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### The Yellow Woman

Leslie Marmon Silko's contemporary, mythical Native American short story "Yellow Woman" is a brilliant work, written from the protagonist's point of view. The concept of the change and longevity of the fairy tale (or myth) is well-illustrated in her story. Not only is the story a modern explanation of a traditional Native American myth, but Silko's style evokes and adopts the oral communication style in which those old myths were originally passed down. The story is also very self-consciously aware of its place as a modern revision of a myth, and makes many internal references to this point. "Yellow woman" is therefore a perfect example of the way in which old tales are made new. In Silko's short story, the reader is exposed to a variety of ambiguous and recurring symbols and characterizations surrounding our main characters and their environment. We can see a mysterious fascination that the yellow woman has for Silva and while she does desire him, she also finds herself wanting to leave him and return home. As the story unfolds, the identifying characteristics of the yellow woman begin to come into light showing just how her desires intermingle with their obligations. Within the story legends were told by the native Pueblo people describing tales of a yellow woman. These stories carried themes of spirituality and nature, and while the specific nature of the yellow woman is shrouded in mystery, one can interpret the symbols surrounding her events. If one analyzes "Yellow

Woman,” one can see that Silko is attempting to explore the origins of these myths and what they mean.

Our protagonist is a woman who finds herself in an ethereal state of mind having just left her home and is traveling along a river where she encounters a man of unknown origins named Silva. After spending the night with him she tries to get a grip on who exactly he is and is troubled by the realization that the events that are transpiring evoke the ancient stories of the Yellow Woman. She explains: “I was afraid lying there on the red blanket. All I knew was the way he felt, warm, damp, his body beside me. This is the way it happened in the stories, I was thinking, with no thought beyond the moment she meets the ka’tsina spirit and they go” (Silko 1686). According to an article on ka’tsina (kachina) from Encyclopædia Britannica, the Pueblo Indians believe that more than 500 divine and ancestral beings interact with humans with each Pueblo culture having distinct and variations of kachinas. Kachinas are believed to reside within a tribe for half of each year. They will allow themselves to be seen by a community if its men properly perform a traditional ritual while wearing kachina masks and other regalia. The spirit-being depicted on the mask is thought to be present with or within the performer, temporarily transforming him. Within the premise of this story it is quite possible for Silva to be the ka’tsina that the Yellow Woman speaks of, but nothing leads us to that conclusion other than how he addresses our protagonist as Yellow Woman and where he brings her on the mountains.

The environment in which a story takes place can have a significant impact on the story and its characters. There is symbolism in all forms of nature, and it is clear there is a deep connection between Yellow Woman and the river. From the beginning of her journey to the end, the river shows itself as more than just a physical formation. In truth it can be seen as a symbol

of life and purity as denoted in the very first statements of the story: “The small brown water birds came to the river and hopped across the mud, leaving brown scratches in the alkali-white crust. They bathed in the river silently. I could hear the water, almost at our feet where the narrow fast channel bubbled and washed green ragged moss and fern leaves” (Silko 1684). The water of the river is depicted as way to wash away or purify oneself of the grimes of their previous endeavors to make way for new prospects. Later in the story, the Yellow Woman resorts to the river after narrowly making her escape on horseback. After the horse leaves her, she states: “I walked towards the river on a wood-hauler’s road that I knew would eventually lead to a paved road. I was thinking about waiting beside the road for someone to drive by, but by the time I got to the pavement I had decided it wasn’t very far to walk if I followed the river back the way Silva and I had come” (Silko 1690). As a form of salvation, the river helps direct the Yellow Woman back towards her home when she finds herself in need of guidance. Other natural symbols exist in the story as well, including the mountain. As described in the University of Michigan’s Dictionary of Symbolism, the mountain is thought to represent divine inspiration, and is the focus of pilgrimages of transcendence and spiritual elevation. It is a universal symbol of the nearness of God, as it surpasses ordinary humanity and extends toward the sky and the heavens. It symbolizes constancy, permanence, motionlessness, and its peak signifies a state of absolute consciousness (Protas). As a place of spiritual elevation, the Kachina were known for luring people up the mountain and the Yellow Woman is no exception. While she interacts with and follows Silva, her state of mind is divided between her sense of reality and the mystical events she recalls from her stories. Being both aware and entranced she thinks about her family but isn’t surprised by her thoughts of temporarily leaving them behind as the story reads: “I thought about my family far below me. They would be wondering about me, because this had

never happened to me before. The tribal police would file a report. But if old Grandpa weren't dead he would tell them what happened—he would laugh and say, “Stolen by a ka'tsina, a mountain spirit. She'll come home—they usually do.” There are enough of them to handle things. My mother and grandmother will raise the baby like they raised me. Al will find someone else, and they will go on like before, except that 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” (Silko 1688). Silva seemingly has the Yellow Woman enthralled and offers her a form of escape from the traditional aspects of life for something more tantalizing and alluring.

Stories told by the Pueblo Indians about the spirits and nature find their way into the events following the Yellow Woman. We can better understand the story through its various symbols, ideals, and dialogs. Everything, from the environment itself to the Yellow Woman's interactions with Silva, help depict the situation and all its facets. Some of the major symbols were that of nature, by the forms of the river and mountain. With all of this in mind it is very clear how much of an impact stories told by the Pueblo had upon its people.

Closer scrutiny reveals “Yellow Woman” to be a rich and melancholy story written by a Native American author who is well acquainted with tribal folklore and quite sensitive to the pathos of the American Indian's life in the modern world. The woman longs not so much for a lover as for a richness, a oneness of life that she has heard about in the stories of her grandfather. She lives in the banal poverty of a modern pueblo with paved roads, screen doors, and Jell-O. She seeks to make contact with the vital world of Coyote (a traditional Native American figure of the creator-trickster), Ka'tsina spirits, blue mountains, and cactus flowers – a world in which

human, animal, spirit, and nature are one, a dynamic world where reality itself is multidimensional and mystical.

When all is said and done, as a human one does indeed walk in the spiritual world as well as the physical. When the narrator, Yellow Woman, speaks of each time she walked along the riverbank, she is in the whirlwind of the spirit world. Since these were stories from when she was little, they're a part of her culture, history, and cherished memories of her family. Sometimes I feel I walk in the spirit world when I am sleep, in my dreams, or at those times when I'm in the physical world experience *deja vu*, where I know I've seen this before or been there before. I enjoyed how Leslie Marmon Silko kept the old story new in a way that seemed so simple and natural.

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