
Storyteller Never Dies

In Laguna culture, stories are as central as the language that tells them. Stories weave the world together and are constantly being reinvented and recreated over time. In *Storyteller*, Leslie Marmon Silko layers short stories, pictures, and poems to portray the common theme that stories and having a storyteller to remember them creates a world where no one truly dies, but lives on in memories. Although all of her works convey this idea, Silko's short stories, "Storyteller" and "The Storyteller's Escape", use characterization to illustrate the cyclical immortality of stories and the ever present need for someone to remember and recite this history. "Storyteller" uses characterization and plot to exemplify the everlasting aspect of stories as well as the customary continuation of a storyteller. Within "Storyteller" there are three main stories present: the grandfather's story, the story of the woman's parents' death, and the the woman's story. Although each of these stories takes place in its own time, with its own characters, they snowball into one, intertwined story.

The grandfather's story is told throughout the story of the women's, and unfolds as hers does. Alternatively, the parents' death story molds the woman's story, shaping what she will do and say. From the beginning of the tale it is explained that the grandfather is always "[continuing] with the stories"(18) and "telling a story even while he dreams" (19). Silko presents a modernized version of a figure ancient in Laguna culture: the storyteller. The grandfather is telling a story the reader does not know at first. His story takes the form of a "giant bear" (21) which he describes in great detail, painting the beginning of his persistent drama. Although little is known about the story at this point, it will unravel parallel to the women's story. Interrupting the grandfather's story, Silko soon transitions to the story of the woman's parents' death. The memory ends with the grandmother overcome with sadness and anger about the lies the storekeeper told to avoid being culpable for the deaths (24). Truth is an important ingredient within stories, and the storekeeper's lies shine as a defiling twist on the sacred aspect of stories. Trailing the parents' story, a hunter joins the grandfather's story. The hunter is attempting to lure the bear to it's death, and this portion of the story ends with the old man muttering in his sleep that "the story must be told. There must not be any lies"(25). This statement contrasts the previous story about the storekeeper and foreshadows the woman's story. Silko begins twisting together each element of the story creating one unified moment. As the bear approaches the hunter, so the woman approaches the storekeeper. The woman creates her story as she leads the storekeeper to his death in the icy river (28). The end of the grandfather's story is not revealed yet, but looms as the women's events unfurl.

Silko introduces two stories, seemingly different, but with the exact same content. She is updating an old story into a new story, showing the way they grow and live on. The parents'

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story too, ties back into the woman's tale. When asked about why she refuses to say the death was an accident she relates her story back to that of her parents explaining that "He lied to them...But I will not lie" (28). The woman juxtaposes the storekeeper's murder of her parents to her murder of the storekeeper. Both were premeditated, both could appear as an accident, but the woman took responsibility for her story while the storekeeper marred his story with lies. The woman uses almost the same words as the grandfather did when finishing her story. She explains that "the story must be told as it is"(30), echoing the grandfather's "there must not be any lies" (25). Silko punctuates the importance of stories in Laguna culture as well as the pride associated with the truth in them and maintaining them overtime. The woman's story ends with her recitation of the beginning of her own story; continuously looping her tale just as the grandfather had done with his (30). This represents the need for a storyteller, and proves that the position of storyteller will continue to live just as the stories continue to live. The grandfather finishes his story explaining that as the hunter waited to kill the bear his plans were shattered as he dropped a knife and it shattered against the ice. The man was defenseless and the bear was victorious in the end (30). The bear represents the woman, and displays the repetitive, ever evolving nature of Laguna stories. As time goes on the stories shapeshift, never dying, but adjusting with the era. Similarly, the storyteller never dies but is passed on like the stories. After the grandfather's time is done the task of telling the stories is passed on to the young woman. The woman becomes the storyteller, and she will tell her version of the same story. As people and their lives fade, the stories continue. The job of telling the story moves on to another, creating an everlasting life for the stories they tell.

Although a very different story, "The Storyteller's Escape" focuses around the same themes as "Storyteller." Through characterization and content, Silko builds another world of timeless truth and tradition. This time focusing more heavily on the importance of having a storyteller to remember each story and to keep the memories of the lost alive. The beginning of "The Storyteller's Escape" vividly portrays the undying importance of the stories. The narrator explains that "with these stories of ours / we can escape almost anything / with these stories we can survive" (239). Silko presents multiple meaning in these lines. The storyteller has heard all the stories; she knows every circumstance and how it ended. Because of this she can literally "escape almost anything" (239). There is no new problem, nothing someone else has not already done. For the storyteller, she can escape by calling upon stories of the past to direct her. The stories morph into one another, repeating history and guiding the lives of the living. The other part of this quote states that through the stories "we can survive" (239). The connotation changes here from surviving in life to surviving eternally. The stories help them navigate through their lives, and in death their lives become part of the stories. Rather than dying, they survive through being remembered.

This same idea can be seen more distinctly as the tale of the old storyteller begins. The storyteller is aged and approaching death. As she stumbles towards the end of her life she

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utters that she “could die peacefully / if there was just someone to tell / how I finally stopped / and where” (241). This relates back to the beginning idea that even in death stories create survival. Silko illustrates how desperately important stories are through the plea of the woman for someone to be there to remember her. Rather than dying without anyone to witness, the storyteller creates her own story to tell of her death. She creates a child who “turned back for a last look at her” (242). This fictitious child will be able to remember that storyteller and tell of her life and how it ended. This not only passes on the storyteller’s story to someone else, but the position of storyteller as well. Similarly to “Storyteller”, “The Storyteller’s Escape” emphasizes the importance of a new storyteller taking up where the old one ended. Although the child was made up so the old storyteller could die in peace, Silko gave this excerpt a narrator. Someone is telling this story of how the woman wanted to be remembered and enables her to live on in the memories of those after her. Even though there was no child to see her, someone is describing the story, allowing her to live. Silko creates a beautiful situation again casing story within story, emphasizing the importance of remembering and being remembered.

Leslie Marmon Silko takes on the role of storyteller herself in her book *Storyteller*. Silko develops the old Laguna stories and transforms them into present day versions of the same lessons. Bringing to life the lives of Laguna people, Silko uses literature to call attention to an overlooked people. Silko's novel and the stories within it preserve the fragmented reality of oral storytelling, safeguarding the characters and situations within her pages. Silko accepts the role of storyteller, and charges her readers to remember. She implores them to remember a people and a culture, a story and a history. Silko demands this act of remembering because to be remembered is to be alive.

Works Cited

Silko, Leslie Marmon. “Storyteller.” “The Storyteller's Escape.” *Storyteller*, Penguin Books., New York, 2012.

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