Story from Bear Country Study Guide

Story from Bear Country by Leslie Marmon Silko

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Introduction

"Story from Bear Country," first published in Silko's collection of poetry and prose *Storyteller* in 1981, retells a Native-American myth in a simple and direct tone. Silko, an award-winning poet and novelist, grew up in New Mexico where she was raised within three strong cultures□Laguna Indian, Mexican, and white European□which influenced her strong writing voice. Borrowing from traditional Laguna "abduction myths," stories of animals seducing humans and transforming them, the poet uses vivid images throughout to guide the reader through a wilderness where bears are waiting to call people into their world. Before people know it, having wandered too far into the woods, they become "locked forever" inside themselves "dark shaggy and thick," with the poet sending "bear priests" to look for them and help them make the journey back. Silko takes on the role of "storyteller" and "trail guide," speaking directly to the reader, mixing description with instruction as they make their way through this beautiful and enticing landscape.

Author Biography

Silko, who is of Laguna Pueblo, Plains Indian, Mexican, and Anglo-American descent, was born on March 5, 1948, in Albuquerque and was raised on the Laguna Pueblo Reservation in northern New Mexico. As a child, Silko attended schools administered by the Bureau of Indian Affairs and also learned about Laguna legends and traditions from her great-grandmother and other members of her extended family. From the fifth grade on, Silko received her education at Catholic schools and then went on to college at the University of New Mexico. She graduated summa cum laude in 1969, earning a bachelor's degree in English. Silko subsequently attended law school for a short while before deciding to pursue a writing career. While working on her poetry and fiction, Silko taught at several universities and colleges throughout the Southwest, including the University of Arizona and the University of New Mexico. The recipient of several grants and fellowships, Silko received the Pushcart Prize for poetry in 1977. Silko is the single parent of two sons, Robert and Cazimir, and lives near Tucson, Arizona.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-3

In these introductory lines, the poet establishes a direct address tone, speaking directly to readers, instructing them as if they were about to take a journey and the speaker is the guide. Readers are also introduced to the location, "bear country," which is probably a general term for any area where bears live and roam.

Lines 4-5

Readers will know they are in bear country by an overwhelming silence. In this unique image, the poet makes "silence" tangible by giving it movement, "flowing" around them as they stand under the juniper trees.

Lines 6-7

Continuing a list of ways readers will know they are in bear country, in these lines, Silko describes the distinctive colors of sandstone in the region. "Sundown colors," or colors associated with the sunset, are most likely referring to red, orange, and yellow.

Lines 8-10

In these lines, the poet uses the sensory detail of smell to help describe bear country. "Yucca" is a commonly found evergreen plant found in the American Southwest, and readers can only guess that bears have "scratched away" the damp earth to expose the roots.

Lines 11-14

These lines help locate readers more vividly in the landscape, surrounded by juniper trees, high cliffs nearby with caves where bears may hide. This is also the first time readers hear the bears, growling and snorting, though they still do not see them.

Lines 15-16

After introducing readers to the surroundings, here the speaker suggests that the bears "call" to them, though it's "difficult to explain" exactly how they do it.

Lines 17-21

Here readers are told not only do the bears call to people, but some people actually follow, joining them, giving up their families and "human" lives. Many traditional stories use other people's examples as warnings, suggesting "be careful or this will happen to you."

Lines 22-23

Although this section does not give readers the exact reason why they would "never want to return," these lines suggest that once people go with the bears, they would have no desire to return to the human world.

Lines 24-26

Here, the poet gives readers an image of beauty that would "overcome your memory" of whatever life was left behind, almost as if people would become entranced by the bears. Note, too, how the season has suddenly changed to winter, the time when bears take refuge and hibernate.

Lines 27-30

In these lines, the poet suggests a transformation from human to animal; people would be trapped inside themselves and see their bodies become "dark shaggy and thick" like the bears who called to them.

Lines 31-32

In the event that people do get trapped in bear country, the poet informs readers that "bear priests," or medicine men specifically knowledgeable of bear magic, would be sent out to rescue them. Native Americans maintain a profound relationship with the natural world, believing animal spirits are just as unique and important as human spirits, each with their own powers and wisdom.

Lines 33-38

These lines describe what the bear priests would be wearing during their search. Taking on the appearance of a bear themselves by painting their legs black and wearing "bear claw necklaces," they would also carry a "medicine bag," which probably contains herbs and medicinal roots.

Lines 39-41

These lines describe the path the bear priest would follow to find people, through canyon and "blue-grey mountain sage," which is an aromatic plant found in the Western United States.

Lines 42-45

The bear priest would follow a person's trail to a clearing in the woods. The poet suggests that this is the place where people first realized their transformation, noticing when they look back that their footprints are no longer human.

Lines 46-49

These lines tell readers that when people hear the bear priests calling, the memories of their families and past "human" life will slowly come back to them and "will writhe around your heart." Even though a very short time may have passed, those memories will seem far away and "startle you with their distance."

Line 50

"The others" are probably other people who wandered too far into bear country as well, and were also turned into bears.

Lines 51-54

These lines suggest that the songs the bear priests sing are so beautiful, "the others" will have to listen. The poet informs readers that this special skill is crucial for the bear priest; otherwise they would not be able to rescue anyone.

Lines 55-59

Once the bear priests find the people who have been taken, they will slowly and carefully bring them back to the very clearing where they first noticed their transformation, where their footprints switched from human to animal.

Line 60

This line indicates a crucial turn in the poem. Up to this point, the poet has been taking on the role of wise storyteller, more knowledgeable about bear country than those readers who might stumble in and be trapped there. In this line, Silko poses the question "whose voice is this?" to both the reader and herself, perhaps implying everything up to this point was not in her own voice. The oral tradition of storytelling is firmly rooted in Native- American culture, and when someone retells a story, they are linking themselves to a long line of past storytellers. Perhaps the poet wonders if, in telling this traditional myth of animal abduction, she is even using her own voice. Perhaps her ancestors are speaking through her. This single line helps open a new level in the poem, moving from simple narrative to questions of heritage, tradition, and the power of myth.

Lines 61-64

After asking readers "Whose voice is this," here the poet implies that maybe everything up to this point has been hypothetical—people have not been transformed; people are really just hiking alone in the woods listening to the speaker's warnings about how the bears might call to them.

Lines 65-67

These lines help engage readers further in the poem by inventing a life, hiking through bear country while their families wait "back at the car," as if they had just stopped for a short while during a drive.

Lines 68-69

Here, Silko forces the reader to notice himself or herself as an active participant in the story, listening patiently. On one level, Silko is speaking as storyteller to listener, on another as poet to reader. By reading this far into the poem, readers have been listening to her "for some time now."

Lines 70-72

After guiding readers through an imagined bear abduction and rescue by a priest, these lines locate readers back where they started, alone in the woods surrounded by silence, where even the birds are silent. Note, too, that silence was one of the first ways people learned they had entered bear country at the beginning of the poem.

Lines 73-74

Similar to lines 6-7, these lines ask readers to notice the sunset and the reddish-orange light on the cliffs. This recurring image helps frame the poem, returning the reader to a familiar place at the middle of the poem after traveling a great imagined distance through the first half of the poem.

Lines 75-78

In a gentle and consoling tone, the poet returns to the role of storyteller, associating herself again with the bear priests. Blurring the line between myth and reality by saying "we've been calling you / all this time," readers have to wonder whether the abduction was hypothetical or real.

Lines 79-83

In these lines, Silko asks people to look behind them to see whether their tracks are human or bear, making them wonder really how far they have traveled into bear country. Was this all just a myth, or did people really become bears before being rescued by Native-American priests? People will only know if they turn around. On a larger scale, perhaps the poet is also commenting on the ability of myth to transform people—often, when a person becomes engaged in a story, he or she will feel as though he or she gets lost in it, hours passing as if only minutes. Maybe this is the power of myth: through the mutual act of storyteller and listener, stories allow readers to become something else for a while, leaving "normal" lives behind and entering a landscape that is magical and mysterious.

Lines 84-89

At this point in the poem, Silko changes tactics. Instead of addressing the reader directly and having the reader question whether there has been an abduction by bears, the poet instead recounts a story of someone else who has been abducted by bears. In the first line of this stanza, she says, "He was a small child." The "was" indicates that the story is from the past, unlike the first half of the poem, which is entirely in present or future tense. The "small child" is "learning to get around / by himself," implying that he is still young and untrained and needs guidance. The fact that "His family went by wagon," as Silko notes in the next line, indicates that this story took place when people traveled by wagon. In this case, the poet most likely intends the poem to take place in the developing American West, where wagon travel was common.

Lines 90-94

The "mountains" mentioned in the previous stanza are most likely the Rocky Mountains, since "piñons"—edible seeds from pine trees—are often found in this region. While the family is harvesting the edible seeds, the poet offers a suggestion for how the child might have gotten away from the protection of his family. The child, still untrained and unaware of potential danger, tries "to follow his brothers and sisters / into the trees" where they are "picking piñons."

Lines 95-96

Nobody thinks to look for him, because each person thinks that the child is being watched by somebody else.

Lines 97-106

As a result, it is not until "the next day" that the family "tracked him." This long gap of time be- tween the child's disappearance and their search for him implies that the food-gathering process was important enough to forget about the care of the child. The use of tracking indicates that this family is most likely Native American, since tracking was one of the many cultural skills that traditional Native Americans used to survive their environment. When the family follows the tracks of the little boy, they find that he has passed into a "canyon," which is "near the place which belonged / to the bears." The use of the word, "belonged," implies that the bears own this place and that the little boy, and now the adult humans, are trespassing.

This idea is reinforced when Silko describes how the search party goes as far as they can, to the very threshold of the bears' domain: "the place / where no human / could go beyond." At this point, the search party's worst fears are confirmed. The boy's "little footprints" are "mixed in with the bear tracks."

Lines 107-109

Now that the family knows for sure that their son is with the bears, they call in reinforcements, asking a "medicine man" to come help them. Like the "bear priests" mentioned earlier in the poem, a medicine man was a Native-American healer, who used his knowledge of the magical powers of various substances and rituals to perform spiritual cleansings. In this case, the family is certain that the medicine man "knew how / to call the child back again."

Lines 110-112

As the poet notes, "There wasn't much time." The transformation from human to bear can happen quickly, especially for a child who has yet to learn the ways of humanity. For such an impressionable youth, the life of a bear can seem just as natural as the life of a human. For this reason, the medicine man is "running," with his "assistants" in close pursuit, moving much faster than the "loping" bear priests that were called upon to help the reader in the first part of the poem.

Lines 113-115

The medicine man and his assistant, like the bear priests from before, wear items to make themselves appear like bears. In this case, the item is "bearweed," which they wear wrapped around their "wrists and ankles" and their "necks." The bearweed also presumably acts like a charm against the hypnotic influence of the bears, so the medicine man and his assistants cannot be transformed themselves while they are trespassing in bear country and trying to save the child.

Lines 116-117

In this short stanza, the medicine man begins to act like a bear: "He grunted loudly and scratched on the ground in front of him." The man is trying to lure the bears out of their cave, the entrance of which he "kept watching."

Lines 118-124

Here, the man's efforts pay off, as his "growling sound" attracts little bears to come out, thinking it is a "mother bear sound." However, the medicine man must grunt and growl "a little more," before he is able to get the child to come out. At this point, the child's transformation into a bear is almost complete. In the absence of human instruction from his family, who was busy picking seeds, the impressionable child has found a new family in the bears. Silko notes that the child "was already walking like his sisters" and that "he was already crawling on the ground." The fact that the child is already close to being part of the bear family underscores the idea that the child is impressionable.

Lines 125-128

Because of this, the child has been all but converted into a bear. As a result, "They couldn't just grab the child." If the family were to do this, they would have one very confused child on their hands. The boy would be stuck "in-between" the human and bear worlds, a disconcerting spiritual state that could lead to his death.

Lines 129-131

Although the child has almost completely turned into a bear at this point, the medicine man is still able "to call him," using the same type of method that the bears use to hypnotize people, to try to slowly coax the boy back to civilization, "step by step." The man is successful, and does in fact bring the child back.

Lines 132-136

However, after getting the boy back from the bears, "he wasn't quite the same." The poet once again draws attention to the fact that this event took place in the past, a "long time ago." Silko also notes that in this time of Native-American myths and legends, the boy was not totally transformed back into a human. The boy had spent time in the company of bears, and this experience will always be a part of him. This is especially true since, when the boy discovered the bears, he was largely untrained. As a result, the bears helped to give him an identity that his human family had not provided yet. And although the medicine man was able to "call" the boy back to humanity, the boy always retained some of his bear-like qualities, which separated him from "the other children."

The story of the boy can be taken literally, as a boy who gets abducted by bears and who must be drawn back to humanity. However, it could also be seen as a symbolic tale, highlighting the struggle for Native-American cultures to preserve their myths and ways of life in the face of European American colonization in the developing American West. Silko uses the first part of the poem to instruct her readers□many of whom are probably not of Native-American descent□in one of the myths of her people, drawing the reader directly into the story by making the reader the focus of it. With this increased focus on myth, Silko then relates an actual story from the myths of her people, where a little boy was permanently transformed□at least in part□by bears.

The boy can be viewed as the symbol of a new generation of Native Americans, who are now out of touch with their heritage, and therefore lack an identity, like young children do. However, if this new generation tries to blindly follow the lead of their older "brothers and sisters," or ancestors, they can lose themselves. This situation is not desirable in a society where such changes of identity would cause them to appear different from others. Differences have historically been used as a method of oppression or exclusion in American society, so Silko seems to be saying that if Native Americans insist on surrendering to their ancient ways, they could be singled out in American society. However, the poem is also a message to Silko's American readers, entreating them not to persecute the new generation for being transformed, at least in part, by its heritage.

Themes

The Individual and the Community

"Story from Bear Country" first appears in *Storyteller*, a collection of poems, photographs, traditional tales, letter fragments, and family history vignettes that is autobiographical yet essentially formed from an "oral" (verbal as opposed to written) tradition whose materials are communal. The idea that tribal stories have the power to teach, guide, and correct individuals is implicit throughout, beginning with the first word, "You."

The direct address to the reader or listener puts us on personal, intimate terms with the author, whose role it is to pass down ancient wisdom in old and new forms for the purpose of connecting us to important Native-American values. "You" is juxtaposed with the "We" of community, which serves as the larger family to whom we are related and that has the power to remind us of who we are. Communal relationships are further complicated by the imposition of "they," which refers both to the bear priests and the bears themselves. The call of the bear is irresistible; their beauty will "overcome your memory like winter sun melting ice shadows from snow." The bear priests' song is also powerful and beautiful. It evokes "faint memories" that "writhe around your heart" entreating you to return to the clan.

The struggle for the individual soul is finally mediated by the narrator, the "me" of the poem, who serves as a universal voice of compassion associated with the natural world. While it is unclear what "footprints" the wandering man in the still canyon may find when he turns (bear claws or human prints) there is still time to heed the call of compassion and avoid being "locked forever inside yourself," lost forever to the human community.

Transformation and Identity

This poem combines elements of traditional Laguna Pueblo mythology ("he" who takes on the aspects of bear) with a contemporary reinvention of the tale that hints at the overwhelming desire for self-transformation and the terrible risk of identity loss. Each person walks a road that will lead either to the recovery of a "memory" or "dream" of the true self (a ritualized form of this rebirth initiation is practiced by Native Americans through vision quests) or a loss or confusion of identity that results from over-identification with another being. This choice creates the tension in the story.

While the poem reverberates with the seductive imagery of the landscape and the "beauty" of bears, the tale is a cautionary one. The child who wanders off, takes on bear aspects, and is finally recovered by the medicine man is never "quite the same after that." Ideally, self-transformation is sanctioned by tribal ritual. Individual rebirth must take place within a human community, forging kinship ties with all of nature but preserving the boundaries that allow us to develop our unique individuality.

The Spirit World

In Native-American cosmology, spirit moves around and within each person. It inhabits animals, plants, rocks, weather, and all things residing in the natural world. A balance is required to keep the earth healthy and in spiritual harmony. Because all things are connected and interdependent in this cosmology, every living thing and element is valuable, both in itself and in its relationship to every other thing. In this poem, bear spirit resides in the dazzling beauty and stillness of the canyons and caves.

Because human identity is flexible and intertwined with all of nature, the spirit of bear can call to a human spirit, coaxing it into a kind of introspective womb-cave that is both powerful and final. Once the call is heard and the transformation made, "you will never want to return." In this spirit world, the intervention of the medicine man is pivotal. He alone has the power to bridge the space between worlds where identity may be caught and forever mutated. But in this poem no simple formula serves to answer the question, "Who am I?" A dynamic uncertainty or ambiguity remains. Readers are asked to weigh the yearning for a miraculous crossing of boundaries into another spiritual realm against the world left behind when someone heeds the call of the bear and surrenders his human self.

Style

"Story from Bear Country" is written in free verse, which means its form grows and varies in relation to the changing moods of the subject matter, unlike formal verse, which is constructed using a set rhyme scheme or number of accented beats per line. Matching this poem's simple tone, Silko uses lines that are short, usually only three or six words long. Similarly, each stanza (which literally means "room" in Italian) is constructed using around seven lines each. Silko arranges one or two images in these "rooms," keeping the poem uncluttered and accessible. In this sense, the poet has constructed a simple framework for a simple voice, the short lines and stanzas helping the reader make the journey through this unfamiliar landscape, wary of bears.

Historical Context

Socially and politically, Native Americans still feel the burden of their separate status as outsiders in their own land. Once heir to an entire continent, their communities are mostly confined to reservations on land that is unaccommodating to the way of life that sustained them for thousands of years before European colonization. Joseph Bruchac writes in his introduction to *Songs from This Earth on Turtle's Back* that "as many as 50 million American Indian people" may have lived on this continent in the 1400s. In the early 1900s, he continues, population figures indicate less than half a million were left.

However, between 1960 and 1980, census figures show that the American Indian population grew from 750,000 to 1,500,000. Simultaneously, the rituals, traditions, and stories of Native Americans underwent a renaissance beginning in the 1960s when N. Scott Momaday won a Pulitzer Prize (in 1969) for his book *House Made of Dawn*. The keen interest in Native-American culture, history, and spirituality is reflected in the new respect accorded Native-American writers and artists and a spiritual awakening in regard to our relationship with the environment and the natural world of which we are a part.

Leslie Marmon Silko was one of the first Native-American writers to be included in the canon of contemporary American literature, and she is well recognized as one of the most gifted fiction writers of our time. Indeed, her home state of New Mexico designated her a living cultural treasure and in her early thirties she was the recipient of a MacArthur "genius" award.

On the back cover of *Storyteller*, the volume in which "Story from Bear Country" appears, it is noted that storytelling in Native-American culture had "a magical quality; [stories] were both real and wondrous, and they had the power to bring the people together as nothing else did." Silko's poem invokes aspects of this "magic" and creates its own mood of wonder by using the ancient tale of the boy being transformed to a bear to discuss the real and problematic nature of identity formation of Native Americans. Because Native-American cultures were destroyed, suppressed or undermined by forced education and absorption into European customs, developing a firm sense of self based on sacred and enduring values has been difficult. Thus, in her capacity as author, Silko is more than a writer. She is both a caretaker of her people's stories and co-creator of new mythologies that serve to continue the tradition of storytelling by which people in the community are sustained and uplifted.

Silko's work, as with many other contemporary Native-American writers such as Paula Gunn Allen, Joseph Bruchac, Linda Hogan, Joy Harjo, Scott Momaday, Simon Ortiz, and Gerald Vizenor (to name a few), invites readers to explore the complex interrelations between individual and community and among human, animal, and vegetable natures. It does so by juxtaposing the language of legends and the anima of the spirit world with the material reality of the everyday physical world. For example, the real problems of despair and alcoholism among Indians and the disturbance of the natural balance by uranium mining in the Southwest regions of the Laguna Pueblo people are important motifs in Silko's popular novel, *Ceremony*. As the hero, Tayo, a Vietnam vet, searches for an authentic self, he must complete his own life-affirming ceremony by remembering the roots of his past and confronting the instruments of death and destruction that threaten the continuity of values embedded in the old stories.

In her poems, essays, novels, and other works of fiction and non-fiction, Silko confronts social and political problems of Native-American life on the reservations, including poverty, alcoholism, social alienation, racism, and suicide. However, Silko places powerful faith in ceremonies that can reverse self-defeating attitudes and outside aggression. That faith is reflected in "Story from Bear Country." Implicit is old Indian wisdom for creating balance and harmony: rely on the strength of community, remember who you are and where you come from, and maintain a respectful kinship with other living things.

Critical Overview

Perhaps best known as a novelist, Silko won the *Chicago Review* poetry prize, soon followed by a national *Pushcart* prize for the best poem published in a small magazine. Although not much has been written specifically about "Story From Bear Country," many critics praise the collection, *Storyteller*, in which it appeared, pointing out the strong Native- American tradition from which Silko writes. Bernard A. Hirsch, writing for the *American Indian Quarterly*, notes how the book "lovingly maps the fertile storytelling ground from which [Silko's] art evolves." Similarly, Linda Danielson, in the *Journal of the Southwest*, concludes that "through the book [Silko] reclaims both personal and tribal traditions about men and women, animals and holy people, community and creativity." According to Hirsch, it is these tribal myths and stories from Native-American culture "that Silko expresses with grace and power through her melding of oral tradition and the written word."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Smith is an independent scholar and freelance writer. In this essay, Smith explores the significance of Native-American legend and oral traditions to Leslie Marmon Silko's poetics.

"Story from Bear Country" is characteristic of Leslie Marmon Silko's work in that it combines a new tale or "telling" that emerges from old tribal wisdom. The new story is appropriate to be told or read since in Native-American tradition, the story is embedded in the everyday communal life of the people. The poem combines Silko's re-telling of a Laguna Pueblo folktale with an original poem that could easily stand on its own. However, Silko uses the tale of a boy who almost turns into a bear as a kind of "coda" or independent narrative that is powerfully connected to the sacred teachings of Native-American traditions.

The folktale and Silko's contemporary "version" of it work in concert to emphasize the point that the stories must continually be told and retold, adding new words and new meanings so that they remain relevant over time. Silko implies that there is danger in forgetting the stories or in not passing them on to future generations. Since one of the powerful themes of this poem concerns the nature of self, the fragility and fluidity of identity in the interconnectedness of all things, then stories and rituals are imbued with an almost magical power to remind us of who we are and from where we come.

The poem first appears in *Storyteller*, an autobiographical collection of poems, photographs, folktales, and family stories that form an oral culture vital to communal life. The storytelling function takes on a sacred quality because stories are used to guide individuals in the ways and beliefs of Native-American thought and being. That the story is meant to be told, that it is meant to include and guide every listener, is implicit from the very first word, "You." This direct address puts us on personal, intimate terms with the ancient wisdom being recycled.

What is it that this "you" is supposed to know? First and foremost, the inner self. But this inner self does not exist outside or apart from either the natural world or the social world of human interaction. So, the first verse orients us to the place in which we find ourselves. It is a particular world of the bear, a country we "will know" by using our senses: to hear and feel "the silence flowing swiftly," to smell the "juniper trees," to see the "sundown colors of sandrock." The images tell us clearly that "you" are in a Southwest landscape; they remind us that "you" are at home in the natural world. The "you" has been here before. As the ominous last line of the first verse indicates, "you" are walking alone, surrounded by the natural world "all around you."

The second verse augments the setting with more images and amplifies them with actions that might be taking place in bear country. The experiences of "you" are less certain. In contrast to the first verse, where the you "will know," the you of the second verse merely "may" smell and hear traces and echoes of bear. The hypothetical language fits the mood. As the "you" walks further into bear country, the poem gives us a sense of disquiet, of meaning that is more ambiguous. This ambiguity is heightened in the third verse when Silko alludes to the mystery of how the bears "call you" and lure you into their realm. The yearning to heed this call of the wild is irresistible, though. Of those who "went," most "left behind families . . . a good life."

There is something wild in us, Silko seems to be saying, that needs the company of other wild things. There is something not quite firm in us, some need to transform ourselves, to transcend ourselves, some desire to lose oneself in the identity of another. The fascination for other life forms, the poem implies, is old and always with us. It has not disappeared, nor will it disappear. It emerges from the very essence of being itself, the nature of connection among all living things.

"The problem is / you will never want to return." These two lines stand by themselves and gain dramatic emphasis thereby. Once you walk too far into bear country, once you identify too strongly with another, you lose track of those that are left behind, including your original self. While the beauty of the bears is seductive, and "will overcome your memory / like winter sun / melting ice shadows from snow," if you stay there you will suffer some consequences. You will be "locked forever inside yourself / your eyes will see you / dark shaggy and thick."

The poem changes focus here with the use of "we" and the introduction of the larger human family to whom we are related and which is endowed with the capacity to "call you back." Communal kinship is further complicated by the use of "they," which refers both to the bear priests and the bears themselves. While the call of the bear is hauntingly persuasive, the "song" of the bear priests is also "beautiful." It evokes "faint memories" that "will writhe around your heart" entreating you to return to the clan. However, these memories already "startle you with their distance." The bear priests dress in their "bear claw necklaces." They paint their legs black to take on aspects of bear. They are "loping after you / with their medicine bags." Their job is to retrieve you, to recall you to yourself "step by step," but you have already seen "only bear prints in the sand / where your feet had been." The listener should now be wondering, is it too late to return?

The struggle for the individual soul is finally mediated by the "me" of the poem, who also has a call or song that emanates from the infinite, from the time of creation, and subsumes all others. It is the voice of compassion calling to the "you" whose wife and sons wait "back at the car." The noncorporeal "me" voice of love reminds the wandering man "hiking in these canyons and hills" that he may safely turn and see his "footprints," that there is still time to heed the call of Native-American spiritual wisdom and avoid being lost forever. The spirit voice is fluid. It easily changes back to the "we" of community. "Don't be afraid," the voice calls. "we love you / we've been calling you / all this time."

Each person walks a road that should lead to the discovery of the true self. The potential confusion of identity is what creates the tension in this poem and in much of Silko's other work. In the folktale that ends this poem, the child recovered from bears by the medicine man is never "quite the same / after that / not like the other children." He has been caught "in between," and his forging of kinship with bears has been gained at the terrible cost of alienation from both groups.

Individual rebirth ideally preserves boundaries that allow us to develop our unique individuality. It is true that in Native-American cosmology, the spirit moves around and within each person. But balance is required to keep spiritual harmony. Because all things are connected and interdependent in this cosmology, every living thing and element is valuable, both in itself and in its relationship to every other thing. In this poem, bear spirit resides in the dazzling beauty and stillness of the canyons and caves where "you" can easily lose yourself. And while no simple formula serves to answer the question, "Who am I?" Silko demonstrates that boundaries are essential to relationships, and relationships are essential to meaning.

Source: Kathy Smith, Critical Essay on "Story from Bear Country," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

Kryhoski is currently working as a freelance writer. She has also taught English Literature in addition to English as a Second Language overseas. In this essay, Kryhoski considers Erdrich's work in relation to the author's heritage.

"Story from Bear Country" offers a small sampling of Leslie Marmon Silko's ability to weave elements of her ethnicity into the fabric of her work. The poem moves with the rhythms and cadence or beat that is as haunting as it is mystical. The author's Laguna Pueblo (Native American) heritage drives the piece, providing both a traditional framework and a common natural theme, infusing "Story from Bear Country" with a unique sense of spirit and vision.

Silko spins the mystical story of Bear Country in the storytelling tradition characteristic of her Native American roots. The work first maintains an oral quality in its delivery, utilizing such repetitive phrases with slight variations, "You will know," or "You may smell." These phrases and others, scattered throughout the poem, are very inclusive, suggesting that the tale is not only a cautionary one, but one that has been passed along or repeatedly told, from generation to generation. The assumption that the audience "will know" or experience common elements of the tale supports the notion that many have investigated the events of the poem with the same results, thus giving the work a mythic quality. This quality is the hallmark of a myth or traditional story, defined as one originating in a preliterate society, one dealing with supernatural beings, ancestors, or heroes serving as primordial types in a primitive view of the world. Silko's own natural storytelling ability is an outgrowth of her Laguna Pueblo ancestry.

In *Women Who Run With the Wolves*, Dr. Clarissa Pinkola Estes devotes the afterword of her book to the art and origins of storytelling. She claims that in any of the stories that have been related to her as "authentic" works, "the relating of the story begins with the bringing up, hauling up of psychic contents, both collective and personal." In "Story from Bear Country," these extrasensory impressions are expressed in the first section of the work, in preparation for or anticipation of the story that follows within the body of the same work. The smell of "damp earth / scratched away," or "snorts and growls" echoing in the cliffs and caves beyond, or the "sundown colors of sandrock" compel the reader to respond by playing on the reader's senses. Storytelling is a process by which Silko is affecting the reader, first drawing him into another level of consciousness in preparation for the "actual" story that follows such preparation. Again Estes points to this practice as identifiably one adapted by the storyteller. On one level, a work can involve not just an actual tale but serve as a vehicle for conveying the ancestry of the story, replete or filled with details of the story's origin, "not [just] a long, boring preamble, but spiced with small stories in and of itself."

Structurally, the "Story from Bear Country" falls in two closely related parts. The first part of the work does hint at the geneology driving the story's history. In the third stanza "All but a few who went" to Bear Country "left behind families / grandparents' / and sons / a good life." The quotation hints at generations of Native-American families who have firsthand knowledge of the secrets of Bear Country. But the main thrust or intent of the first section of the poem is to convey the mystical history of human experience in Bear Country. The poet, who expresses her experiences in a series of statements, consequently shares a sense of this history with the reader. Some of her psychic preparation involves the relation of important details in the form of statements akin to "You may wonder," or "You will remain." Other related details come in the form of warnings, such as "They will try to bring you," or "You will never want to return." Such statements, though seemingly ominous or dark in meaning, also lend a supernatural quality to the work itself. In one instance, when a "bear priest" is sent, "loping after you," his beautiful song may not be enough to entice the reader, to draw him from the beautiful songs of the bears. In another, the reader is warned that he may soon discover he is the victim of a mystical transformation. In several places in the poem, the narrator warns of an instance in a "clearing / where you stopped to look back / and saw only bear tracks / behind you."

From a Native-American past also comes an oral tradition based on the retelling of stories that on a psychic level strongly connect both Silko as well as her people to the natural world. In her essay, "Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination," the author explains the intensely intimate connection of her people to the environment. This connection dictates a certain harmony among all things, living and dead in the context of the natural world. This harmony, in turn, is possible because of the belief by Native-American cultures that everything in the natural world is equal, that nature does not solely exist for man's benefit. She explains, rather, that man is co-equal with everything in nature, be it plant, animal, or the rocks that make up the landscape. Nature needs no improvement□ the focus of Native-American culture is instead on the reciprocity among all of the elements of creation. Out of this sense of equality also comes a deep spiritual connection for the Native American amongst the various aspects of the natural world, a connection which forms the basis for the group's religious convictions. Silko's work mirrors this spirit. It is recognized for its perpetuation of both an oral tradition and the supernatural energy of the natural world that inspires it.

"Story from Bear Country" is infused or filled with the spirit of the natural world defining Native- American life. It is related in the powerful relationship that entwines both man and bear on a deeper, more religious level of experience. In the beginning of the work, the various sounds of the bears are not only audible but "they call you." In the same instance in the poem, the narrator claims that the power of the bear's beauty "will overcome your memory." These statements foreshadow a potential transformation, from man to bear, as it is slowly recounted in the first half of the poem. At a certain point in the work, both man and bear become synonymous with one another, man developing eyes that will see himself as the bear, "dark shaggy and thick." The transformation is recounted again and again in the poem's insistence of the reader to "Go ahead / turn around / see the shape / of your footprints / in the sand." As the poem continues, backward glances reveal the symbolic melding or mixing of both human and animal tracks, until, at the end of the poem, only bear tracks are clearly visible. Man is not only embraced by the bear, but psychically connected to the bear, hence becoming "one" with the furry creature. Other lines in the poem reinforce this almost familial bond, particularly at the end of the first section of the poem. The narrator warns of a situation in which isolated, alone, the reader may hear the sound of the bear's "voice" calling "we love you / we've been calling you / all this time." The second half of the poem also illuminates the mystical exchange that connects both man and bear in the story of a Laguna Pueblo child who, after having strayed from his parents, must be gently coaxed out of his bear-like trance. The power of Silko's "Story from Bear Country" is found in the influences of the Laguna Pueblo tradition. The work is a celebration of nature. The splendor and mystery of the celebration is powerful, so much so, that the reader cannot help but be drawn in to the realm of Bear Country, even at the risk of a glance backward to find "only bear prints in the sand."

Source: Laura Kryhoski, Critical Essay on "Story from Bear Country," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #3

Covintree is a graduate of Randolph-Macon Women's College with a degree in English. In this essay, Covintree divides the poem into two sections to examine how Silko develops the idea of transformation, first individually, then as a whole.

Leslie Marmon Silko has divided her poem "Story from Bear Country" into two sections, both different in form and voice. Though the poem is not numbered into sections, a division becomes clear first visually, then stylistically. The first section is aligned to the left side of the page, with occasional lines indented. It is told in second person with the speaker (or storyteller) directly addressing the reader as "you." The second section, written in the center of the page, is a third person narrative. Though both sections are different in form, Silko uses the same strategies with each. Lines are broken according to how they would be spoken, ending a line to create a break, space or emphasis in the narrative. Linda Krumholz, in her essay "To Understand This World Differently," notes that this is an important aspect of Silko's writing. Krumholz states that Silko "uses the ends of lines to indicate verbal pauses, she indents to indicate visually the structural importance of repetition." What is interesting in "Story from Bear Country" is the drastic visual difference between these two sections. Form used in one section (left alignment and indentation) is not used in the other (centering). Krumholz believes "[t]hese textual indicators control the pacing and reception of the stories, increasing the accessibility and emphasizing the poetic and narrative effects for readers." If this is true, then the reader must approach both of these sections differently based on their structural indicators. Though separate, Silko makes it clear, by placing them together as one poem that the greatest understanding of the poem comes when taking the two pieces together. By dividing the poem, Silko allows the reader the opportunity to see how both the poetic (the first section) and narrative (the second section) perspectives of this poem affect her retelling of this Native-American tale and then forces her audience to draw the final understanding.

The first section of this poem is more traditionally poetic. Written in second person, the reader takes an active role and is immediately drawn in to the "juniper trees" and "sundown colors of sandrock" described in the first stanza. Through the detailed description of bear country, the reader can visualize this special place. When the lines are spoken aloud, the reader can see Silko's intentional use of various poetic elements like alliteration in the phrase "because bear priests sing / beautiful songs" and cacophony in the lines "black / bear claw necklaces / rattling against their capes." These elements enhance this section's rhythmic back and forth meter that soothes the reader, almost seducing the reader directly into the section.

The reader is called into the poem like the section's "you" is drawn into bear country. The reader's attraction to the poem and its poetics parallels what the speaker is saying. "It is difficult to explain / how they call you . . . [t]heir beauty will overcome your memory." The journey and the calling become personal. It is the reader's transformation that occurs during the course of this section; the reader's body is now "dark shaggy and thick." The "bear prints in the sand" are from "where [the reader's] feet had been." In this way, what is written alters the readers understanding of self and life. This is a very Native-American concept, and as Krumholz asserts in her article "To Understand This World Differently," published in *Ariel*, "[i]n Native American oral traditions . . . language has the power to create and transform reality."

The speaker makes it clear this is a man being changed, because the reader's "wife and sons are waiting." Even so, Silko makes the bear transformation possible for both genders. Placing this fact near the end of the section gives a female reader plenty of time to relate personally to the poem. Perhaps for a man, the transformation is from man to bear, and for a woman it is from woman to man to bear. In addition, by beginning the next stanza with "[b]ut you have been listening to me / for some time now / from the very beginning in fact" Silko validates the importance of the personal experience and change garnered through the whole section over this one simple fact.

These simple facts ground the reader. They finally allow the reader the opportunity within the poem to return to his or her personal reality and think about his "wife and sons" or his or her lack of these. Also, this same stanza informs the reader about present-day nature of this tale. Until this point in the poem, there is no time frame given. Now, the reader knows that not only are his "wife and sons" waiting, but they are "back at the car." This contemporary word pulls the poem away from ancient or stagnant myth and blurs the lines between past and present, real and imagined.

At times, the speaker's voice also becomes blurred. As the poem itself states, "[w]hose voice is this?" It is unclear exactly who the speaker is. Is this a bear calling the man further in to the wilderness or a bear priest calling the man back out to his family? In this section, the calling bears pull the reader into "caves / in cliffs high above you." Then, with the help of the bear priest, the reader is told to "turn around" and leave "this canyon of stillness." It is as if two voices are playing tug of war for the reader. This contest concurs with a Native- American ritual that David Rockwell discusses in his book, *Giving Voice to Bear: North American Indian Myths, Rituals, and Images of the Bear*, "[s]hamans often dueled with song." The bear and bear priests can both be seen as shamans. In Silko's poem, the bear priest is shown to be a superior power, "because bear priests sing / beautiful songs . . . they will try to bring you / step by step / back." This is the voice that prevails by the end of the section.

In addition, neither the section's "you" nor the reader can rejoin the bear priest and family until notice of "the shape / of your footprints / in the sand." Silko intentionally breaks these three lines in a manner that places stress on three words, "shape," "footprints," and "sand." Observing footprints, or bear tracks, in the sand is mentioned three times in this section, and it is obviously an important image for Silko. In fact, Silko manipulates these trail markings to reinforce the idea of transformation for the reader. In the first instance, Silko mentions "bear tracks / behind you" that the "you" observes. Then these tracks evolve into "bear prints in the sand/ where your feet had been." Again, Silko has blurred the line, and the reader is forced to contemplate the idea that he or she might have made those bear prints. Finally, Silko tells the reader to return to his or her own "footprints." Though they are called footprints, Silko has already entertained the idea that these could be bear prints or at least a combination of bear/foot print. In doing this, the reader leaves this section with a distinct understanding that the "you" has changed. The "you" is returning, but the "you" is different.

This is the same viewpoint the reader is left with at the end of the second section. In this section's last stanza Silko writes, "So long time ago/ they got him back again/ but he wasn't quite the same / after that / not like the other children." Here, Silko does not use the metaphor of footprints to indicate change but directly speaks of the young boy's transition. Still, the two last sectional stanzas compliment each other so well that, when read in tandem, the reader is left with a more comprehensive understanding of the transformation. Obviously, the "you" from the first section will never be the same, and the young boy may forever carry a memory of his own footprints as bear prints. With the addition of the second section, the reader's awareness deepens.

The second section, in contrast to the first, is distance and straightforward. Told as a narrative, it is clear who the characters are: the small boy, his family, the bears, and the medicine man. The reader is never confused as to who the characters are or what roles they play in the story. The reader believes in the story and the speaker is sharing it. Written in simple English, breaks in line now seem especially important for emphasis. Some lines are very short like, "by himself," while others are very long like, "He grunted loudly and scratched on the ground in front of him." Line breaks follow the flow of the story being told, and lead the reader into a better understanding of how the story should sound. Hearing the story, even on the page, is especially important in this section. This is a distinctly external speaker, sharing a story, and using the line breaks to help bring the story to life.

In this way, the second section directly follows the path of traditional Native-American storytelling. By telling the more classic tale, Silko demonstrates that the first section is an adaptation of an old story. There are many tales of bears told by many Native-American tribes. In the title chapter of his book *Giving Voice to Bear: North American Indian Myths, Rituals, and Images of the Bear*, David Rockwell states that one type of tale tells about "a powerful but benevolent spiritual animal [that] help[s] . . . humans." Silko's poem would be a variation of the story type. Certainly, her storyteller introduces the bears as compassionate. These bears take care of the boy when his own family has forgotten him. The storyteller shows that the bears welcome the boy into their family by saying he was "walking like his sisters." In this version, it is carelessness of the family that alters the child. What stops the medicine man from "just grab[bing] the child" is not the violent nature of the bears, but the impact the forced separation will have on the boy.

With this new section also comes a new title for the person who transforms visually into a bear to draw the child or the "you" out from the bears. In the first section, it is a bear priest, complete with "medicine bags / . . . Naked legs painted black/ bear claw necklaces / . . . [and] capes of blue spruce. In the second section, the medicine man comes with assistants and all are dressed with "bearweed / tied at their wrists and ankles and around their necks." They have different techniques and yet each knows the brevity of the situation and is able to accomplish the task set before him.

Unlike the first section, the narrative portion takes the reader right to the caves, not as the child, but as an omniscient observer. Now the reader can not only see what the medicine man wears, but how he behaves in order to move the child out of the den. "He grunted and made a low growling sound.. . He grunted and growled a little more/ and then the child came out." The reader can notice how the child has already been transformed in his time with the bears. The reader can also witness the child and the bears' reactions to the medicine man's actions. Then, the storyteller explains the reasons behind the medicine man's behavior. The storyteller makes the reader aware of a danger involved for the boy, "he would be in-between forever / and probably he would die." This dark side of the journey into bear country is never apparent in the first section.

With the addition of the second section, Silko widens the reader's understanding of the story. Now the reader is alerted to the danger and separation involved in personal transformation. Silko also reiterates that as caring as the bears (a metaphor for whatever creates change) are, the original home, family, tribe, life, is stronger and more important. This is where everyone returns, and the reader, the "you," and the child are left with an experience that will forever alter their view of the world.

Source: Kate Covintree, Critical Essay on "Story from Bear Country," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Adaptations

In 1978, Leslie Marmon Silko was the subject of a documentary video called "Running on the Edge of the Rainbow: Laguna Stories and Poems," one of a series of videotapes of oral literary performance produced by Larry Evers at the University of Arizona and available from Norman Ross Publishing Co. in New York.

Topics for Further Study

What is the main "story" of this poem, and how is it rooted in our common experience? What spiritual beliefs are made manifest by the story?

The belief in self-transformation and rebirth is common among Native-American tribes. Tribe members were initiated into adulthood by undertaking "vision quests" in the wilderness to discover their "totem" animal that was thought to guide them through life. What can this transforming rite tell us about the relationship between humans and animals in Native cultures?

Storytelling is essential to Native-American oral traditions. Imagine that this poem plays a significant role in educating Laguna Pueblo children. What do you think the poem is trying to teach? Is there a lesson or even many lessons embedded in the poem?

Poems are meant to be read aloud just as drama is meant to be performed on the stage. Read the poem aloud. What emotion or feeling does the imagery of the poem conjure up for you? How is nature presented; is it filled with terror or beauty or both? Does the author evoke a mood of fear or desire toward wild nature? What specific images create this mood?

In Native-American traditions, it is important to "walk in balance" with nature. Is something out of balance in this poem? What is the source of conflict or tension in this poem? What can the ambiguous ending tell us about Laguna Pueblo culture?

Research the significance of the bear as a totem animal in Native-American traditions. What singular, valuable qualities does the bear possess? Relate what you find to the poem.

Compare and Contrast

1400s: Before contact with Europeans, indigenous peoples of North America lived in longestablished tribal homelands and developed cultures that reflected their economic and spiritual relationship with the natural world.

Today: Many of America's indigenous peoples experience a dual identity, as natives who lost their way of life as a direct result of U.S. policies of aggression and containment and also as patriotic Americans who feel an innate sense of belonging to the continent.

1400s: In Native-American folk legends and narratives of creation, animals were co-creators of the earth. Animals and humans could "talk" to each other, and the natural world was balanced by a sacred respect for all living things.

Today: New awareness and respect for Native- American traditions has led to a greater sensitivity to the ecological problems facing the planet and our responsibility for preserving and protecting all life forms.

1400s: Since writing was non-existent in Native- American cultures, tribes relied on storytelling to pass down to its members common values, wisdom, and sacred beliefs. This oral tradition relied on both ancient tales and imaginative new stories that would make the past memorable to each generation of listeners.

Today: Native-American authors write in English and are widely read and celebrated nationally and abroad. But Native-American literacy has not diminished the importance of stories and legends. On the contrary, writing has enabled a new kind of storytelling technique that allows the text to act as the storyteller.

1400s: Native Americans recognized the power of the feminine in creation myths, tribal laws, ceremonies, and rituals. The animating spirit that pervades life is referred to variously in ancient stories as "Spider Woman," "Corn Woman," or "Thought Woman," she who thinks a thing and brings it into being.

Today: As a corrective to predominately patriarchal social constructs, the power of the feminine is being restored to Native-American stories by such writers as Silko, Paula Gunn Allen, Linda Hogan, and Wendy Rose.

What Do I Read Next?

Storyteller is the autobiographical collection of writings published in 1981 in which "Story from Bear Country" first appears. It is particularly helpful to read the poem in the context of photographs, letters, legends, and family histories, the accumulated experiences of Silko's life that give deeper meanings to Laguna Pueblo culture and her poetic sensibilities. She invites readers to transform themselves by entering a world where memory and imagination recreate the spirit of place, where that place in turn molds the community and the personal interior landscape.

Ceremony (1977), Silko's first novel, reinforces the Native-American wisdom that storytelling occupies a central place in maintaining the health, balance, and strength of community. Implicit in the novel is the notion that without stories to live by, we lose our place in the natural world. Ritual and tribal legends are essential ingredients in healing the spirit and correcting destructive forces. The alienated hero must learn this lesson to complete his journey toward authentic selfhood.

Almanac of the Dead (1991) is Silko's second novel. In it, she attempts to find justice and resolution for the pain, loss, and disenfranchisement of her people. Ironically, it was written during the 1980s, a time dominated by the conservative politics that made life more difficult for the economically disadvantaged and ethnically marginalized.

In 1969, N. Scott Momaday, a Kiowa poet, novelist, and essayist, won a Pulitzer Prize for his novel *House Made of Dawn*. By doing so, he helped open the doors for other Native-American writers who became established in the American literary canon. In the novel, the protagonist is transformed from an alienated alcoholic war vet to a man whose psyche is finally healed through participation in tribal ritual and reintegration into the fragile web of the cosmos.

Songs from This Earth on Turtle's Back (1983), edited by Joseph Bruchac, is a collection of contemporary American Indian poetry by 52 poets from more than 35 Native-American nations. Each section includes a photograph and brief biography of the poet.

The Sacred Hoop (1986), by Paula Gunn Allen, is a collection of essays whose purpose lies in "recovering the feminine in American Indian traditions." The sacred hoop represents the circle of life, in which every living thing plays a part. The book includes essays on Native- American history and culture as well as reviews of Native-American writers and their art. Allen writes from the perspective of a mixed blood (Laguna and Lebanese) lesbian who is a respected scholar as well as a well-known poet and novelist.

Joseph Bruchac calls Karl Kroeber's *Traditional American Indian Literatures* "one of the better contemporary books" to explore the heritage of American Indian oral traditions still alive today. Published by the University of Nebraska Press in 1981, Kroeber's book is a wonderful resource for tracing the lineage, range, meaning and relevance of these traditions.

Further Study

Allen, Paula Gunn, *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows*, Spinsters Ink, 1983.

As with Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* and Silko's *Ceremony*, this novel propels us into a "ceremonial motion" of Indian chronology that disrupts the linear time of most non-Indian writing. The lessons and experiences of the book's protagonist are understood through stories that take place in dreamtime, the time of mythic tales and history, and dynamic present time.

Deloria, Vine, Jr., *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion*, Fulcrum, 1994.

A prominent Native-American lawyer, educator, and philosopher, Deloria contrasts Christian traditions and principles to Native-American spiritual beliefs and practices.

Kingston, Maxine Hong, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, Knopf, 1976.

The book's heroine discovers that growing up healthy and whole as a Chinese girl in America requires a deep understanding of Chinese values and traditions that her mother passes down to her through powerful and imaginative teaching stories.

Lincoln, Kenneth, *Native American Renaissance*, University of California Press, 1983.

An important guide to Native-American literature, this book includes a smart reading of Silko's novel *Ceremony* as well as reflections on Laguna life and landscape.

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Silko discusses politics, literature, and Native-American life as well as her own experiences growing up as a mixed blood Laguna Pueblo woman.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Poetry for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, 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 Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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