

## Safe Distance

When I am reading a story for personal reasons, either to understand something going on in the world or for entertainment purposes, if that piece doesn't give me a motivation to keep reading, I will often put it aside and forget about it. But, I never really thought about what would make up motivation to read a story until recently. I worked at the Writing Center and, as a result, had to attend weekly training sessions. In a recent session, we talked about good reading skills. One of the things we discussed was having a purpose, or focus, for reading. If one has a purpose in reading, then he or she has motivation to read further.

In a lot of prose, part of the theme or thesis is made clear at or near the beginning of the work. For example, in fantasy novels, we are often introduced to a character who must travel somewhere and achieve some "great deed." Presto, we are given a reason to continue reading--we want to find out if the character will be successful in completing his or her task. In "Storyteller" by Leslie Marmon Silko, the theme doesn't become apparent until the end of the story. I was tempted to put the story away since the events didn't seem to fit together or follow a chronological pattern. But, since reading this story was required for class, I persisted with it, reading quickly and skipping quite a bit. Eventually, understanding began to come to me after reading it several times. Through my struggle with this story, it became apparent that it is important to read a work while having a purpose in mind, otherwise understanding cannot come.

My first reading, as I have said, was haphazard after the first couple of pages. I sought to find some meaning in the piece and trying to understand what the narrator was showing me. I remember that my mind latched onto the most dramatic scenes: the girl's unpleasant school experience and her grandmother's death, her denial that the old man was her grandfather, her baiting of the storeman and his subsequent death, and her interview with the police. Out of this, I concluded that the death of the storeman was an important part of the story. I wanted to know why she desired the man's death, so I decided to reread it and find out. In seeking the answer to my question, I had found a focus.

I reread the story a second time immediately after my first reading. This time I looked for clues. During my first reading, I noticed that she had accepted the blame for the storeman's death (even though it was really his own lust, hate and stupidity that killed him). I also noticed that she insisted upon telling her story over and over, just like the old man. In my second reading, I looked for things that related to these observations. By doing so, more things stood out for me as a reader. I learned that the storeman had poisoned the girl's parents by sending them poison but telling them it was alcohol and safe to drink. This was the reason she wished to kill the storeman. Even though I clarified much, some of the things I read the second time didn't make sense. For instance, I noticed that there was a recurring image of dogs in the story which seemed to indicate the use some sort of symbol. However, I was not sure what the symbolism meant, so I concluded that further understanding depended upon understanding the use of symbols by the author.

I put the story aside for a few days before reading it again. I felt I would get more out of further readings if I let the story get a little cold and unfamiliar. That way I could look at it with a fresher

and less frustrated eye. When I finally read the story a third and fourth time, the meaning began to clarify for me. On my third reading, I read to understand the metaphors and symbols, and on my fourth, I read to link my insights together in order to understand the theme. I picked out four main symbols in the story: the ice, the sun, the color red and the dogs. The ice represented time and, more specifically in some places, the past. The sun represented the girl's spirit and possibly her hope. The color red represented endings (death). The dogs represented bigotry.

The ice, and its accompanying cold, overtook the old man's spirit (represented by a hunter) in the form of a giant glacier bear as he died of old age. The ice overtook the storeman, who had been hiding from an evil past, via the unstable river. The ice cannot be kept out of any building, and it ruins equipment just like the effects of time. As it invades manmade objects in the story, they crack and stop working; it seems to indicate that those objects are only good for so long. Of course, this affects the Gussuck's lifestyle, too. The ice's destructiveness is symbolic of the waste involved in drilling--over time, wanton abuse of the environment catches up with us and causes the environment to be as broken and useless as the men's equipment.

The ice affects the girl in the story also. As the ice creeps up on the sun in the story, the girl grapples more and more strongly with her emotions as her mysterious past haunts her. The sun being consumed by the ice also coincides with her unchanging lifestyle and her attempts to cope with her aging friend (lover?). The sun freezes in the sky, just as she is at a point when the world has crashed down upon her head. These clues strongly suggest that the sun is a symbol of the woman's spirit in this story. The red color she sees both when her parents and the storeman die seems as if it could very plausibly be a sunset. If it is a sunset, it further enhances the symbolic relationship between the girl and the sun, because the color red symbolizes impermanence and death in "Storyteller." Silko uses the color each time something ends in the story: the red clothing worn after the girl's grandmother dies, the red wine as she breaks the store's long-standing policy, and the red-hair as she stops sleeping with the white man.

The dogs are another strong symbol in this story. The woman and the dogs in the story do not have good relationships with each other. They growl at her, leap at her or howl at her whenever they notice her. The symbolism of the dogs is clearly indicated in two places in the story: a picture she sees of a dog atop a woman while she and the red-head have sex, and in her comparison between the storeman and a dog. To her, the dogs symbolize the white man--the Gussucks. Her treatment and impressions of dogs throughout the story enhance, for the reader, how she feels about the whites. For example, the matted, ugly yellowish cur belonged to the storeman. They are also amusing from a distance and fun to tease, but dangerous if approached too closely as indicated by the reflection of the dog laying upon ammo and knives. Though she acknowledges the danger, however, she never doubts her superiority or ability to keep the dogs at bay and under control. Likewise, she seems to exhibit the same attitude toward the whites. She is "safe" so long as she enforces her distance. In a way, this does make her responsible for the storeman's death because her proven ability to invoke a helpless and mindless fury upon the animals was consciously directed at the storeman.

These insights into symbols and the girl's actions helped me to discover what the theme was. The story is telling its reader that no amount of false or manmade protection (like the useless looking yellow strands of insulation) were going to keep out the ravages of the cold and ice (or

time). Trying is useless; each and everything sets like the red sun (comes to an end) and so the endless story continues (told over and over by both her and the old man). Endings can also include a person's ideas of "safe distance" like the girl's safe distance between her and the whites. There are undeniable similarities between her people and the Gussucks. For example, dogs are a part of the lives of both the Eskimos and the whites in the story, and the old man even points out, in the wintertime the two of us are no different from those dogs. We wait in the cold for someone to bring us a few dry fish.

The girl is forced to breach her "safe distance" and communicate with the Gussucks since she must tell her endless story. Her story became the only way to free the sun (her spirit) from the ice (the past) and send it moving across the sky again "like a wounded caribou running on strength which only dying animals find, leaping and running on bullet shattered lungs."

"The Storyteller" was quite interesting; I learned something new each time I read it. In figuring out the theme of this story, I have gained tools I can use to understand stories in the future. It also gave me insight for understanding the metaphorical nature of many Native American tribal stories. I have learned through "The Storyteller" that some stories can be worth the struggle to seek a focus as opposed to just being handed the theme near the beginning. Some complex stories, such as this one, can yield more reward in one package than many simpler stories in many packages. The things that I have gained by reading this story will allow me to find a focus much more quickly in a story which doesn't seem to make sense near its beginning. If I am not focused when reading complex stories, I do not have any motivation to read or understand them.