Yellow Woman Study Guide

Yellow Woman by Leslie Marmon Silko

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Introduction

First published in 1974 in Kenneth Rosen's anthology, *The Man to Send Rain Clouds: Contemporary Stories By American Indians,* "Yellow Woman" has subsequently appeared in Leslie Marmon Silko's 1981 work, *Storyteller,* a collection of poems, stories and photographs. "Yellow Woman" tells the story of a young Laguna Pueblo woman who temporarily goes off with a strange man she meets on a walk along the river. The woman is swept up in the traditional Keresan myth of Kochininako, the Yellow Woman, who left her tribe and family to wander for years with the powerful ka'tsina, or spirit, Whirlwind Man. The story features a compelling blurring of the boundaries between myth and everyday experience, between contemporary Native American life and ancient myths.

In Kenneth Rosen's anthology, *The Man to Send Rain Clouds,* "Yellow Woman" was published to stand alone. In *Storyteller,* Silko surrounds "Yellow Women" with additional poems and stories that further elucidate Yellow Woman's relationship to the land, the spirits that pervade it and the stories that derive from it. Bernard Hirsch writes in *American Indian Quarterly* that "this multigeneric work lovingly maps the fertile storytelling ground from which her art evolves and to which it is here returned— and offering to the oral tradition which nurtured it." In conjunction with the other works included in *Storyteller,* "Yellow Woman" manages to both recreate and comment upon the oral traditions that have sustained the Laguna Pueblo community.

Author Biography

Born in 1948 in Albuquerque, New Mexico, Leslie Marmon Silko grew up on Laguna Pueblo, a Native American reservation fifty miles west of Albuquerque. The Laguna Pueblo is central to her sense of herself as a person and a writer. In *The Man to Send Rain Clouds,* she explains: "I grew up at Laguna Pueblo. I am of mixed-breed ancestry, but what I know is Laguna. This place I am from is everything I am as a writer and human being."

One of three sisters, Silko describes her childhood as "sheltered." Her parents valued education, and encouraged their daughters to succeed on many levels. In *Backtalk: Women Writers Speak Out,* Silko tells Donna Perry that her father, Lee Marmon, taught her to shoot a gun at age seven and let his daughters compete in contests against grown men: "My dad would say, 'Well, my girls can do anything your boys can do, and my girls can do it better.'" Silko describes her family as a "book family"; from a very early age, she was surrounded both by written words and the oral tradition of the Laguna Pueblo. Her family valued education so much that from the fifth grade on they sent her to a small private school in Albuquerque, fifty miles away when it became clear that the Laguna Day School, where she was not allowed to speak Keresan, the language spoken by the Laguna people, was providing an inferior education.

At the University of New Mexico, Silko majored in English. She published her first stories, "Tony's Story," and "The Man to Send Rain Clouds" before she graduated Phi Beta Kappa in 1969. While an undergraduate, she married her first husband and gave birth to her first son, Robert. Even though she had achieved critical success as a writer of fiction, she was determined to be a lawyer. She wanted to follow in the footsteps of her father, Lee Marmon, who had been a tribal officer and had successfully sued the State of New Mexico over six million acres of stolen land. While still in law school at the University of New Mexico, Silko received a National Endowment for the Arts Discovery Grant in 1971 for her short story "The Man to Send Rain Clouds." After her second son, Casimir, was born, she decided that she would be a writer rather than a lawyer, and did not complete the program.

Silko was awarded the Pushcart Prize for poetry in 1973. Seven of her short stories (including "Yellow Woman") were anthologized in Kenneth Rosen's *The Man to Send Rain Clouds* (1974). In that same year, she published her volume of poetry, *Laguna Woman* to great critical acclaim. When she published her first novel, *Ceremony* in 1977, *The New York Times Book Review* called it "a splendid achievement," declaring, "Without question Leslie Silko is the most accomplished Indian writer of her generation." In her introduction to *Yellow Woman,* Melody Graulich writes that Silko's "early work focuses on growing up as an Indian and as mixed-breed, on young people who come to understand the 'I' in relation to their cultural practices and to the land, a significant theme in American Indian literature."

In 1981, Silko published *Storyteller,* in which she included "Yellow Woman" in a series of stories and poems. In *ARIEL,* Linda Krumholz explains: " *Storyteller* is a book of stories

and a book about stories: it contains traditional Pueblo Indian stories, Silko's family stories, poems, conventional European style short stories, gossip stories and photographs, all woven together to create a self-reflexive text that examines the cyclical role of stories in recounting and generating meaning for individuals, communities and nations." That same year, Silko received a MacArthur Foundation fellowship, colloquially known as the "genius grant." The MacArthur Foundation fellowship allowed her to stop teaching and to devote all her time to her massive novel, *Almanac of the Dead* (1991). Eight hundred pages long, *Almanac of the Dead* is a departure from Silko's earlier work. Based on fragmentary Mayan almanacs, Silko spins dozens of interconnected tales to rewrite five hundred years of American history and envision a future where the tribal people of the Americas retake the land from the governments that stole it from them. Concludes Perry in *Backtalk,* "That Silko manages to pull off this tour de force is amazing; that she does it with humor is incredible." In 1985, she published a deeply moving collection of letters, *With the Delicacy and Strength of Lace.* In 1993, she told Perry that " *Almanac* spawned another novel about a woman who is a serial killer . . . [who] just kills policemen and politicians." Silko lives on a ranch outside Tucson, Arizona.

Plot Summary

The poem that prefaces "Yellow Woman" suggests that the story that follows is mythic. Whirlwind Man belongs "to the wind," and he and Kochininako, Yellow Woman, "travel swiftly / this whole world." At the story's opening, the unnamed female narrator awakens at dawn next to a man on a riverbank. She watches the sun rise, then gets up and walks south, following their footprints from the day before. She comes across their horses, and she looks for but cannot see her pueblo (a multi-storied dwelling built of adobe; capitalized, the word also means "people" in the sense of a tribal group).

She returns to the sleeping man to tell him she is leaving. He reminds her, smiling, that she must come with him. He calls her "Yellow Woman" and will not answer her questions about who he is, saying only that the night before she had guessed who he was and why he had come for her. The narrator insists she is *not* Yellow Woman ("I have my own name and I come from the pueblo on the other side of the mesa. Your name is Silva and you are a stranger I met by the river yesterday afternoon"). Laughing, he tells her that what happened yesterday has nothing to do with today. He calls her Yellow Woman again. The narrator evokes the Keresan myth explicitly, telling him that "the old stories about the ka'tsina spirit and Yellow Woman can't mean us."

The narrator recounts that in the old stories, Yellow Woman went away with a spirit from the North and lived with him for a long time. Eventually, she returned to her pueblo with twin sons. The narrator and the stranger make love in the river sand again, and she wonders if what she is currently experiencing "is what happens in the story." She speculates that the Yellow Woman of the ancient story may have been an ordinary woman with a family who did not realize, at first, that she was being taken by a mountain spirit. When Silva stands up, points to her clothes "tangled in the blanket" and says "Let's go," she walks off with him, but she hopes they will meet someone who will indicate that Silva is "only a man" and that she is just a woman and not Kochininako. They ride north, into the mountain foothills of black lava rock.

They arrive at Silva's house, and the narrator asks Silva if he often uses the story about Yellow Woman and the ka'tsina to lure women home with him. He does not answer her directly, but he says that "someday they will talk about us, and they will say, 'Those two lived long ago when things like that happened.'" Later she joins him on a ridge overlooking mesas, valleys, and plains. Although she cannot see her own pueblo, Silva tells her, "From here I can see the world." He indicates different areas of the landscape, pointing out ranches and pastureland owned by Texans and Mexicans. He reveals that he is a cattle rustler. The narrator asks if he is a Navajo, which he denies, implicitly insisting on his identity as the ka'tsina.

The narrator awakens alone the next morning in Silva's house. She thinks of her family, whom she imagines will report her missing. If her old grandpa were alive he would tell them that she'd been stolen by mountain spirit and would eventually come home " — they usually do." In the meantime, her mother and grandmother will raise her baby and her husband will find someone else. She imagines her family will continue as they have

before but with a story about her disappearance. She decides to return home, and walks off, but returns to Silva's house at noon. When she sees the house, she remembers that she meant to go home, "But that didn't seem important any more." Silva is prepapring a beef carcass, and he asks her to ride to Marquez with him to sell the meat.

As they are riding toward Marquez they encounter a fat white rancher who accuses Silva of rustling cattle. Silva tells the narrator to ride back up the mountain. As she urges her horse to run up the difficult mountain trail, she hears four shots and concludes that Silva has shot the rancher. Instead of continuing upward toward Silva's house, she rides into the valley and homeward. Near the place by the river where she first encountered Silva, she dismounts, and starts the horse off alone on the trail she has just traveled. She continues on foot in the opposite direction, sitting for a while by the river and thinking about Silva before walking the rest of the way to her pueblo. As she approaches, she can hear her mother, grandmother, husband, and baby. She decides to tell them she was kidnapped by a Navajo, and regrets that her old grandfather is not alive to hear her true story "because it was the Yellow woman stories he liked to tell best."

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

"Yellow Woman," a short story by Native American writer Leslie Marmon Silko, was first published in 1974.

Yellow Woman is both the title to this story as well as the name of the Pueblo legend that has been handed down through generations of native oral tradition. In the legend, which has a number of variations, a young woman will typically agree to leave her village with a spirit-walker (ka'tsina), forsaking her family and her village to ensure a benefit for the entire community in return, such as a supply of food or other security for the village.

Silko's "Yellow Woman" begins with an unnamed young woman as its narrator. The story is set in the present time, and the young woman is has been lying on the edge of the river that flows past her village. It is evident from the tone of the account that the young woman feels a connection to the beauty and the spirituality of this place - she is watching the sun rise above the New Mexico landscape.

The young woman has just awoken. A stranger, with whom she had met and then had sex with on the riverbank that night is asleep beside her - she feels his legs against her as he sleeps.

The young woman had been alone in this natural setting when she first went to the river - her family, including her husband, a baby, her mother and her grandmother, are at her home in the village nearby. Through the tone of her narrative, she conveys of herself a sense of her own physical beauty and resolve as she describes the river and the land around her.

She had intended to return to her home and her family, but she lingers, describing a compulsion to remain at the side of this man until he awakes. The tone of the story, from this point forward to its conclusion, has a surrealist element, and the boundary between the woman's fantasy and her reality is very blurred.

When the stranger awakes, she learns that his name is Silva. The woman recalls the Yellow Woman legends told to her by her grandfather, and she senses that the stranger on the riverbank might be ka'tsina, the spirit walker of the Pueblo legend. At this point in the narration of the story, the present day meeting between the young woman and Silva, and the Yellow Woman Pueblo legend, begin to merge in the narrator's account.

The legend and the reality become one in the mind of the young woman when Silva tells her that she will accompany him to his cabin. The scene from the riverbank now shifts abruptly, as the young woman describes the brown sandstone and the river water replaced by dark, lava colored hills, with a corresponding sense of distance from the village.

It is clear that the narrator now believes herself to be living the Yellow Woman legend in the manner of the stories that were told to her as a child. Although she never steps beyond her narration to describe herself as the Yellow Woman, it is evident that this is now her role. As if fulfilling a destiny, the young woman expresses the thought that her child can now be cared for by her mother, and that her husband can find another woman as a partner. There is no suggestion in the narrative that the young woman was particularly unhappy or unfulfilled in her family or village life. However, her attraction to Silva is so great that the young woman appears prepared to remain with Silva for an indefinite period.

When the young woman arrives with Silva at his cabin, they are in the mountains. Silva tells her, as she makes him a meal, that Silva has a reputation as a notorious cattle thief among the nearby Texas cattle ranchers. The young woman determines that Silva must be a Navajo, and not a Pueblo Indian, as she believes that a Pueblo man would not steal another's cattle.

From Silva's cabin, the young woman can see where the Texas ranchers have farms, Navajo lands, the Mexican people and the boundaries of her own pueblo.

As night falls at the cabin, the young woman describes the conflict between her physical fear of Silva and her sexual desire for him. She does not attempt to either flee or to protect herself from Silva, and Silva ultimately forces himself upon her - "You don't understand do you, little yellow woman? You will do what I want." After Silva has sex with the young woman, he falls asleep, and she continues to watch him. The young woman tells of her ongoing physical desire for Silva even after having been sexually forced by him.

The next morning, Silva asks the young woman to accompany him to the town of Marquez. Silva intends to sell meat that is clearly the product of his cattle rustling. Silva arms himself with a rifle and they set out by horse along the trail. Silva and the young woman travel with meat strapped to their horse. As they progressed along the trail, the young woman describes how they encounter with a fat, white Texas rancher, who on seeing the meat strapped as their cargo, concludes that he has in fact met Silva, the reviled cattle thief.

Silva tells the young woman to go back to his cabin. As she leaves, she hears four gunshots - she does not return to the scene of the confrontation to investigate, and in fact returns to her own village and family. On her return, she resolves to tell them that a Navajo kidnapped her. She smells a meal being cooked, and she hears her mother telling her grandmother how to make Jell-O salad.

The young woman believes that Silva (or the ka'tsina) would one day return to the riverside near her village. She tells of how she wants to kiss him and to touch him again, a longing for Silva that evidently will continue through her own existence with her family in her community.

Analysis

As noted in the summary, the title "Yellow Woman" has a number of purposes. It is both the connector between present day and native legend, and it is a physical descriptor of the narrator in the eyes of Silva. The title gives the reader a sense of both the central figure of the story as well as the genre, as the Yellow woman legends are a type of native oral history as opposed to a finite account of a particular event or person.

In this story, where legend is melded with the present day, fantasy meeting reality, it is clear that the Yellow Woman is a strong, quasi-heroic character, determined to act as she feels that she must. Both the Yellow Woman of legend and the present narrator are unconventional persons - they act in a fashion that seems selfish and contrary to the institutions of family and the community.

There is the powerful sense in "Yellow Woman" that the actions of the young woman in lusting for Silva and leaving with him for his home are not the subject of a moral weighing, but rather are destiny being played out. The feelings and desires that she expresses for Silva from the moment that she sees him asleep on the riverbank underscore the classic distinction between amoral and immoral behavior. Much of Yellow Woman has a dream like feel to the narrative that helps to underscore the morality of the young woman's actions. There is never a sense that the young woman is concerned with the reactions of others, nor is she ever ashamed or remorseful for her actions, or her thoughts concerning Silva.

Both the Yellow Woman of Pueblo oral legend and the young woman of the story are confident, purposeful characters. The image of boundary or personal barrier being crossed, as opposed to being transgressed is a compelling one through out the story. Just as the legendary Yellow Woman crossed the bounds of propriety in leaving with a spirit walker, the narrator transcends the barriers of family, monogamy, geographical place and tribal culture (Pueblo / Navajo) in a short period. She does not invite any judgment upon her own actions - they are stated as fact - nor does she judge Silva, for either his physical domination of her, nor for his apparent theft of rancher's cattle.

In a superficial sense, Yellow Woman can be viewed as a feminist essay, given the strength and purposefulness of the central figure. A better, and perhaps, subtler analysis would be to regard the young woman as empowered, at least temporarily, as the narrative unfolds. The instrument of her empowerment is Silva, and the fact that the young woman yearns for his return suggests that she is dependent upon either the man Silva or the spirit of the Yellow Woman legend to feel free.

There are other themes in "Yellow Woman" that are capable of a broad interpretation. The conflict between the young woman's lust for Silva and her physical fear of him transcends Native American legend and its people, as "Love / fear" relationships between men and women seemingly exist in every culture. Further, the intervention of the supernatural, either by invocation or by design, is a common cultural thread.

Characters

Kochininako

See Yellow Woman

Narrator

The main character of "Yellow Woman" is the narrator. The reader never learns her name. She is a Laguna Pueblo wife and mother. She has been to school and does not seem to relate her modern life with the myths of her people, but she heard "the old stories" from her grandfather before he died. She goes away with an appealing stranger whom she encounters on a riverbank, mildly surprised at the ease with which she walks away from her known life in the Pueblo. As she spends time with her mysterious lover, she begins to wonder if she is experiencing events identical to those that inspired the original Yellow Woman tales. After a violent encounter with a white rancher, she leaves her lover and returns home with a story to tell, adding to the Yellow Woman lore and interweaving her own tale and life with the traditions of her people.

Old Grandpa

The narrator's grandfather has died before "Yellow Woman" begins, but his presence informs the narrative. He was the person from whom the narrator heard the myths and legends of the Laguna, including the Yellow Woman stories, which were his favorites. The narrator thinks of her grandfather several times during the course of the narrative. When she returns home, she wishes that he were alive to hear her new version of the Yellow Woman story. Old Grandpa represents the living history of the oral tradition.

The Rancher

The white rancher, a fat young man, precipitates the narrator's return to her community. He confronts Silva and the narrator as they ride to Marquez to sell stolen beef. The rancher represents the thievery of the Anglos who stole Indian lands, as well as hostility and racism.

Silva

The stranger whom the narrator encounters by the riverbank is called Silva. He is a cattle rustler who lives alone in the mountains and does not belong to any tribe that the narrator can ascertain. Silva repeatedly calls the narrator "Yellow Woman," and the narrator begins to identify herself with Yellow woman and Silva with Whirlwind Man, the ka'tsina who takes Yellow Woman to his House in the Sky in the myths. Silva says he

can "see the whole world" from the prospect before his isolated mountain house, though the narrator cannot even see her home from that vantage point.

Silva tells the narrator that he steals cattle from the Texan and Mexican rancherss (who of course initially stole land from the Native people). Twice the narrator appears to be leaving him; once she returns to his mountain dwelling, but the second time she goes back to the spot where she first saw him by the riverbank. She wants to return to him then— "to kiss him and to touch him" — but the mountains seem very far away by then, and she continues to her own home, believing that one day she will find him again waiting for her by the river.

Yellow Woman

Yellow Woman, or Kochininako, is a central figure in Laguna oral tradition. Different Yellow Woman stories have various focal points— abduction, meeting with powerful spirits, getting power from the spirit world and returning it to the people, female sexuality, the birth of twins, the refusal to marry, weaving, grinding corn, getting water, outwitting evil spirits. Silko's story draws from a version in which Yellow Woman goes away with a ka'tsina or mountain spirit from the North and lives with him or a long time. Eventually, she returns to her pueblo with twin sons. Yellow Woman's nonconforming and often outrageous (by her community's standards) behavior often brings benefits to her people. She is seen less as a role model for Laguna women than as a remarkable avatar of the spirit of all womankind.

Themes

Ambiguity and Identity

Like many other contemporary Native American stories, "Yellow Woman" is concerned with liminality, which is a state of being between two worlds or two states of existance. In the Native American world view, "nature" includes the spirits as well as the animals and people who inhabit the land, and the land itself. The unnamed narrator of "Yellow Woman" finds herself between two worlds— that of her everyday life and that of the mythic history of her people. It is also significant that from the bluff in front of Silva's house in the foothills, he can point out both Texan and Mexican lands to the narrator, underscoring that the story itself takes place in a borderland region.

That Silko never names the narrator of "Yellow Woman" adds to the story's ambiguity. The narrator and her companion potentially occupy several realms of reality at once. On one level she is a young Native American woman possessing a certain identity. She lives in real time, in a world dominated by automobiles and trains and the bustle of modern life. She has received a formal education; she is a wife, mother, daughter, and granddaughter. She is also identified with the Yellow Woman of Laguna folktale or legend. She meets and has a brief affair with a mysterious man and then returns home. He is seemingly a Navajo cattle rustler named Silva who has been sought by local Texan and Mexican ranchers for some time. On another level, he is closely identified with the mountain spirit or ka'tsina Whirlwind Man, who in the legend makes off with Kochininako, or Yellow Woman.

As "Yellow Woman" progresses, the narrator undertakes what Bernard Hirsch calls "a journey beyond the boundaries of time and place." She confuses her own identity with that of Kochininako, or Yellow Woman, and that of Silva with Whirlwind Man. By the time the story draws to a close, the reader sees her as both: a contemporary young woman who lives in real time with her ordinary family *and* as Yellow Woman, a living embodiment of Native American traditions and values. She now understands that her everyday experience and the timeless, all-inclusive mythic reality of her grandfather's stories are inextricably connected.

Storytelling, Transience, and Transcendence

Another important theme in "Yellow Woman" is the centrality of storytelling to a community's history and sense of itself. Native American cultures, including the Laguna, about whom Silko writes, have a rich oral tradition, in which favorite stories are repeated over and over again in family and ceremonial settings. Through the verbal retelling of ancient myths, the community is able to see the relationship of its presence to its past. But in the face of modern lifestyles, the oral tradition is dying; the narrator's grandfather, who loved the old stories, has passed away, and the narrator does not know anyone who can tell the ancient myths the way he did.

In "Yellow Woman," the narrator repeatedly insists that the story of Yellow Woman bears no meaning in her own life, that it could not happen in contemporary times. She suggests that the story is exists only in the past and that it has no relevance for her own life or for that of a late-twentieth-century Native American community: "The old stories about the ka'tsina spirit and Yellow Woman can't mean us," the narrator comments. "Those stories couldn't happen now."

As the narrative progresses, the narrator begins to realize that she, too, has a tale to share with her community: "I decided to tell them that some Navaho had kidnapped me." By contributing her own story to the community's rich oral traditions and by seeing the resemblance of her own experience to that of Yellow Woman, the narrator transcends her individual identity. True, she is a contemporary young mother who has been to school and has followed a strange man on an adventure, but she is also more than that. She is an incarnation of the mythic Yellow Woman. As the narrator's story is repeated among the people in her community, her individual narrative will become part of the larger narrative of the community and its history. As Silko says in Melody Graulich's book, *Yellow Woman: Women Writers: Texts and Contexts,* "Within one story there are many stories coming together."

Transgression, Sexuality, and Power

In many ways, "Yellow Woman" is a story about transgression and power through sexuality. The young narrator leaves her husband Al and her child to follow the mysterious Silva. Although she is a married woman with many responsibilities, the encounter by the the river leads her to leave her old life behind with scarcely a second thought. In an essay entitled "Yellow Woman and the Beauty of the Spirit," Silko writes: "Kochininako, Yellow Woman, represents all women in the old stories. Her deeds span the spectrum of human behavior and are mostly heroic. . . . Yellow Woman is my favorite because she dares to cross traditional boundaries of ordinary behavior during times of crisis to save the Pueblo; her power lies in her courage and in her uninhibited sexuality, which the old-time Pueblo stories celebrate again and again because fertility was so highly valued."

In *The Desert Is No Lady,* Patricia Clark Smith and Paula Gunn Allen explain that "the ultimate purpose of such ritual abductions and seductions is to transfer knowledge from the spirit world to the human sphere, and this transfer is not accomplished in an atmosphere of control or domination."

Nature

The theme of nature plays an important role in "Yellow Woman." Prior to her experience with Silva, the narrator has lived in a time-bound, historical world, in which she lives an ordinary life with her family. She has been to school, married, and given birth. Her grandfather's stories have given her a link to her past, but she, her mother, and

grandmother live primarily in the present. The pueblo in which she has lived her whole life is her entire world.

In "Yellow Woman," nature seems mythic and timeless. When she is along with Silva in the mountains, there is nothing— no highways, cars, or people— to indicate the reality of the late twentieth century. (However, once she is making her way home again, she notices the trails of jets in the sky.) The world to which the narrator eventually returns may seem mundane— her mother and grandmother are making Jell-O, her husband is playing with their baby— but the narrator now knows these two worlds are inextricably connected.

Style

Setting

"Yellow Woman" is set along a river, on mountain trails, in Silva's mountain dwelling, and in the narrator's Laguna pueblo in Arizona. The enclosed world of the pueblo, where the narrator lives with her family, suggests a limited and comfortable world. The world of the mountains, where Silva takes her, connotes timelessness and mythic knowledge. Although Silko's references to pick-up trucks, highways and Jell-O firmly place "Yellow Woman" in the later twentieth century, in one sense, the setting is timeless: myths cannot be contained by human conceptions of time and place. Since the narrator is simultaneously a modern young woman and Yellow Woman, living both in the late twentieth century and mythic time, it is important to consider that Silko employs a Native American understanding of time. In Native American philosophy, time is dynamic and achronous, or non-linear, meaning that the past and the future always exist in the present moment. Europeans conceptualize a "progressive" model of time, in which time "moves forward" or "advances." The Native American concept of time is circular; the past is never really past, it is always alive and informing the present. The circle or "sacred hoop" is a central image in many Native American belief systems.

Point of View and Narration

"Yellow Woman" is narrated in the first person by a young woman who remains unnamed throughout the story. First-person points of view limit the narrative to only what the narrator perceives. In "Yellow Woman," the entire narrative is filtered through the narrator's experiences, expectations and prior knowledge. In this instance, the first-person narrative contributes to the story's ambiguity, as the narrator has difficulty distinguishing whether her experience takes place in "real time" or in mythic time.

"Yellow Woman" is a self-reflexive story, meaning that the narrative refers to the process of composing the story itself. In "Yellow Woman," the narrator explicitly refers to the Yellow Woman story that her grandfather used to tell. She wonders if the original Yellow Woman knew that she was a character in a story. During her adventure with Silva, she repeatedly wonders if she has become the original Yellow Woman, or if she is reliving an episode similar to that actually experienced by a Laguna woman in "time immemorial" and will herself be the subject of a later tale.

Archetypes and the Oral Tradition

Although Silko's "Yellow Woman" does not assume that readers will be familiair with the original myth, it helps to be familiar with the concepts of archetypes and the ceremonial telling of stories in the Laguna Pueblo culture. Psychologist Carl Jung defined the archetype as the shared memories of the countless typical experiences of our ancestors, held in the "collective unconscious" of all humankind. In purely literary terms,

an archetype is a universal type of recurring image, character, plot device, or action. Archetypes occur in myths, religion, and dreams as well as literature. That Yellow Woman represents all the women in the old stories, as Silko has suggests elsewhere, and that dozens of Yellow Woman stories exist in the oral tradition supports the interpretation of Yellow Woman as a cultural archetype. Additionally, through the identification of herself with Yellow Woman, the narrator experiences a deep connection with her culture, recognizing that the story that she will tell is part of the stories told by old Grandpa in the oral tradition.

Through the oral tradition, the passing down of tribal histories and myth in ceremonial fashion, each passing generation connects its present moment to that of the past. In its recounting of the Yellow Woman story that "old Grandpa" used to tell and in its suggestion that the written narrative presented to readers will also become part of an often-repeated story, Silko's "Yellow Woman" draws upon the significance of the oral tradition. Furthermore, Silko suggests that oral tradition, in which stories change with each teller in each new context, is the lifeblood of community because it connects who we once were to who we have become.

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Historical Context

The Myth of Kochininako, Yellow Woman

In *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions,* Paula Gunn Allen observes that many different Kochininako, or Yellow Woman, stories circulate among the Laguna and Acoma Pueblos in New Mexico. The themes of these stories, she writes, are always female-centered and told from Yellow Woman's point of view. Allen notes that Yellow Woman stories concern many different things— abduction, meeting with powerful spirits, getting power from the spirit world and returning it to her people, the birth of twins, the refusal to marry, weaving, grinding corn, getting water, outwitting evil spirits. Often, Yellow Woman stories highlight her alienation from her people. In some of the stories she is punished for her differences; others celebrate the ways in which her nonconformity helps the community. Kochininako might be seen as a role model for women, Allen suggests that she more accurately represents "the Spirit of Woman." In her essay, "Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit," Silko agrees: "Yellow Woman is my favorite because she dares to cross traditional boundaries of ordinary behavior during times of crisis in order to save the Pueblo; her power lies in her courage and in her uninhibited sexuality, which the old time Pueblo stories celebrate again and again because fertility was so highly valued. . . . In each story, the beauty that Yellow Woman possesses is the beauty of her passion, her daring, and her sheer strength to act when catastrophe is imminent."

Although Silko remembers looking at the traditional Native American tales collected in the 1920s by ethnologist Franz Boas and his protegee, Elsie Clews Parsons, she told Larry Evers and Denny Carr of *Sun Tracks* journal, "I've never sat down with them and said I'm going to make a poem or a story out of this." Furthermore, "the things in the anthropological reports looked dead and alien" to her, not part of a living language and culture. Indeed, the assumption behind Boas's and Parsons's ethnological project was that the Keresan language was dying out and needed to be preserved. Since the Keresan language is primarily an oral language and is actively spoken by the Laguna as well as other Pueblo peoples, such an assumption was not only inaccurate but offensive to many of them. Indeed, Silko's multiple and eclectic sources for "Yellow Woman" attest to the fact that the oral tradition is alive and well. In *Storyteller,* Silko explains: "I know Aunt Susie and Aunt Alice would tell me stories they had told me before but with changes in details and descriptions.The story was the important thing and little changes here and there were really part of the story. There were even stories about the different versions of the stories and how they imagined those differing versions came to be."

Native American Cosmology and World View

Balance and harmony are two primary assumptions of the Keres people who inhabit the Laguna and Acoma Pueblos of New Mexico. As Silko explains in *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit,* the people and the land are inseparable: "In the old days there had

been no boundaries between the people and the land; there had been mutual respect for the land that others were actively using. This respect extended to all living beings, especially the plants and animals." Everything in Keres culture— the human, the animal, the vegetative, the spirit world— is interconnected like the strands of a spider's web.

In Keres theology, the Great Creator is a woman, Thought Woman, or the Spider Woman. There is no time when Thought Woman did not exist. In *The Sacred Hoop,* Paula Gunn Allen explains that Thought Woman is the only creator of thought, and that thought precedes creation. With the help of her two sisters, Thought Woman created the entire universe. Her presence is felt everywhere— on the plains, in the forests, in the great canyons, on the mesas, beneath the seas. She is, writes Allen, "the Old Woman Spider who weaves us together in a fabric of interconnection."

Because everything is connected, the tribal concept of time is timelessness and the concept of space is multidimensional. As Silko's retelling of "Yellow Woman" makes clear, the world of the everyday incorporates the ceremonial or mythic, and the mythic is present in ordinary experience. The past and the future dwell in the present moment. People cannot be separated from the landscape they inhabit. Every story contains every other story.

The Keres people are matrilineal, which means that women are central to their culture and descent is traced through the maternal rather than paternal line.Women are celebrated in social structures, architecture, law, custom and oral tradition. To address a person as "mother" is to pay the highest respect. In an interview with Kim Barnes in *MELUS,* Silko praises her Pueblo's fluid gender roles and matriarchal culture: "In the Pueblo, the lineage of the child is traced through the mother, so it's a matrilineal system. The houses are the property of the woman, not the man. The land is generally passed down through the female side because the houses belong to the women."

Because Native American communities value harmony between all living things, it is difficult for their belief system to remain intact in the late twentieth century. In her book *Song of the Turtle,* Paula Gunn Allen writes, "Legislation and local regulations concerning grazing, logging, fishing, hunting and particularly land, mineral, and water and power management have dramatically impaired not only the environment but the survival of Native peoples as communities and cultural entities in their own right."

The Legacy of Manifest Destiny

Manifest Destiny was a nineteenth century doctrine that the United States had both the right and the moral imperative to expand throughout the North American continent, which was characterized as an uninhabited wilderness. The philosophy of Manifest Destiny enabled the genocide of the people who already inhabited the lands to which white Americans laid claim (genocide is the systematic destruction of an entire people or culture). In 1834, under President Andrew Jackson, Congress designated all lands west of the Mississippi "and not within the States of Missouri and Louisiana and the Territory of Arkansas" to be "Indian Territory"; as Anglo-Americans traveled westward, however,

the area designated "Indian Territory" grew smaller and smaller. During the 1838 Trail of Tears, in which the Cherokee Nation was forcibly moved from the Carolinas to "Indian Territory" (what is now Oklahoma), one out of every four Cherokees died from cold, hunger or disease. In *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee,* historian Dee Brown writes that Manifest Destiny an "era of violence, greed, audacity, sentimentality, undirected exuberance, and an almost reverential attitude toward the ideal of personal freedom for those who already had it."

To fulfill its Manifest Destiny, the United States Government made many treaties with the various tribal nations and broke almost all of them. The stealing of their land is not ancient history to Native American tribes; Silko's father, Lee Marmon, was a tribal officer for the Laguna Pueblo people who successfully sued the State of New Mexico for six million acres that were improperly taken.

Critical Overview

"Yellow Woman" is probably Silko's most famous story. After it first appeared in *The Man to Send Rain Clouds,* "Yellow Woman" received immediate attention and praise and was reprinted in a number of other collections. In the introduction to his anthology, *The Man to Send Rain Clouds,* Kenneth Rosen praises Silko's rich style and her exploration of the intersection between traditional stories and individual voice: "Using Indian lore and history as a kind of counterpoint to her special music, she writes with a depth and intensity that to my mind, set her work apart and mark her as a talent from whom we can expect new, important work."

Some critics have felt that "Yellow Woman" is largely about cultural loss and the need to reconnect to an abandoned spiritual heritage. In *Spider Woman's Granddaughters,* Paula Gunn Allen observes that the narrator of "Yellow Woman" seems cut off from her culture. Allen writes that "Silko's use of the Yellow Woman stories . . . leans more toward the isolation of her protagonist from her people rather than toward connectedness—though even here her sense of connection is of necessity through the stories by way of her family." In an early essay in *Multi-Ethnic Literatures of the United States* A. Lavonne Ruoff argues that in "Yellow Woman," "Silko emphasizes the need to return to the rituals and oral traditions of the past in order to rediscover the basis for one's cultural identity." Along with other critics, Ruoff and Allen have also paid particular attention to the ways in which "Yellow Woman" draws upon and revises the oral traditions and ceremonial practices of the Laguna Pueblo people. In an essay in *The Sacred Hoop,* Allen discusses the ways in which Silko draws upon the Laguna Pueblo people's "gynocentric" (or woman-centered) creation myth and subsequent understanding of the land as feminine in her celebration of female strength, courage, and sexuality.

Some feminists have voiced discomfort at Silko's treatment of female sexuality in "Yellow Woman." Writing in *Modern Language Studies,* Victoria Boynton perceives sexual violence between Silva and the narrator, who knows that he can hurt her if he chooses. Nevertheless, in Silko's story, the narrator presents herself as a willing participant in the sexual encounters. Boynton acknowledges that Native American critics such as Allen understand the Yellow Woman stories to be celebrations of female sexuality. Nevertheless she is concerned that the "rape fantasy" represented in "Yellow Woman" is dangerous to women. In *The Desert Is No Lady,* Patricia Clark Smith and Paula Gunn Allen explain that "the ultimate purpose of such ritual abductions and seductions is to transfer knowledge from the spirit world to the human sphere, and this transfer is not accomplished in an atmosphere of control or domination."

Critics such as Bernard Hirsch in *American Indian Quarterly* and Tobey Langen in *Studies in American Indian Literatures* have focused on the design of *Storyteller,* which combines poems, fiction, autobiography and photographs to create a *written* representation of an *oral* storytelling. Hirsch comments upon the story's achronous representation of time, on how "successive narrative episodes cast long shadows both forward and back, lending different complementary shades of meaning to those preceding them." Langen argues that *Storyteller* produces for the reader the effect of

participation in oral tradition, using repetition and interlocking clusters of poems, photographs and stories: "Leslie Silko has assembled the parts of *Storyteller* to distress and interrupt the activity of reading and to disown the authority of writing and authorship. . . . Reading a story takes less time than listening to one; a function of the photographs in *Storyteller* is to invite a more 'oral' tempo into our reading."

When considering "Yellow Woman," though, most critics discuss the theme of storytelling. Linda Danielson writes in *Studies in American Indian Literatures* that the structure of *Storyteller* resembles a spider's web: "While the radial strands provide the organizational pattern of the book, the web's lateral threads connect one thematic strand to another, suggesting a whole and woven fabric. . . .These pieces constantly guide the reader's attention back to the act of storytelling as creation, to the creative in all aspects of human interaction, to the female deities, and as well to the ordinary tribal women, Silko's most frequently selected narrators who carry on Thought Woman's function of speaking into being." Also focusing on the significance of storytelling, in *The CEA Critic,* Helen Jaskoski explores the ways in which *Storyteller* simultaneously addresses two different audiences, Laguna and non-Laguna, by translating oral story into written fiction and the role of the author into the performance of the storyteller.

Silko's use of Native American myths and celebration of female sexuality have led some critics to compare her work, including "Yellow Woman" to similar work by other contemporary women writers. For example, Catherine Lappas has compared Silko's compelling combination of myth and autobiography to that of Chinese-American writer Maxine Hong Kingston and Susan Castillo has compared treatments of gender and ethnicity in Silko's work to that of Louise Erdrich, who is of Chippewa descent.

Criticism

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BOOKRAGS

Critical Essay #1

Bily has a master's degree in English literature, and has written for a variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, she discusses "Yellow Woman" as a representation of the literature of ecofeminism.

Since the 1970s, many writers have explored the connections between human oppression and environmental abuse, and have developed a body of thought called *ecofeminism.* As explained by Carol J. Adams in the introduction to the anthology *Ecofeminism and the Sacred,* "Ecofeminism identifies the twin domination of women and the rest of nature. To the issues of sexism, racism, classicism, and heterosexism that concern feminists, ecofeminists add naturism— the oppression of the rest of nature. Ecofeminism argues that connections between the oppression of women and the rest of nature must be recognized to understand adequately both oppressions." This connection between the domination of women and the domination of nature is a strong thread running through much of Leslie Marmon Silko's work, including the novel *Ceremony* and the story "Yellow Woman."

The woman narrator of "Yellow Woman" does not reveal what she is running away from when she leaves her home and family. In fact, she does not seem to know what is wrong with her, or what the importance of the old stories might be in her life. Catherine Lappas explains in an essay excerpted in this volume, that "Hers is a condition born of cultural dislocation: She is an Indian woman living in a Western world that dismisses all stories as irrelevant. . . . In her Indian world, however, stories have an ongoing connection to people's lives." Or do they? This woman is constantly longing for her grandfather, the last member of her family to tell and understand the old stories, the old connections. According to Carol Lee Sanchez, a descendent like Silko of the Laguna Pueblo, "Native American Tribal histories and culture stories stress the idea of harmonious coexistence— providing both positive and negative examples, by consistently showing us how everything is related." I believe that the narrator of "Yellow Woman" is searching for a life of harmony, a way to escape the Western patriarchal structures that dominate her and dominate nature.

For a time, she believes that Silva can offer her that life.

The woman's inborn connection to nature is still alive in her. An important ecofeminist understanding is of the ways in which women of Western cultures are more closely connected to animals than men are. For the narrator of "Yellow Woman," the only connections that seem to resonate are to the animals around her; she does not reveal any deep feeling for or understanding of her husband or family, or the stranger Silva. She is not only more connected to animals than Silva is, she is more connected to animals than she is to men. In the story's second paragraph she walks over the where the horses are still lying down. They do not get up at her approach, and she speculates, "maybe it was because the corral was made out of thick cedar branches and the horses had not yet felt the sun like I had." In the first paragraph the man she has slept beside

has felt the same sun she felt and has not gotten up, and she does not reveal the same curiosity about his motives. He is an enigma, and she never tries to understand him.

While she does not examine Silva closely (she doesn't mind that he is always watching her closely, but she does not often look at him), she is always aware of the sights and sounds of the natural world. She recognizes individual trees as tamaracks and willows and cedars and junipers, but she cannot tell what kind of man he is. As they travel to Silva's house she takes in her surroundings in great detail: "I watched the change from the cottonwood trees along the river to the junipers that brushed past us in the foothills, and finally there were only piqons, and when I looked up at the rim of the mountain plateau I could see pine trees growing on the edge." From the corral at his house she can 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." As the two ride to Marquez she stops looking into the distance because Silva questions her perceptions, but her close-up vision is just as acute: "Only the waxy cactus flowers bloomed in the bright sun, and I saw every color that a cactus blossom can be; the white ones and the red ones were still buds, but the purple and the yellow were blossoms, open full and the most beautiful of all."

Silva believes his vision is superior to hers: "From here I can see the world." He frequently challenges her, telling her that she does not see what she thinks she sees, and does not understand what she thinks she understands. But what he sees is not the unity of nature, but man-made demarcations: "The Navajo reservation begins over there . . . . The Pueblo boundaries are over here. . . .The Texans have their ranches over there, starting with that valley, the Concho Valley. The Mexicans run some cattle over there, too." He sees the land only in terms of territories, claims, property.

The woman is attracted to him in part because he lives outside the rules of the patriarchy. He does not recognize a husband's right to own or control a woman any more than he recognizes the cattle owners' rights to their cattle. For a time it seems to her that he offers an escape from "highways and pickup trucks" and the modern life that has separated her from her cultural connections to the Earth. But she comes to understand that his rejection of conventional rules is not an embracing of his place as a part of nature, or of her place as an equal. Although he rejects other men's rights to control his access to women and to animals, nevertheless he still claims his own right to power over them. He simply wants to control women and the rest of nature without interference from other men.

At the heart of the narrator's conflict with Silva is her respect for the animals around her and Silva's disregard for their spirits. For him, the horses and cattle are commodities: transportation, food, wealth. The woman has a closer relationship, feeling their warmth, listening to their breath just as she does with Silva's. When she returns to Silva's house after her walk, the narrator sees gray squirrels playing in the pines, the horses standing in the corral— and a beef carcass hanging from a tree. Some of the sharpest and most narrowly focused detail occurs in this scene: "Flies buzzed around the clotted blood that hung from the carcass"; "I looked into the bucket full of bloody water with brown-and-

white animal hairs floating in it." In much of her writing, Silko insists that readers confront their fears of blood and death, and accept the giving up of life as part of the ritual of natural existence. In that regard, Silva is admirable. He does not flinch from what it means to take a life. But Silva again offers only a shadow of what the woman needs. When he lies to the white man he underscores the shallowness of his venture: he has not "been hunting," as he claims, but only stealing domestic cattle from an enclosed area. He will not even close the circle and eat the flesh he has taken; he is on his way to sell it. He does not fear blood, but he sheds it for commerce, not for community.

The woman follows him for a time, across a ridge "steep on both sides like an animal spine," until she sees in his eyes "something ancient and dark" just before he murders the white man. Early she had been afraid when she understood that "his strength could hurt me. . . . I knew he could destroy me." The white man's fear echoes her own. She flees on the horse, hearing but not seeing the four shots that "reminded me of deer hunting" but are instead another mockery of hunting. The last thing she sees as she turns the horse loose is the blood-soaked gunny sacks full of meat.

The narrator cannot rely on rationality to direct her decisions; her memory and thought patterns are clouded, unreliable. Instead, she follows natural instincts, seeking food and warmth as the animals do. Throughout the days of the story she is seen eating only potatoes and apricots— she eats no meat. She is frequently hungry, and her hunger directs her thoughts back to her family. The first time she feels hungry, at the beginning of the story, she starts to follow the river back the way she came after she met Silva. Memory of his warmth— her hunger for him sexually— send her back to him. As they approach Silva's house, "I felt hungry and wondered what they were doing at home now." The next morning, having decided again that she will leave him, she again thinks of food: "But first I had to eat, because I knew it would be a long walk home." Although she has not realized it, whenever she feels the call of the natural energy of hunger, she turns away from Silva.

The woman also follows the natural yearning for warmth. Different things make her warm: the sun's rays, the horse's body beneath her, Silva's body, the fire in the stove, the wind. Only three times does she find things chilling. After arguing with Silva about the meaning of the Yellow Woman story, she is pulled along beside him, "his hand around my wrist. I had stopped trying to pull away from him, because his hand felt cool and the sun was high." Later, when she first sees his house, she shivers, and when Silva reveals that he is a cattle thief she turns away from him, saying, "I'm cold .... I'm going inside." She does not seek warmth from him this time; she knows he cannot provide what she needs.

But the woman's spiritual home, her source of spiritual food and warmth, is not back with her family, either. They have become thorough Westernized. Pointedly, the narrator's mother is teaching the grandmother how to cook Jell-O, a packaged product made from the boiled tissues of animals, especially horses. The traditional order has been overturned. Daughter is passing knowledge on to mother, not the other way around, and the thing she is teaching is a way of utilizing the bodies of animals without

approaching their spirits. Old Grandpa would have listened to the woman's story and understood it— understood that it is a story of how Western patriarchal society distances people from nature and permits the destruction of Native cultures, and how modern Native American women have been cut off from their cultural connections to each other and to the Earth.

Source: Cynthia Bily, "Yellow Woman as Ecofeminist," for *Short Stories for Students,* Gale, 1998.

Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpt from a longer essay, Lappas discusses Silko's collection Storyteller *as a "polyphonic" autobiography, one that seeks to tell the story of not just one person, but also that person's community and historical traditions.*

Silko was born in 1948 of Laguna-Mexican-Anglo ancestry. Her work *Storyteller* was originally conceived not as an autobiography at all but as a multigenre form including poems, traditional tales, expository pieces on Laguna tradition, letters, even photographs. It was, in effect, an attempt to record an oral tradition that was in fear of disappearing, for, as Silko explains, "an entire history/an entire vision of the world" depended "upon memory/and retelling by subsequent generations." Such emphasis on community is not unusual coming from a person who is concerned primarily with relationships; after all, "that's all there really is."

"Polyphonic" autobiography, as Arnold Krupat and others have suggested, for many indigenous people and many women alike, establishes the self and maintains it through relationships that "bear witness." . . .

The Yellow Woman stories included in *Storyteller* are part of Cochiti and Laguna Pueblo oral tradition. Some of these stories were first collected by the famous anthropologist Franz Boas in the 1920s, but countless others exist unrecorded, in flux, reflecting the individual concerns of each teller and his or her community. In the first Yellow Woman story, a young woman awakens to find herself beside a stranger who has, we guess at first, abducted her from her village. As the story unfolds, the man's actions and the woman's responses seem to resemble those of lovers more than those of abductor/abductee.

Paula Gunn Allen explains that in Native American culture "the sacred and the ordinary are perceived as a seamless whole." Silko's modern-day Yellow Woman, in contrast, seems entirely incognizant of such perceptions. Hers is a condition born of cultural dislocation: She is an Indian woman living in a Western world that dismisses all stories as irrelevant and, in some cases, antithetical to lived life. In her Indian world, however, stories have an ongoing connection to people's lives. As a product of multiple cultures, like Silko herself, she experiences a kind of fracturing of her identity that mimics "postmodern . . . schizophrenia." Dazed by her "abduction," the protagonist desperately wonders "if Yellow woman had known who she was — if she knew that she would become part of the stories." The boundaries between fact and fiction are thus problematized and grow increasingly so at the conclusion. There, three identities merge: Yellow Woman's, the protagonist's, and the narrator's. Returning home, her family is seemingly oblivious to her abduction— her mother and grandmother fixing "Jell-O" in the kitchen while her oblivious husband plays with the baby in an adjacent room. Throughout, she is a detached observer pondering a disappearance that may (or may not) have taken place. Unanswered, too, remains the question of which story is actually told to her family, thus leaving open the possibility for other tellings. Silko teases her audience further by not providing a traditional ending but instead playfully flaunting her

ability to incorporate "personal quirks and lapses of memory," those "pluralistic voices of her autobiographical traditions, both oral and written, Indian and Anglo" as aspects of her "manifold identities":

I decided to tell them that some Navajo had kidnaped [sic] me, but I was sorry that old Grandpa wasn't alive to hear my story because it was the Yellow Woman stories he liked to tell best. . . .

Source: Catherine Lappas, "'The way I heard it was . . .': Myth, Memory, and Autobiography in *Storyteller* and *The Woman Warrior,*" in *CEA Critic,* Vol. 57, No. 1, Fall, 1994, pp. 57-67.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Danielson discusses the "spiderweb structure" of Silko's Storyteller, in which the Yellow Woman is a significant figure.

In American Indian traditional cultures, good songs and stories are useful, fostering the survival of the people and their culture. The verbal arts sustain cosmic relationships, testify to sources of creative energy, teach young people, heal the sick, bring lovers together, or reprimand the socially irresponsible. Leslie Silko's *Storyteller* is an heir of such tradition and a testimony to verbal art as a survival strategy. Moreover, the work takes its spiderweb-like structure from the Keresan mythologic traditions of female creative deities who think— or tell— the world into existence (Thought Woman) and who offer disciplined protection to the living beings (Grandmother Spider). When we read *Storyteller* bearing in mind the significance of both the spiderweb structure and the values underlying traditional verbal art, we realize that *Storyteller,* often dismissed as an oddly assorted album, is a coherent work about how tribal people survive. By making stories, people continue the tradition of Thought Woman and Grandmother Spider: they continuously create and protect themselves and their world. . . .

In *Storyteller,* thematic clusters constitute the radiating strands of the web. While the radial strands provide the organizational pattern of the book, the web's lateral threads connect one thematic strand to another, suggesting a whole and woven fabric. Throughout the book, Silko spins such a lateral thread of attention to storytellers and the art of storytelling. These pieces constantly guide the reader's attention back to the act of storytelling as creation, to the creative in all aspects of human interaction, to the female deities, and as well to the ordinary tribal women. Silko's most frequently selected narrators who carry on Thought Woman's function of speaking into being.

Grandmother Spider of course lives at the center of the web, giving *Storyteller* its authority. But Grandmother Spider, and thus the whole pantheon of protective, creative female deities, live also in the author and in all the aunts, grandmothers and other people from whom she heard these stories. . . .

The next radiating filament of *Storyteller*'s web structure involves stories of Kochininako, or Yellow Woman, which explore the creative power and survival value of this Everywoman figure among the Keresan holy people. Kochininako's power, Paula Gunn Allen observes, is that of an agent or catalyst. She enables the seasons to follow their appointed rounds, for example. Not only does she catalyze the seasonal progression, but, as A. Lavonne Ruoff points out, she renews tribal vitality through "liaison with outside forces."

Her fictional character in "Yellow Woman," Silko tells us, joins "adolescent longings and the old stories, that plus the stories around Laguna at the time about people who did, in fact, just in recent times, use the river as a meeting place." Besides addressing an audience she assumes is sympathetic, this narrator is also telling herself the story she wants to hear, justifying herself, but with enough self-awareness and humor to

recognize the doubtful elements in her story. She does bring renewal to her sense of mythic reality through her adventure with Silva, the "outside force," as she almost convinces herself that she really is Yellow Woman. The proposition is not utterly unlikely. Yellow Woman exhibits the desires and weaknesses of ordinary women; why should the protagonist not be Yellow Woman? Through her adventure, at any rate, she livens up an apparently dull existence. She identifies with the freedom of Yellow Woman in her grandfather's stories, reminding us that modern women embody the potential of Yellow Woman, bring the vitality of imagination to everyday life. After all, the power to make a convincing excuse or to fool oneself is yet one more version of the power to create the universe.

Silko's story of a young woman going off with an attractive stranger whom she meets on a riverbank closely follows the beginning of a Laguna story published by Franz Boas under the title "Cliff Dweller." The stranger, Silva, smilingly goes along with her suggestion that they may really be Yellow Woman and a Ka'tsina spirit. Eventually, the narrator makes her way back to the pueblo, reorienting herself to ordinary reality as she goes, speculating about what the family is doing in her absence.

In the course of the adventure she has renewed the power of the myth by imagining what Yellow Woman's life and state of mind would have been like:

I was wondering if Yellow Woman had known who she was— if she knew that she would become part of the stories. Maybe she'd had another name that her

husband and relatives called her so that only the ka'tsina from the north and the storytellers would know her as Yellow Woman.

Finally she sees her story as an artifact that only her grandfather could properly appreciate because the Yellow Woman stories were what he liked best. But it is not by chance that out of her grandfather's repertory the narrator recollects a Yellow Woman story involving a sexual encounter with Coyote. Silva, of course, is more opportunistic than evil, and thus more Coyote than Cliff Dweller. And the narrator shares the same appetite-driven opportunism. As there is a bit of Grandmother Spider and Yellow Woman in all women, so there is a bit of Coyote in all people. For storytellers are tricksters like Coyote as well as agents like Yellow Woman, or creator-deities, and this character certainly contains all three possibilities. . . .

Source: Linda Danielson, "The Storytellers in *Storyteller,* in *Studies in American Indian Literatures,* Series 2, Vol. 1, No. 2,Fall, 1989, pp. 21-31.

BOOKRAGS

Critical Essay #4

In the following excerpt, Hirsch focuses on "Yellow Woman" and other pieces in Storyteller *as he examines how Native American oral traditions shape the structure and themes of her collection.*

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 [entitled Storyteller] 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 difficult 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 old 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. . . .

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 intensified 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 done without certain kinds of clouds— some white and scattered like river rock and others mountains rolling into themselves swollen 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, comprising 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 [earlier] "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 wind and so it is we will travel swiftly this whole world with 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." . . .

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.

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 love-making 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 a 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, Winter, 1988, pp. 1-28.

Critical Essay #5

In the following interview, Silko discusses her ideas on storytelling, the Laguna oral tradition, and the role of women in tribal culture.

[*Barnes*]: *The first question I want to ask you is, who do you consider to be your audience? Who are you writing for?*

[Silko]: I've never thought too much about an audience per se. When I first started writing, I wasn't sure that anyone would want to read or listen to the work that I did. I didn't think about it at first. In a way, it's good not to think about an audience. If you start thinking about the audience, it can inhibit what you do. When I was younger, there was concern about what will Grandma think, or what will Mama say or something like this, and that in a sense is being concerned about audience and can really inhibit a writer. Initially, I guess I assumed that I wouldn't have to worry about an audience because there would not be an audience. I didn't think about it, and I didn't even worry too much about what Mama would think or what Grandma would think or what Uncle So-and-So would think or what the people would think because at first I didn't think that I would ever have to worry that they would see what I had written. Now, I'm working on this new novel which is long and complex to the point of being foolhardy. Who knows, a polite way would be to call it an ambitious project. But I'm so caught up in trying to see if I can make it happen. It's sort of a personal challenge, and again I'm not thinking about an audience. I've been quoted in other interviews as saying that I want this novel to be a novel that, when you shop at a Safeway store, it will be in the little wire racks at the check-out station and that I don't want to write something that the MLA will want. I want something that will horrify the people at the MLA. Mostly, I'm teasing, but in another way I'm not. I'm sad to see that so little serious fiction gets out into the world. I was amazed that Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* and Mark Helprin's book *Winter's Tale* made it to the wire racks at the check-out stands in the United States. So I'm probably only part-way serious when I say that I don't think about an audience.

So you didn't write a book like Storyteller *for a particularly white or Indian audience.*

I don't think about Indian and white. What I wanted to do was clarify the interrelationship between the stories I had heard and my sense of storytelling and language that had been given to me by the old folks, the people back home. I gave examples of what I heard as best I could remember, and how I developed these elements into prose, into fiction and into poetry, moving from what was basically an oral tradition into a written tradition. The way I figured it, there would be some Native American people who would be interested in it and some Laguna Pueblo people who would be interested in it. There might be other people who are working out of a different cultural tradition but still working with oral material and working in their own art to bring the two together who would be interested. The book is for people who are interested in that relationship between the spoken and the written.

Do you consider yourself a storyteller in a traditional sense?

No, not at all. My friend Meimei Berssenbrugge, the poet, spent some time at Laguna Pueblo a few years ago, and she sat in on a kind of a session. I hesitate to call it a storytelling session because they're real spontaneous. It was at my uncle's house, and my uncle's wife Anita and her two sisters were there and some other people. It was in the evening and everyone was feeling jolly and talking. We might have started out with some kind of notorious incident that had happened recently, and pretty soon Meimei was sitting there listening to the way people would relate something that happened, and we'd all laugh and then one of Anita's sister's would say, "Well, you remember the time," then the other sister would take over. When the whole session was over, we all went back over to my grandma's house where Meimei and I were staying, and Meimei said, "They really have a way of telling these stories and incidents and kind of playing off one another." She was really impressed, and I said, "See, I'm not in that class at all." I suppose if I didn't have the outlook of the writer, I might get better at storytelling, but I always say that I'm not good at giving off-the-cuff presentations. Oh, sometimes I have a fine moment. If you really want to hear people who can get rolling in telling, you have to do down to Laguna and kind of fall into the right situation, right feelings and right time.

Was a storyteller a spiritual leader? Was he or she someone who was born into or inherited that role?

It's not like that at all. There is a period of time at the winter solstice when people get together for four days and four nights, and they re-tell all the stories connected with the emergence and the migration of the People. There are people who have to learn and remember those stories and people who have to participate in that telling and re-telling once a year. Those people would probably be designated persons, but they would not be specially designated in any kind of ceremonial or religious way. They wouldn't be called storytellers; they would be called ceremonial religious leaders. The key to understanding storytellers and storytelling at Laguna Pueblo is to realize that you grow up not just being aware of narrative and making a story or seeing a story in what happens to you and what goes on around you all the time, but just being appreciative and delighted in narrative exchanges. When you meet somebody at a post office, he or she says, "How are you, how are you doing?" At Laguna, people will stand there and they'll tell you how they are doing. At Laguna, it's a way of interacting. It isn't like there's only one storyteller designated. That's not it at all. It's a whole way of being. When I say "storytelling," I don't just mean sitting down and telling a once-upon-a-time kind of story. I mean a whole way of seeing yourself, the people around you, your life, the place of your life in the bigger context, not just in terms of nature and location, but in terms of what has gone on before, what's happened to other people. So it's a whole way of being, but there are some

people who are willing to be funnier or better storytellers than others, and some people because they are older or they remember better, have a larger repertoire of the *hummahah* stories. It's not at all like the Irish idea of the bard or the chosen one.

Why are you writing these stories? Are you trying to put the oral tradition in a more stable or lasting form? Do you think anything is lost in the writing down of these stories?

Well, no, I'm not trying to save them, I'm not trying to put them in a stable or lasting form. I write them down because I like seeing how I can translate this sort of feeling or flavor or sense of a story that's told and heard onto the page. Obviously, some things will be lost because you're going from one medium to another. And I use *translate* in the broadest sense. I don't mean translate from the Laguna Pueblo language to English, I mean the feeling or the sense that language is being used orally. So I play with the page and things that you could do on the page, and repetitions. When you have an audience, when you're telling a story and people are listening, there's repetition of crucial points. That's something that on the printed page looks really crummy and is redundant and useless, but in the actual telling is necessary. So I play around with the page by using different kinds of spacing or indentations or even italics so that the reader can sense, say, that the tone of the voice has changed. If you were hearing a story, the speed would increase at certain points. I want to see how much I can make the page communicate those nuances and shifts to the reader. I'm intrigued with that. I recognize the inherent problem; there's no way that hearing a story and reading a story are the same thing; but that doesn't mean that everyone should throw up his hands and say it can't be done or say that what's done on the page isn't catching some of those senses. When I read off the page and read some of the *hummahah* stories that I wrote down or go through some of the Aunt Susie material, then of course, I think it's more persuasive. In a way, that's not fair; because I'm reading it out loud, I've gone back again. But I think there are some instances where I've been successful so that the reader has a sense of how it might sound if I were reading it to him or her.

In a work like Storyteller, *are you actually creating something, or are you simply re-telling a myth?*

Every time a story is told, and this is one of the beauties of the oral tradition, each telling is a new and unique story, even if it's repeated word for word by the same teller sitting in the same chair. I work to try to help the reader have the sense of how it would sound if the reader could be hearing it. That's original. And no matter how carefully I remember, memory gets all mixed together with imagination. It does for everybody. But I don't change the spirit thing about the way she and I have gotten along, or how we related to one another? But, just remember what the position of the father and the mother would be in Pueblo society. If someone was going to thwart you or frighten you, it would tend to be a woman; you see it coming from your mother, or sent by your mother. . . .

I know that you have said in the past that the greatest influence on your writing has been your surroundings. Has there been a single novelist or poet whose work you find particularly inspirational or informational?

You mean working right now?

Not necessarily. I know you have talked about Milton and Shakespeare.

Well, lately, the one person that's meant a lot to me is Wittgenstein. I think his remarks on color turn into some of the most beautiful poetry I've ever read. People call

Wittgenstein a philosopher and I call him a poet. I really like reading Wittgenstein right now.

How about influences on your style?

That is for style. You can see the clarity of his remarks on color in one of the last pieces he wrote before he died. With style, I'm like a sponge. I don't consciously look towards anyone. The poetry of my friend Meimei Berssenbrugge, I think, influences me. Her writing influences me, my ideas, and some of the things I write about influences her. And I think in terms of my prose style something of what she does with her poetry filters into me and has influenced me, but I couldn't say how exactly. What she does is real important, and so are some of her ideas about her connection with the so-called avant-garde in New York, and so forth. And the kinds of musicians, a lot of her interests have kind of filtered through to me, and I in turn have picked up and taken off with that in my own directions. My friend Larry McMurtry is a rare book dealer, and he comes across wonderful books in looking for rare expensive books. He's been breaking me out of the mold of just reading fiction or poetry. For example, H. D.'s tribute to Freud is wonderful. I like H.D.'s tribute to Freud about a million times more than I like any of her damn poems. I would really not mind if some of H. D.'s magical prose rubbed off on mine; I would not mind that at all.

Paula Gunn Allen has said that reading Momaday's House Made of Dawn *was a turning point in her life. Has Momaday had the same effect on you as a writer?*

I'm trying to think. Turning point? Where was Paula headed before? I don't quite understand. No. I like *The Way to Rainy Mountain* very much, but I would have been doing what I was doing regardless of what Scott had done or not, written or not written.

Source: Leslie Marmon Silko and Kim Barnes, in an interview for *The Journal of Ethic Studies,* Vol. 13, No. 4, Winter, 1986, pp. 83-105.

Critical Essay #6

In the following essay, Ruppert discusses the mingling of reality and myth in Silko's collection of stories Ceremony.

Leslie Silko as a contemporary writer and a Laguna brings a new perception to the effort to topple [the boundaries of fiction], or rather an old one, older than American Literature. Her short fiction and her novel Ceremony are illuminated by the assumption that the story has a greater, truer reality than the objective reality of the world around us. In the story reality, the seeming simplicity and reality of objective actions and reinterpreted and woven into a larger scheme through which the actions take on a new and deeper meaning and their place in a mythic pattern emerges. The characters and the readers must believe as much as the author that the world exists in story which gives objective reality its meaning, or they are lost. Although the story may be stretched over eons, although it may move slowly and our understanding of it come only with great difficulty, we can understand it; we can enter into the story reality. Despite the hardships and the violent wrenchings of perspective required to do this, the attempt is necessary because it is only through entry into the story reality that each character is given his/her identity and perhaps ultimately so are we, the readers.

The "Yellow Woman" is an excellent example of the larger, all-encompassing reality of the story through which individual objective actions are reinterpreted and given new meaning. The contemporary girl by the river is incorporated into the traditional mythic Laguna story. In the Laguna story, Yellow Woman is near the river where she is surprised by a mountain spirit. The mountain spirit seduces her, and they go through a series of interesting adventures before she returns home, rather reluctantly to her husband and relatives. The original Yellow Woman of the Laguna tale is aware of the inevitability of her actions; it has been ordained since time immemorial. In Silko's story, a young girl is seduced by the river and swept away by someone who says he is a mountain spirit. She feels that an old Laguna story is patterning the encounter. The girl becomes confused and uncertain about her identity; is she the person she always thought she was, the one living in an objective mundane reality, or is she becoming Yellow Woman of the stories? She struggles to affirm that she is a girl with her own name and a family, to establish time boundaries and boundaries between objective reality and myths. "I don't have to go," she says to the man. "What they tell in stories was real only then, back in time immemorial, like they say." As she goes off with the mountain spirit man, she cries that if only she might see someone who knew her, who could place her in the objective reality, she would be sure of her identity. "I will see someone, and then I will be certain that he is only a man— some man from nearby— and I will be sure I am not Yellow Woman." But the reality of the story triumphs and following the Laguna story, she runs off with the man. She is seduced into the story and goes off into the mountains where time seems to matter little and where she sees the larger pattern. When she leaves her husband, a new meaning is given it, and on the mountain she sees the larger patterns of living: in her own words, she can see "the world."

The girl's merging into the story seems to occur in part because it is ordained (a fortuitous collection of particulars), but more important the girl projects the proper psychic framework of a balanced being, while she is wondering if Yellow Woman herself had a sense of a separate identity or knew she was to become a story. The girl at this time is able to live totally in the present, in the story flow. "This is the way it happens in the stories, I was thinking with no thought beyond the moment she meets the Ka'tsina spirit and they go." At this time, the girl is thinking about her identity, not about the past or the future, for identity, as all existentialists know, reveals a child of the present moment. As if understanding the girl's thoughts and anticipation of her words, the mountain spirit man says, "What happened yesterday has nothing to do with what you will do today, Yellow Woman." Her description of her departure emphasizes the power of the story and her non willful entering into it. "They the girl's family will go on like before, except there will be a story about the day I disappeared while I was walking along the river. Silva had come for me; he said he had. I did not decide to go. I just went. Moonflowers blossom in the sand hills before dawn, just as I followed him." When she finally returns home, according to the traditional story pattern, she speaks of "my story" and wishes that old grandpa was still alive because, as a storyteller, he would understand the identity the story gave her. In an interview in *Suntracks,* Silko explains this function of stories in oral traditions.

That's how you know, that's how you belong, that's how you know you belong, if the stories incorporate you into them. There have to be stories. It's stories that make this a community. People tell those stories about you and your family or about others and they begin to create your identity. In a sense, you are told who you are, or you know who you are by the stories that are told about you. . . .

What I think we see in Silko's short fiction is that the story has a greater reality than objective reality, and that this story reality can be entered by placing ourselves in proximity to the story and acting with no thought beyond the moment so as to enter the story. In story reality, we assume an identity meaningful not only for ourselves, but also for the community that lives through the story. Perhaps this all becomes clearer if we turn now to Ceremony.

When Tayo returns from the war, he is sick, sick in much the same way his people are sick, and the world is sick through the influence of the manipulators. We are soon made to understand through old Betonie that "his sickness was only part of something larger, and his cure would be found only in something greater and inclusive of everything." His cure will be long, slow and difficult like the telling of the story itself, but it can be of great benefit to the people, for his story will be merged with the larger one of the destroyers and the people. Or as Silko concludes, "In the novel, it's the struggle between the force and the counter-force."

If we agree that Tayo enters story reality in the novel, we may be tempted to say that it is through old Betonie's ceremony that he does so and hence the name of the novel. But near the end of the story, as the pattern and the proper ending is working itself out in the person of Tayo, Ts'eh, the mysterious mountain woman, observes that the Destroyers:

Work to see how much can be lost, how much can be forgotten. They destroy the feeling people have for each other.

Tayo revives his hurt and the deaths of Rocky and Josiah, and she continues:

Their highest ambition is to gut human beings while they are still breathing, to hold the heart still beating so the victim will never feel anything again. When they finish, you watch yourself from a distance and you can't even cry— not even for yourself.

This is the very sickness that has affected Tayo. His gutted feelings have been stimulated by Betonie, but it is not until the love of Ts'eh, the story woman of the mountains, that he is able to feel, to give himself to the flow of the story with no thought beyond the moment. At this point, he understands the larger story because he has entered it, as well as something of the false endings that the manipulators are trying to push on him. Through love, the boundaries dissolve between story-beings and real people, between the story as a true ongoing reality and our distinctions of time. As Leslie Silko puts it, "One of the large battles Tayo begins to have to deal with is to keep the end of the story right. They're trying to manipulate him into doing something that would change the way the story has to go. It goes back to the ceremony thing that started long ago, and, of course, it does on and on."

As Tayo struggles to conclude the story and the ceremony, the only honing device he has is the "feeling of the story" that he has received from Ts'eh and Betonie. With this to guide him, Tayo sees the world, its peoples and cultures as one huge swirling sandpainting and all the peoples of the world as one clan that must unite ceremonially to defeat the fate the destroyers have planned for mankind. "Towards the end, everything Tayo sees is what Arrow Boy saw, but in a different century and a different form. It's there, it almost has to be. There's just no way around it."

Tayo's identity comes from this understanding of the story's reality. He may be a savior or just a facilitator, but he must contribute his part to the ceremony. His strength at the end of the novel comes from this understanding. When he returns to the village, the old men understand the story. They want to know about the story woman he met in the mountains, and they conclude that they will be blessed again because he has seen her. His communal identity is secured because he is the one who has seen the woman in the mountains, who has brought the blessing, who has entered the story. They purify him, and the story has ended correctly. He is ready to gather the story-woman's seeds and to plant them as he promised. He has found himself.

However, when we put the book down, another important question can be asked. Has the reader understood the story? Has he entered the story reality? If the reader has, then he has an identity determined by the story either as a victim, a manipulator, or one of the aware people who must unite to defeat the destroyers. Let's hope we can all get the ending right.

It may be commonplace to say that Silko's work attempts to introduce dimensions of oral literature into written literature, and seeks a unification of the two in a new reality or

a better explanation of the ordinary one, but her work at once stands out from modern fiction because of it and blends with it.

Of course, modern writers have injected and explored the mythic dimension in their works, but normally it has been in the creation of personal myths as with Yeats, the reemergence of mythic patterns as structural aides to meaning as in Joyce and Lawrence, or the expose and potential salvation of a disintegrated culture as with Eliot. In the development of contemporary fiction, "self-conscious" fiction struggles to incorporate the consciousness of the writer writing the story into the story, thus creating a myth of the writer. The result is that fiction and reality merge into one sphere. Silko, while having a different mission in inviting the story reality into what appears to be a non-story world, picks up the thrust of contemporary art toward an understanding of performance. The telling of the story creates a reality that merges with the non-story reality. The storyteller functions as a catalyst and an intersection for the merger of story reality and objective reality. The performance of the story becomes part of the story and though we do not feel the presence of Silko herself, the result is the same— a vision of the world as a unity of fiction and reality. More specifically in Ceremony, the unity is of the non-story world and the reality of the story-in-the-making. This is in effect a self-consciousness of oral literature. The story is being performed, and created. It is the material for future legends and the archetype for future tellings; the world and the story have been welded together.

Source: Jim Ruppert, "Story Telling: The Fiction of Leslie Silko," in *The Journal of Ethnic Studies,* Vol. 9, No. 1, Spring, 1981, pp. 53-8.

Compare and Contrast

1970: The publication of Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* arouses widespread general interest in the history of Native American tribes.

1990s: Native American studies have been integrated into many high school and college multicultural programs.

1973: The Department of Education's Head Start Program begins operation in the Laguna Reservation, offering counselling and tutoring services to the schoolchildren of the reservation's six villages.

1990s: The Laguna Head Start Program is consolidated at a central site, with 120 children enrolled in the program.

1974: Laguna Pueblo residents begin producing their distinctive red, yellow, and orange pottery for sale. Painters and jewelry-makers recreate traditional tribal designs and market their works on a small scale to tourists.

1990s: The Casa Blanca Village outside of Albuquerque is a shopping center that specializes in Pueblo handicrafts, providing a source of income for the Laguna Pueblo.

What Do I Read Next?

Ceremony (1977), a novel by Silko. After fighting in World War II, a young Native American man, Tayo, finds health and new meaning by returning to traditional Native American practices. The novel also recounts the harsh realities of reservaton life.

Almanac of the Dead: A Novel (1991), a novel by Silko. In what Silko calls "a 763-page indictment of the United States," she spins dozens of interconnected tales to rewrite five hundred years of American history and envision a future in which the aboriginal peoples of the North American continent take back their land.

Laguna Woman (1974), a collection of poems by Silko. Poems included in this early volume received the 1973 Pushcart Prize for poetry. The poems contain themes that Silko later develops in her fiction.

Love Medicine (1984), a novel by Louise Erdrich. The first book in Louise Erdrich's Native Ameri-can series along with *The Beet Queen*, *Tracks* and *The Bingo Palace*, *Love Medicine* tells the stories of two Chippewa families in North Dakota.

The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts (1976), by Maxine Hong Kingston. Kingston combines myth, history and autobiography to explore a young Chinese-American womans exploration of her live, her relationship with her mother, and her cultural heritage. Winner of the 1976 National Book Critics Award for nonfiction.

The Broken Cord (1989), an autobiographical work by Michael Dorris. In this deeply moving account, Dorris tells of his life with his adopted son, a Native American, who suffers from fetal alcohol syndrome.

House Made of Dawn (1968), a novel by N. Scott Momaday. Awarded the Pulitzer Prize, this novel launched what Paula Gunn Allen calls the "second wave of American Indian Fiction." Like Silko's *Ceremony*, this novel also features a young Native American who returns from World War II to find himself and his community devastated and demoralized. On his recovery to health, the main character finds racism and brutality, but manages to survive through the rediscovery of the traditions and ceremonies of his peoiple.

Bury My Heart At Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West (1970), a history by Dee Brown. Brown reveals the dark side of Manifest Destiny— genocide of the Native Americans who occupied the land for which the United States Government hungered— and tells how they fought back.

Death Comes for the Archbishop (1927), a novel by Willa Cather. In this gentle, meditative novel, set in the New Mexican desert in the 1850s, Cather writes about the encounters two Catholic priests have with the Native Americans who live there.

Further Study

Black Elk. *Black Elk Speaks; Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Ogalala Sioux as told to John G. Neihardt,* Morrow, 1932.

The Memoirs of Black Elk, an Ogalala Sioux tribal leader who lived from 1863 until 1950.

Boas, Franz. *Keresan Texts,* American Ethnological Society, 1928.

An collection of oral stories of the Laguna and Acoma Pueblo gathered by the anthropologist Franz Boas in the early twentieth century in an attempt to make a written record of the Keresan language.

Zinn, Howard. *A People's History of the United States: 1492 to Present,* HarperPerennial, 1995.

This ambitious book recounts United States history from the perspective of underprivileged or powerless groups and includes several fine chapters that involve Native Americans.

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David Galens

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Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

Editor, Short Stories for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535