Yellow Woman

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF LESLIE MARMON SILKO

A Native American novelist, poet, and short story writer, Leslie Marmon Silko was born in Albuquerque, New Mexico in 1948. She grew up on the Laguna Pueblo reservation and attended a local grade school before attending high school in Albuquerque. She earned a bachelor's degree in English from the University of New Mexico and later taught courses in creative writing and oral tradition for the university. She published her first work, *Tony's Story*, in 1969. Though she grew up on the Laguna Pueblo reservation, Silko was of mixed Native American, Mexican, and Caucasian heritage, and she long struggled to reconcile her racial and ethnic identities. Her grandmother and great-grandmother cared for her and her two sisters while her parents worked, and from them Silko inherited a proclivity for storytelling. Silko has published numerous works of poetry, short stories, and novels. Her best-known work, *Ceremony* (published in 1977), is regularly taught at the university level. In 1981 Silko received a MacArthur Foundation Grant, and in 1994 she received the Native Writers' Circle of the Americas Lifetime Achievement Award. Silko has been married and divorced twice, has two sons, and currently resides in Tucson, Arizona.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The early 1970s in the United States saw intense upheaval with the intensely controversial Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal and subsequent resignation of President Richard Nixon, the continuation of civil rights struggles for women and racial minorities, and the emergence of the "New Right"—a conservative sociopolitical backlash against the welfare state and socially progressive advancements of the 1960s. Many artists and writers responded with a general distrust of the government and fought to hang onto the personal liberties of expression that had been hard-won during the previous decade. Silko's "Yellow Woman" was published in 1974 and delivers a woman's account of an extramarital sexual experience and her exploration of her spiritual identity. The climax of the story occurs when Silko's protagonist and her lover encounter a white rancher, and the confrontation that ensues echoes the long history of oppression and persecution faced by Native Americans at the hands of whites.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Like other works of the Native American Renaissance (a controversial term for this literary period still debated among scholars), "Yellow Woman" celebrates Native American storytelling traditions and confronts the fear of losing such traditions in the increasingly modern era. Silko's most famous work, *Ceremony*, also explores finding a balance between modernity and traditions. The works of the Native American Renaissance are most often defined by their attention to reclaiming Native American cultural heritage with a renewed focus on mythology, oral storytelling, and ceremonies. In "Yellow Woman" and her other short stories, Silko draws attention to the lingering importance and influence of mythology within her Pueblo community. Other writers of this literary period include N. Scott Momaday, James Welch, Louise Erdrich, and nila northSun. Momaday's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *House Made of Dawn*, is widely regarded as the work that catalyzed this literary movement.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Yellow Woman
- **Where Written:** Ketchikan, Alaska
- **When Published:** 1974
- **Literary Period:** Native American Renaissance
- **Genre:** Short fiction
- **Setting:** New Mexico
- **Climax:** Yellow Woman and Silva encounter the white rancher
- **Antagonist:** The white rancher and erasure of Native American culture
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Career Change. After graduating with her bachelor's in English, Silko enrolled in law school before deciding to pursue a writing career.

Personal Themes. Because of her mixed racial heritage, Silko has often referred to herself as "a half-breed or mixed-blood person," and her writing attempts to reconcile the different facets of her identity.

PLOT SUMMARY

The narrator wakes up next to the **river** at sunrise, her limbs intertwined with the man sleeping next to her. She notices the sounds and wildlife moving around her. She decides she cannot leave without saying goodbye and wakes the man to tell him she's leaving. Unperturbed, he merely reminds her that she is coming with him and calls her "Yellow Woman." She asks him

who he is, but he tells her that she already guessed his name and his purpose last night. The narrator argues that they couldn't possibly be the ka'tsina spirit and Yellow Woman from the old stories, but the man, who is named Silva, continues addressing the narrator as Yellow Woman. Lost in thought, the narrator remembers her grandfather telling Yellow Woman stories, and she wonders if Yellow Woman had an ordinary identity and family life in addition to her role as the Yellow Woman of myths. After making love with Silva again, she thinks about how Yellow Woman left to live with the ka'tsina spirit for many years before returning to her home with twin boys. She considers the parallels between her current experiences and the Yellow Woman story but declares that she does not have to go with him because such things don't happen anymore. Silva doesn't argue but simply pulls her along with him, and she goes.

As they ride north, further into the **mountains**, the narrator's thoughts wander to her family and she wonders what they are doing at home. Eventually, they reach Silva's home, and the narrator looks out across the mountain. Silva points out the boundaries of Pueblo, Navajo, Texan, and Mexican lands. When the narrator asks if he works for the cattle ranches, Silva confesses that he steals from them. She tells him that he must be a Navajo, but he insists that she already knows who he is, and the Navajo people know him, too. They climb under the blankets together and Silva kisses her face. She turns away from him, but he pulls her back, becoming forceful, and tells her that she will do what he wants. Yellow Woman feels afraid and recognizes that he is more powerful than she is. Later though, her feelings switch to tenderness, and she kisses his face as he sleeps. The narrator wakes the next morning to find that Silva has left, and she recognizes this as an opportunity for her to return home. As she wanders through the pine trees, she eventually ends up back at Silva's house instead of going home as she had intended. Silva is dressing an animal carcass when she returns and asks if she wants to accompany him to sell meat in a town called Marquez.

As Silva and the narrator make their way down the mountain, a white rancher rides up to Silva and the narrator and demands to know where Silva got the fresh meat. Silva claims he was hunting, and the rancher accuses him of being the cattle thief he has been looking for. The narrator describes the rancher as fat, sweaty, and smelly. Silva turns to the narrator and instructs her to ride back up the mountain. As the narrator turns to leave, she sees Silva's hand on his rifle. She rides away as fast as she can. She thinks she hears four gunshots. When she spots the river, she leaves the horse and follows the river toward the pueblo. She stops to rest and thinks about Silva, feeling sad that she left him but still confused about him. She tells herself that he will be waiting for her again one day. Walking back into the village, the narrator reaches the door of her house and is greeted with the sounds and smells of home. Everything seems normal inside, with her mother and grandmother fixing Jell-O and her husband playing with the baby. She decides to tell her family that a Navajo had kidnapped her, but she wishes that her grandfather was around to hear her story, a Yellow Woman story.

CHARACTERS

Yellow Woman/Narrator – The unnamed narrator of the story is referred to as Yellow Woman—a mythological character from Native American folklore. She spends the story trying to determine whether it is possible that she could be both an ordinary woman living in the present *and* the mythical Yellow Woman of her grandfather's stories. After meeting Silva, who claims to be a mountain spirit, and going with him into the **mountains**, she wonders how her family will react to her disappearance and decides that "they will go on like before." From her thoughts about her family, it becomes clear that Yellow Woman doesn't feel strong ties to any of them, and perhaps was seeking a reprieve from her mundane life. Despite Silva's reassurances that he is ka'tsina and she is Yellow Woman, the narrator dismisses the seemingly far-fetched idea that she and Silva could be the characters of myth, claiming that such things didn't happen anymore. Even so, the Yellow Woman mythology functions as a kind of prophecy for the narrator, who finds herself compelled to follow the myth's trajectory despite questioning the possibility that she could truly be Yellow Woman. By the end of the story, it appears that the narrator has embraced a more fluid sense of self, thinking of herself as both the nameless woman from the pueblo and Yellow Woman. Through the narrator's thoughts, Silko gives a modern voice to an old tradition of storytelling. The narrator is a modern woman pulled into an old folktale, discovering that mythical stories often have ordinary beginnings.

Silva/Ka'tsina – The narrator meets Silva as he sits by the **river** bank. He claims to be ka'tsina (a mythical **mountain** spirit known for seducing native women) and says that he has been waiting for her. The narrator doesn't know anything about Silva when they first meet and then spend the night together, and he remains a mysterious figure throughout the text. Although the narrator remains skeptical about their mythical identities, Silva regularly and calmly insists that he is ka'tsina and she is Yellow Woman (another character from mythology), and in this way slowly pulls the narrator into a world of half-myth, half-reality. Silva and his connection to the mountains provide the narrator with an opportunity to escape from her ordinary life and to explore her identity as more fluid than she originally thought. Silva only parts with the narrator after they encounter a hostile but unarmed white rancher and Silva orders her to leave. As she rides off, the sound of several gunshots leave the narrator and the reader wondering if Silva has killed the other man. The narrator returns home believing that Silva will one day be waiting for her again, as the Yellow Woman story goes.

The Narrator's Grandfather – Although the narrator's grandfather is deceased at the time of the narration, he occupies an important space in the text and in her mind. The narrator thinks about how her grandfather loved to tell Yellow Woman stories. Her memory of the stories seems to function like a prophecy, and because her grandfather was the source of this information, he remains a powerful force in her life despite his absence. At the end of the text, when she returns home, the narrator wishes her grandfather were around to hear her story—a Yellow Woman story—because he would have understood in a way that the rest of her family would not.

The White Rancher – The white rancher intercepts Silva and Yellow Woman as they head to the town to sell Silva's butchered beef. The narrator describes the white rancher as having "thick rolls of belly fat" and smelling "rancid." Her description suggests a criticism of the gluttony of the white people who stole native land and used tit to feed themselves and line their pockets. The white rancher addresses Silva gruffly as "Indian," immediately accuses him of being the cattle thief, and expects him to willingly turn himself in to state police. Both because of the violence implicit in addressing someone by their race, and because of his connection to the state police, the white rancher represents the vestiges of colonial authority—the same authority that committed grievous offenses against indigenous populations and now polices those populations. He embodies the existential threat constantly faced by native people who struggle to maintain their cultures and communities. The narrator implies that Silva kills the rancher when she writes that she hears four gunshots in the distance, having earlier remarked that she thought the rancher was probably unarmed.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

IDENTITY

Identity is perhaps the most significant theme explored in this story. The title character and narrator is only known to the reader as "Yellow Woman," a figure from Pueblo folklore, while the stranger she meets by the **river**, called Silva, claims to be "ka'tsina," a **mountain** spirit known to seduce native women and take them from their communities. The narrator becomes fixated on uncovering Silva's true identity, telling herself he couldn't possibly be the mountain spirit of stories, but must be a Navajo. The characters' identities are tied together because if Silva is indeed ka'tsina, that means that the narrator must be Yellow Woman. Thus, in her efforts to pin down Silva's identity, the narrator is also searching for her own identity.

Faced with the unknown, identifying things can be a way of gaining a sense of security and control. The narrator seeks to gain control over her situation by identifying it and the stranger in a way that makes sense to her. The narrator reasons, "But I only said that you were him and that I was Yellow Woman—I'm not really her—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." Here, she is attempting to rationalize the situation and her place in it by using familiar terms in order to pull herself out of the unknown and back into her familiar reality. Though she names Silva, she fails to explicitly name herself, saying only that she has "[her] own name." By not replacing Yellow Woman with another name, she leaves her true identity a mystery for the reader.

When leaving for the mountains with Silva, the narrator wishes to herself that they would come across another person who could confirm that he is a man and not a mountain spirit, for then she would be certain that she is not Yellow Woman. She is seeking confirmation from someone else of his identity and, by extension, her own. When Silva and Yellow Woman encounter a white rancher, the rancher addresses Silva only as "Indian"—a vague, catch-all term for indigenous American people—and accuses him of thievery. Though Yellow Woman and the reader know that Silva does indeed steal cattle, the rancher has no other evidence for this accusation beyond Silva being a Native American in possession of fresh meat. The rancher then instructs Silva to ride on to Marquez, stating, "We'll call the state police from there." The rancher believes he can exercise power over Silva, first, by calling him Indian (a term the rancher's white ancestors forced on Silva's ancestors while colonizing North America), and second, by alluding to the colonial authority behind him: the state police. The rancher asserts his power by explicitly connecting himself to the state police and colonial authority, and he seems to identify with this power so confidently that he confronts an alleged thief unarmed. Interestingly, it is during this encounter with another person that the narrator glimpses something of "time immemorial" in Silva. As Silva confronts the rancher, the narrator sees "something ancient and dark" in Silva's eyes, which suggests a mystical presence underneath his human exterior. She was hoping for another person to confirm his ordinariness, but instead, the rancher summoned evidence of the ka'tsina lurking beneath Silva's human face.

The story also explores the human tendency to identify things based on their relationships to or differences from other predetermined groups. The narrator argues that she cannot be Yellow Woman because she doesn't belong to "time immemorial," the time when stories were made, and that she has a different name, as does Silva. She wants to believe that he

is a Navajo because if he is (she reasons) he cannot be a ka'tsina. However, she begins to consider the notion that identities can be fluid and people can be many different things. She explains, "I was wondering if Yellow Woman knew who she was—if she knew that she would become part of the stories. Maybe she 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." Here, the narrator is thinking about Yellow Woman in the third person, but seems to be describing herself. She wonders whether Yellow Woman exists as one person separate from her family and community and as another person with another name when within those spaces. As the narrator moves farther away from her family, she seems to become increasingly enmeshed in the mysticism and Yellow Woman identity. The deeper into the mountains they go, the more the narrator seems to believe that Silva is a mountain spirit. Just as her proximity to her home influences her perception of her identity, their connection to the mountain space shapes her perception of Silva's identity as a mountain spirit. Thus, the characters' identities flow and change depending on their environments, suggesting that identity is perhaps much more fluid than either the reader or the characters may have thought.

By the end of the story, the narrator seems to embrace a more fluid identity. Standing outside of her house, she identifies her family members' voices, and they draw her back into her relationship to and identification with each of them. Although she decides to tell her family that she was kidnapped by a Navajo, she thinks, "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." By associating her own story with the Yellow Woman stories, she's suggesting to the reader that she has embraced her identity as Yellow Woman in addition to her "real" identity, which is defined by her relationships at home. The narrator has returned from her journey with a more fluid sense of self, no longer wondering whether she is Yellow Woman or the woman from the pueblo, but rather accepting that she may contain multiple identities which she first thought to be irreconcilable.

REALITY AND MYTH

For most of the story, the narrator is in a dream-like state, taking in the details of her surroundings but constantly doubting her senses. Reality blends indistinguishably with myth and mysticism during the time she spends with Silva. In the end, she decides to tell her family a version of the truth—that she was kidnapped by a Navajo rather than by a **mountain** spirit. By making the narrative a blend of realism and mythology, Silko blurs the boundary between reality and myth and suggests that no such boundary actually exists.

At various moments throughout the story, the narrator's senses compete to shape her present reality. Her knowledge of her home—and who she is in that home on the other side of the mesa—conflict with her feelings as Yellow Woman connecting with the mountain spirit. Additionally, her proximity to certain spaces seems to influence her perception of reality. At Silva's house in the mountains, she sits in silence and explains, "I drowsed with apricots in my mouth, and I didn't believe that there were highways or railroads or cattle to steal." When she wakes from her drowsing, she sees ants, which remind her of her family in the present, small and far below her. Like the ants, her family and community live on and "under" the ground—in houses made of bricks from the earth. In the mountains—above and away from that familiar world—she slips easily between myth and reality. Silva claims to be able to see the whole world from his spot on the mountain, where his vision is unobstructed, but the narrator cannot see her pueblo. Later, when riding down the mountains with Silva, she thinks she spots a town in the distance, but he tells her that there isn't a town there. She saw what she expected to see and her eyes fooled her. Silva's embrace of both the mythical and the real seems to give him a sense of clarity that the narrator lacks. In contrasting Silva and the narrator's perception in this way, Silko further dismantles notions of a boundary between the mythical and the real, suggesting that those who seek to establish such a boundary (like the narrator) only end up clouding their vision.

Depending on one's perception of their encounter, Silva oscillates between the roles of abductor and seducer. At times he uses physical force to take the narrator with him, and at times she fears violence from him. At other moments, she thinks of him fondly and misses him, imagining him waiting for her until they meet again one day. Her feelings about their interactions ebb and flow depending on how immersed she feels in the Yellow Woman mythology. The more she believes in their roles as Yellow Woman and ka'stina, the more their relationship feels appropriate—since their story is, after all, legendary. But when she clings to the other reality that she's merely a woman from the pueblo with a family, a husband, and a child, the relationship feels wrong. At times, the narrator claims to openly resist Silva, showing that his behavior is forceful. She says, "I walked beside him, breathing hard because he walked fast, his hand around my wrist. I had stopped trying to pull away from him, because his hand felt cool and the sun was high, drying the river bed into alkali." The narrator explains, "he pulled me around and pinned me down with his arms and chest. 'You don't understand, do you, little Yellow Woman? You will do what I want.' And again he was all around me with his skin slippery against mine, and I was afraid because I understood that his strength could hurt me. I lay underneath him and I knew that he could destroy me." This moment in particular makes their relationship appear more like assault than a romantic affair. In the very next moment, however, she describes her tender feelings towards him, as "a feeling" overcomes her. After they are separated and the narrator

makes her way home, she misses Silva and believes that he will be waiting for her again one day. Her initial resistance to Silva perhaps was more of her resistance to the mythology, and in trying to push him away, she had been seeking an arbitrary boundary between the mythical and the real. Now that she is free to return to her "real" life, however, she looks forward to blending the mythical and the real in the story she plans to tell her family.

At the end of the story, the mystical and realistic threads seem to join in harmony. The smells and sounds of home greet her when she returns to her family, reminding her and the reader that her family exists in a reality of highways, pickup trucks, and Jell-O. She keeps her Yellow Woman story to herself not because she doesn't believe it, but because perhaps that isn't a story her family would understand as real. She wishes her grandfather was around because he liked Yellow Woman stories. Like Silva, perhaps her grandfather could also "see the whole world" since he, too, seems to have accepted that the mythical and the real exist in harmony. The narrator's choice to tell her family that she was abducted by a Navajo suggests that she knows it would be easier for them to accept that than it would be for them to believe that she had gone away with a mountain spirit. Living with a fixed boundary is more comfortable for them. Thus, her story once again demonstrates that the difference between myth and reality often depends on one's perspective and willingness to relinquish control over boundaries.

TIME, STORYTELLING, PROPHECY

The tradition of oral storytelling is central to many Native American traditions, and the Yellow Woman stories are popular folklore among the narrator's Pueblo community, particularly with her family. In "Yellow Woman," stories are shown to have a certain power over characters that verges, at times, on the prophetic. Throughout the text, the narrator searches for her identity and argues that she, a modern woman living in a time with highways, pickup trucks, and railroads, couldn't also be a mythical character since things like that don't happen in the modern world. Silko uses the narrator's resistance to the mythology as a voice for modern readers' disbelief of old folktales, but shows that despite modern advances, stories are just as important and powerful as ever. The narrator suggests that if she is, in fact, the Yellow Woman from the myths, that means she is also bound to Yellow Woman's fate. As she gets swept along in her romantic affair with Silva, the alleged ka'tsina **mountain** spirit, her memories of the Yellow Woman stories that her grandfather told blend together with her current experiences, creating a nonlinear storyline and placing the stories parallel with events in her present. For the narrator, the Yellow Woman stories function like a prophecy that dictates her present and future—such that, even if she chooses not to believe her place in the story, she is powerless against the story's prescriptive influence.

The Yellow Woman mythology interrupts the story so that the tales that happened supposedly long ago are intertwined with the present narrative. By weaving the old stories in, Silko creates a nonlinear story and demonstrates that time can be experienced in different ways and sequences. Breaking from a rigid linear composition of time, Silko writes a more circular story to better capture her character's cyclical, timeless journey. Immediately after claiming that the ka'tsina and Yellow Woman stories can't be about her and Silva, the narrator remembers her grandfather telling Yellow Woman stories, specifically the one about Badger and Coyote. As Coyote makes his way back to Yellow Woman, Silva's voice cuts in and beckons to the narrator, thereby creating a link between him and the Coyote, as well as between the narrator and Yellow Woman. The narrator finds herself in a storyline very similar to that of Yellow Woman but refuses to believe that she is Yellow Woman because she doesn't belong to "time immemorial." Silva reminds her that, someday, the present moment will be long ago for someone else, and that all stories start somewhere—in other words, stories are not confined by time, and the stories people tell about long-ago times are likely to be repeated in different iterations throughout history.

At the beginning, the narrator isn't sure whose story she's in, and she feels powerless, simply going along with events as they occur. As they lay by the **river**, the narrator explains, "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." Though she is clearly thinking beyond the moment, the narrator cannot yet say for sure that she is not Yellow Woman and follows the storyline that has been laid out for her. She thinks of the Yellow Woman stories almost like memories and doesn't resist the events happening in her present because to her it feels as though they have already happened. In this way, the stories she knows from her childhood become like a script for her to follow, or even a type of prophecy dictating her own life. She reasons that if she isn't Yellow Woman then she should be immune to Silva's charms and free to return to her family. But since she remains unsure about her identity (and therefore her control over the narrative) she follows the person who seems sure about his own identity and allows him to control the events. She says, "I did not decide to go. I just went. Moonflowers blossom in the sand hills before dawn, just as I followed him." Again, she presents the story of Yellow Woman as a kind of fate against which she herself is powerless.

It is only after Silva sends the narrator away that the forces keeping them together seem to slacken. She rides until she sees signs of the familiar river, and then follows the river to make her way home. When she comes across their first meeting place, the narrator experiences a strong urge to return to Silva, but she doesn't, knowing that he will be waiting for her again in

the future. As she imagines what her grandfather's reaction to her disappearance would have been, she thinks about how Yellow Woman always comes back eventually. Just as the prophetic forces of the Yellow Woman stories compelled her to leave with Silva, they brought her back home, and she feels sure that one day the ka'tsina will beckon to her again.

The narrator's deference to the Yellow Woman myths and her struggle to determine her relationship to them demonstrate Silko's preoccupation as a writer with the power stories can hold over people. When experiencing the same storyline as Yellow Woman, the narrator explains that she never chose to go with Silva. She went as blossoms bloom before dawn: she had no choice in the matter, it simply happened. Though she is the narrator of this story, the overlapping Yellow Woman mythology overpowers her control of the narrative, and eventually it seems that she accepts her place in it. Though she returns to her family life and offers them a story befitting a modern, skeptical audience, her final thoughts about wishing to share her story with her deceased grandfather forge a connection between her and the old traditions he represents. The narrator exists in the modern world but has experienced for herself the undeniable influence of times long ago on her own unfolding life—as history and storytelling guide her fate.

NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURE, IDENTITY, AND EXPERIENCE

This short story was written a few years after the beginning of the American Indian Movement in 1968. As more Native American artists and writers produced work that celebrated their cultural heritage, they also spoke out against the persecution of Native Americans, past and present. Silko's work in particular highlights the discord between Native American and white cultures. She fought against the erasure of her culture by centering the subjects of Pueblo identity, tradition, and experience in her writing. Her short story, "Yellow Woman," can be read as a story about a Pueblo woman's journey as she reconnects with her roots, though it can just as easily be interpreted as the story of her abduction and rape. In this way, the story celebrates Native American traditions of oral storytelling as a powerful force capable of transforming lives, even as it poses urgent questions about the place of violence in Native American history and identity—violence committed not only by white people against Native Americans, but between Native American people.

While standing on the **mountain** together with the narrator, Silva points out the Pueblo, Navajo, Texan, and Mexican borders to the narrator, laying out a picture of how the land has been divided among the various groups to benefit of the white population. The borders are a vestige of the colonial concept of landownership; they function to establish a sense of control over an area and to keep outsiders from coming in. Perhaps more significantly, though, borders often function just as much to keep the inhabitants of an area *in*. Reservations may foster community, but they also delimit boundaries outside of which Native Americans are treated as outsiders in a land that was theirs to begin with. Silko is highlighting this dynamic when Silva and the narrator encounter a white rancher who only addresses Silva as "Indian" and immediately accuses him of theft. This kind of intolerance and hostility is portrayed as unexceptional in the narrator's experience; Silko is reminding readers that tension and violence have always been the chief characteristics of the relationship between Native Americans and white people. Based on the gunshots the narrator hears as she rides away, she can only assume the confrontation between Silva and the rancher ended in violence. Seeking safety, she rides back to the Pueblo reservation. Thus, in this story, borders represent both safety and restriction.

In addition to physical and cultural violence, Native Americans are the most at-risk population for sexual violence in the United States. According to studies conducted by the Department of Justice, Native Americans are two and a half times more likely to experience sexual assault and rape than any other ethnic group, and the perpetrators are most often white or non-Native American men. In Silko's story, Silva (who is Native American) at times shows aggression toward the narrator. Her fluctuating feelings of fear and affection for him make it unclear whether she feels their relationship was consensual. In this light, the mythical or fantastical aspects of the story could be interpreted as a strategy on the part of one or both characters for justifying an otherwise problematic relationship—that is, by re-interpreting it within the framework of a mythical romance. The narrator likely would rather be the protagonist of a legendary love affair than an unfaithful wife or victim of rape. Thus, embracing the Yellow Woman mythology as a fate against which she is powerless could provide her with a sense of agency—if not over the events themselves, then over the way they are understood. The sexual liberation and empowerment of the Yellow Women in Pueblo mythology suggests that characters associated with her would have similar experiences of sexual empowerment, but that narrator in this story initially resists Silva as he physically pulls her along with him. The narrator also expresses fear at moments, realizing that Silva could easily "destroy" her. Depending on one's reading of the text, then, the narrator might be renewing her connection to old stories and traditions while exploring her spiritual identity and an uninhibited sexuality—but she also might be the survivor of an unfortunately common pattern of abuse against Native American women.

"Yellow Woman" tells the story of a Pueblo woman whose name Silko never reveals—perhaps so that she can more easily serve as Native American "everywoman." The reservation borders in which Native American women live may provide a modest buffer against the pervasive onslaught of cultural violence, but they also cause many of those inside to feel trapped and seek

an escape. Native American or not, myths and storytelling often provide such an escape for people who dream beyond the borders of their life. Silko's story celebrates the power and influence of Native American mythology as a living vessel of Native American cultural heritage, simultaneously enabling people to feel rooted and transported. Silko, like many of her peers in the Native American Movement, offers stories like "Yellow Woman" as a means of enhancing the visibility of Native American experiences. She employs storytelling to preserve Native American cultural identity and to shine a light on some of the problems facing Native Americans today.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE RIVER

The river—and water imagery more generally—permeate nearly every scene of this story, making the river the most complex symbol within the text. The river is the setting for the story's opening, the guiding path for much of the narrator's journey, and symbolizes not only the narrator's connection to home, but the constant presence and evolving nature of storytelling that is central to the narrative. Yellow Woman first meets Silva, the supposed ka'tsina **mountain** spirit, as she is following the river, and they spend the night next to the river making love. Like the lens of folklore through which the character see one another and themselves, the river brings them together. In the morning, when Yellow Woman questions his identity and insists that he cannot be ka'tsina, Silva washes his face in the river, almost as if to demonstrate that his face is clear and uncovered—he isn't hiding his identity. As Silva and Yellow Woman ride farther north into the mountains, Yellow Woman loses sight of the river, and this distance makes her somewhat disoriented; she no longer sees her home, and imagines that she sees towns in the distance where in fact there are none. After Silva tells her to ride back up the mountain, Yellow Woman rides until she spots signs of the river, which guides her back home again. In this way, the river guides her in and out of her experiences as the mythical Yellow Woman.

The Yellow Woman stories weave in and out of the narrator's mind just as the river winds through the story's landscape. Like the stories, the river is a constant and familiar presence in the narrator's life. Both the stories and the river have shaped the people and communities around them over time, and remain central to the narrator's personal and communal identity.

THE MOUNTAINS

Distinct from the **river**, the mountains are a mysterious and seemingly mythical place that represent an escape. The ka'tsina is a mountain spirit known for seducing native women, luring them away from their communities, and bringing them into the mountains. The association of the mountains with these seductive spirits makes the mountains seem like a mysterious and intriguing site of liberation. When the narrator stands in the mountains with Silva, she explains, "I was standing in the sky with nothing around me but the wind that came down from the blue mountain peak behind me." In this statement, the narrator conveys her feelings of freedom. Moreover, the narrator's thoughts about her family and home life reveal that she feels bored and doesn't share strong intimate bonds with her family members. The mountain provides her an escape from the familiar and the mundane.

In addition to being physically elevated, the narrator also climbs further into the dreamscape of the mythology as she ascends the mountain. While she's there, her senses deceive her, leaving her unable to distinguish between reality and mythology, and she wanders within this liminal space. Silva, as the mountain spirit, also offers her an escape from the ordinary. He's mysterious and offers her the possibility of being someone other than an ordinary woman from the pueblo; with Silva in the mountain, she is the Yellow Woman of legend. In this way, too, the mountain is a site of spiritual elevation, helping characters rise above the ordinary to access a different dimension of experience.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *Storyteller* published in 2012.

Part One Quotes

"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.

Related Characters: Silva/Ka'tsina, Yellow Woman/Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

This brief dialogue establishes the premise of this text: the narrator has spent the night with a man, and the next morning, instead of returning to her home, she is pulled into a journey. Here, the man refers to her as "Yellow Woman," the title character of the text, and by being the first to address her as such, he effectively names her. The narrator's question demonstrates her attitude of deference to the stranger. By asking whether she will come back, she seems to imply that he has more control over her movements than she does. She also foreshadows that the journey will be a transformative one; although she will eventually return home, she arguably returns a different person than she was before she left, and in that sense the answer to her question is that the woman she once was will *never* come back.

> But I only said that you were him and that I was Yellow Woman—I'm not really her—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.

Related Characters: Yellow Woman/Narrator (speaker), Silva/Ka'tsina

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator argues that she cannot possibly be the mythical Yellow Woman because she is a woman from the pueblo with another name. But, because the narrator does not give another name, she remains Yellow Woman to Silva and the reader. She attempts to gain control of the situation by identifying herself and Silva in familiar terms in order to pull herself out of the unknown and back into her familiar reality. Even though she explains that Silva is a stranger she met the day before, she also refers to him vaguely as "him" (probably referring to the ka'tsina spirit), thereby maintaining a sense of mystery surrounding his identity.

> 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.

Related Characters: Yellow Woman/Narrator (speaker), Silva/Ka'tsina

Related Themes:

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

Though the narrator is thinking about Yellow Woman in the third person, she is describing herself and wondering if she could be both the woman from the pueblo and the mythical Yellow Woman character of the old stories. Her reference to a husband and relatives is the first indication that the narrator might be struggling to explain her disappearance to a waiting spouse and family. Her thoughts also start to explore the possibility of a more fluid identity—that is, the idea that she could exist as one person within her Pueblo community and as another person in the mountains with the ka'tsina.

> "I don't have to go. What they tell in stories was only real then, back in time immemorial, like they say."

Related Characters: Yellow Woman/Narrator (speaker), Silva/Ka'tsina

Related Themes:

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator argues that since she is an ordinary woman living in the present, she is not bound to that same fate as Yellow Woman—and doesn't "have to" do what Yellow Woman did. Her understanding of myths is that they happened long ago, and such stories couldn't happen in modern times. Her description of the mythology as "only real [back] then," however, suggests that she believes the events described in the Yellow Woman mythology actually did occur at one point, so the disbelief is not in the story itself, but rather, that those same events could happen to her.

I will see someone, eventually 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 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.

Related Characters: Yellow Woman/Narrator (speaker), Silva/Ka'tsina

Related Themes:

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

Again, the narrator struggles to completely dismiss the notion that she and Silva are mythological figures. Wishing for external confirmation of their ordinariness indicates that she feels unable to confirm it for herself. The stream-of-consciousness sentence illustrates how her mind grasps for evidence, for something concrete to root her in a rational and comprehensible present. To her, old stories and their characters cannot exist in modern day because traditional myths and the modern but mundane normalcy seem mutually exclusive. However, the narrator's inability to come to a resolution on this point suggests that time may not be as linear as she thinks, and stories may have a more fluid relationship with reality than most people are led to believe.

Part Two Quotes

"I don't believe it. Those stories couldn't happen now," I said.

He shook his head and said softly, "But someday they will talk about us and they will say, 'Those two lived long ago when things like that happened.'"

Related Characters: Silva/Ka'tsina, Yellow Woman/Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

Still trying to convince herself that the Yellow Woman mythology exists separately and long before her present moment, the narrator struggles to maintain a boundary between myth and reality. But, as Silva argues, stories are not confined by time, and the stories people tell about long-ago times are likely to be repeated in different iterations throughout history. It is unclear whether Silva simply has a loose grasp on reality, or whether he is speaking with a wise understanding of the ways in which history repeats itself. His later encounter with the white rancher, for example, seems to be a modern echo of a timeless story about violence between white people and Native Americans.

From here I can see the world.

Related Characters: Yellow Woman/Narrator, Silva/Ka'tsina (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

From his dwelling place on the mountain, Silva claims to have supremely clear vision, which is something the narrator proves to be lacking when she identifies a town in the distance where, in reality, there isn't one. Perhaps because Silva embraces and exists in the liminal space between mythology and reality, he possesses an insight that is as yet unattainable for people (like the narrator) who endeavor to keep a boundary between the two realms. Silva is repeatedly portrayed by the narrator as someone with access to a kind of preternatural power of perception. This perceptivity is linked to the perspective afforded by the mountain and its elevated vantage point, but also to Silva's rootedness in folk traditions and spirituality. Thus, Silko portrays this sense of connectedness to one's heritage and the spirit world as something that is ultimately expansive, clarifying, and uplifting.

He pulled me around and pinned me down with his arms and chest. "You don't understand, do you, little Yellow Woman? You will do what I want."

And again he was all around me with his skin slippery against mine, and I was afraid because I understood that his strength could hurt me. I lay underneath him and I knew that he could destroy me.

Related Characters: Silva/Ka'tsina, Yellow Woman/Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 56

Explanation and Analysis

Silva dominates the narrator after she turns away from his caresses, which is the second time during their journey that he becomes forceful with her. In these moments, their relationship seems more like abuse or abduction than a consensual romantic affair. The Yellow Woman of Pueblo mythology is a figure of uninhibited sexuality and empowerment, but the narrator's experiences with Silva complicate her story as a potential Yellow Woman story because she alternates between feeling sexually liberated and oppressed with Silva. She knows that he could "destroy" her, and although this word choice is particularly powerful, it is unclear exactly what she means by it: that he could destroy her sense of identity by erasing the woman from the pueblo in favor of Yellow Woman, or that he could destroy her by making her an outsider to her family and community. A third possibility, of course, is that he has the physical power to destroy her by injuring her or ending her life. The word "destroy" signals something of an existential ending. Thus, her experience with him could either liberate her and open up her identity, or it could ruin her.

❝ 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.

Related Characters: Silva/Ka'tsina, Yellow Woman/Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

Since the narrator remains unsure about her identity, and therefore of her place in the narrative, she follows the person who seems sure of his identity, allowing him to take control of events. She presents her journey with Silva as a kind of fate against which she herself is powerless, but in comparing her passivity to flowers blooming, she seems to think of the forces compelling her to leave with him not as nefarious but as natural. By comparing the unfolding of their relationship to the blooming of flowers, the narrator seems to treat the Yellow Woman mythology as a kind of prophecy guiding her life, against which she has no agency or power.

Part Three Quotes

❝ "Where did you get the fresh meat?" the white man asked.

"I've been hunting," Silva said, and when he shifted his weight in the saddle the leather creaked.

"The hell you have, Indian. You've been rustling cattle. We've been looking for the thief for a long time…Don't try anything, Indian. Just keep riding to Marquez. We'll call the state police from there."

Related Characters: Silva/Ka'tsina, The White Rancher (speaker), Yellow Woman/Narrator

Related Themes:

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

This dialogue represents the story's climax, in which Silva and the narrator come into a hostile confrontation with a white rancher. Though the narrator and the reader know that Silva steals cattle, the rancher has no real evidence on which to base his accusation other than the fact that Silva is a Native American man with fresh meat. By addressing Silva with a vague racial epithet, the rancher attempts to assert authority over him, and his reference to the state police gestures to the vestiges of colonial authority that reinforce the rancher's sense of power over Silva.

The white rancher embodies the past and present colonial powers that committed grievous offenses against the indigenous people of North America and which now severely polices those populations. He represents the existential threat constantly imposed on the native people who struggle to maintain their cultures and communities. Silva's standoff with him, which ends in violence, is therefore an echo of a history of violence between whites and Native Americans.

Part Four Quotes

❝ I saw the leaves and I wanted to go back to him—to kiss him and to touch him—but the mountains were too far away now. And I told myself, because I believe it, he will come back sometime and be waiting again by the river.

Related Characters: Yellow Woman/Narrator (speaker), Silva/Ka'tsina

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 60

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has finally separated from Silva and returned to the place along the river where they first met. She finds the leaves, evidence of their meeting, and experiences an urge to return to him, but the forces compelling her to stay with him seem to have slackened after their confrontation with the white rancher. Now that she is free to return home, it seems that she has embraced her fate as a Yellow Woman figure destined to meet the ka'tsina again. The river serve as a guiding force that led her to Silva, guides her way back home, and will one day be the point at which they reunite.

> I decided to tell them that some Navajo had kidnapped 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.

Related Characters: Yellow Woman/Narrator (speaker), The Narrator's Grandfather

Related Themes:

Page Number: 60

Explanation and Analysis

Though the narrator seems to have embraced her role as Yellow Woman by the end of the text, she decides to tell her family that a Navajo abducted her, suggesting that her family prefers a story that minimizes the extent of her deviation from a traditional family role and maintains their perception of her as an ordinary member of their family and community. Her wish to share her story—a Yellow Woman story—with her grandfather, however, suggests that he would appreciate her experience in a way that the rest of her relatives would not. Her grandfather functions as an absent but important figure who represents the old storytelling traditions and her deepening connections to them.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART ONE

The narrator wakes up next to the **river** at sunrise and notices the sounds and wildlife moving around her. A man is asleep next to her, and she looks at him before following the river back to her horse. She looks off into the distance, not seeing her home in the pueblo but knowing it's there. After the man's horse tries to follow her, the narrator decides she cannot leave without saying goodbye and makes her way back to their spot along the river.

The visual and auditory imagery establish the setting of the story, but they don't suggest any particular time period or place besides a peaceful spot along a river. The narrator's inability to leave without saying goodbye to the sleeping man suggests that something draws her back to him. The river functions as a guiding force that brings them together.

The narrator wakes the man to tell him she's leaving. Unperturbed, he merely reminds her that she is to come with him and calls her "Yellow Woman." She asks him who he is, but he tells her that she already guessed his name and his purpose last night. The narrator argues that she isn't really Yellow Woman like she said but a woman from the pueblo, and he is a stranger named Silva.

The man's assuredness suggests that he knows something the narrator does not. Her reaction when he calls her "Yellow Woman" informs the reader that these two people don't know each other even though they have just spent the night together. Although the narrator argues that her name is not Yellow Woman, she doesn't give her other name, so both Silva and the reader continue thinking of her simply as Yellow Woman.

Silva continues to address the narrator as Yellow Woman, though she argues that they couldn't possibly be the ka'tsina spirit and Yellow Woman from the old stories. The narrator then gets lost in thought, remembering her grandfather telling Yellow Woman stories, particularly one about characters called Badger and Coyote. She thinks about how Coyote tricks Badger so that he can keep Yellow Woman to himself, and just then Silva's voice cuts in, calling her to him.

The narrator's conversation with Silva allows the reader to slowly piece together their conversation from the night before and adds mystery to both Silva and the narrator's identities. As the narrator refuses to believe that they could be mythological characters, her thoughts about the old stories interrupt the storyline, and then, just as quickly, Silva's voice cuts into her thoughts. In this way, the narrative continues to weave between the narrator's present and the old myths.

As she moves into his embrace, the narrator thinks again about Yellow Woman, wondering if she had an ordinary identity and family life in addition to her role as the Yellow Woman of myths. The narrator's thoughts are again interrupted as Silva pushes her into the **river** sand.

Though the narrator thinks about Yellow Woman in the third person, she is describing herself and wondering if she could be both the woman from the pueblo and the mythical Yellow Woman. Again, her present situation echoes Yellow Woman's relationship with the ka'tsina spirit, whom Silva claims to be.

Immediately, the Yellow Woman story enters the narrator's thoughts again, and she thinks about how Yellow Woman left to live with the ka'tsina spirit for many years before returning to her home with twin boys. The narrator asks Silva if he knows the story. He pretends not to know what story she's referring to and pulls her closer. She considers the parallels between her current experiences and the Yellow Woman story but declares that she does not have to act as Yellow Woman did. She doesn't have to go with him because such things don't happen anymore.

The narrator's thoughts become increasingly enmeshed with the Yellow Woman mythology as she struggles to determine the degree to which she has agency in the situation. If she is, in fact, Yellow Woman, that means she is also tied to Yellow Woman's fate. Here, the narrator suggests that the Yellow Woman mythology functions as a type of prophecy. She argues—trying to convince herself more than Silva, it seems—that she couldn't possibly be Yellow Woman because those stories took place a long time ago.

Silva doesn't argue with her but simply says, "Let's go," and pulls her along with him. The narrator explains that she eventually stopped resisting and hoped that they would encounter another person who could confirm that she and Silva are just ordinary people and not mythical figures.

Silva's calm authority again reinforces the idea that perhaps he already knows they're going to leave together regardless of the narrator's protestations. However, the narrator mentions initially resisting his pull, which suggests that Silva's actions are more akin to abduction than seduction. She also wishes for someone else to confirm their ordinariness, indicating that she feels unable to determine her identity (or Silva's) for herself.

Silva and the narrator ride north on horseback and the narrator describes the change of scenery as they climb higher. Silva doesn't speak but sings a soft **mountain** song as they go. The narrator's thoughts wander to her family and she wonders what her mother, grandmother, husband, and the baby are doing at home. Her focus abruptly shifts to describing Silva's mountain home, made of lava rock and mud and set high up above her familiar ground.

The emphasis on the natural surroundings demonstrate the narrator's connection to the land—she recognizes familiar sights while taking note of the unfamiliar landscape. The narrator recognizes Silva's singing as a mountain song, suggesting that the two share a connection that may be cultural, or it may be more fundamental—perhaps even spiritual.

PART TWO

Once inside, the narrator takes in Silva's living quarters that contain only an old stove, enamel coffee pot, worn Navajo blankets, a bedroll, and a cardboard box. She fries them potatoes to eat and he sits on the floor, watching her as she cooks. As they eat together, the narrator questions Silva about whether he has brought other women home and if he uses the ka'tsina trick on them, too. She again refuses to believe the Yellow Woman story could be about them. He tells her that someday others will tell their story.

Silva's house lacks identifying details, which helps retain the mystery around his identity. The worn Navajo blankets could mean that he is Navajo, but he also could have obtained them through other means. Silva remains steadfast in his strange insistence upon their mythical identities, but the narrator's inability to confirm or deny this ultimately points to the shifting and undefinable nature of identity.

After eating, the narrator walks around outside and explains feeling like she was standing in the sky. She sees the outlines of the surrounding **mountains** and wonders who else has walked through a landscape like this. From there, she cannot see her pueblo, but Silva claims that he can see the entire world. He points out the boundaries of Pueblo, Navajo, Texan, and Mexican lands.

The narrator's proximity to the mountains and the sky seem to pull her further into the mythology as she is able to imagine other hypothetical people wandering this same liminal, mythical landscape. She can no longer see her home grounded on the earth and in the modern world. Silva appears to embrace both the mythic and the real, believing that they can coexist, which grants him insight that the narrator lacks.

When the narrator asks if he works for the cattle ranches, Silva confesses that he steals from them. They go back inside and the narrator continues pondering Silva's identity. She tells him that he must be a Navajo, but he insists that she already knows who he is, and the Navajo people know him, too.

Silva's stealing further establishes his identity as an outsider—both in relation to the narrator's community and to the surrounding ranches. As an outlaw living in the mountain and therefore between communities, he exists in a liminal space both physically and socially.

They climb under the blankets together and Silva kisses her face. The narrator asks him why he's laughing and he tells her it's because she is breathing so hard. She turns away from him, but he pulls her back, becoming forceful. He tells her that she will do what he wants. Yellow Woman feels afraid and recognizes that he is more powerful than she is. Later, though, her feelings switch to tenderness, and she kisses his face as he sleeps.

The narrator's hard breathing could be interpreted either as passion or as fear, but either way, Silva's comment offends her. Silva again resorts to force, and the dynamic quickly shifts from one of romance to one of abuse. The narrator's feelings oscillate between fear and tenderness towards him, making it difficult to determine whether she views their relationship as consensual.

The narrator wakes the next morning to find that Silva has left. She recognizes this as an opportunity for her to return home but decides to eat something before starting her journey back down the **mountain**. She sits eating dried apricots and drifts off as she thinks about how, sitting there in silence, she doesn't believe in highways, railroads, or cattle. When she wakes up from her drowsing, she sees ants at her feet and thinks of her family far down below her.

In Silva's absence, the narrator plans to return home, but shows no hurry in doing so. Instead, she rests, and the silence of the mountains pulls her into a time and space untouched by modernity. In the mountain, she is both physically and spiritually elevated, and her family—her only concrete tie to the real, modern world—seems small and far away.

The narrator wonders how her family has reacted to her disappearance and knows her deceased grandfather would have understood that a ka'tsina had taken her into the **mountain**. She thinks about how her family would get along if she never returned, deciding that they all would simply move on.

The narrator's thoughts about her grandfather suggest she felt a connection with him and the storytelling tradition he represents which she doesn't feel with the rest of her family. Her calm conclusion that her family would simply move on with their lives in her absence implies a lack of strong affection between them.

The narrator thinks about the story her family would tell about her disappearance and remembers that she had never decided to go with Silva—she simply went, just as "moonflowers blossom in the sand hills before dawn." As she wanders through the pine trees, she eventually ends up back at Silva's house instead of going home as she had intended. Silva is dressing an animal carcass when she returns.

In the mountain and away from her family, the narrator seems to drift easily between reality and myth. The Yellow Woman story weaves in and out of her thoughts, and she seems bound to its storyline, unable to break free from the forces that compel her to stay with Silva just as flowers are unable to resist blooming. This feeling of inevitability further strengthens the notion that she may—seemingly impossibly—be the subject a myth that was written before she was born.

Silva asks her if she is coming with him to sell meat in a town called Marquez. As he prepares the horses for their trip, the narrator notices that he looks tall even next to the horses. She asks him again if he's a Navajo, and he just shakes his head. Before they leave, Silva grabs his rifle, and the narrator asks if the people he steals from ever try to catch him. He says they don't because they don't know who he is.

The narrator has been wishing for external confirmation of Silva's humanness, and the trip to town promises social interactions that might be able to provide just this. Silva's decision to arm himself, however, creates suspense and the possibility of violence, implying that their interactions in town may not be what the narrator had hoped for.

PART THREE

As Silva and the narrator make their way down the **mountain**, she looks off into the distance and thinks she sees a town, but Silva informs her that there isn't one there. She refocuses her attention on the colorful flowers they pass as they ride.

The narrator continues searching for evidence of their place in the modern world but finds that her eyes deceive her. Because Silva doesn't seem to believe in the conventional boundaries between reality and myth, his vision remains clear and unobstructed.

A white rancher rides up to Silva and the narrator and demands to know where Silva got the fresh meat. Silva claims he was hunting, and the rancher, calling him "Indian," accuses him of being the cattle thief he has been looking for. The narrator describes the rancher as fat and sweaty, and says he smells rancid. She thinks he must be unarmed.

Though the narrator and the reader know that Silva steals cattle, the rancher has no evidence on which to base his accusation other than the fact that Silva is a Native American man in possession of fresh meat. By addressing Silva with a vague racial epithet, the rancher attempts to assert authority over him. The narrator's description of the rancher implies a criticism of the colonial power he represents—gluttonous, ill-suited for the environment, and indulgent to the point of spoiling or turning "rancid."

Silva turns to the narrator and instructs her to ride back up the **mountain**. The white rancher orders Silva to ride to Marquez, saying that he plans to call the state police. As the narrator turns to leave, she sees Silva's hand on his rifle and notices "something ancient and dark" in his eyes. She rides away as fast as she can.

The mountain represents safety for the narrator, and she seems able to finally break free from Silva in this moment of confrontation with white cultural violence. Instead of confirming Silva's identity as an ordinary human (rather than a ka'tsina), the confrontation with the white rancher seems to call evidence of the ka'tsina spirit within Silva to the surface.

Once she reaches a forked trail in the mountain ridge, the narrator pauses to let her horse rest. She recalls hearing four gunshots but thinks there might have been more. She continues riding downhill until she reaches the plain and spots the **river**. She gets off the horse and sends it back up the **mountain**.

The gunshots confirm Silva's encounter with the rancher has escalated into violence and possibly murder, but thoughts about Silva potentially being a murderer never cross the narrator's mind. Instead, the river provides a visual anchor that pulls her toward the path back home.

PART FOUR

The narrator follows the **river** back toward the pueblo. She stops to drink the river water and sit in the shade. As she rests, she thinks about Silva, feeling sad that she left him. Even so, she still feels confused about him. Eventually she comes back to the place by the river where they first met, and she feels an urge to return to him, but resists it. She tells herself that he will be waiting for her again one day.

Just as the river guided her to her affair and mythical experiences with Silva, it guides her back home again. Though she heard gunshots after leaving Silva, she never expresses concern over his safety but, instead, she feels certain that their storylines will cross once again. Her thoughts suggest that she has accepted the Yellow Woman stories as a prophecy of her own fate.

Walking back into the village, the narrator reaches the door of her house and is greeted with the sounds and smells of home. Everything seems normal inside with her mother and grandmother fixing Jell-O and her husband playing with the baby. She decides to tell her family that a Navajo kidnapped her, but she wishes that her grandfather was around to hear her story, a Yellow Woman story.

The narrator's senses signal a return to familiarity and the modern world. Her choice to tell her family that a Navajo abducted her suggests that her family—people who seem firmly rooted in a reality of Jell-O and pickup trucks—is more comfortable accepting that version of her experience than they would be accepting the truth of a Yellow Woman story. When missing her grandfather, she refers to her own story as a Yellow Woman story, which indicates that has accepted her identity as both the woman from the pueblo and Yellow Woman.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

McLendon, Kelsey. "*Yellow Woman.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 13 Apr 2018. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

McLendon, Kelsey. "*Yellow Woman.*" LitCharts LLC, April 13, 2018. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/yellow-woman.

To cite any of the quotes from *Yellow Woman* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Silko, Leslie Marmon. Yellow Woman. Penguin. 2012.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Silko, Leslie Marmon. Yellow Woman. New York: Penguin. 2012.