets in a traditional way, so Ayah carries on the tradition of weaving a tale in the style of the oral tradition. The old army blanket becomes even more significant at the end of the story, when Ayah wraps it around her husband as he lies curled up to die in the snow. The motif of the blanket is an important element of this story because it expresses Silko's concern with the ways in which Native Americans can combine traditional with contemporary culture in order to create meaning in their lives.

The Lullaby

The lullaby that lends the story its title, and ends it, is central to the story itself. The lullaby represents the passing of oral tradition from generation to generation of women in the Native American family: "She could not remember if she had ever sung it to her children, but she knew that her grandmother had sung it and her mother had sung it." When her husband is dying, this lullaby is the first thing that comes to her mind to sing to him as a means of comfort. The lullaby itself combines images of nature and family to affirm both in eternal unity.

Historical Context

The Native American Literary

A new generation of Native American writers emerged in the 1970s in what has been termed the Native American Renaissance in literature. Prominent writers of this generation include Leslie Silko, Paula Gunn Allen (b.1939), Louise Erdrich (b. 1954), Scott Momaday (b. 1934), James Welch (b. 1940), and others. Silko was in fact the first Native American woman ever to publish a novel. Erdrich's Novel *Love Medicine* and Allen's novel *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows* have been compared to those of Silko in terms of their perspective on tradition and their portrayal of issues around gender in Native American culture.

Sherman Alexie

Sherman Alexie (b. 1966) has become one of the most prominent Native American writers of the generation following that of Silko. Alexie's output includes collections of poetry *(The Business of Fancydancing),* short stories *(The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven),* and novels (such as *Indian Killer).* Alexie adapted his short story collection to the screen, in a 1998 film production entitled *Smoke Signals. Smoke Signals* was directed by Native American Chris Eyre and features the Native American actor Gary Farmer. It was the first major film exclusively written and directed by Native Americans and featuring an exclusively Native American cast in all major roles.

The American Indian Movement

Silko's story was written in the wake of signifi- cant political activism among Native Americans. Inspired by the Civil Rights movement led by African Americans, Native Americans in the 1960s began to exert increasingly organized efforts to overcome cultural oppression. The American Indian Movement (AIM) was founded in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 1968 by four Native American men. AIM organized three highly publicized protests during the early 1970s, including the occupation of Alcatraz Island (in the San Francisco Bay) for nineteen months in 1969-1971; a march on Washington, D.C., in 1972; and a protest at the historical battle site at Wounded Knee on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, in 1973. Wounded Knee is the site at which over 200 Sioux Indians were massacred by U.S. troops in 1890, and represented the ultimate defeat of Native Americans by the United States. From February 27 to May 8, 1973, 200 members of AIM took over the reservation hamlet by force, in protest against U.S. policy toward Native Americans. The protest turned violent when the AIM members were surrounded by federal marshals, and a siege ended with the surrender of the Native Americans after two of the Indians had been killed and one of the federal marshals badly wounded. The AIM members did, however, win a promise of attention to their concerns by the U.S. government. AIM was disbanded in the early 1980s.

Native American Languages

One theme of "Lullaby" is the language barrier between the Native American woman and the white authorities whose language she cannot understand. Silko's concern with Native American culture and tradition in the modern world encompasses a desire to preserve Native American speaking styles, if not the language itself. According the *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online,* there were originally as many as 300 different Native languages spoken in North America, before the arrival of the Europeans. In 1962, estimates accounted for about 200 of those still spoken. Although there is no clear understanding of the roots of native North American languages, linguists have categorized them into about 60 different language families.

Pueblo Indians

Silko's cultural heritage is part Laguna Pueblo Indian. Pueblo culture has been traced as far back as the first millenium A.D. The Pueblo Indians are known for the ancient living structures they built into the sides of cliffs, starting in the sixth century, and located in what is now the area of intersection of Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and Utah. The most famous of these are located in Mesa Verde National Park, Colorado. According to *Encyclopaedia Britannic Online,* Cliff Palace, the largest of the remaining structures, housed as many as 250 people in 217 rooms. These were inhabited from the eleventh through thirteenth centuries, after which most Pueblos migrated South into what is now New Mexico. Silko's family are probably descendants of this original tribe. The total population of Indians in New Mexico, where Silko was born, is less than ten percent, and includes a large Navaho reservation, as well as Pueblo Indians living on land grants.

Native American rights

In 1978, The American Indian Religious Freedom Act was passed by the federal government as a commitment to protecting and preserving tribal rituals, which are often tied to sacred ground in specific locations. In 1979, Congress passed the Archaeological Resources Protection Act, which protects Native American cultures from the removal of cultural artifacts by archaeologists and other collectors. In 1990, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) called for the return of thousands of sacred objects and human remains to their rightful tribal owners.

Critical Overview

Silko is widely recognized as one of the most important Native American writers of her generation. With her first novel, *Ceremony* (1977), she was the first Native American woman ever to publish a novel. Paula Gunn Allen followed in her footsteps, with the publication of *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows* in 1983, as did Louise Erdrich with her novel *Love Medicine* in 1984. Silko is associated with a generation of Native American writers which emerged in the 1970s, in what has been called the Native American Renaissance in literature. Silko has been associated with other writers of this renaissance such as Scott Momaday, James Welch, and Gerald Vizenor.

Silko's first significant publication, while she was still in college, was the short story "The Man to Send Rainclouds," which has since been anthologized several times. Her first book of poetry, *Laguna Woman,* referring to her heritage as part Laguna Pueblo Indian, was published in 1974. But Silko's first significant critical attention came after the publication of Kenneth Rosen's anthology of Native American literature, *The Man to Send Rain Clouds,* which took its title from Silko's story. In addition to the title story, several other of her works were included in the anthology.

The publication of her first novel, *Ceremony*, in 1977 brought her widespread critical attention and acclaim. *Ceremony* follows the central character Tayo, who, returning from combat in World War II, must reconcile his personal experiences in the war with his traditional Native American heritage. Silko's collection *Storyteller*, published in 1981, includes some of her earlier poems from *Laguna Woman,* as well as autobiographical reminiscences, short stories, songs, and newer poems, as well as photographs of her family and ancestors taken by her father, who is a professional photographer. In this interweaving of various literary forms, Silko attempted to capture the storytelling forms of the oral tradition in Native American culture. The short story "Lullaby" is one of the most noted of the Storyteller collection, and has been anthologized in *The Best American Short Stories of* 1985, as well as the *Norton Anthology of Women's Literature.* Also in 1985, Silko's personal correspondences with the poet James A. Wright, whom she met only twice before he died, were published in a book entitled *With the Delicacy and Strength of Lace.*

In 1983, Silko received the distinguished MacArthur Foundation award of $176,000. This allowed her to devote herself full time to her next novel, *Almanac of the Dead,* which took almost ten years to write and was published in 1991. It is of epic proportions, and includes a wide range of characters. It covers five centuries of conflict between Native American and European cultures, focusing on a mixed-race family. *Almanac of the Dead* has received a mixed response from critics. While some have rated the novel highly for its mythical elements, others have criticized it for its sprawling structure and underdeveloped characterization. In 1996, Silko published a collection of her own essays entitled *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit: Essays on Native American Life Today,* which includes discussion of Native American tradition, philosophy, and politics. Her novel *Gardens in the Dunes* was published in 1999. It focuses on the

character of Indigo, a Native American woman who runs away from a white government school and ends up traveling throughout Europe, England and Brazil.

Silko's body of work has been noted for the ways in which her characters incorporate Native American tradition and ritual into a context of experiences in contemporary Native American life. She has been particularly interested in the role of the storyteller in Native American culture, and the transformative power of the act of storytelling itself. Her writing style has attempted to represent the Native American literary tradition in a written English form by interweaving memoirs, songs, poems, and photography into non-linear narrative. Of mixed Anglo and Native American heritage herself, Silko's characters are often of mixed race, and must struggle to reconcile their dual cultural heritage. Having learned much about her Laguna Pueblo cultural heritage from her grandmother and other female relatives, Silko often focuses on themes of the ways in which native culture is passed on through the matrilinear generations. She has explained that Pueblo Indian culture is in many ways matriarchal, and that women and men do not suffer the kinds of gender inequalities present in Anglo culture.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Brent has a Ph.D. in American Culture, specializing in cinema studies, from the University of Michigan. She is a freelance writer and teaches courses in American cinema. In the following essay, she discusses the theme of cultural loss in "Lullaby."

Leslie Marmon Silko's short story "Lullaby" depicts Native American culture in collision with a white culture that has dominated and oppressed it. Silko's story illustrates the sense of loss experienced by one Native American woman at the hands of white authority figures. As the main character, Ayah, looks back on the most devastating events of her life, she mourns the loss of tradition, language, and family experienced by many Native Americans in the twentieth century. At the same time, however, Ayah, as many of Silko's characters, is able to combine traditional with modern cultural elements in order to make meaning in her life.

Language as a bearer of culture is central to Ayah's sense of loss throughout her life. The language barrier between Ayah and the white doctors who eventually take her children away is an important factor in Ayah's experience. Because she does not speak their language, she has no idea why they have come to her home. It is mentioned in the story that this was "back in the days before they hired Navajo women to go with them as interpreters." This highlights the fact that the doctors did not bother to find someone who could have translated for them in order to explain to Ayah exactly what it was they wanted. Furthermore, she is unable to read the contract they want her to sign. She sees only that it is being thrust upon her in an intimidating way, and that they are regarding her children as an animal does its prey: "They were wearing khaki uniforms and they waved papers at her and a black ball-point pen, trying to make her understand their English words. She was frightened by the way they looked at the children, like the lizard watches the fly."

Ayah has, however, learned from her husband how to write her name in English. It is in part because she is proud of this new ability that she signs the papers they put before her. "Ayah could see they wanted her to sign the papers, and Chato had taught her to sign her name. It was something she was proud of. She only wanted them to go, and to take their eyes away from her children." The ability of the doctors to essentially trick her into signing away her children thus hinges on a language barrier in several ways. It turns out to be worse for Ayah to know a little bit of English (only enough to sign her name) than not to know any English at all.

This incident becomes a rift between Ayah and her husband, Chato. Chato has learned to speak English, presumably as a means of fairing better in a world dominated by whites, and so she blames Chato for the theft of her children by the white authorities: "She hated Chato, not because he let the policeman and doctors put the screaming children in the government car, but because he had taught her to sign her name." To Ayah, learning English, or any attempt at assimilation into a white world, does more harm than good: "Because it was like the old ones told her about learning their language or any of their ways: it endangered you." Ayah's anger toward her husband for learning

English, and her self-righteousness in the belief that assimilation carries no rewards, is expressed by her response to Chato being fired by the white rancher and kicked out of their house when he is deemed too old to work: "That had satisfied her. To see how the white man repaid Chato's years of loyalty and work. All of Chato's fine-sounding English talk did not change things."

The strong association with language as a bearer of culture—and the loss of language as loss of culture &amp& is most poignant in Ayah's few brief visits with her children after they have been taken away from her. When Danny and Ella are first brought to visit her by the white woman, Danny is still fluent in his Native Navajo, and is able to maintain a sense of connection with his mother. The Native American home, as well as the Navajo language, however, is seen by the white woman as a negative influence, an unfit environment for the raising of children. The white woman "was frightened by what she saw inside (the strips of venison drying on a rope across the ceiling and the children jabbering excitedly in a language she did not know." The last time the children visit, the almost complete loss of their native language signifies that they have become so assimilated into white culture that they cannot even communicate with their own mother. While Ella, the young child, stares at her as if she were a stranger, Ayah speaks "cheerfully" to Danny. But, "When he tried to answer her, he could not seem to remember and he spoke English words with the Navajo." With this language barrier, Ayah's sense of alienation from her own children is so strong that she does not even say goodbye to them.

The loss of tradition which Ayah experiences at the hands of whites is conveyed in part through the motif of the blanket, which she wraps around herself at the beginning of the story, and around her dying husband at the end of the story. A motif is a minor theme or element which recurs throughout a story, gathering significance with each new appearance. The blanket is a key motif in this story, as it links Ayah with her grandmother as well as her dead son Jimmie. The blanket mixes images of traditional Native American culture with modern American culture in a way that becomes meaningful to Ayah. Silko's work has often been noted for the ways in which her characters create meaning in their lives through such amalgamations of traditional and modern culture.

As she sits leaning against a tree watching the snow in the beginning of the story, Ayah wraps an old army blanket around herself for warmth. The blanket is a reminder of her son Jimmie, who had sent it to her while serving combat in war. Ayah recalls the day the white man came to their door to inform them that Jimmie had died in a helicopter crash. Although the blanket comes from the U.S. government, which is responsible for Jimmie's death, as well as the death of thousands of Native Americans in the nineteenth century, it takes on great significance for Ayah. The army blanket comes to hold great sentimental value, as it is a tangible reminder of Jimmie, whose body was never recovered. When she goes to look for her husband in the white man's bar, an environment clearly unwelcoming toward her, Ayah finds comfort in the old blanket: "The wet wool smell reminded her of new-born goats in early March, brought inside to warm by the fire. She felt calm."

Jimmie's army blanket also reminds Ayah of happier times, sitting outside while her mother wove blankets on a big loom and her grandmother spun the yarn from raw wool. Ayah's recollections of the making of these traditional blankets is expressed through rich, colorful imagery: "She watched them dye the yarn in boiling black pots full of beeweed petals, juniper berries, and sage." The blankets themselves are described in terms of the warmth and comfort they provided: "The blankets her mother made were soft and woven so tight that rain rolled off them like birds' feathers. Ayah remembered sleeping warm on cold windy nights, wrapped in her mother's blankets on the hogan's sandy floor." The traditional hand-woven blanket made from scratch by the women in the family also serves as a metaphor for the passing of the oral tradition between generations of women—just as her mother and grandmother wove blankets in a traditional way, so Ayah carries on the tradition of weaving a tale in the style of the oral tradition.

The old army blanket becomes even more significant in the end of the story, when Ayah wraps it around her husband as he lies curled up to die in the snow. Wrapping him in the army blanket given to her by Jimmie, while singing a traditional lullaby taught by her grandmother, Ayah combines elements of Native American tradition with important personal associations from modern culture in comforting her husband as he dies. In singing the lullaby, Ayah carries on an important element of Native American culture, as embodied in language. The singing of the lullaby while wrapping Chato in the blanket also clinches the metaphor of traditional blanket-weaving with the oral tradition of song and storytelling. Ayah symbolically weaves the modern white culture (represented in the army blanket) with traditional Native American culture (the lullaby, and, by association, the tradition of blanket-making). The motif of the blanket is an important element of this story because it expresses Silko's concern with the ways in which Native Americans can combine traditional with contemporary culture in order to create meaning in their lives.

Ayah's life is characterized by a series of traumatic losses of her family members at the hands of white culture. Loss of traditional culture, loss of native language, and loss of family are each brought about by her encounters with white culture. Her son Jimmie dies in a war, fighting for the U.S. government, the very government responsible for the destruction of his native culture. Ayah loses her two younger children, Danny and Ella, when they are taken away to a government institution. Their removal from the family home ultimately leads to their alienation from their native culture and language, as well as their family.

Juxtaposed against these traumatic losses is the burial of two of Ayah's babies who did not survive. For Ayah, it was easier to accept the death of two of her babies when she was able to bury them in a traditional way on their native land than to accept the theft of her children by white culture: "It was worse than if they had died: to lose the children and to know that somewhere, in a place called Colorado, in a place full of sick and dying strangers, her children were without her." By contrast, the burial of the two babies becomes an enactment of tradition and ritual that allows Ayah to heal from the loss:

She had carried them herself, up to the boulders and great pieces of the cliff that long ago crashed down from Long Mesa; she laid them in the crevices of sandstone and

buried them in fine brown sand with round quartz pebbles that washed down the hills in the rain.

The death of Jimmie, and the removal of Ella and Danny from her home, thus, are her most painful losses because they represent not just the loss of loved ones to death, but the loss of an entire culture to the hands of white culture.

While the story ends with Chato's death, this is not the most crucial loss Ayah experiences in her relationship with her husband. Rather, it is their encounters with white culture which lead to alienation between them. After her children are taken away, and Ayah blames Chato for teaching her to sign her name, she no longer sleeps in the same bed with him. She even sleeps outside until winter sets in, her only comfort being the army blanket given to her by Jimmie. Ayah's feelings for Chato never recover from the trauma caused by the loss of Danny and Ella. Shortly before Chato dies, as they are walking together in the snow, Ayah looks upon him as a stranger, her sense of alienation from him is so great: "this man is a stranger; for forty years she had smiled at him and cooked his food, but he remained a stranger." Nevertheless, Chato's death at the end of the story becomes the final episode in a series of losses Ayah has suffered at the hands of white culture: the loss of tradition, the loss of language, and the loss of family. As the old couple sit together in the snow, shortly before he curls up and dies, Ayah invites her estranged husband into the fold of the army blanket, symbolically inviting him back into the warmth of tradition and family that the blanket represents to her: "She offered half of the blanket to him and they sat wrapped together." When Chato lies down and curls up in the snow, wrapping him in Jimmie's army blanket and singing a lullaby learned from her grandmother, Ayah symbolically reconciles all of these losses through a continuation of the oral tradition.

Source: Liz Brent, for *Short Stories for Students,* Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

Taibl has a master's degree in English writing and has written for a variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, she discusses multiple voices and the ritual of reading as a means of creating meaning in "Lullaby."

As one of the foremost authors to emerge from the Native American literary renaissance of the 1970s, Leslie Marmon Silko is challenged to blend Western literary genres with the oral tradition of her Laguna Pueblo roots. The result is a narrative grounded in two literary worlds, that of the Native American tradition and that of contemporary America. In her work, the past world meets the present in creative if not conflicting ways. Her collection of poems, short stories and non-fiction, *Storyteller,* uses mixed genres and voices in an attempt to put an oral tradition on the page. The resulting narrative mimics the give and take of oral storytelling and creates a unique reading experience. Silko strives to teach readers how to read this type of work, which is multi-voiced and culturally diverse. The second story in the collection, "Lullaby" harbors many examples of this multi-voiced, mixed discourse. In "Lullaby," the stories and memories of the protagonist, Ayah, enter into dialogue with the reader and initiate the creation of meaning through the act or ritual of reading.

Leslie Marmon Silko's main character, Ayah, in her story "Lullaby," watches "wide fluffy snow fill in her tracks, steadily, until the direction she had come from was gone." In real time, the snow's falling spans only a few hours, the capsule of the story, yet in these hours we come to experience a Native American woman's grief process. In the western critical tradition, a reader might experience Ayah's stages of grief as formulated by psychologist, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross in her book *On Death and Dying.* Ayah follows Kubler-Ross's grief theory in the cycle of denial, anger, despair and finally reconciliation. Silko's special talent in "Lullaby" and the entire *Storyteller* collection is in drawing the reader into the text through an anticipated discussion, one that is grounded in a western tradition, such as the Kubler-Ross theory of the grief process, and then turning that discussion around so that it might express cross-cultural goals. The resulting voice is a "mixed" discourse, blending a unique Native American voice and a Western Anglo voice that engages readers on many levels. As Ayah's tracks are filled in with snow until she no longer knows where she has come from or where she is going, so are the readers', as they disengage from a strict Anglo, or traditionally western, interpretive tool and encounter the text as both Native American and contemporary American.

Silko, in a talk entitled "Language and Literature from a Pueblo Indian Perspective," said that "a great deal of the story is believed to be inside the listener, and the storyteller's role is to draw the story out of the listeners." In the case of "Lullaby," the listener is the reader and must fabricate his or her own meaning for the text. The mixed discourse as a tool enables meaning making in a diverse population of readers and initiates the great challenge for Native American writers, which is to teach readers how to read this kind of work, both on traditionally Anglo and Native American levels. The ritual of reading, or the interaction of the reader with the written words, is likened to the storytelling event

and is the event that creates meaning. Silko strives to help that meaning-making experience along in the entire *Storyteller* collection and in "Lullaby."

In order to grasp the idea of a "mixed" discourse in "Lullaby," or one that engages and encourages readers on a variety of cultural levels, readers may enter the text at the end of the story with the poem or lullaby. The voice of the ending poem is not the protagonist's nor the narrator's. The voice is one of tradition, the great story of the world. In many ways, it is representative of everyone's story. Readers locate the story of Ayah within the universal story of the poem, and as they do, they discover that the voice also leaves room for the reader to read him or herself into the poem. In this act of discovery, readers are undertaking the journey Silko most wants for them. They are experiencing the narrative as ritual.

Reading as ritual is not an easy concept to understand. Paula Gunn Allen, herself a celebrated Native American writer, is quoted by Linda Krumholz in "Native Designs: Silko's *Storyteller* and the Reader's Initiation," saying, "Ritual can be de- fined as a procedure whose purpose is to transform someone or something from one condition or state to another." Readers can use this definition of ritual to describe the stages of grief through which Ayah travels as well as what happens to themselves as they experience Ayah's losses. Through Ayah's progression of memories, readers experience stories as self-renewing acts of imagination, designed to keep cultures and identities from the tragic fate of being lost to memory. Ayah's children return to her and their home without their memory. They don't know their Native language; they have forgotten their history. They have been transformed in dangerous and negative ways. Their transformation elicits transformation for the reader. Krumholz, a Silko scholar, writes in *To Understand This World Differently': Reading and Subversion in Leslie Marmon Silko's "Storyteller,"* that ritual "is the arena of the 'other' where the power of mystery supersedes the power of the social structure." In other words, that which is foreign, in this case Native American, is given meaning through ritual. Readers experience Ayah's losses and her children's loss and discover something about themselves and the world. Silko's power as author is through emphasizing not the story but the ritual of storytelling and of reading as the way of creating meaning for the Native American story. Ayah can journey through the stages of grief and arrive at reconciliation because of the stories she actively relives in her few hours in the snow. Her act of remembrance is ritual, and through this ritual her life has meaning. The reader's act of reading becomes ritual as well, which has the power to initiate deep cultural survival as he or she understands the necessity of the story's stories as avenues to preservation and survival of real culture.

As a part of *Storyteller,* "Lullaby" is in what has been called the "survival" section. The section deals with the need for stories as a means of survival. In "Lullaby," Silko asks for an interpretation of white culture from the reader on conflicting levels. On one level, the English-speaking white community uses a language that takes away, that results in the loss of her children. Yet, this is the same language Silko chooses for *her* story. She uses English as a creative tool to comment on English as a destructive tool. Stories told or written in English are the ultimate tools of survival for the "other," or foreign one, as they use the oppressor's language to actively create meaning for marginalized lives. Mixing

Native American voices and different genres with traditional western theories and writing in English allows the ritual of reading to shape multiple and rich meanings for the text.

The ability to glean differing and sometimes conflicting interpretations from the ritual of reading is what Silko relies upon in her narrative. According to Andrew Wiget in his article, "Identity, Voice, and Authority: Artist-Audience Relations in Native American Literature," Silko can't write tradition because it will be misrepresented, misunderstood; neither can she create something utterly "Other," or foreign, from "her historical and cultural entanglements, because that space is occupied by Euro- American voices." How does Silko navigate these challenges, which would seem utterly paralyzing? She denies a commanding narrative voice, which Wiget says, almost disengages her from a Western notion of authorship or author's authority, and allows the act of storytelling, not simply the stories themselves, create the narrative. She relies on a theory of reading, writes Krumholz in "Native Designs: Silko's *Storyteller* and the Readers' Initiation," "in which ritual bears similarities to certain reader response theories that describe novels as sites of change." Silko's multiple genres and voices require that the reader read as ritual or fail to understand the goal of any storytelling which is the integration of action and change within the thread of commonality.

The narrative becomes an exciting and fertile place for Silko's readers. The readers' response to the text may be as simple as storytelling and the sacred act of memory preservation. This is ritualistic transformation, when the text becomes a time and place of possibility, where, in "To Understand the World Differently," Krumholz says, a reader "may take imaginative risks that may transform his or her perception of the world." Krumholz writes that the stories told in *Storyteller* and in "Lullaby," "depict the determination of Native Americans to resist the forces that are dismantling Native American families, traditions and interpretations." The transformative goal of the text is to reveal this resistance and perhaps invite a reader, Native American or non-Native American, to actively take part in that resistance.

The transformation initiated through the ritual of reading takes different forms for Native American and non-Native American readers. Krumholz writes, "What serves as an act of transformation for a non-Indian reader may serve as an affirmation for an Indian reader." In other words, as the reader creates meaning for the text, the meaning can and will be different for each reader. This, perhaps, is the finest example of the success of a "mixed" discourse; it is a text which allows the creation of meaning for a diversity of readers. A non-Native American reader may discover that English is an oppressor's language as Ayah, who prides herself in her ability to sign her name, then signs away her children. What should, conventionally speaking, be empowering, the utilization of language, becomes an instrument of oppression. For the Native American reader, the same illustration may simply affirm what the reader already knows and has experienced. The story offers a community to the Native American reader, as the non-Native American reader is simultaneously offered a new perspective.

The verb that is storytelling, that is the interaction of text and reader, is where meaning is made. The beginning of "Lullaby" describes Ayah as an old woman whose life had become stories. This is what the text wishes upon readers, a life comprised of stories

with which the reader constantly interacts. Ayah travels through her stories to her death. She dies, and readers travel to the end of her story, which becomes, in the words of the poem, a universal story. The song is a song of continuity sung by a dying woman about the living story of which she is simply one small part. Though Native American stories are rendered meaningless or simply unheard by traditional Anglo interpretive structures, the song is a great hope. As it embodies a multi-leveled discourse, it addresses a collective you, who is Ayah, who is Silko, who is every storyteller, every character, and every reader encountering and experiencing the text. "The earth is your mother, she holds you. The sky is your father, he protects you." With the poem, readers are placed in space, the space in which stories are created and recreated. English, which has been the oppressor's language is taken back by the "other," or the foreign one, as means of empowerment. Language is honored as having the power to create and transform reality, a power Brian Swan in his introduction to "Smoothing the Ground: Essays on Native American Oral Tradition," describes as "generative," a "sacrament." The power of the word translates to the reader and effects change in his or her own perspectives. The readers' perspectives are then freed in the literary dialogue.

The discourses, ethnicities, and various "I's" that are carried to the story as author, character and reader, are, as the ending poem promises, "together always." Readers are warned and encouraged to believe in the power of the story, which is echoed in Silko's affirmation that these voices and stories were always enmeshed, that "there was never a time when this was not so." The great hope of the entire *Storyteller* collection is that there will never be a time when this is not so as readers learn to read themselves toward a deeper meaning of texts written in multiple and rich voices.

Source: Erika Taibl, for *Short Stores for Students,* Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #3

Madsen Hardy has a doctorate in English literature and is a freelance writer and editor. In the following essay, she discusses the relationship between language and power in Silko's story "Lullaby."

In Leslie Marmon Silko's lyrical short story "Lullaby," Ayah, an aged Navajo woman, reflects back on her life as she trudges through a snowstorm to retrieve her husband Chato from the bar where he is drinking away their monthly welfare check. Silko's writing balances tragedy against beauty; loss and bitterness scar Ayah's life, but she is sustained by a spiritual connection with nature and its cycles of generational continuity. In "Lullaby," as in many of her works, Silko celebrates the strength of Native American cultures through mixing genres and including aspects of traditional oral forms in her writing. "One of Silko's purposes . . . is to stress the continuity of her literary work with the oral tradition that she had absorbed" from her grandmother and other family members, writes William C. Clements in his entry on Silko for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography.* "Lullaby" celebrates the purity and power of Ayah's connection to her Navajo heritage even as it reveals the costs of her powerlessness in the context of the larger Anglo-American society.

Silko is herself an unapologetic "half-breed." Of white, Mexican, and Native American (Laguna) descent, she has always occupied two cultural worlds and negotiated between them. Raised on a reservation, she was educated at a Bureau of Indian Affairs school and a private Catholic one. Even as these non-Natives trained her mind, she was equally influenced by the stories and traditions passed down by her family and the Laguna community around her. In several of her works, most notably her acclaimed novel *Ceremony,* blending between Anglo and Native cultures is represented as a strength and a form of survival. It makes sense that someone with Silko's personal history would reflect this view, and her work itself offers an example of such cultural blending. In *Ceremony* she transforms the Western literary form of the novel by injecting Native American concepts of non-linear plot and by integrating examples of Native American oral culture. *Storyteller,* the collection in which "Lullaby" appears, is another example of multi-generic blending—it mixes poetry, fiction, and photographs and melds Anglo and Native forms and aesthetics.

In *Ceremony* the protagonist is, like Silko, of mixed ethnic heritage and reflects a hybrid cultural consciousness, capable of understanding both Native American and Anglo sensibilities. But in "Lullaby" Silko lets English-speaking readers inside the mind of a woman who is thoroughly enclosed within traditional Native American belief systems and is highly suspicious not only of the mainstream Anglo society, but of those, like her husband, who try to straddle the two worlds. The majority of the story involves the sundering of Ayah's connections to her family members by the intrusion of a larger and more powerful Anglo-American culture. At each point, the English language is significant in breaking the bond that ties Ayah and her family together through their Navajo cultural heritage. In Ayah's mind, the destructive force of Anglo culture is represented most clearly by English. "It was like the old ones always told her about learning their language

or any of their ways: it endangered you." While Chato is proud of his mastery of English, thinking that it will bring him power in the white man's world, Ayah sees that it is otherwise. She sees that while it gets him a job, it does not protect him from his white employer's exploitation of him as a worker or prevent his betrayal and their poverty once Chato becomes too old to work. Even the government welfare check leads only to Chato's drunkenness. "All of Chato's fine-sounding English talk didn't change things."

Language is also pivotal in the Ayah's experience of the loss of her children. When her first son, Jimmie, dies in war, the news comes by means of "a man in a khaki uniform trimmed in gold" who "gave them a yellow piece of paper" and told them—in English, of course—that Jimmie was dead. Chato translates for his wife, saying "'Jimmie isn't coming home anymore,' and when he spoke, he used the words to speak of the dead." The report of Jimmie's death reveals the chasm between Native and Anglo ways of speaking—and, thus, thinking— of the dead. Because of the way he died and the way the news reached her, the death doesn't feel real to Ayah. Mediated by distance, government institutions, and a foreign language, it isn't part of the rhythm of life and death that she knows and has a spiritual way of coping with. "It wasn't like Jimmie died. He just never came back."

English is even more central to Ayah's loss of her two remaining children, Danny and Ella, who are taken into custody by a government agency when they test positive for tuberculosis. She is afraid of the doctors who come "wearing khaki uniforms and they waved papers at her and a ballpoint pen, trying to make her understand their English words." In an attempt to get them to leave her alone, she signs her name on the forms that give them the legal right to take the children away. She blames Chato for having taught her to write her name and refuses to sleep next to him for many years thereafter. The children both survive the sickness, but they are never returned to Ayah's care. Due to prejudice and poverty, she is quietly deemed unfit. Meanwhile, during their brief visits, she feels her children slip away from her and from the land and language that give Ayah's life meaning. "She knew they were already being weaned from these lava hills and this sky," she thinks after their first visit home. On their last visit, when Ayah speaks to him, Danny "could not seem to remember and he spoke English words mixed with the Navajo." This loss to Anglo culture is "worse than if they had died" for Ayah. She had lost babies in infancy and buried them in the nearby hills. "She had carried them herself . . . [and] laid them in the crevices of sandstone and buried them in fine quartz pebbles that washed down the hills in the rain. She had endured it because they had been with her. But she could not bear this pain."

For Ayah, life is a cycle. At the beginning of the story she reaches out to the snow "like her own babies did"—an old woman, near death, becoming like a baby again. This snow reminds her of "new wool-washed before the weaver spins it" and carries her back in memory to the wool that she watched her grandmother spin long ago, when she was young. Nature, the earth and sky, represent continuity with the past—with her heritage, the generations before her, and the beloved dead. Thus death, for her, is not an absolute loss. The Englishspeaking world—which her husband partially inhabits—robs her of this sustaining continuity, bringing about losses that are more profound than even death.

The story ends with the lyrics of a traditional lullaby, which Ayah sings to her estranged husband as he, passed out in drunkenness, freezes to death under the transcendently beautiful night sky. This lullaby has simple lyrics but a complex status in the context of the story that proceeds it. The lullaby is, at once, a sincere tribute to Native American cultural continuity and an ironic statement about all that Ayah has lost. Intended to lull a baby to sleep, it lulls a man to death. "The earth is your mother, / she holds you. / The sky is your father, / he protects you," it begins. On the one hand, this is true. In death, Chato is not lost to Ayah as radically as Jimmie, Danny, and Ella are. He is with her. The earth on which Chato lies and the freezing sky above him, with the "purity of the half moon and the stars" and the "strength of the stars in Orion" usher him gently beyond his hopeless life, so compromised by his concessions to Anglo ways. His death is, thus, a kind of return to her.

"We are together always / We are together always / There was never a time / when this / was not so." These words are both true—in a spiritual sense, Chato and Ayah have reconciled—and heartwrenchingly false. Ayah has lost all of her family and is now alone in the world, a world in which being "together always," through the perpetual cycle of birth, life, and death, is no longer so. Mother and child, husband and wife, people and land, are wrenched apart by the belief systems and power associated with the English language. Even as Silko reaches toward a sense of continuity and resolution by closing the story with the lullaby, the lyrics' ironies underscore the story's themes of discontinuity and loss. And, given Ayah's feelings toward the treacherous nature of the English language, it is even more ironic that Silko translates the Navajo lullaby into English for the benefit of her largely Anglo reading public. While many readers and critics—Anglo and Native American alike—may appreciate Silko's cultural translation of Ayah's experience and her literal translation of the lovely Navajo lullaby, it is just this kind of translation that Ayah would believe has broken her family and her heart.

Source: Sarah Madsen Hardy for *Short Stories for Students,* Gale, 2000.

Adaptations

Running on the Edge of the Rainbow: Laguna Stories & Poems is a videorecording made in 1978 in which Leslie Silko shares stories and poems with friends and discusses the role of storytelling in Laguna culture. It is directed by Denny Carr in cooperation with the University of Arizona, Radio-TV-Film Bureau.

Native American Novelists is a videorecording of interviews with four Native American novelists, including Leslie Silko, N. Scott Momaday, James Welch, and Gerald Robert Vizenor. It was produced in 1995, directed by Matteo Bellinelli and written by Andrea Belloni.

Topics for Further Study

Many of Silko's stories address the issue of the role of tradition in contemporary Native American culture, and particularly the role of the storyteller. Read a short story by a different contemporary Native American writer such as Paula Gunn Allen, Louise Erdrich, or Sheman Alexie. In what ways does this author address similar or different issues within Native American culture? What role does tradition play in the story, as compared to Silko's story? How do the characters in the story reconcile Native American tradition and history with the conditions of contemporary Native American life?

There are hundreds of Native American tribes on the North American continent (such as Navajo, Cherokee, Chippewa, Pueblo, etc.), yet one complaint many Native Americans have is that mainstream American culture does not recognize the tremendous diversity of cultures among these tribes. Find out more about the history, traditions, and contemporary conditions of one particular Native American tribe. In what ways is it different from or similar to that of other tribes?

In addition to fiction, Silko and other writers of the 1970s Native American literary renaissance wrote collections of poetry. Pick one Native American writer and read several of her or his poems. In what ways do they address similar or different concerns from those addressed in Silko's fiction? In what ways does the poetic form communicate ideas differently from the fictional prose form?

Learn more about contemporary Native American visual art forms, such as drawing, painting, jewelry-making, and other crafts. In what ways do these visual forms grapple with similar concerns about the role of tradition in contemporary Native American culture? To what extent are the forms, process, and use of this art different from or similar to that of traditional Native American culture? What role does art play in contemporary Native American culture?

The 1970s, during which Silko's short story "Lullaby" was first written, were a significant time in the history of Native American struggles with mainstream American culture. Learn more about the political, cultural and economic struggles of Native American tribes from the 1960s through the 1990s. What national organizations of Native Americans are active today? What has changed as a result of these struggles? Was has not changed?

Compare and Contrast

1970s: Silko's novel *Ceremony* (1977) was the first novel by a Native American woman ever to be published.

1990s: Several Native American women novelists have risen into prominence, including Paula Gunn Allen, whose first novel, *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows,* was published in 1983, and Louise Erdrich, whose first novel *Love Medicine,* was published in 1984.

1970s: The Native American rights movement, first formally organized in 1968 as the American Indian Movement (AIM), was still in its early stages. Native Americans were concerned with such issues as the return of land stolen from them by the U.S. government, the return of cultural artifacts and human remains pillaged by white anthropologists and collectors and placed in museums; and the right to practice spiritual traditions on sacred ground, among many other concerns.

1990s: Although AIM was disbanded in the early 1980s, Native Americans in North America have met with some success realizing their civil rights demands.

1970s: Up until 1978, the U.S. government made little effort to protect the freedom to practice traditional religious ceremonies among many Native American tribes.

1990s: A number of federal acts aimed at protecting and preserving Native American cultures have gone into effect, including the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990.

1970s: There had never been a major motion picture written and directed exclusively by Native Americans, and casting Native Americans in all significant roles.

1990s: In 1998, *Smoke Signals*, adapted by writer Sherman Alexie from his own collection of short stories, became the first major motion picture written and directed by Native Americans, and features an (almost) all-Native American cast.

What Do I Read Next?

Ceremony (1977) by Leslie Marmon Silko. Interweaves free verse poetry with narrative prose. Tayo, a World War II veteran of mixed Anglo- Indian heritage, returns to the reservation after the war, psychically wounded by his war experiences. Rejecting alcohol and other diversions, Tayo must come to terms with his cultural heritage in a process of spiritual and psychological healing.

Storyteller (1981) by Leslie Marmon Silko. A collection of autobiographical reminiscences, stories, poetry, songs, and photographs concerning the role of storytelling and the storyteller in contemporary Native American culture.

The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven (1993) by Sherman Alexie, a Native American writer. A collection of short stories about growing up on the Coeur d'Alene Indian Reservation in Washington. Concerns the role of both popular mainstream American culture and Native American tradition in the formation of contemporary Native American identity.

Love Medicine (1984) by Louise Erdrich. One of the best known novels by one of the most prominent Native American writers of the Native American literary renaissance. Erdrich won the National Book Critics Circle Award for this, her first novel, which is comprised of fourteen interconnected stories told by seven different members of the Turtle Mountain Chippawa community.

The Woman Who Owned the Shadows (1983) by Paula Gunn Allen. A novel in which the main character, of mixed Anglo-Indian heritage, grapples with her ethnic heritage and her sexual identity as a lesbian.

Leslie Marmon Silko: A Collection of Critical Essays (1999) by Leslie Marmon Silko. Silko's most recent non-fiction work of critical essays.

Song of the Turtle: American Indian Literature, 1974-1994 (1996) edited and with an introduction by Paula Gunn Allen. A collection of contemporary American Indian poetry and short stories, including "Tony's Story," by Leslie Marmon Silko.

Yellow Woman and the Beauty of the Spirit: Essays on Native American Life Today (1997) by Leslie Marmon Silko. Includes essays on Native American philosophy, folklore, and social conditions.

With The Delicacy and Strength of Lace: Letters Between Leslie Marmon Silko and James Wright (1986) by Leslie Marmon Silko and James Wright. A collection of the personal correspondences between Silko and the poet James Wright, who met each other in person only twice before Wright died.

Carriers of the Dream Wheel: Contemporary Native American Poetry (1975) edited by Duane Niatum. A collection of poetry by contemporary Native American writers, including Leslie Marmon Silko.

The Man to Send Rain Clouds: Contemporary Stories by American Indians (1974) edited by Kenneth Rosen. An early collection of stories by the writers of the Native American literary renaissance of the 1970s. Includes Silko's early story "The Man to Send Rain Clouds," after which the book was titled. Critical attention to this book helped to gain early recognition of Silko's work.

Further Study

Brown, Wesley, and Amy Ling, eds., *Imagining America: Stories from the Promised Land,* New York: Persea Books, 1991.

A collection of short stories by immigrant and minority authors that present alternative visions of America. Includes "American Horse," by Leslie Marmon Silko.

Coltelli, Laura, ed., *Winged Words, American Indian Writers Speak,* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Books, 1990.

A collection of interviews with contemporary Native American writers, including Leslie Marmon Silko. This book is part of a series entitled American Indian Lives.

Gattuso, John, ed., *A Circle of Nations: Voices and Visions of American Indians / North American Native Writers & Photographers,* Hillsboro, OR: Beyond Words Publishers, 1993.

A collection of Native American literature and photography. Includes a forward by Leslie Marmon Silko.

Jaskoski, Helen, *Leslie Marmon Silko: A Study of the Short Fiction,* New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998.

Critical essays that focus on Silko's short stories in terms of her representations of gender and the Southwest in the context of twentieth-century Native American history.

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

Discusses the works of N. Scott Momaday, James Welch, and Leslie Marmon Silko in terms of their representations of landscape. Covers Silko's novel *Ceremony.*

Ortiz, Simon J., ed., *Speaking for the Generations: Native Writers on Writing,* Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1998.

A collection of essays by Native American writers on Native American identity and the writing process. Includes a chapter by Leslie Marmon Silko entitled, "Interior and Exterior Landscapes: The Pueblo Migration Stories."

Roalf, ed., *Strong Hearts: Native American Visions and Voices,* New York, NY: Aperture, 1995.

Described on the book jacket cover as "the first comprehensive collection of contemporary Native American photography." Includes a photographic essay by Leslie Marmon Silko entitled "An Essay on Rocks."

Salyer, Gregory, *Leslie Marmon Silko,* New York: Twayne, 1997.

Includes biographical information on Leslie Marmon Silko, as well as critical essays on each of her major works.

Trafzer, Clifford E., ed., *Earth Song, Sky Spirit: Short Stories of the Contemporary Native American Experience,* New York: Doubleday, 1993.

A collection of short stories by Native American writers that focus on the contemporary experience of Native Americans. Includes "The Return of the Buffalo," by Leslie Marmon Silko.

Velie, Alan, R., ed., *The Lightning Within: An Anthology of Contemporary American Indian Fiction,* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991.

A collection of contemporary Native American short stories. Includes "The Man to Send Rain Clouds," by Leslie Marmon Silko.

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Kubler-Ross, Elizabeth, *On Death and Dying,* New York: MacMillan, 1969.

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Swann, Brian, Introduction, *Smoothing the Ground: Essays on Native American Oral Literature,* edited by Brain Swann, Berkley: University of California Press, 1983, pp. xi-xix.

Wiget, Andrew, "Identity, Voice, and Authority: Artist- Audience Relations in Native American Literature," in *World Literature Today,* Vol. 66, No. 2, Spring, 1992, pp. 258-263.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) 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, SSfS 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 SSfS 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 SSfS 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 SSfS 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 SSfS 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

SSfS 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 Short Stories 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 SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS 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 Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories 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 SSfS 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.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

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

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories 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 SSfS, 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 Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

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 Short Stories 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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