

Leslie marmon silko essay



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“ Leslie Marmon Silko is a famous novelist, poet, and short story writer whose work is primarily concerned with the relations between different cultures and between human beings and the natural world. ” [(Fajardo-Acosta)] Silko was born in Albuquerque, New Mexico, under Laguna Pueblo, Plains Indians, and Anglo-American decent. Known as the Old Laguna, she grew up on the Laguna Reservation in Northern Mexico and is a part of a town formed several years ago by Pueblo tribes. Her family was storytellers among the Laguna; her relatives were among the Native American who taught early twentieth-century anthropologists traditional myths and stories. ” [(Foundation)] Part of Leslie’s education came in part from her grandmother and aunts in the traditional stories of Laguna people, and as a result caused her to be identified with the native part of her ancestry. She was educated at a Catholic school in Albuquerque, married her first husband, Richard C. Chapman, and went on to receive a BA for the University of New Mexico in 1969.

After receiving the National Endowment for the Arts’ Discovery Grant in 1971, she briefly attended law school before leaving to pursue her literary career and marry her second husband, John Silko. [(Leslie Marmon Silko Biography)] [(Fajardo-Acosta)] In 1972, she gave birth to her second son, Cazimir Silko, and moved with her husband to Alaska. She returned to the Laguna reservation in 1976 where she later divorced her husband and continued on with her career. She published a short story “ The Man to Send Rain Clouds,” a collection of poems including “ Laguna Women” in 1974, and her first novel, Ceremony, in 1977. The critical acclaim she earned from Ceremony solidified her position in the literary field and earned her

numerous prestigious writing awards. " [(Foundation)] This major work, including her other literary works, weaves myths, history, and personal recollection of her Laguna background. It was in 1978 that she formed a friendship with poet James Wright as well as earning the Pushcart Prize for Poetry. [(Fajardo-Acosta)] She continues to pursue her writing career to this day in Tucson, Arizona. Leslie Marmon Silko portrays storytelling as an essential element in Native American identity and cultural practice, and the position of the listener-reader as taking varied roles. Leslie's ' Storytelling' and ' Storyteller' stories operate as gifts that anyone can claim but no one can possess, and listener-readers help shape the stories' natures through interaction. " [(Brill)] Silko makes it clear that her place in Laguna community life as a storyteller is at the core of her identity and that her stories must be viewed in that context.

Silko's novels, short stories, and poems are shaped by the Native American heritage through which she grew up under. In Thomas Irmer's interview with Silko, in her response to his question about drawing from old Indian legends handed down by her ancestors, Silko responded, " When one grows up in the Pueblo community, in the Pueblo tribe the people are communal people, it is an egalitarian communal society. The education of the children is done within the community; each adult works with every child, children belong to everybody and the way of teaching is to tell stories. [(Irmer)] The majority of her works focus on the inferiority of Native Americans in the white society during her time and the importance of native traditions that helped them cope with modern life. " Like many contemporary writers, Silko experiments with the narrative line, weaving in and out of chronological time as she

explores the consciousness of her characters. " [(Velie)] The Native Americans of the Pueblo see time as cyclical rather than linear.

In *Ceremony*, Silko produces a text that emphasizes this notion by using a nonlinear narrative structure. In most of Western literature, narrative proceeds in a temporal succession from beginning to end and from earlier to later. In *Ceremony*, it is often difficult to distinguish between primary and secondary narratives, or between past and present. Silko switches back and forth from Tayo's childhood to his time in the Philippines to various moments after his return, following no order except the order of thematic connections between the different events.

The entire novel is narrated in the past tense, so whether an event actually occurred before Tayo's birth or in the midst of the ceremony, it appears to happen at the same time. The effect of this is to recreate a Pueblo sense of time, where all things are cyclic and where their immediacy is related not to how long ago they happened but to how important they feel in the present. Silko's use of poetry invokes the rhythmic, communal storytelling patterns of the Native Americans, while her use of prose belongs to a Western narrative tradition.

By combining the two in her novel, Silko asserts that the form as well as the content of the story is about the blending of the two cultures. Thematically, white and Native American cultures clash with each other more often than they complement each other, but the prose and poetry weave together easily. In many ways, they tell the same story; " only thing is," as Grandma says at the end, " the names sound different. " The entire stories sound

different as well, as the division of verses, rhyming, alliteration, and repetition give the poems a distinctive rhythm.

The poem at the end of the novel completes the line on the page before the first prose section, enclosing the entire novel within a poem. In other words, just as whites are said to be an invention of Native American witchcraft, so is a Western form of storytelling shown to be contained within a Native American form of storytelling. Many passages in Ceremony reflect the important roles that storytelling plays in the Pueblo culture. One of these passages that reflect the importance of storytelling is: " I will tell you something about stories, they aren't just for entertainment.

Don't be fooled, they are all we have, you see, all we have to fight off illness and death. You don't have anything if you don't have the stories. So they try to destroy the stories, let the stories be confused or forgotten. They would like that, they would be happy because we would be defenseless then. "

(Silko 2) This passage, " accurately summarizes the repeated attempts of white groups to decimate the Pueblo culture by destroying its ceremonies.

(Austgen) The author of this literary analysis goes on to say that despite the fact that Pueblo Indians have faced large amounts of threats by white conquerors in the twentieth century, the key to survival, demonstrated in Ceremony, is found in allowing native Pueblo ceremonies to change to meet the present-day realities of reservation life. It is in this fusion of old and new that the Pueblos can find the healing they so badly need after suffering more than four hundred years of white conquest. (Austgen) Literary critic Paula Gunn Allen states in her analysis on Ceremony that the Hunter played an important role in the survival of the Pueblo Indians through his actions of

providing love, care, and respect for the animals in making sure that they returned to the Laguna reservation each year. " Thus the traditional hunter acts as a connection between the past, present, and future, just as Silko's Hunter serves to connect the circle of Tayo's ceremony. " (Shapiro) The introduction of Betonie, a new kind of medicine man who used modern items as his healing devices, represented change in the way ceremonies were performed.

Silko's use of Betonie in the novel helped ceremonial life to grow and develop through his use of new myths and rituals. " Silko's belief in the importance of allowing myth and ritual to evolve to meet the needs of present circumstances can best be understood in the words of Betonie: ' At one time, the ceremonies as they had been performed were enough for the way the world was then. But after the white people came, elements in this world began to shift; and it became necessary to create new ceremonies. I have made changes in the rituals.

The people mistrust this greatly, but only the growth keeps the ceremonies strong. '" (Austgen) Betonie provides Tayo with the tools and faith Tayo needs in order to complete the ceremony. Betonie's role is that of the teacher, rather than that of the hero. The reader also sees Silko's symbolic value of colors in the novel. She refers to the Hunter's face as " wide and brown...smooth and soft like an old woman's. " Night Swan is constantly associated with the color blue: " open-toe blue stain slippers," " blue satin," " blue armchair with dark wooden feet carved like eagle claws," and " blue flowers painted in a border. Silko uses reference to the colors of turquoise and silver in the novel when Tayo " remembers hunting with Rocky, Josiah,

and Robert. " In this earlier passage, Tayo is reminded of the ritual that would take place when the dead deer is taken home ' and Old Grandma would put a string of turquoise around its neck and put silver and turquoise rings around the tips of the antlers. '" (Shapiro) (Silko, Ceremony 52) Silko's " Lullaby" was a short story told from the perspective of an old woman who recalls key events in her life, through which she interweaves memories as an old woman with memories from childhood. In teaching ' Lullaby,' the idea of harmony is essential-the Navajo woman is balanced because she is aware of her relation to the natural world, that she is a part of it and that is the most important relationship. This allows her to nurture as the earth nurtures. "

(Wilson) Some techniques that Silko uses in writing " Lullaby" was gradually building the story with emotion, leaving the reader with a saddened sense of satisfaction. She writes the story chronologically, which leads to the climax of the story, which then brings the reader along the decrescendo following it.

Silko also develops her characters with startling clarity, depicting several internal and external conflicts for each of them. " Storyteller," a prose work, emphasizes the storyteller; " Storytelling," displayed in verse format, emphasizes the process of storytelling. Both focus on the importance of stories and the storytelling tradition. Silko's " Storyteller" provides the oral storytelling experience for her readers through her transformation of the literary into a written form of the oral. As Robert M. Nelson notes, " Throughout Storyteller the development is concentric rather than linear, associated rather than chronologically determined. (Nelson) Bernard A. Hirsch points out that Silko simulates the oral storytelling experience through her writing style. He notes, for example, her voice shifts that demonstrate

the “ flexibility and inclusiveness of the oral tradition. ” (Hirsch) Silko’s “ Storytelling” provides a strong contrast to “ Storyteller. ” Throughout “ Storytelling,” worlds and peoples (mythic, historic, lived) are interrelated by means of a conversive intersubjectivity that interweaves elements into a telling that includes rather than excludes. Silko shifts the language and events back and forth between the domain of the mythopoeic and contemporary times.

Her language shifts represent a traditional storytelling strategy that deflects the focus away from the teller and to the story listeners and the different characters in the story. In contrast to the conversive literary style of “ Storytelling,” Silko’s “ Storyteller” presents an informed text that keeps the reader at a distance from the events of the story. Silko shows her readers the situation of a young Eskimo woman who ends up in jail because she insists on telling the authorities that she was his murderer because she wanted him to die.

She tells her story completely and without any lies to her attorney and the jailer, but they do not believe her story. Thinking that she is crazy, they do not even really listen to her story. Her words are spoken but to no listener in particular. Silko’s story parallels the woman’s story with a distancing literary structure that presents the story in a more abstract and distanced third person voice that serves to keep the reader outside the short story. Whereas “ Storytelling” demonstrates the process of storytelling in which tellers and listeners closely interact, “ Storyteller” tells the story of storytellers continually frustrated in their efforts to share their stories with others; this is a story about the impediments that prevent storytellers from telling their

stories and, more specifically, of the Eskimo woman's struggle to tell her story: " it will take a long time, but the story must be told. " [(Silko, Storyteller)] Silko used numerous themes in her short story, " Yellow Woman. " This story is also one of identity and ambiguity. It is concerned with a state of being between two worlds or two states of existence.

Silko does not create a name for the narrator of the story to show the reader that the young Native American woman possesses a certain identity and lives in the modern world, despite the fact that she finds herself between two worlds—that of her everyday life and that of the mythic history of her people. Silko uses the theme of storytelling to represent the centrality of the 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. [(Fajardo-Acosta)] Critiques of Silko focus most on the " preservation of oral traditions and ceremonies of the Laguna Pueblo Indians. They believe that she has used the role of ' the first Native-American woman author' to bring attention to many controversial political ideas. " (Color) Silko's other main theme of the story is nature. The narrator is given stories from her grandfather that link to her past, but she, her mother, and grandmother live primarily in the present.

These themes from "Yellow Woman" are portrayed in Silko's different novels as well. Silko is an author living in real times and modern life, representing and partaking in her Native American traditions and values.