Storyteller Study Guide

Storyteller by Leslie Marmon Silko

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Introduction

"Storyteller" was first published in the journal *Puerto del Sol* in 1975, and in 1981 it was collected in a mixed-genre book of the same name. "Storyteller" includes the following mix of genres: short story, poetry, and photography (and many of the poems seem more like stories than poems). The book was well-received, garnering special praise for its effect and statement as a whole. It is hailed as an important literary statement in the way that the mixing and inter-mixing of genres point to artistic practices beyond mainstream ones.

The significance of the title of this short story and book becomes clear from a consideration of their contents. Both story and book are centrally concerned with the art of storytelling and narrative, and with how stories and storytelling shape persons and communities (to tell stories that also tell stories about stories is to write "metacritical" works).

"Storyteller" depicts a clash of cultures in Bethel, Alaska, as well as the coming of age of a new storyteller in the local Eskimo community. The indigenous Eskimo community must contend with the "Gussucks" who, from the point of view of the main character, come not to live but to exploit the territory and its peoples. (The Yupik word "Gussuck" refers to any non-indigenous person; it is a derivation of the word "cossack," and thus can be dated to early Russian colonization of the area.) The main character's resistance to U.S. culture is evident from the description of her experiences at school, to which she goes for a brief time. She refuses to speak English and is whipped for her rebellion.

The young woman's identity as a storyteller is inseparable from this context of culture clash and resistance. Her story, when she begins to tell stories, appears to be of a personal nature (telling of a personal revenge). This story, however, is symbolic of the larger concerns of her community. This story about her parents' cruel death at the hands of a "Gussuck" storekeeper symbolizes her community's struggle against disdainful cultural interlopers in general. In Silko's story, the community storyteller witnesses, records and relates those events and circumstances of the most pressing communal significance or import.

Author Biography

Leslie Marmon Silko grew up on the Laguna Pueblo Reservation. This land is in the southwestern United States and was home turf to Native-American peoples before the first Europeans (Spaniards) arrived, and before the United States gained the land from Mexico. Albuquerque, the town she was born in, reflects in its Spanish name the history of the earliest European conquest of the Americas. The state she was born in, New Mexico, reflects the region's close ties to the Mexican nation southwards, the nation that only gave up the territory of New Mexico after a bitter war with the United States. Leslie Marmon Silko, of European and Keresan descent, was born a United States citizen on March 5, 1948. Silko's art and life are deeply informed by this history of cultures meeting, meshing, and clashing.

Silko and her two sisters were brought up in Old Laguna, a small town about fifty miles outside of Albuquerque. Silko went to elementary school locally and, from the sixth grade on, attended Catholic schools in Albuquerque. She completed a B.A. in English, with Honors, at the University of New Mexico in 1969, and following this she enrolled in the school's American Indian law program. Soon, however, she settled on her talent and career, and transferred to the university's M.A. program in creative writing. Silko first published while a student at the university (1969).

In 1969, the year Marmon graduated from college (undergraduate), the Pulitzer Prize in fiction went to N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn.* Momaday, like Silko, is of American Indian descent, and this book marked a milestone in U.S. letters. It won this nation's highest literary prize and its Native American themes were penned by a close cultural insider, and not a Euro-American writing, as it were, from the outside. This literary and cultural event undoubtedly helped consolidate Silko's literary path, which was to make her Native American heritage, and all the historical, political, and cultural issues this infers, absolutely central to her concerns as a writer.

Silko, very quickly, became a major and wellrespected presence in U.S. letters. First published (and anthologized) were individual short stories. Her first full-length work was the 1974 book of poetry, *Laguna Woman: Poems by Leslie Silko*. This book of poems was succeeded by her first novel, *Ceremony*, in 1977. The year 1981 was an especially good one for Silko. Besides the publication of the collection of stories and poems *Storyteller* (which includes the short story of the same name), Silko received a prestigious MacArthur Foundation Prize Fellowship ($176,000 for five years). Silko continues to publish regularly, in both fictional and non-fictional modes. Her latest effort is the prodigious and ambitious novel, *Almanac of the Dead* (1991).

Plot Summary

The story begins with a young woman in a jail cell. The reason for her incarceration is not known. She is looking out of the window and sees that the sun has stopped in its course. She calls the jailer excitedly. He hears what she has to say then walks away uninterested.

Details that provide a view into the story's world are next presented ("white people" and "Gussucks" are named; the cold Alaskan world is fully sensed). Random thoughts from the girl's consciousness are presented (thoughts of "Gussuck" arrogance make her laugh). She thinks of her village and her cabin there; she thinks about the previous summer when she nailed red tin over the logs of the cabin.

The story now moves into the past. The girl's decision to go to school, out of curiosity, and because she is tired of being cooped up with her grandmother and the old man, is recounted. Her aloneness has to do with the fact that other children avoid her cabin out of fear of the old man and woman. Already at this point in the past, the old man is enfeebled and spending winters in bed. The grandmother is gnarled and in pain due to a joint malady. She says her joints are "swollen with anger" (anger, presumably, at the disintegrating Eskimo world).

The girl hates the school, as the old man tells her she would. She is whipped for refusing to speak English, and from this detail it is understood that what the girl resists is being inducted into a culture and language other than her native one (Yupik). She returns to the village at the end of the school year to find her grandmother dead. She will never return to school. It is also learned that the old man uses the girl sexually.

The story now jumps forward in time, but still not to the present of the jail cell. The young woman has outgrown the unwelcome sexual advances of the old man. She goes looking for a "Gussuck" lover. The old man warns her that this will only lead to trouble. Also around this time, the old man begins the story that he will tell until his death; it is the story of the advance of a great bear.

The next major scene takes place in a local Gussuck store. This is where the young woman meets the "red-haired man." He sits in the back room socializing with other men. The storekeeper looks on enviously at the socializing and at the redhaired man who has the young woman come join him. They leave the store and go to the man's room. She has always been curious as to what he pins up above the bed when she can no longer see. She is careful to look this time before the item is removed. It is a picture of a woman with a large dog on top of her.

The story now jumps further back in time, to the young woman as a little girl asking her grandmother about the morning after her parents died. She says that she saw "something red" in the grass that morning, presumably near the bodies of her parents. This could be a reference to blood, but this is not certain. Her grandmother tells her how her parents died. They were sold poison, or bad alcohol, in place of the drink they

thought they were buying. They were found dead the next day; the shopkeeper who sold the substance left town to escape punishment.

The story now returns to the young woman's life with the old man (during the period after the grandmother has died and just before the present time of the story). He continues with his story. His great bear is slowly but surely gaining on him. He intones stories for hours, even days on end without stop, sometimes not even sleeping nights.

The denouement of the story now begins. The young woman goes to the store and entices the storekeeper to follow her. He runs out into the cold after her, without hat or gloves. She runs out onto the iced-over river, and, as she had planned, the storekeeper falls through thinner ice. Since she is seen being chased by the storekeeper, she is questioned about his death by a state trooper. She tells the state trooper that she killed the man.

The story's last major scene is in the present. An attorney is visiting the young woman and cannot understand why she insists on taking responsibility for the crime. Eye witnesses claim that the man simply fell through thin ice, and that the girl was not near him and so did not push him. But she does not explain her motivations or thinking. The attorney therefore does not understand her and plans to defend her as someone who is "confused." In the meantime, the old man has died and villagers appear with food for the girl, just as they used to bring food to the old man. She has already begun storytelling by this time; she has become the new storyteller. The story's final scene depicts the last moments of the old man, his moment of death when the "blue glacier bear turned slowly to face him."

Characters

Attorney

The attorney is a public defender sent to look after the young woman's interests. He is perplexed that she insists on taking responsibility for the storekeeper's death. He is a sympathetic character but, ultimately, somewhat patronizing. Although the young woman does not help him understand the meaning and significance of her desire to take responsibility for her act, for his part he is quick to decide that she must be confused or of unsound mind.

Girl

See She and Young Woman

Grandmother

The grandmother seems eminently tired out by life. Her having felt its blows harshly is reflected in the gnarled and painful state of her body. Glimpses into the past suggest that she does her duty to the young woman, her orphaned grandchild, dryly and without relish. She passes on stories and nominally looks after the girl, but she does not, on the other hand, protect her from the old man's misdeeds. The unhappy nature of this household reflects the unraveling of the properly functioning traditional Yupik culture.

Jailer

The jailer angers the young woman as he refuses to speak Yupik (although he understands it). To the girl this means he is a cultural traitor, one who has capitulated to cultural conquest. He exhibits no concern for or interest in the young woman (in contrast to the community members who bring her food).

Old Man

The old man is the local storyteller at the narrative's beginning. He is old, dying, and even as far back as the story tunnels in time, he is enfeebled. His status as storyteller guarantees a certain veneration and care from his community. He is brought food, and both the grandmother and young woman seem to look after him willingly . The young woman, for unexplained reasons, also tolerates his sexual advances, despite the fact that she does not welcome them. When his death is imminent, he begins narrating a story about the approach of a great bear. This story is about the approach of his own death (and it could also signal the slow approaching "death" of his culture).

Red-Haired Man

Nobody is given a name in this short story, least of all this "Gussuck" lover the young woman takes. He is not particularly defined as a character except that his interest in the young woman seems as limited as her own interest in him. His habit of pinning a representation of a woman and dog above their bed suggests how their relationship appeals to him primarily as fantasy, and not as an interpersonal partnership or direct communion with another human being.

She

"She," also known as The Young Woman and Girl, is the main character of the story. Her character is best described as self-sufficient. She has learned to be alone from a childhood of other children running away due to her being a member of an unusual household (other children are frightened of the old man and the grandmother with whom she lives). Her self-sufficiency is demonstrated by her habit of laughing at "Gussuck" pretensions to mastery or control of nature. When she sees the disassembled parts of prefabricated houses with insulation spilling out, or when she sees machines stalled in the cold, she laughs as if she knows all along that the Alaskan freeze is the true master of all things. This knowing laughter is suggestive of superior knowledge and self-confidence. Her role in the story is to emerge as the next community storyteller, as the old man who is the current storyteller moves, at the same time, to meet his death. This process involves an act of terrible revenge. This revenge is motivated not only by the murder of her parents but also by anger at her culture's usurpation by outside cultural forces.

Young Woman

See She and Girl

Themes

Colonization: Territory and Culture

The Eskimo girl, along with her grandmother and the old man, represent a culture withering under the press of U.S. interests. Clearly dominant in the area are the "Gussucks," probably most of whom are U.S. citizens of European descent, who are in Bethel for the business of oil, pelts, fishing, and so forth. Bethel, of course, is official U.S. territory, and at the time that this story takes place, it is where many U.S. citizens are at "home." The region's annexation by the United States marked, for the indigenous peoples, the beginning of the end—or at least the massive disturbance—of what had been up until then largely uninterrupted tradition. The Inuit and Aleut (Eskimo) populations of the Alaskan region had no choice but to submit to the laws of the territory's conquerors.

That the traditional Eskimo way of life continues to slowly but steadily wither is subtly indicated throughout "Storyteller." For example, when the girl goes to school she appears to be the only student who even thinks to rebel against foreign ways. Yet, clearly, the school is a English-speaking school for Eskimo students run by the U.S. government: The dormitory matron pulled down her underpants and whipped her with a leather belt because she refused to speak English. "Those backward village people," the matron said, because she was an Eskimo who had worked for the BIA a long time, "they kept this one until she was too big too learn." The other girls whispered in English. They knew how to work the showers, and they washed and curled their hair at night. They ate Gussuck food. This passage demonstrates the manner in which Eskimos who have adopted U.S. ways and language might go so far as to internalize racist opinions about their own culture. Hence, the Eskimo matron refers to the village people as "backward." As for the other Eskimo girls at the school, they appear to have adopted the English language and U.S. styles and habits without question; they even whisper amongst themselves in English.

"Storyteller" is eloquent testimony to what happened following the colonization of the Americas by Europeans; namely, the decimation of indigenous ways of life and therefore of entire cul tures. In this light, the approaching, obliterating, white and "final" winter that the girl expects is a metaphor for the European blanketing and cultural smothering of the indigenous American populations. This unfortunate history of empire and colonization is recently the subject of much study and debate. Up until mid-century, history books tended to recount this history in terms of an European colonization of territory, instead of it being also an attempted colonization of peoples, cultures, and ways of life.

Revenge

"Storyteller" is a tale of a young woman's revenge, felt as a grim playing out of destiny or fate. In every respect, the girl goes about her preparations in an exceedingly calm and deliberate manner, obeying some inner voice or outer force that finally informs her that "It [is] time."

She wishes to revenge her parents, next to whose dead bodies she saw "something red." Once this association between red and revenge has been made, certain details, in retrospect, become quite ominous. For example, well before the actual act of revenge itself, the girl has ritualistically nailed red tin all over her cabin. The details of her red-lined and red tasseled boots also resonate somewhat eerily. The thought that she chooses these boots precisely because they remind her of what she must do inevitably crosses the reader's mind.

The murder is planned in cold blood. The icedover river is inspected minutely. It takes her days to get to know it intimately. She knows she can entice the storekeeper to run after her, and she knows she can excite him to the point where he will not be thinking of his own safety. Her plan unfolds without a hitch. The storekeeper falls to an instantaneous death in the freezing water, and she has guaranteed her own safety by having close knowledge of the river.

Style

Imagery

The most prevalent image in this story is that of landscape losing its boundaries. The girl and the old man await, notice, or comment upon the manner in which, during high summer or high winter, all becomes blue-green or white. Sky and land become the same color, and the line separating them on the horizon is not distinguishable. This dissolution of boundaries symbolizes a number of things in the story. If the "Gussuck" exploitative management of nature (oil drilling, killing animals for luxury coats as opposed to clothing) is compared to the Yupik living with and in nature, then this symbolism suggests how certain populations live in tandem with nature, as a part of it, as opposed to seeing it as something to be managed and used. That is, the Yupik do not live as if nature were something separate from their own being. This imagery also points to a storyteller's relationship to his or her community. There is no distinguishing a storyteller's concerns from those of the community's. When the boundaries between the two entities have dissolved, then the community knows its storyteller. This sense of boundaries dissolving could also point to a moral or ethical idea regarding the individual, his or her actions, and how the impact of these actions should be imagined. Each person must regard all of his or her actions as a studied ethical choice, as substantially impacting on the environment or others, and as having direct moral signifi- cance and repercussions. In this way, each person is enmeshed in the world such that there are no boundaries between them. This idea would accord with the story's treatment of responsibility. Even as she does not literally push the storekeeper to his death, she will not deny her responsibility for it. This meshing of distinct things could also symbolize the intermixing of cultures. The story expresses regret for the demise of the Yupik culture, but also the inevitability of this intercourse with U.S. forms. This imagery also reflects, finally, the technical achievement of the short story. The narrator is indistinguishable from the main character, and the story jumbles time, moving ambiguously through past and present. This avoidance of linear, chronological time suggests how what is important is not the young woman's voyage through time, or her own personal story, but rather her relationship to the broad world around her which has takes on significance and meaning through her community and its contact with other cultures.

Narration and Point of View

"Storyteller" is a lesson in the fine points of narration and point of view. The story is narrated by an external narrator, that is, by a voice not belonging to an actor with a role in the story. Thus, the characters in the story are referred to in the third person: "she," "he" or "they." (If the narrator were involved in, or "internal" to the story, then the first-person forms of "I" or "we" would be used.) However, this outside narrator does not necessarily provide the reader with an objective outlook on events. Instead of clearly distinguishing objective information or narrator point of view from character point of view, the two are often combined and meshed. Most often, the narrator's voice and

information in "Storyteller" is imbued with the point of view and attitudes of the main character. Hence sentences such as: "There were no cars or snowmobiles that day; the cold had silenced their machines," or "The cold stopped them; they were helpless against it." The words "silenced" and "helpless" are not merely the erudite word choices of an articulate narrator. They convey also the somber pleasure of the young woman who is glad to see that the cold has stopped "Gussuck" work. She is pleased that there is something that can overcome the "Gussuck" will to extract oil from the land (i.e. render them "helpless").

Historical Context

Native American Rights Movements

It is difficult to conceive of this country's society and culture before the 1960s, yet the very visible markers of sexism and racism were everywhere. Racial segregation was the norm, and few African Americans and other non-European ethnic minorities had progressed appreciably economically or socially. Following in the footsteps of the vocal Black Rights advocates of the 1960s, American Indians began organizing at this time as well. Some actions were bold and angry, designed to capture the attention of the nation and government. For example, the American Indian Movement (AIM) seized Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay for a period of nineteen months in 1970-71. This same organization occupied the territory of Wounded Knee, South Dakota, in 1973. Other, less militant organizations such as the National Tribal Chairman's Association, also formed around this time (1971). This seizing of power and putting forward of demands worked to the Native Americans' bene- fit. They alerted a nation and a world to their admirable cultures, received monetary reparations, regained land, and recovered sacred grounds.

Multiculturalism

The prevailing notion, up until the 1960s, about the multi-ethnic nations of the Americas was that of a "melting pot," or the meshing of all the distinct cultures into a vibrant new singular one. Although, certainly, the Americas are unique precisely because of such a meshing of cultures, this is not a process that happens overnight or completely. Distinct cultures persist, whether due to the desires of the people who belong to them, or else because the world is a place of traveling people who necessarily bring their distinct cultures with them when they relocate. Now, therefore, it is more common to hear the word "multiculturalism," as opposed to "melting pot," when referring to the globally mixed regions of the world. This simply means that a nation or region need not have a single dominant culture, but can house numerous communities each with different practices and values.

Feminism

While the young woman and old man are strong purveyors of criticism against the cultural encroachments of non-indigenous populations, they are not themselves exempt from criticism within the story. The old man's casual attitude toward the young girl's body is clearly meant to disturb. And just as the girl is exploited sexually by the old man, so she seeks out "Gussucks" as sexual mates without any thought of her partner's humanity. Moreover, when she entices the storekeeper to follow her to his death, she uses her sexuality in an exploitative manner. "Storyteller" is not simply an argument about the demise of native American populations. It is also contains a feminist element

insofar as feminism entails a denunciation of abusive or unequal gender power dynamics (sexism). Silko's feminism is a function of her time and place. She grew up during the progressive 1960s and 1970s, when women and other minorities asserted their rights to equal treatment, respect, and opportunity.

Critical Overview

What is known as the Native American Renaissance began in the 1970s. It is a cultural event whose name echoes another major cultural event this century, The Harlem Renaissance. The Harlem Renaissance refers to the those years in the 1920s and 1930s when African Americans constituted themselves as a political and cultural force. Similarly, in the 1970s, American Indian populations established themselves as political and cultural forces with which to be reckoned. Leslie Marmon Silko is an important literary figure in this latter Renaissance.

Until the publication of her first novel, Silko's place within the Renaissance was that of a poet and consummate writer of short stories. Her reputation was bolstered upon the publication of *Ceremony* (1977), and attention from a wide range of critics followed from this. In fact, Silko's body of work was, by 1981, considered substantial and admirable enough to justify her receipt of a prestigious MacArthur Foundation Fellowship (the proceeds from which supported her while she wrote her second novel, *Almanac of the Dead*).

Whereas Silko's short stories, "Storyteller" preeminent among them, are known for their tight form and compositional finesse, *Ceremony* is occasionally critiqued for its compositional looseness. Almanac of the Dead is similarly critiqued for compositional weaknesses and has fared poorly in reviews, mainly because critics react negatively to its ethnic militancy and its central themes of cultural decadence and apocalypse. This does not mean, however, that it is not taken seriously; in fact, it is the subject of numerous scholarly articles.

"Storyteller" is seldom discussed as a single story; more often, it is an element in a larger discussion about the mixed-genre work of which it is a part. This mixed-genre work, *Storyteller*, contains story-poems, poems, photographs of relatives and the New Mexican landscape, and short stories. Some of the narratives, like "Storyteller," seem contemporary; others seem closer to traditional Laguna narratives. For those critics who wish to classify the collection, it is often considered to be autobiography. But if it is, it is a highly unusual one by mainstream standards. But this difference is, precisely, the text's point and strength. Silko is a major figure in the Native American Renaissance because she takes her heritage seriously and weaves its traditions into works that are still contemporary in flavor. The literary critic Linda Krumholz, in "Native Designs: Silko's 'Storyteller' and the Reader's Initiation" describes "Storyteller" in this way: "The Native American autobiographical subject is created amid a community of voices that relate, interact, and define one another. . . .Thus 'Storyteller' is an autobiography in which the 'I' has been recast as 'the storyteller,' one who finds her identity through her role for and in the community, which shifts the reader away from a traditional Western location of the 'I' (as central and clearly differentiated) for author and reader." For Krumholz, the photographs of relatives and landscape demonstrate Silko's intention of diffusing herself amongst family, community, and place. Much of the scholarly work on Silko's fiction, like Krumholz's essay, explores its incorporation of Native American traditions and beliefs.

The importance of landscape and place is a central aspect of "Storyteller," and essays about this story often examine it in light of the centrality of landscape and place within Native American tradition. In the essay "Where I Ought to be: A Writer's Sense of Place," Louise Erdrich (another major literary figure of the Renaissance), explains why landscape and place is so important: "In a tribal view of the world, where one place has been inhabited for generations, the landscape becomes enlivened by a sense of group and family history. Unlike most contemporary writers, a traditional storyteller fixes listeners in an unchanging landscape combined of myth and reality. People and place are inseparable." Silko expresses this same view in the introduction to *Laguna Woman*: "I grew up at Laguna Pueblo. . . .This place that I am from is everything I am as a writer and human being." The young woman and old man's intense relationship with place and landscape in "Storyteller" is understandable in this light, and they are, therefore, authorial alter egos. That is, these characters tell the reader something about how Silko thinks about storytelling and herself as a storyteller. As Linda Krumholz says, "'Storyteller' epitomizes a metacritical text; every piece can be read for the story it tells and for its story about storytelling and the role of stories."

In an essay entitled "To Tell a Good Story," Helen Jaskoski agrees with Krumholz's view: "Through all her writings Silko has been engaged in developing a theory of story and storytelling as constitutive of human identity and community, and these short stories, on the nature of story, are some of her earliest meditations on the theme." Jaskoski focuses, in her essay, on "the nature of language and its function in maintaining identity." For Jaskoski, the manner in which the Yupik girl rejects English at school is a crucial detail. This signifies the girl's sense of how the "hostile" world of foreigners is "bent on dissolving the outlines of her own identity," an identity that is intimately bound up with her own "language" (Yupik).

Jaskoski remarks, as do many critics, on the unusualness of the setting of this short story. It is the only narrative of Silko's that reflects the time she spent in Alaska (while she was writing *Ceremony*): "'Storyteller,' the first short story to appear in Storyteller, seems an odd source for a book that is permeated with loving familiarity with the American Southwest." Jaskoski calls "Storyteller" a "brooding" fatalistic tale and considers another short story in the volume, Geronimo, to be its "comedic companion piece."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4
- Critical Essay #5

BOOKRAGS

Critical Essay #1

Carol Dell'Amico teaches English at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, where she is currently working on a dissertation. This essay explores imagery in Silko's short story, such as the use of the color red and the motif of landscape losing its boundaries.

The most pervasive motif in Leslie Marmon Silko's "Storyteller" is that of landscape losing its boundaries. A "motif" is the reoccurrence of a literary device (for example, an image, symbol, or scene), not necessarily to achieve precisely the same effect or meaning each time. For example, landscape losing its boundaries in "Storyteller" is first alluded to in the first paragraph of the story: "She told herself it wasn't a good sign for the sky to be indistinguishable from the river ice. . . .The tundra rose up behind the river but all the boundaries between the river and hills and sky were lost in the density of the pale ice." As the young woman's thoughts make clear, this instance of a loss of horizon is "not a good sign." Yet, as the story progresses, this landscape motif proves not always to signal something definitively "bad." Later, for example, it is the indicator of when the young woman must act out her revenge: "On the river bank in the distance she could see the red tin nailed to the log house, something not swallowed up by the heavy white belly of the sky or caught in the folds of the frozen earth. It was time." Whereas at the beginning of the story this special state of nature is visited upon the girl and her region, in this latter instance it is a state of nature that "speaks" to her personally. Or, to put this another way, in the first instance she passively reads the signs and in the second, nature is implicit in her own designs. "Storyteller," therefore and rather cleverly, manages to suggest the very essence of a literary motif in the image that is repeated: landscape losing its bounda ries suggests ambiguity and indistinctness, and a repeating motif is always an highly ambiguous literary effect. This narrative ploy points to the mechanics and method of "Storyteller" as a whole. Almost all of Silko's technical expertise in this story is mustered to suggest indistinctness, ambiguity, and shifting meaning.

Next to landscape losing its boundaries, the use of the color red, or things red, is perhaps second in suggestive importance. Things red are associated with her parents' death and her plans for revenge, even if always ambiguously or indirectly so. The story takes place during winter time, and although there are some references to the past that include descriptions of summer's green grass, the reader's impression of the story's world is that of overwhelming whiteness. This is reasonable, to be sure; the story is set, after all, in Alaska during winter, and it is also a story about the imminent demise (winter) of a culture to the encroachments of various "white people" or "white" cultures. For this reason, on the few occasions that red objects or references to the color red occur, they strike the reader at once.

The first reference to the color red is when the young woman thinks how she has "nailed scraps of red tin over the logs" of her cabin the previous summer. She has done this "for the bright red color, not for added warmth the way the village people had done." This detail distinguishes the young woman intriguingly from other villagers, but it is unclear at this juncture why she has done this (given that she is uninterested in the extra warmth).

This sense of reading something significant, but having little clue as to its significance, is felt again upon noting the strange, seemingly random details of her boots having "bright red flannel linings" and "red yarn tassels" (and her lover having red hair).

However, these disparate references to red are pulled together finally when the story broaches how her parents died: "'Grandma,' she said, 'there was something red in the grass that morning. I remember.'" Then, later in the story: "'I heard sounds that night, grandma. Sounds like someone was singing. It was light outside. I could see something red on the ground.'" In keeping with the rule of ambiguity, it is never learned what this "something red" is in "Storyteller." Most readers probably first think of blood, but then might very well wonder how this might be so if the father and mother were poisoned, indicating a bloodless death. Another reasonable conjecture is that this "something red" is a nearby, discarded item of clothing or other debris that sticks illogically but persistently in the girl's mind. In any event, the color red is profoundly associated with her parents' death, and so the story's other references to red take on meaning in retrospect. The "red lining" of the boots now suggest the red and tender interior of the body or stomach, which in her parents' case was undoubtedly scarred and torn by the poison. The "tassels" suggest flowing blood, and, therefore, death or murder again. The color red is threaded through the story like the intertwining themes of death, crime (murder), and revenge.

Perhaps most interesting of all in terms of color imagery is the manner in which the mysterious references to "something red" manage to affect the collapse of boundaries between past, present, and future. This effect is achieved by one very strategically placed reference to "something red" quite late in the story. This strategic repetition of the phrase occurs well after "something red" has been used in association with the parents' murder. It occurs, specifically, right after the young woman has lured the storekeeper to his freezing death: "She stood still. The east bank of the river was lost in the sky; the boundaries had been swallowed by the freezing white. But then, in the distance, she saw something red, and suddenly it was as she had remembered it all those years." Unanswerable questions tumble forth upon reading this passage. "Remembered" what? Her parents' bodies lying on the grass? Is this red she sees the red tin on her cabin? But, surely not, as it has been learned that her cabin is "miles" distant from the town where she now is. Is she, then, having a vision, perhaps of the past, or is she simply seeing some other red thing or somebody else's red tin? Whatever it is that she sees, this sentence about "something red" and about remembering takes the reader back in time to the original death scene. And this association, taken in conjunction with the ambiguously worded notion that "it was as she had remembered it all those years," elicits the most crucial question of all, namely: did she see this moment in the future that morning? Was the "something red" she continuously believes she saw in the past in fact her vision into the future—a vision of this very moment of seeing "something red" in the distance immediately upon completing her long awaited revenge for her parents' murder? The answers to these questions, finally, cannot be known. But one result of this ambiguity and inclusion of "something red" in a past, a present, and, possibly, a future, is the collapse of the reader's sense of strict chronological time. Past, present, and future lose their distinctness because they are not treated as clearly separated

categories in the story. The reader simply cannot know where to definitively situate a "something red."

Silko's story is, in many details, ambiguous, and its imagery and jumbling of time suggests the collapse of usually distinct realities and levels. This imagery and ambiguity could mean any number of things, given the content and themes of the story. Clearly, the story opposes the indigenous Inuit population from the "Gussucks" (the Euro-Americans). The Gussucks exploit nature, and the Inuits live with it in harmony. In this respect, the story's imagery and form could be said to advocate harmonious living with nature, or the blending of human life and society into the rhythms of nature. It could also signify, conversely, the inevitable result of foreign presence in the area, namely, the blending of cultures. Another possible meaning to ascribe to these effects pertains to the nature of storytellers and storytelling. Once a storyteller's sense of him or herself is indistinguishable from the community's fate, then he or she will tell truly meaningful stories. Also along these same lines, this collapsing of boundaries could signify the Native American belief in there being only "one story." That is, the entire world's fate is of a piece, with each person and each nation's acts affecting the rest of the world. If "everything is connected," then there are "no boundaries" between anything. As for the story's treatment of time, this could reflect the centrality of notions of cyclical time in Native American cultures. This is nature's time, and the time of seasonal reoccurrence, as opposed to the linear, chronological time of past, present, and future. Also of significance in this regard would be the Native American closeness to the past, or the past's profound relevance in the present. Traditionally, Native Americans keep their ancestors very much "alive," if only in historical memory. It is to Silko's credit that her stories are so dense with overlapping meanings. It is for this reason that she has the reputation of being a consummate writer of short stories. She does not waste a single word.

Source: Carol Dell'Amico, in an essay for *Short Stories for Students*, Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Jaskoski provides a look at the use of allegory in relation to the "essentialist position" in "Storyteller."

"Storyteller," an arctic allegory set in the forbidding reaches of the Yukon River, seems a strange choice as title story for *Storyteller*, a miscellany suffused with familiar scenes of Silko's beloved Southwest and the intimacy of a family album. The chilling remoteness of "Storyteller," on the other hand, the anonymity of its characters and its lack of connection with the autobiographical or mythical materials in the rest of the book, indicates a special role for this story. Silko herself has noted that this story has a particular significance within the body of her work: "Nowhere is landscape more crucial to the outcome than in my short story 'Storyteller' ("Interior"). This comment emphasizes the necessity of seeing all her fiction in relation to landscape and place.

Every place is in some sense contested ground, and this is nowhere more so than in places where people of different values, cultures, and lifeways live within what is supposed to be shared physical and cognitive space. Mary Louise Pratt has introduced the term *contact zone* as a way "to refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths." Since the fifteenth century the Western Hemisphere has been such a contact zone, and Silko's writings meditate on the exigencies of American Indian life within such geographical, political, cultural, and psychological borderlands.

While Silko comments on how "Storyteller" elaborates the concept of relationship between people and place, even to the extent of seeing the landscape as an essential character in the story, this short story also introduces other critical themes that pervade all her writing. Language is an abiding preoccupation, and "Storyteller" takes up language in two senses: the language of individual and communal self-creation that is storytelling, and the language—and silence—that creates boundary, identity, and personal power within a multidimensional, polyglot contact zone.

The text traces the thoughts and memories of a Yupik woman as she waits in a jail in the arctic bush to be interrogated regarding the death of a storekeeper. This place is a sparsely populated, climatically rigorous world where newcomers are all "Gussucks," a Yupik word derived from "Cossacks" and reflecting the historical fact of Russian traders, explorers, and missionaries having been the first Europeans to move in on the region. The landscape is so crucial that it comes to have the force of a character; Silko observes in her own commentary on the story: "The Yupik woman knows the appetite of the frozen river. She realizes that the ice and the fog, the tundra and the snow seek constantly to be reunited with the living beings that skitter across it" ("Interior").

The fatal impotence of those who understand neither the land nor their own desire leaves them literally overwhelmed. A thoughtless urge to gratify his sexual cravings sends the Gussuck storekeeper heedlessly across the ice in pursuit of a woman he has assaulted. She, however, has seen that the man is so enslaved to his lust that he cannot withstand her manipulation of it. The storekeeper's personal desire expresses the overwhelming cupidity of the whole Gussuck world, a perverse malignity of longing and frustration. At the moment of his attack the woman remembers that "[h]e hated the people because they had something of value . . . something which the Gussucks could never have. They thought they could take it, suck it out of the earth or cut it from the mountains; but they were fools. . . ."

The desire to take, to appropriate, to consume drives the colonial enterprise even as it impels the individuals caught up in the corporate project, and a naive overestimation of their power proves to be their undoing. The demise of one storekeeper swept away by the current rushing underneath the river ice is but a single moment in the fate of the whole project, a destiny inscribed in the tracings of the disappeared drilling rigs: "But the imprints and graves of their machines were still there, on the edge of the tundra above the river, where the summer mud had swallowed them before they ever left sight of the river. . . ."

As Kathryn Shanley's analysis demonstrates, "Storyteller" reveals how the relationship between sexual, material, and psychological covetousness lies at the heart of the colonial enterprise. An insatiable and perverse lust to possess and consume urges the Gussucks to this inhospitable place. As the old man has explained to the protagonist, the outsiders first came for the fur-bearing animals and the fish. Their appetites have depleted these resources, he tells her, and "[n]ow they come for oil deep in the earth. But this is the last time for them." Compressed within these ominous words are 400 years of colonization through trade, religious conversion, and resource extraction, from the first visits of Russian sailing ships through the construction of the Alaska pipeline. The old man's prophetic utterance returns to the woman's memory as she looks out the window of her jail cell and sees the sun about to glaze over in an apocalyptic final freeze.

The protagonist, on the other hand, is not greedy for material goods or for power over others. Rather, it is curiosity, a hunger for knowledge, that drives her. A restless inquisitiveness sends her to find out what the boarding school is like, regardless of the old man's warnings; curiosity and something resembling boredom take her in the direction of the Gussuck drillers: "She wondered what they looked like underneath their quilted goose-down trousers; she wanted to know how they moved. They would be something different from the old man." The same impulse sends her back to the red-haired oil driller with whom she has copulated, so she can find out the particulars of his pathetic fetishism. Curiosity about sex, or about Gussuck life in general, is only one expression, and not the most important one, of her desire and need. In contrast to the acquisitiveness and power hunger of the Gussucks she encounters, it is hunger for knowledge, closure, and a fullness of understanding that motivates the girl. Most of all she yearns for a satisfactory account of her parents' death, for completion of the story her grandmother has told her in tantalizing fragments. In the end, she herself enacts the

completion of the story and then turns to recount her experience and her parents' as her own story, assuming the storyteller's place left vacant by the death of the old man.M

"Storyteller"—as the title suggests—offers a meditation on storytelling that continues throughout the whole of the book, as well as throughout Silko's writings and lectures. The short story "Storyteller" contains many stories within it, but most are presented in attenuated, fragmentary form. At the heart of the central conflict of the plot are the stories of how the protagonist's parents met their death. A storekeeper had given one explanation, it seems, but the woman's grandmother believes that his story is a lie; the grandmother tells "the story as it must be told" of how she tried unsuccessfully to convey the truth to the authorities. But the girl senses that the grandmother's story is unfinished, the explanation incomplete, and she continues to search for "something red lying on the ground" that will satisfy her craving for explanation and closure. There are also competing accounts of the death of the man who pursues the protagonist: one story, which the protagonist's attorney wants her to tell, and the counterstory that she insists is the only valid account, the story that "must be told as it is."

Another story, alluded to only briefly, is the old man's warning of what will happen to the young girl if she goes to boarding school; also briefly mentioned is the story he tells her of what will happen if she joins him in bed, a story that she eventually discovers is a lie. At the end of "Storyteller," the villagers who have come to see the protagonist listen to her begin a story in words implying that this will be the tale we have just read, enclosing its events within a circle of storytelling. Woven fragmentarily throughout the narration of "Storyteller" is the old man's story of the hunter and the bear; it seems to be an ancient story that somehow—it is not clear how—must be implicated in the sordid contemporary events revolving the woman, her family, and the Gussucks. There is, finally, the whole story composed of and reflecting on all these stories, the text of "Storyteller" itself. The threads that link these stories together are the recurring motifs of language and identity, power and desire. . . .

It is impossible to extract from this disrupted narration a clear chronology of events in the woman's life, nor is there any indication of how much time passes between episodes. The reader has no way of knowing how long after her parents' death and the storekeeper's disappearance it was that the protagonist heard the grandmother's story of what happened, nor how long again before she went to the boarding school, although apparently she was much older than the other students. How much time passes between her return from boarding school and the events that finally bring her to the jail? Critics often after to the protagonist as a "girl," but she could be a mature woman: several times the story refers to years passing.

All this ambiguity about chronology and sequence contributes to the mythic, allegorical texture of "Storyteller." The characters—the grandmother, the old man, the storeman (or men), the jailer, the dormitory matron, the village people, and the protagonist girl/woman —all have the archetypal anonymity of mythical personages. The girl, her grandmother, and the old man, like the supernaturals of the old stories, live at a distance from ordinary human interaction. They are marginalized and isolated at the edge of the village, treated with suspicion but respected by the villagers as central in some

mysterious way to the community's continuing life. The old man "had not fished or hunted with the other men for many years, although he was not crippled or sick"; this is strange and otherworldly behavior in a precarious subsistence economy. The villagers come to visit him, as if approaching an oracle or a healer, to listen to his stories and leave their offerings in exchange.

Kenneth Lincoln has sought a specific mythical connection for Silko's story in the Greenland Eskimo myth of the Mistress of the Sea as related by Knud Rasmussen. In "Storyteller" the grandmother's rage and physical suffering do call to mind the powerful, angry, mutilated girl in Rasmussen's retold legend However, the Greenland story pays homage to the elephant seal as a principal of fecundity and regeneration, a sense entirely absent from the apocalyptic vision of "Storyteller": the watery raptures of the Greenland shamans, who dive deep into the sea in their sacred trances, are unthinkable in the unnamed village of "Storyteller," which lies "many miles upriver" from a town that is itself upriver from the Yukon delta. In Silo's story, those who enter arctic waters drown. The quality of myth also tends to efface the question of whether one or two storekeepers are present in the story. In the end the "facts" about the number of storekeepers become secondary to what the story has to say about the endemic and corrupting rapacity of colonialism.M

"Truth" is less important than story. Only once do we find the word *truth* in "Storyteller" —when the protagonist recognizes that "what the old man said was true"—but as with the absence of so much of the stories that are alluded to, the text does not contain what the old man said, and so that particular truth is withheld. What "Storyteller" offers is a fundamental opposition not between lying and truth, but between lying and story. For the protagonist there is only one story that is not a lie. Her intransigent insistence on her truth as the only truth, her story as the only story, corresponds with her equally rigid insistence on her own language. In boarding school, she understood language as her defense against encroachment on her selfhood, and she recalls now how "the dormitory matron pulled down her underpants and whipped her with a leather belt because she refused to speak English." The assault on her language, carried out as a physical assault on her body, prefigures the Gussuck men's sexual deviance and the Eskimo jailer's reliance on English. She insists absolutely on her own language. In this character's ruthless refusal to compromise, there is potential for the heroic, even the tragic.

The dramatic potential in the text is qualified, however, by its intense focus on a single point of view. For all the story's mythic resonance, it is thoroughly modern in its strict reliance on the narrative device of unified point of view. The natural world of the story comes filtered through the liminal consciousness of the protagonist, whose awareness fixates on the apparently imminent disintegration of the whole of nature: "She told herself it wasn't a good sign for the sky to be indistinguishable from the river ice, frozen solid and white against the earth. The tundra rose up behind the river but all the boundaries between the river and hills and sky were lost in the density of the pale ice." The passage echoes the sense of disorientation and loss of boundaries that Silko

herself recalls from her experience of living in the region: "Here the winter landscape can suddenly metamorphose into a seamless, blank white so solid that pilots in aircraft without electronic instruments lose their bearings and crash their planes into the frozen tundra, believing down to be up. Here on the Alaskan tundra, in mid-February, not all the space-age fabrics, electronics, or engines can ransom human beings from the restless, shifting forces of the winter sky and winter earth" ("Interior"). This is what the protagonist pictures in the apocalyptic vision she has in her jail cell: "That was how the cold would come: when the boundaries were gone the polar ice would range across the land into the sky. . . ."

This monotone world lacking outline, perspective, and landmarks reflects the problematics of moral navigation in the story. The storeman pursues the woman to his death apparently because he wants to violate her, which she attributes to his jealousy of the oil drillers she has been free with. Yet selfdefense is an issue never raised by the attorney, who only mentions accident and the view that "her mind is confused." She herself does not relate her actions to self-defense. Nor does craving for retribution figure as her motive. The realization of her project is the story she begins to tell to the villagers, a story that, like the old man's story of the hunter and the bear, will both fulfill and consume her. . . .

In her uncompromising repudiation of the Gussuck world the protagonist bears a strange resemblance to that other model of passive aggression as the sign of personal integrity, Herman Melville's Bartleby the Scrivener. Like Bartleby, who "prefers not to" do one thing and then another, until it seems that existence itself impinges too heavily on his sense of self, the Yupik woman steadfastly resists interaction with the world on any terms but her own. It is true that the ending of "Storyteller" finds the woman telling her story to the villagers who have come to hear it, suggesting continuity and perhaps regeneration; however, the example of the old man, whose place she has taken, and who ended his own days like Bartleby, communing with no one but himself, qualifies that suggestion.

For the protagonist of "Storyteller," truth is single and absolute, and the only way for her to maintain identity and integrity is to set impregnable boundaries around her language, her story, and herself, excluding all that would compromise her isolate vision. She hears her grandmother's voice telling her that "[t]here must not be any lies," and "I killed him," she says of the storekeeper, "but I don't lie." There is no room here for ambiguity, compromise, contestation, revision, qualification, or any alternative possibility: this is a frozen certitude, as rigid and as lethal as the frost that threatens to immobilize the sun. The protagonist of "Storyteller" is an icon of essentialism, and the story is an allegory on the essentialist position, an allegory that will be tested and contested in the remaining stories in Storyteller.

Source: Helen Jaskoski, *Leslie Marmon Silko: A Study of the Short Fiction*, Twayne Publishers, 1998, pp. 13-22.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Hirsch conveys a connection between the "oral tradition" and the "written word" in "Storyteller."

"I was never tempted to go to those things . . . ," said Leslie Marmon Silko of the old BAE reports ". . . I . . . don't have to because from the time I was little I heard quite a bit. I heard it in what would be passed now off as rumor or gossip. I could hear through all that. I could hear something else, that there was a kind of continuum. . . ." That continuum provides both the structural and thematic basis of Storyteller. Comprised of personal reminiscences and narratives, retellings of traditional Laguna stories, photographs, and a generous portion of her previously published short fiction and poetry, this multigeneric work lovingly maps the fertile storytelling ground from which her art evolves and to which it is here returned—an offering to the oral tradition which nurtured it.

Silko has acknowledged often and eloquently the importance of the oral tradition to her work and tries to embody its characteristics in her writing. This effort, as she well knows, is immensely diffi- cult and potentially dangerous, and this awareness surfaces at several points in Storyteller. She recalls, for instance, talking with Nora, whose "grandchildren had brought home / a . . . book that had my 'Laguna coyote' poem in it": "We all enjoyed it so much [says Nora] but I was telling the children the way my grandpa used to tell it is longer.""Yes, that's the trouble with writing," I said. You can't go on and on the way we do when we tell stories around here. . . ."The trouble with writing," in the context Silko here establishes for it, is twofold: first, it is static; it freezes words in space and time. It does not allow the living story to change and grow, as does the oral tradition. Second, though it potentially widens a story's audience, writing removes the story from its immediate context, from the place and people who nourished it in the telling, and thus robs it of much of its meaning. This absence of the story's dynamic context is why, in writing, "You can't go on the way we do / when we tell stories around here."

But Nora does a wonderful thing. She uses Silko's poem to create a storytelling event of her own. In this sense Silko's poem itself becomes a part of the oral tradition and, through Nora's recollection of her grandfather's telling, a means of advancing it as well. The conversation with Nora is important in *Storyteller* because it reminds us of the flexibility and inclusiveness of the oral tradition. Even writing can be made to serve its ends.

Storyteller helps keep the oral tradition strong through Silko's masterful use of the written word, and the photographs, to recall and reestablish its essential contexts. The photographs are important because they reveal something of the particular landscape and community out of which Laguna oral tradition is born, and of specific individuals—of Aunt Susie, Grandma A'mooh, Grandpa Hank, and all those storytellers who have accepted responsibility for "remembering a portion . . . [of] the long story of the people."

The photographs, however, as Silko uses them, do more than provide a survival record. As we shall see, they involve the reader more fully in the storytelling process itself and, "because they are part of many of the stories / and because many of the stories can be traced in the photographs," they expand the reader's understanding of individual works and also suggest structural and thematic links between them.

The photographs also are arranged to suggest the circular design of *Storyteller*, a design characteristic of oral tradition. The merging of past and present are manifest in the book's design, as is the union of personal, historical, and cultural levels of being and experience, and through such harmonies— and their periodic sundering—the ongoing flux of life expresses itself. The opening photograph, for instance, is of Robert G. Marmon and Marie Anayah Marmon, Silko's great-grandparents, "holding [her] grandpa Hank." The second picture, three pages later, is of Aunt Susie—of whom Silko is the "self-acknowledged, self-appointed heir"—and Leslie Silko herself as a child. These photographs do not merely locate Silko within a genealogical context or even that of an extended family, but within a continuous generational line of Laguna storytellers as well. The last three photographs in the book bring us full circle. The first of these comes at the end of the book's written text; it is of the adult Silko and was taken among the Tucson Mountains where she now lives. The second is of Grandpa Hank as a young man after his return from Sherman Institute, and the third is of three generations preceding her, including her father as a boy, Grandpa Hank's brother, and her great-grandfather. Though there is clearly an autobiographical dimension to Storyteller, Silko's arrangement of photographs at the beginning and end of the book subordinates the individual to the communal and cultural. Her life and art compels us, as does the literature itself, to acknowledge the ongoing power of Laguna oral tradition in her writing.

This cyclic design, of course, is not merely a function of the arrangement of photographs. It derives primarily from the episodic structure of *Storyteller* and the accretive process of teaching inherent in it. Each individual item is a narrative episode in itself which relates to other such episodes in various ways. Oral storytelling, Walter J. Ong tells us, "normally and naturally operated in episodic patterning . . . episodic structure was the natural way to talk out a lengthy story line if only because the experience of real life is more like a string of episodes than it is like a Freytag pyramid"; and it is real life, "the long story of the people," that is Silko's concern. Moreover, the telling of her portion of the story, and of the individual stories which comprise it, involves, like all oral storytelling, a teaching process, one in which the varieties of genre and voice Silko uses are essential.

In *Storyteller*, the reader learns by accretion. Successive narrative episodes cast long shadows both forward and back, lending different or comple mentary shades of meaning to those preceding them and offering perspectives from which to consider those that follow. Such perspectives are then themselves often expanded or in some way altered as the new material reflects back upon them. This kind of learning process is part of the dynamic of oral tradition. Silko uses it in Storyteller to foster the kind of intimacy with the reader that the oral storyteller does with the listener. Such a relationship is born of both the powerful claims of the story, in whole and in part, on the reader's attention and the active engagement by the accretive process of the reader's

imagination. This process in effect makes the reader's responses to the various narrative episodes a part of the larger, ongoing story these episodes comprise while simultaneously allowing the episodes to create the contexts which direct and refine these responses. In this way the stories continue; in this way both the story and the reader are renewed.

It is impossible within the limits of this paper to explore the workings of this process over the entire length of *Storyteller*, yet the interrelationships between the various narrative episodes and photographs throughout is so rich and intricate that any attempt to formally divide the work into sections or categories would be arbitrary at best, of necessity reductive, and at worst misleading. Still, there are groups of narrative episodes that seem to cluster around particular themes and cultural motifs which I believe can be meaningfully seen as representative of the overall design and method of the book.

Critical Essay #4

N. Scott Momaday has said: "We are what we imagine. Our very existence consists in our imagination of ourselves. . . . The greatest tragedy that can befall us is to go unimagined." It is apparent throughout *Storyteller* that Silko would agree, and she reminds us that in the oral tradition, "sometimes what we call 'memory' and what we call 'imagination' are not so easily distinguished." In "The Storyteller's Escape," the old storyteller's greatest fear as she waits for death is that she will go unremembered—unimagined. *Storyteller* itself is a self-renewing act of imagination memory designed to keep storytellers as well as stories from so tragic a fate. The book's opening section, which I will arbitrarily call the "Survival" section, establishes this particular concern. Embracing 5 reminiscences, 4 photographs, 2 traditional Laguna stories, the short stories "Storyteller" and "Lullaby," and the poem "Indian Song: Survival," this section explorers from various angles the dynamics and meaning of survival, both personal and cultural, for tribal people in contemporary America.

Silko visually establishes continuity through the photographs. The first two, described earlier, reveal in their depiction of three generations of Silko's family genealogical continuity, but especially important in primarily the second and third photos is the idea of cultural transmission. Such transmission involves more than the passing of stories from generation to generation, essential as that is. It involves the entire context within which such passing occurs, and this includes both the land and the relationship, beyond blood ties, between teller and hearer. That is why, to tell the story correctly, Silko must bring us into the storytellers' presence, to let us somehow see them, learn something of their histories, and most of all, to hear them tell their stories.

These elements are certainly present in the book's title story, "Storyteller," which is at the hub not only of the "Survival" section but of the book as a whole. Explaining, in Silko's words, "the dimensions of the process" of storytelling, this tale, set not in Laguna but in Inuit country near Bethel, Alaska, is at once dark and hopeful, embracing all that has come before it in the book and establishing both the structure and primary thematic concerns of what follows. It is a tale of multiple journeys that become one journey expressed through multiple stories that become one story. At its center is a young Eskimo girl, orphaned, living with a lecherous and dying old man, the village storyteller, and his wife, victimized by Gussuck and "assimilated" Eskimo men, and determined to avenge herself against the Gussuck storekeeper responsible for her parents' death.

Speaking of his use of "three distinct narrative voices in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*—the mythical, the historical, and the immediate"—Momaday says: "Together, they serve, hopefully, to validate the oral tradition to an extent that might not otherwise be possible." A similar mix of voices occurs in "Storyteller"—indeed, throughout the book as a whole>—and to similar effect. Against the backdrop of the prophesied coming of a "final winter," the girl comes of age and the old man, the mythic voice, begins his story of the great bear pursuing the lone hunter across the ice.

He tells the story lovingly, nurturing every detail with his life's breath, because it is the story that makes his death meaningful. The story is an expression of sacred natural processes, ancient and unending, of which his death is a part, processes Silko will treat later in the book in such works as "The Man to Send Rain Clouds" and the poem "Deer Song." But most importantly the story, in the intensely beautiful precision of the old man's telling, becomes the girl's legacy, a powerful vision by which she can unify the disparate aspects of her experience to create herself anew in profoundly significant cultural terms.

She recalls having asked her grandmother, the old man's wife, about her parents, and her grandmother told how the Gussuck storeman traded them bad liquor. The grandmother is the historical voice. Her story and that of the giant bear become linked in the girl's imagination. Once, while listening "to the old man tell the story all night," she senses her grandmother's spirit. "It will take a long time," the old woman tells her, "but the story must be told. There must not be any lies." At first, she thinks that the spirit is referring to the bear story. She "did not know about the other story then. . . ."

This "other story" is in truth the conclusion of her grandmother's story, a conclusion that will make it the girl's story. As it stands, in the inaction of civil and religious authorities and in the storeman's continued existence, the story of her parent's death has not been properly told. The Story is life and in life it must be completed. And the story of the giant bear "stalking a lone hunter across the Bering Sea ice" tells her how. "She spent days walking on the river," getting to know the ice as precisely as the old man had described it in his story, learning "the colors of ice that would safely hold her" and where the ice was thin. She already knew that the storeman wanted her and thus it is easy for her to lure him out onto the river and to his death. Though he appeared to chase her out onto the ice, it was she who was the bear.

The attorney wants her to change her story, to tell the court that "it was an accident," but she refuses, even though to follow his advice would mean freedom. Hers is the "immediate" voice, the voice that carries the old stories into the present and locates the present within the cycle of mythic time. Through the story, life derives purpose and meaning and experience becomes comprehensible; also through the story, and through her fidelity to it, the girl recreates herself from the fragments of her own history.

Her emergence whole and intact from her experience is, in this respect, like Tayo's emergence in Silko's 1977 novel *Ceremony*, a victory for her people; given the immediate context in which the title story is placed in *Storyteller*, it is, like all stories in the oral tradition, a ritual. The girl's role as a culture-bearer, for example, receives significant emphasis from the surrounding material.

Following "Storyteller" there is a picture of Marie Anayah Marmon, Grandma A'mooh, reading to two of her great granddaughters, Silko's sisters. She is reading, apparently, from *Brownie the Bear*, a book, we later learn, she read many times, not only to her great-granddaughters but to Silko's uncles and father. Accompanying this photograph is a reminiscence about Grandma A'mooh, whose name Silko, as a child, deduced from the woman's continual use of "'a'moo'ooh' / . . . the Laguna expression of endearment /

for a young child / spoken with great feeling and love." That love is evident on the faces of the old woman and the little girls; it is also clear that although she is not in this captured moment telling a story from the oral tradition, she has turned the occasion, much as Nora did with the printed version of Silko's coyote poem, into a rich oral storytelling experience.

We come to the title story by way of several other narrative episodes, beginning with Silko's brief reminiscence and history of Aunt Susie, her father's aunt. Aunt Susie

was of a generationthe last generation here at Laguna,that passed down an entire cultureby word of mouthan entire historyan entire vision of the world . . .

In its rhythms and repetitions, Silko's telling here assumes the quality of a chant and in this she reinforces not only Aunt Susie's role as culturebearer but her own as Aunt Susie's cultural heir. Their relationship provides a necessary context within which to consider the girl and the old man in the title story. That relationship is complicated in several ways, but this context, along with the photograph that follows "Storyteller," highlights her role as the storyteller-successor to the old man.

For Silko, how a story is told is inseparable from the story itself. The old man's bear story exerts its hold on the girl's imagination through his intensely precise, chant-like, dramatic telling and retelling of it. Silko recalls a child's story Aunt Susie told about a "little girl who ran away," and she insists that we hear it as Aunt Susie told it: "She had certain phrases, certain distinctive words / she used in her telling. / I write when I still hear / her voice as she tells the story." In her own telling Silko uses poetic form with varying line-lengths, stresses, and enjambment to provide some of the movement and drama of oral storytelling. She also provides several italicized expository passages to evoke the digressive mode of traditional storytellers and the conversational texture of their speech. When the little girl asks for "yashtoah," for example, we are told that

"Yashtoah" is the hardened crust on cornmeal mushthat curls up.The very name "yashtoah" meansit's sort of curled up, you know, dried,just as mush dries on top. . . .

"This is the beauty of the old way," Silko has said. "You can stop the storyteller and ask questions and have things explained."

Aunt Susie's story, in some respects, is a sad one about a little girl who, feeling unloved because she does not get what she wants, decides to drown herself. Attempts by a kindly old man and her mother to save her fail and the child drowns. Grieving, the mother returns to Acoma where, standing on a high mesa, she scatters the girl's clothes to the four directions—and "they all turned into butter- flies— / all colors of butterflies." This is a child's story and whatever truths it may teach it should evoke the child's capacity for wonder and delight. Aunt Susie succeeded brilliantly in this respect. She brought the characters to life, the mother's tenderness and the prophetic foreboding of the old man "that implied the tragedy to come":

But when Aunt Susie came to the placewhere the little girl's clothes turned into butterfliesthen her voice would change and I could hear theexcitementand wonderand the story wasn't sad any longer.

The child learns something of pain through such a story, but she learns too of life's perpetuity, that from death itself can emerge beautiful life. She learns of the delicate balance in which all things exist, a balance forever threatened and forever renewed.

But harsh realities, having been delicately yet honestly prepared for by Aunt Susie's story, dominate, appropriately enough, the two recollections leading directly into "Storyteller." The first offers a brief history of Silko's great-grandparents, and we learn that Robert G. Marmon married a Pueblo woman and "learned to speak Laguna"; but "when great-grandpa went away from Laguna / white people who knew / sometimes called him 'Squaw Man'." The second recollection is of the Albuquerque hotel incident in which Marmon's two young sons, because they are Indians, were not permitted in the hotel.

"Storyteller," is fed by the various motifs and concerns of the narratives leading into it and it recasts them in new ways. In that sense it is as much a retelling as an original telling. It is not merely a story of survival but, like the bear story within it, a survival story itself. It is unsparing in its treatment of the nature and consequences of discrimination and unqualified in its vision of the capacity of oral tradition not merely to survive discrimination but to use it as a source of power. However, as the narratives that follow "Storyteller" suggest, the oral tradition is only as strong—or as fragile—as the memories that carry it and the relationships that sustain it.

Silko's remembrance of Grandma A'mooh, which follows "Storyteller," is warm and moving, yet painful as well. Grandma A'mooh, as her name suggests, was love itself to Silko. She loved the land, her people, her granddaughters, and the stories that evolved from them, yet it was thought best, in her later years, to remove her from all that sustained her and have her live with her daughter in Albuquerque. The daughter had to work, so much of the time Grandma A'mooh was alone—"she did not last long," Silko tells us, "without someone to talk to". . . .

"Indian Song: Survival," like the narrative episodes which precede it, concerns what survival is and what is needed to survive, but it considers these ideas from a somewhat different perspective than the others. It is in the first-person and this heightens the intimacy of the sustaining relationship of the individual with the land the poem explores. The poem moves in a sequence of spare yet sensual images which express at once the elemental and regenerating power of this relationship, and Silko's versification, like that of most of the poetry in Storyteller, is alive with motion and the subtle interplay of sound and silence. It is a "desperation journey north" she describes, but it is marked by neither panic nor haste.

"Mountain lion," Silko writes, "shows me the way." He is her guide as he has been for Laguna hunters throughout the time, and his presence helps to establish the true nature of this journey. It is a journey to reestablish old ties, ties essential to survival in any

meaningful sense. As the journey continues the "I" becomes more inclusive as the speaker becomes increasingly able to merge with the nature around her. Asked at poem's end "if I still smell winter / . . . I answer:"

taste meI am the windtouch me,I am the lean brown deerrunning on the edge of the rainbow. . . .

The "desperation journey" has become a journey of self-discovery, of finding one's being entire in the land. Now she can travel spirit roads.

The wholeness of the relationship emerging from "Indian Song: Survival" enhances our understanding of what, precisely, the young girl in "Storyteller" accomplishes. Her life has been a desperate journey and her final awakening involves the reestablishment of a vital, intimate connection to the land. This is what the bear story requires of her. The poem also intensifies further the poignancy of Grandma A'mooh's last days by compelling us to learn again the value of what, for her own "good," had been taken from her.

Silko follows "Indian Song: Survival" with a painfully enigmatic story from Aunt Susie, a Laguna "flood" story in which a little girl and her younger sister return home to their village after a day's play only to find it abandoned except for "the old people / who cannot travel." Their mother and the others went to the high place to escape the coming flood. If "Indian Song: Survival" concerns the establishment of vital relationships, this story tells of their being sundered. There is a beauty in the girl's devotion to her sister as there is pain in their mother's leaving them and these elements, devotion and separation, are central to the short story, "Lullaby," which follows.

If, as Momaday said, the greatest tragedy is to go unimagined, the title of Silko's "Lullaby" is in one sense bitterly ironic. Having been robbed of her grandchildren, Ayah, the old Navajo woman at the heart of the story, sings a song for them, a song that she remembers having been sung by her mother and grandmother. It is a beautiful song expressing with delicate economy the world view in which she was raised, and its closing words doubtlessly provide some consolation:

We are together alwaysWe are together alwaysThere never was a timewhen thiswas not so. . . .

But we cannot forget that there are no children to hear it and, though Ayah's "life had become memories," those memories seem dominated now by the loss of children—of her son Jimmie in the war and the babies to the white doctors. For Silko, to go unremembered is to go unimagined, and in that sense Ayah's is a tragic story. Grandma A'mooh, in her last years, was taken from her grandchildren but she does not go unremembered. Such a fate, though, seems likely to befall Ayah, for her babies are taken not simply to make them well, but to make them white.

The "Survival" section, however, does not end on a hopeless note. Ayah's "lullaby" expresses a timeless harmony and peace which are reflected in the photograph which closes the section, taken from the sandhills a mile east of Laguna. The land seems

whole and eternal here, and where that is so the people, and the oral tradition, will survive.

Critical Essay #5

But today, even the land is threatened. A photograph in what I will call the "Yellow Woman" section of *Storyteller* is of the Anaconda company's open-pit uranium mine. "This photograph," Silko tells us, "was made in the early 1960s. The mesas and hills that appear in the background and foreground are gone now, swallowed by the mine." This photograph deepens our understanding of many things in Storyteller: of the importance of the photographs to the stories, for one thing, and of Silko's father's love of photography for another. "He is still most at home in the canyons and sandrock," she says, "and most of his life regular jobs / have been a confinement he has avoided." Some might think less of him for this, but Silko stifles this tendency—first by the story of Reed Woman and Corn Woman that precedes the reminiscence about her father and second by his photographs themselves, one of which is that of the now vanished mesas and hills. Moreover, his photography intensi- fied his love of the land and enabled him to relate to it in new and fulfilling ways. We learn, for instance, that

His landscapes could not be donewithout certain kinds of clouds—some white and scattered like river rockand othersmountains rolling into themselvesswollen lavender before rainstorms. . . .

Clouds, as we know, are a source of life itself to the land, and for Lee H. Marmon they bring to it a profound and varied beauty as well. Essential to the continuity of physical life, the clouds are no less essential to his spirit in that they help him express through his art his particular vision of the land and by so doing, to define himself in terms of it. Equally important, in these times, is that his artistry can help others, be they Indians removed from the land or people who have never known it, to develop a richer, more meaningful sense of the land than is held by such as those who run Anaconda. It is precisely the development of such a relationship— to the land, to the spirits that pervade it, and to the stories that derive from it—that occupies the "Yellow Woman" section of *Storyteller*.

"The Yellow Woman" section, comprised of the short story "Yellow Woman," 4 poems, poetic retellings of two traditional stories, 4 reminiscences, 4 photographs, and 2 "gossip stories," is framed by "Yellow Woman" and "Storytelling," a poem consisting of six brief vignettes based on the abduction motif of the traditional Yellow Woman stories. As does "Storyteller" in the "Survival" section, "Yellow Woman," and the traditional stories from which Silko's version evolves, establish the primary structural and thematic concerns of this section.

Based on the traditional stories in which Yellow Woman, on her way to draw water, is abducted by a mountain kachina, Silko's "Yellow Woman" concerns the development of the visionary character. This is hinted at in the story's epigram, "What Whirlwind Man Told Kochininako, Yellow Woman":

I myself belong to the windand so it is we will travel swiftlythis whole worldwith dust and with windstorms. . . .

Whirlwind Man will take her on a journey beyond the boundaries of time and place, a journey alive with sensation and danger which promises a perspective from which she can see the world new and entire. This in effect is what happens in the story. Like the prophets and visionaries of many cultures, Indian and non-Indian, the narrator travels to the mountain where she learns to see beyond the range of mundane experience. She recalls that, at Silva's mountain cabin,

I was standing in the sky with nothing around me but the wind that came down from the blue mountain peak behind me. I could see faint mountain images in the distance miles across the vast spread of mesas and valleys and plains. I wondered who was over there to feel the mountain wind on those sheer blue edges— who walks on the pine needles in those blue mountains. "Can you see the pueblo?" Silva was standing behind me. I shook my head. "We're too far away." "From here I can see the world. . . ."

The pueblo, which comprised her whole world before, is, from the perspective of the mountain, but a barely discernible part of a much larger whole. With Silva, on the mountain, she has entered the more expansive and truer realm of imagination and myth.

When we can see imaginatively, William Blake has said, when we can see not merely with but through the eye, "the whole creation will appear infinite and holy whereas it now appears finite and corrupt. This will come to pass by an improvement of sensual enjoyment" (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* . . .). This is the narrator's experience. She follows a strong impulse in running off with Silva; desire moves her to leave the familiar, secure world of the pueblo and her family to walk a new and daring road. She opens her story in the morning, after she and Silva first made love:

My thigh clung to his with dampness, and I watched the sun rising up through the tamaracks and willows . . . I could hear the water, almost at our feet where the narrow fast channel bubbled and washed green ragged moss and fern leaves. I looked at him beside me, rolled in the red blanket on the white river sand. . . .

She does not awaken to the proverbial harsh light of morning awash in guilt, but to a newly, more vibrantly alive world of sensation within and around her. But this is a world which, like Silva himself, is as frightening in its strength and intensity as it is seductive, and when Silva awakens she tells him she is leaving:

He smiled now, eyes still closed. "You are coming with me, remember?" He sat up now with his bare dark chest and belly in the sun. "Where?" "To my place." "And will I come back?" He pulled his pants on. I walked away from him, feeling him behind me and smelling the willows. "Yellow Woman," he said. I turned to face him, "Who are you?" I asked.

Last night, he reminds her, "you guessed my name, and you knew why I had come." Their lovemaking made her intuitively aware of another, more vital level of being, one which had been within her all along, nurtured since childhood by her grandfather's

Yellow Woman stories—and she knew she was Yellow Woman and her lover the dangerous mountain ka'tsina who carries her off.

But imaginative seeing on this morning after is threatening to the narrator, for seeing oneself whole demands eradication of those perceptual boundaries which offer the security of a readily discernible, if severely limited, sense of self. The narrator clings to that historical, time-bound sense of self like a child to her mother's skirts on the first day of school. "I'm not really her," she maintains, not really Yellow Woman. "I have my own name and I come from the pueblo on the other side of the mesa." It is not so much "confusion about what is dream and what is fact" that besets her here as it is the fear of losing that reality which has heretofore defined her—and him. As they walk she thinks to herself:

I will see someone, eventually I will see someone, and then I will be certain that he [Silva] is only a man— some man from nearby—and I will be sure that I am not Yellow Woman. Because she is from out of time past and I live now and I've been to school and there are highways and pickup trucks that Yellow Woman never saw. . . .

Jim Ruppert is right, I think, when he says that the narrator "struggles to . . . establish time boundaries and boundaries between objective reality and myths," and that struggle is part of the learning process she undergoes in the story. Newly awakened to her own imaginative potential, she has yet to discern the proper relationship between experiential reality and the timeless, all-inclusive mythic reality of her grandfather's stories.

Her desire, however, is stronger than her fear. After they reach his cabin, eat, and she looks out over the world from the mountain, Silva unrolls the bedroll and spreads the blankets. She hesitates, and he slowly undresses her. There is compulsion, this time, on his part, and fear on hers, but she is held to him more by her own passion than by his force. When she does leave, during their confrontation with a rancher who, rightly, accuses Silva of stealing cattle, it is at his command. "I felt sad at leaving him," she recalls, and considers going back, "but the mountains were too far away now. And I told myself, because I believe it, that he will come back sometime and be waiting again by the river."

She returns home. Yellow Woman stories usually end that way. And as she approaches her house, A. Lavonne Ruoff tells us, "she is brought back to the realities of her own life by the smell of supper cooking and the sight of her mother instructing her grandmother in the Anglo art of making Jell-O." The details here suggest a world governed more by routine than by passion, a world somewhat at odds with itself, as mother instructing grandmother suggests, and a world no longer receptive to the wonder and wisdom of the old stories. Having sensed this, she "decided to tell them that some Navajo had kidnapped me." But the unnamed narrator here, like the unnamed Eskimo girl in "Storyteller," keeps the oral tradition alive by going on her own journey of self-discovery—a journey born of acknowledging the rightful demands of passion and imagination—and by intuitively accepting the guidance of her grandfather's stories. Her life itself has become part of a visionary drama to be completed by Silva's return, and within that

context it has gained fullness and meaning. Her recognition, in the story's final sentence, that hers is a Yellow Woman story—and that she is Yellow Woman—reveals as much. She has come to see herself, in Momaday's words, "whole and eternal" and like Momaday when, on his journey, he came out upon the northern plains, she will "never again . . . see things as [she] saw them yesterday or the day before."

Cottonwood, which follows "Yellow Woman," is in two parts, each a poetic rendering of a Laguna Yellow Woman story; taken together, these poems and Silko's story provide a richer, more inclusive perspective than they do separately on both the relationship between oral tradition and the written word and Silko's use of the Yellow Woman character.

The focus in "Yellow Woman" is on the unnamed woman narrator. She tells her own story, which concerns her evolving consciousness of who she is, and though that story has definite communal implications, its focus is interior and personal. *Cottonwood*, however, though undeniably Silko's creation, derives directly from the oral tradition and retains that tradition's communal perspective. Neither "Story of Sun House" nor "Buffalo Story," the poems that comprise Cottonwood, deal with character development or internal conflict any more than do the stories on which they are based. Rather each poem underscores the communal consequences of Yellow Woman's action, and in each case those consequences are positive. Given the narrator's references within "Yellow Woman" to the grandfather's Yellow Woman stories—indeed, Silko's story ends with such a reference—the *Cottonwood* poems, placed where they are, suggest that however offensive her actions may be to conventional morality, the narrator brings from her journey with Silva a boon for her people.

"Story of Sun House" ends as follows: "Cottonwood, / cottonwood. / So much depends / upon one in the great canyon." It is this tree, "among all the others" where Yellow Woman came to wait for the sun. Like the lone cottonwood, Yellow Woman too has been singled out, and much depends upon her as well. She is called by the Sun to journey to Sun House, and this involves the loss of what is familiar and secure and dear:

She left precise stone roomsthat hold the heart silentlyShe walked past white cornhung in long rows from roof beamsthe dry husks rattled in a thin autumn wind.She left her homeher clanand the people(three small childrenthe youngest just weanedher husband away cutting firewood). . . .

The sacrifice is great, and in the spare yet powerfully evocative images of these lines Silko conveys the intense pain of separation. Her versification here, with "home," "clan," and "people" isolated in separate lines and children and husband further isolated in parentheses to the right, makes such pain almost palpable, as does the southeastward movement of the verse as it mirrors her journey toward the sun. Such "drastic things," however, "must be done / for the world / to continue." Harmony between the people and the spirit powers of the universe is necessary to existence and, through her marriage to the Sun, Yellow Woman perpetuates this harmony. The "people may not understand"

her going; the visionary is invariably misunderstood. But that does not deter her, for she goes "out of love for this earth. . . ."

The narrator in "Yellow Woman," too, restores an essential harmony through her going — a going which is also likely to be misunderstood. Her experience in living the reality revealed in her grandfather's stories has shown her the oneness of past and present, of historical and mythic time, and of the stories and the people. More, she has given the people another story and that, too, "must be done / for the world / to continue. . . ."

Yellow Woman brings about good in "Buffalo Story" as well, and in a sense its link with Silko's short story is even stronger than that of "Story of Sun House." Like "Sun House," it enriches the short story by locating it for the reader within the necessary cultural and communal context, but "Buffalo Story" is itself enriched by the individualistic perspective cast forward upon it by "Yellow Woman." "Buffalo Story" follows the abduction storyline somewhat more closely than does "Story of Sun House" and evokes the sexual aspects of the traditional Yellow Woman stories more insistently. During a time of drought, when game is scarce and crops cannot grow, Yellow Woman, looking for water for her family, comes to a churning, muddy pool. At first she fears that a great animal had fouled the water. Then

She saw him.She saw him tying his leggingsdrops of water were still shining on his chest.He was very good to look atand she kept looking at himbecause she had never seen anyone like him.It was Buffalo Man who was very beautiful. . . .

She has ventured far from her village, as has the narrator in "Yellow Woman," and the intense sexual pull Buffalo Man has on her here recalls that of Silva on the narrator. When Arrowboy, her husband, finds her asleep and calls to her to run to him so that they might escape the Buffalo People, to whose country Buffalo Man had abducted her, "She seemed to / get up a little slowly / but he didn't think much of it then." Her slowness here, he later learns, is not due to fatigue. After he kills all the Buffalo People, he tells Yellow Woman to go tell the people that there is meat, but she refuses to come down from the cottonwood which they had climbed to escape the Buffalo People's pursuit. Arrowboy sees that she is crying and asks her why:

"Because you killed them,"she said."I suppose you love them,"Estoy-eh-muut [Arrowboy] said,"and you want to stay with them."And Kochininako nodded her headand then he killed her too. . . .

Paula Gunn Allen, while acknowledging the underlying centrality of oral tradition in the lives of tribal people, nonetheless maintains that "the oral tradition is often deceptive in what it makes of the lives of women." She says that

so cleverly disguised are the tales of matricide, abduction and humiliation that the Indian woman is likely to perceive consciously only the surface message of the beauty, fragility, and self-sacrificing strength of her sisters though she cannot help but get the more destructive message that is the point of many tribal tales.

Such a "destructive message" is at least potentially present in the "Buffalo Man" story in Boas' *Keresan Texts*, but Silko casts the killing of Yellow Woman in "Buffalo Story" in a much different light. In Boas' version, when Arrowboy explains to Yellow Woman's father why he killed her, the Chief says, "Indeed? . . ." "All right," said he, "never mind." His response seems to justify the killing. In "Buffalo Story" her father, though implicitly accepting the justice of what was done cries and mourns. Moreover, in Silko's rendering we are told that "It was all because / one time long ago / our daughter, our sister Kochininako / went away with them" that the people were fed and buffalo hunting began. Yellow Woman here is not an adultress who deserted her people but rather remains "our daughter, our sister," whose journey, like her journey in "Story of Sun House," brought good to her people.

The context here established by the written word—Silko's short story—is essential in helping us to see Yellow Woman more completely than do the traditional stories alone, just as those stories in turn provide the necessary cultural context for "Yellow Woman." Through the narrator's telling in Silko's story, the individual dimension predominates and personal longings are shown to be as powerful and worthwhile as communal needs. Silko well knows, as the Cottonwood poems make clear, that individual sacrifice is at times crucial to community survival. But, as "Yellow Woman" reveals, individual fulfillment can be equally important to a tribal community, especially in the modern world where acculturation pressures are perhaps greater than ever before. Silko shows us, in this opening sequence of the "Yellow Woman" section, that personal and communal fulfillment need not be mutually exclusive—that they in fact enhance each other. And, by extension, the same is true of oral tradition and the written word as ways of knowing and of expression. To attain this harmony requires a powerful and inclusive vision, one receptive both to internal and external demands and the diverse languages which give them meaning. The development of such a vision, and of the network of relationships to the land, the people, the stories, and oneself it fosters, is, as I have said, the controlling idea of what I have called the "Yellow Woman" section of Storyteller, and it is expressed in various ways in the narrative episodes that follow.

The five short pieces that follow "Yellow Woman" and the *Cottonwood* poems focus on learning to see the land rightly and developing the proper relationship to it. This learning process is implicit in the narrator's experience in "Yellow Woman," both in her journey with Silva up the mountain and in the precise, evocative detail in which she describes particular aspects of the landscape; it becomes refined describes particular aspects of the landscape; it becomes refined and expanded in these brief narratives. In the first one, a poem entitled "The Time We Climbed Snake Mountain," the narrator is a teacher who knows the mountain intimately and knows that "Somewhere around here / yellow spotted snake is sleeping": "So / please, I tell them / watch out, / don't step on the spotted yellow snake / he lives here. / The mountain is his." "Them" are never identified, but that is unimportant because this kind of teaching has been going on for thousands of years. It is a simple lesson in perspective and respect.

What follows is a personal reminiscence which in a different way reinforces this lesson. It is of Silko's girlhood when she first learned to hunt, and through her telling we learn something of how she began to acquire the wisdom she hands down in "The Time We

Climbed Snake Mountain." Hunting alone one day Silko saw, or thought she saw, a "giant brown bear lying in the sun below the hilltop. Dead or just sleeping, I couldn't tell." She "knew there were no bears that large on Mt. Taylor; I was pretty sure there were no bears that large anywhere," and she also knew "what hours of searching for motion, for the outline of a deer, for the color of a deer's hide can do to the imagination." Almost paralyzed with caution and curiosity, eager to examine the bear up close but unsure if it is dead or is just sleeping or is at all, she walks, "as quietly and as carefully as I probably will ever move," away from it. As she goes she looks back, still unsure of what she has seen, and "the big dark bear remained there. . . ." "I never told anyone what I had seen," Silko laughingly recalls, "because I knew they don't let people who see such things carry .30-30s or hunt deer with them. . . ."

That the bear impressed itself deeply on her imagination, however, is apparent as she recalls another hunting trip which took place two years after the first one. Her uncle had killed a big mule deer, and, as Silko went to help him, she realized that it was the same time of day as when she saw, or thought she saw, the bear:

I walked past the place deliberately. I found no bones, but when a wind moved through the light yellow grass that afternoon I hurried around the hill to find my uncle. Sleeping, not dead, I decided. . . .

At this point, there is no longer any doubt in her mind that the bear was real; and her use of poetic form further suggests that this place where she saw the great bear has become part of an inner as well as an outer landscape. Through an act of imagination she has learned a profound truth from the land which intensifies her bond to it.

The photograph which separates these two reminiscences reinforces this idea. In it, laid out on the porch of the old cabin in which Silko and her hunting party stayed on Mt. Taylor, are five mule deer bucks, prayer feathers tied to their antlers, Silko herself, and her Uncle Polly. She and her uncle had just finished "arranging the bucks . . . so they can have their pictures taken." Given the "special significance" of photographs to her family and to the people of Laguna, the careful arrangement of the deer, and the prayer feathers, we are prepared for the subtle revelation in her second reminiscence. Her vision of the bear, like the deer, was a gift to help the people survive. It was the intimate expression of the land to her imagination of its own spiritual integrity and that of its creatures. Through the mystery and wonder of her seeing, the land, impressed itself indelibly upon her memory.

Two photographs follow the second bear reminiscence. The first, discussed earlier, is of hills and mesas that no longer exist and, placed where it is in *Storyteller*, the photograph movingly conveys the need, more important now than ever before, for all people to know the land as the place that gives us being and the source of our profoundest wisdom. It reminds us, as does *Storyteller* as a whole, about the oral tradition—of the fragility of what was once thought whole and eternal and of how much all life ultimately depends on imagination and memory. The second photo, taken from the east edge of Laguna looking toward the west, enhances this idea by showing us the place from which the stories in *Storyteller*, old and contemporary, arise. What follows is a series of

such stories and reminiscences unified not by subject or theme but by the shared landscape that nurtured them. They express the richness, diversity, playfulness and humor of Laguna oral tradition. Like the first of these two photographs, they also express its fragility.

The first story which follows these photographs is a poetic retelling of a hunting story Silko, when a child of seven, heard from her Aunt Alice. It flows smoothly out of the photograph of Laguna in that it endows a particular portion of the land with mystery and wonder, and by so doing makes it a gift of and to the imagination. Though she heard this story six years before she saw the great bear on a hunting trip, the story flows out of her recollection of this experience as well; and by using cyclic rather than chronological structure, she more strikingly evokes, as with the "Yellow Woman" and *Cottonwood* sequence, the timeless significance of the oral tradition to the understanding of human experience. Told, as are other such stories in the book, in the conversational accents and occasional expository digressions of the traditional storyteller, the story is again of Yellow Woman, here a young girl and a fine hunter who, having gotten seven big rabbits in a morning's hunting, comes upon "a great big animal" who asks for one of her rabbits, which he immediately devours. The animal's demands escalate with his appetite and they are rendered by Silko in a compellingly dramatic sequence as the animal, having demanded and received all the girl's rabbits and weapons, insists upon her clothes as well. Rightly fearful that she herself will be next, little Yellow Woman fools the animal into letting her remove her clothes in a cave too small for him to enter. Knowing, however, that her escape is at best temporary, she calls upon the twin Brothers, Ma'see'wi and Ou'yu'ye'wi, who kill the animal with their flint knives. They then cut the animal open, pull out his heart, and throw it. At this point in the telling the legend melds with contemporary reality, myth enters experience, as we are told that the heart landed "right over here / near the river / between Laguna and Paguate / where the road turns to go / by the railroad tracks / right around / from John Paisano's place— / that big rock there / looks just like a heart, / . . . and that's why / it is called / Yash'ka / which means 'heart'. . . ."

By telling this story to her seven year-old niece, who is disappointed at not having been allowed to join her parents on a hunting trip, Aunt Alice both entertains and teaches. She raises the child's selfesteem by showing her that young girls can be skillful and clever hunters, alerts the prospective young hunter to the unexpected dangers that at times confront a hunter, reassures her that such obstacles, however dangerous, may be overcome, and perhaps most importantly, helps her niece to see the land with the same sense of wonder and joy with which she heard the story. A part of the landscape heretofore ordinary and unremarked has by means of the story been made precious to the child. Six years later, when she sees the giant bear, Silko will have her own hunting story to tell—and Aunt Alice's story will be recalled anew, recreated as it is here, richer and truer than ever.

The story told by a loving aunt of a special place engenders a reminiscence of another place which is special because of the woman who may, or may not, be buried there. With this reminiscence Silko shifts her focus from the land per se to the people—more precisely, to how people get remembered. This reminiscence concerns two women.

Silko's great-grandmother, Helen, was born of an old traditional family, and Silko recalls that "even as a very young child / I sensed she did not like children much and so I remember her / from a distance . . . ." Much dearer to memory is a woman Silko never knew, old Juana, of whom Silko learned from the stories of Grandma Lillie, one of Helen's daughters. Juana, who "raised Grandma Lillie and her sisters / and brothers," was not born into a "genteel tradition" as was Grandma Helen. A Navajo, "Juana had been kidnapped by slavehunters / who attacked her family. . . ." Stripped of her family, of whom no trace remained, her language, and her heritage, Juana "continued with the work she knew" and was eventually hired by Silko's Grandpa Stagner to care for his family. Silko recalls going on Memorial Day with Grandma Lillie to take flowers to Juana's grave. The graveyard where she was buried was old and the "small flat sandstones" which served as grave markers were mostly broken or covered over; as a result Grandma Lillie could never be certain if they found her grave—"but we left the jar of roses and lilacs we had cut anyway." Juana's actual presence, like the giant bear's in the earlier hunting story, is ultimately irrelevant. As the bear lives in Silko's imagination, so Juana lives in her, and in Grandma Lillie's heart, where they have more perfect being. Though orphaned young, Juana is restored through the stories to a family, language, and heritage.

Juana is remembered for her loving kindness, but that is not the only way people get remembered. The tone shifts rather suddenly from the reminiscence about Juana to two "gossip" stories, both of them rich in humor and irony. The first story, of a man caught en flagrante in a cornfield by his wife and her two sisters, and Silko's telling of it—in which she uses the storyteller's conversational tone and shifts the point of view from the two lovers to the wife and sisters and then to the man alone— express a delicious comic blend of conspiracy, anticipation, antagonism and resignation. She dramatically sets the scene: "His wife had caught them together before / and probably she had been hearing rumors again / the way people talk." The lovers planned to meet in the afternoon, when it was so hot that "everyone just rested" until evening, when it was cool enough to return to work. "This man's wife was always / watching him real close at night / so afternoon was / the only chance they had." When they were caught the woman left, and the man had to take the inevitable chastisement alone. His "wife would cry a little," her sisters would comfort her, "and then they would start talking again / about how good their family had treated him / and how lucky he was. / He couldn't look at them / so he looked at the sky / and then over at the hills behind the village." Though the man's inability to look at the women may suggest guilt, his wandering gaze has something of boredom in it, as if he were merely playing a role in an ancient and rather tiresome domestic ritual. His manhood is not spared, as the women are quick to remind him that his lover "had a younger boyfriend / and it was only afternoons that she had any use / for an old man":

So pretty soon he started hoeing weeds againbecause they were ignoring himlike he didn't matter anywaynow thatthat woman was gone. . . .

The irony here is rich. The man, it seems, is important to his wife and relatives, and perhaps to the community as a whole, only by virtue of his infidelity. It is this by which he lives in a communal memory, enriches the storytelling life of the people, and gains mythic dimension. Apart from that context he "didn't matter."

"Then there was the night," Silko gleefully continues, whetting our appetite for the story of old man George who, on a trip to the outhouse, "heard strange sounds / coming from one of the old barns / below." Checking, "just in case some poor animal / was trapped inside," the old man is shocked to discover Frank,

so respectable and hard-workingand hardly ever drunk—well there he wasnaked with that Garcia girl—you know,the big fat one.And here it wasthe middle of winterwithout their clothes on!. . .

Silko's tone here expresses two points of view simultaneously. George, to say the least, is surprised to find a man like Frank in this situation and Silko, as storyteller, relishes the irony. Further, she creates the proper context here by giving us, through her "you know" aside, a sense of her immediate audience—another young person, perhaps, to whom Frank would be cited by conventional morality as an example to follow. "Poor old man George / he didn't know what to say," and his befuddlement is comically rendered in the story's closing lines: "so he just closed the door again / and walked back home—he even forgot where he was going / in the first place." But he'll remember Frank and the Garcia girl.

It may at first glance seem strange that these stories are followed by a brief recollection of Grandma A'mooh and the way she read the children's book *Brownie the Bear* to her great-granddaughters, especially since "Storytelling," which follows, consists of six vignettes largely in the same vein as the "gossip" stories. This reminiscence, however, mentioned earlier in another context, is wonderfully appropriate here. Taken in conjunction with the "gossip" stories that surround it, it reminds us again of the variety and inclusiveness of the oral tradition. It also underscores Silko's intent throughout *Storyteller* to convey the dynamic relationship between the oral tradition and the life it expresses. The life of a community, or of an individual, does not arrange itself into precise categories, literary or otherwise, nor does it follow neat, unbroken lines of development; and Silko, by juxtaposing different kinds of narratives and subjects, helps us to see vital, rewarding connections that might otherwise go unnoticed. Remember, too, that her emphasis in the "Grandma A'mooh" reminiscence is on how a story is told. A good story cannot exist apart from a good storyteller. Much of the fun of the "gossip" stories, as we have seen, is in Silko's manner of telling them. Grandma A'mooh

always read the story with such animation andexpressionchanging her tone of voice and inflectioneach time one of the bears spoke—the way a storyteller would have told it. . . .

Her telling makes the story live, recreates it in effect with each repetition. This is what Silko, in the "gossip" stories as well as in others, tries to do, to give a sense of the flux and immediacy of life lived. Too, it is her telling which links Grandma A'mooh to past generations of storytellers—as it does Silko. The six vignettes in "Storytelling," all variations on the Yellow Woman abduction stories, bring what I have called the "Yellow Woman" section of Storyteller full circle. The first of these is Silko's abbreviated rendering of the opening of the "Buffalo Story," when Yellow Woman goes for water:

"Are you here already?""Yes," he said.He was smiling."Because I came for you."She looked into theshallow clear water."But where shall I put my water jar?". . . .

In this version Yellow Woman is apparently expecting Buffalo Man, and though coercion might be implied when he says he came for her, her response is willing, even coy and playful. The tone of the fifth vignette is quite similar:

Seems likeits always happening to me.Outside the dance hall doorlate Friday nightin the summertime.and thosebrown-eyed men from Cubero,smiling.The usually ask me"Have you seen the way the stars shineup there in the sand hills?"And I usually say "No. Will you show me?". . . .

Silko alerts us as "Storytelling" begins that we "should understand / the way it was / back then, / because it is the same / even now." The traditional stories, Silko is saying, both here and throughout *Storyteller*, offer profound and necessary insights into contemporary experiences. Specifically, the "Yellow Woman" stories, especially Silko's renderings of them, are among other things open, unqualified expressions of woman's sexuality. This is not to say that, because the traditional stories are abduction stories, Silko is dealing in rape fantasies. Quite the contrary. In her versions the coercive element, though present, is not the controlling one. Yellow Woman is at all times in charge of her own destiny. She understands and accepts her sexuality, expresses it honestly, and is guided by her own strong desire. We see this in Silko's short story, "Yellow Woman," in the *Cottonwood* stories, and again in these two "Storytelling" vignettes. By focusing in these little narratives not on the lovemaking but on the prelude to it, Silko establishes the sexual integrity of both the mythic and contemporary Yellow Woman, and conveys with playful subtlety the charged eroticism between them and Buffalo Man and "those / brown-eyed men from Cubero" respectively.

Yellow Woman's sexual integrity gets a broadly comic touch in the fourth vignette, where Silko inverts the traditional abduction motif. The F.B.I. and state police in the summer of 1967 pursued a red '56 Ford with four Laguna women and three Navajo men inside. A kidnapping was involved, and the police followed a trail "of wine bottles and / size 42 panties / hanging in bushes and trees / all along the road." When they were caught, one of the men explained: "'We couldn't escape them' . . . / 'We tried, but there were four of them and / only three of us'. . . ."

But sexual honesty, especially a woman's, is, as we have seen, likely to be misunderstood. In the first *Cottonwood* poem, "Story of Sun House," the Sun tells Yellow Woman that even though their union is necessary for the world to continue, "the people may not understand"; and the narrator in "Yellow Woman" must make up a story for her family about being kidnapped by Navajo. In fact, the abduction motif of the Yellow Woman stories proves useful, or almost so, in a number of situations. "No! that gossip isn't true," says a distraught mother in the third "Storytelling" vignette: "She didn't elope / She was *kidnapped* by / that Mexican / at Seama Feast. / You know / my daughter / isn't / *that* kind of girl." As was stated earlier, however, there cannot be a good story without a good storyteller, as the contemporary Yellow Woman of the sixth vignette learns. "It was / that Navajo / from Alamo, / you know, / the tall / good-looking /

one," she tells her husband. "He told me / he'd kill me / if I didn't / go with him." That, rain, and muddy roads, she said, are why "it took me / so long / to get back home." When her husband leaves her, she blames herself: "I could have told / the story / better than I did. . . ."

In a *Sun-Tracks* interview, Silko said of "these gossip stories": "I don't look upon them as gossip. The connotation is all wrong. These stories about goings-on, about what people are up to, give identity to a place." What she argues for here is in effect what the "Yellow Woman" section is all about: a new way of seeing. Seen rightly, such stories are neither idle rumor nor trivial chatter, but are rather another mode of expression, a way in which people define themselves and declare who they are. Thus it is fitting that the "Yellow Woman" section, and this essay, conclude with a photograph taken of some of the houses in Laguna. Here, after all, is where the people live their lives and it is this sense of life being lived, of life timeless and ongoing, changing and evolving, contradictory and continuous, that Silko expresses with grace and power through her melding of oral tradition and the written word in *Storyteller*.

Source: Bernard A. Hirsch, "'The Telling Which Continues': Oral Tradition and the Written Word in Leslie Marmon Silko's 'Storyteller,'" in American Indian Quarterly, Vol. 12, No. 1, 1988, pp. 1-25.

Topics for Further Study

There are, occasionally, unrealistic details in this short story (for example, at the story's beginning, the young woman is certain that the sun has stopped in its path). How do these elements relate to the plot or themes of the story?

How does the opening and closing of "Storyteller" exemplify the plight of the protagonist in general (the young woman is in prison)?

Research the significance of Wounded Knee, South Dakota, in Native-American history. Discuss the 1973 clash between protesting Native Americans and federal marshals, and the historic battle between U.S. soldiers and Native Americans at this site in 1890.

Research early treaties between British colonials and Native Americans. What was the legal status of these treaties in later twentieth-century reparation negotiations and agreements?

Persons indigenous to the American continents at the time of European conquest and colonialism were descendants of Asian peoples. How do anthropologists distinguish the various populations that stretch from Alaska to southernmost South America?

Examine those Native-American nations divided by the Canada-Alaska border or the U.S.-Mexico border. How do these borders affect these split populations culturally?

Compare and Contrast

1970s: Affirmative action programs, designed to enhance the employment and educational opportunities of ethnic minorities and women, are set into play in the 1960s. By the late 1970s, these programs and quota systems are under attack as forms of "reverse discrimination" (that is, it is argued that the laws that protect minorities discriminate against Euro-American males).

1990s: The passing of Proposition 209, the California Civil Rights Initiative, marks a definitive and severe blow to affirmative action in the United States. Its passing encourages other states to draw up similar propositions that make it illegal to give preferential treatment to persons based on their race or sex. One immediate result of the passing of this proposition is that Black and Latino enrollment at the California UC campuses drops considerably.

1970s: Following in the footsteps of feminist and Black Rights' movements, Native Americans join together and organize major demonstrations and protests demanding civil rights, reparations for past wrongs, and the restitution of sacred lands. Political action on the part of American Indians in the 1970s ranges from the highly militant to the more traditional (armed seizures of territory to formations of negotiating bodies).

1990s: A central global concern in the late twentieth- century is the ecological health of the planet. International political bodies such as the Green Party find their inspiration in cultures such as the American Indian ones which, despite their variations, are on the whole admired for the manner in which Nature determines social life, and not vice versa.

What Do I Read Next?

The Man to Send Rain Clouds: Contemporary Stories by American Indians (1974), is an early short story collection of the Native American Renaissance. It takes its title from one of Silko's stories. Edited by Kenneth Mark Rosen.

Ceremony (1977) is Silko's first novel. It is the story of a young American Indian who returns from WWII and who must sort out his experiences, his adult world, and his relationship to his ancestry and heritage.

Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit (1996) is a collection of essays by Silko. The book is subtitled "Essays on Native American Life Today." Silko expounds on topics ranging from Native American legal battles to Native American culture and art.

Love Medicine (1984), by Louise Erdrich, won the 1984 National Book Critics' Circle Award for Best Work of Fiction. It is a highly readable and often funny text set on a North Dakota reservation; it tells the stories of three interrelated families.

Last of the Mohicans (1826) by James Fenimore Cooper is one of this nineteenth-century author's novels about the North American frontier. Cooper popularized a particularly American-style adventure tale that was internationally popular during his time. Native American characters figure prominently in his novels, and they afford the contemporary reader a glimpse into attitudes and notions of the past.

Further Study

Seyersted, Per, *Leslie Marmon Silko*, Western Writers Series, 45, Boise State University, 1980.

This text offers a short biography of Silko. It is good for information about her social and cultural milieu and early writing days. No other biography, as yet, exists.

Brown, Dee, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee; an Indian History of the American West*, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1970.

Brown's book is a classic in Native American letters. It is a moving account of U.S. history from the point of view of Native Americans.

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

Lincoln's book provides an overview of the figures, goals, and achievements of the Renaissance.

Anzaldua, Gloria, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987

Anzaldua's book is a cultural and feminist theory that speaks to the cultural "borderlands" of the U.S. Southwest. Anzaldua describes cultures forming at the borders and exchanges of distinct cultures.

Wong, Hertha Dawn, "Contemporary Innovations of Oral Traditions: N. Scott Momaday and Leslie Marmon Silko," in *Sending My Heart Back across the Years: Tradition and Innovation in Native American Autobiography*, Oxford University Press, 1992, 153-99.

This dense chapter details how the two writers engage with the oral traditions of their cultures. An attempt to deal with the issues inherent in writing published print literature about oral storytellers.

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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.

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