

The Beauty of Simplicity
Leslie Marmon Silko's
How To Make A Poem About The Sky

The beautiful thing about literature is that there is no actual limitation to the words used in making an artwork. There is no regulation about how many words we must include, or what word choices we have when writing about something. I'm sure a lot of poets and authors are grateful for this because this really pushes the boundaries of creating something new, wonderful, and with clever, big words. However, we must realize that being 'clever' can sometimes lead the readers to confusion; and rather than being beautiful, big words can make literary works seem like nothing.

Concerning simplicity, one particular branch of American literature, in my opinion, is the master of creating beautiful literary works without having to write too complicated words. It is the Native American Literature that have successfully hypnotized literature readers into a new world of natural beauty through simple narrative words. Also a part of simplicity, Native American literature mainly focuses on what the authors know best: of how their people were brought up. Poets and authors like blablabla and Leslie Marmon Silko all emphasize their works around their and their tribes' lives. Particularly in Silko's *Storyteller*, we can read the prose-poetries about herself, her great Grandmother – Marie Anaya, and also about her grandfather – H. C. Marmon.

Leslie Marmon Silko was born in 1948 to an Indian tribe in Albuquerque, New Mexico, called the Laguna Pueblo Tribe. This tribe was divided into 9 big communities,

and Silko lived in one called Laguna, which was the center of political activities of the tribe. Being born into an Indian tribe who still held their traditions got her very in touch with who she was as a Native American. Then, just like other Native American poets and authors, she never strays far from topics concerning her people when creating her stories and poems. In fact, she integrates many of the folklores told by family members in her works.

Another trademark of the Native American Literature is the fact that this division of American Literature often cites about nature. It is obvious that nature plays a great role in their lives, before and after the British colonialism, and also until today. Thus, given the long history of Native Americans in the land of America, I think there is nobody better than the Native Americans to give us insights about Mother Nature.

In *Storyteller*, Silko also inserted a lot of poems and stories about nature. In fact, people like them so much, poems like *In Cold Storm Light* and *The Time We Climbed Snake Mountain* often brought up as subject of discussions in classrooms. However, it is not the two poems that brought my attention; instead, it is the poem that she wrote for the students of the Bethel Middle School in Alaska in 1975: *How To Write A Poem About The Sky*.

The poem *How To Write A Poem About The Sky* is specifically written for students in Alaska. As we know Alaska is a region where the climate is very cold and most of the time it is snowy. If you read the poem, it is clear to see that Silko intentionally situate the speaker in the poem in an area that is similar to Alaska. Perhaps this is to make it easier for the children in Bethel Middle School to understand the theme that Silko was introducing.

You see the sky now/ colder than the frozen river/ so dense and so white/ little birds walk across it. The first stanza introduces us to the ongoing weather in the area where the poem took place. The fact that the sky is dense and white and the river that is frozen may represent winter-y place. The funny thing about the first stanza is how the speaker is talking about birds walking across the sky. I have no definite explanation about this particular part, but from my point of view, maybe she wants to emphasize the fact that the area is so cold. 'Birds walking' may be a hint that even the sky became thick just like the frozen river.

The second stanza is even more interesting. *You see the sky now/ but the earth/ is lost in it/ and there are no horizons.* As a person, we know that the earth and the sky are separated by a line called horizon, and it's very easy to see that the two are different set of nature's belonging. However, if we place ourselves as the children in Alaska, perhaps what we would see everyday is one whole entity made of both the sky and the earth since we would only be seeing white and nothing else. Up until now this is a much too simple explanation, I know. But perhaps by looking at the last line in the second stanza, it would all make sense.

The speaker then say that the sky and the earth is one, or at least, "it is all/ a single breath." What Silko meant by this is that the earth and the sky are 2 inseparable things. A *single breath* consists of 2 actions: to exhale and to inhale. Without either one, we would not call it a breath, we would only call it with each names: inhale, or exhale. Another possible interpretation includes a point many Native Americans poets, and Romantics, often mentioned: that nature is, indeed, alive. Just like human they have their own language, emotions, and of course nature breathes too.

The first three lines of the third: *you see the sky/ but the earth is called/ by the same name*, is a further information still concerning the second stanza we've just discussed. Since they are now 1 entity, it becomes hazy by what name we should call the earth (or the sky).

The rest of the third stanza seems to be unattached with the previous lines. Not only did Silko played with the words visually by giving spaces to the words *the moment/ the wind shifts*, she also wrote *sun splits it open/ and bluish membranes/ push through slits of skin*. Interestingly enough, it is even possible to combine these lines with the next stanza which consist only of 1 line: *you see the sky*. Perhaps the purpose of the extended space given by Silko is to give it a dramatic pause just like pauses that happens in real occurrences. Winter comes and goes, but it goes after a period of time. Spring would have to wait until *the moment the wind shifts*. Or, if spring is considered to be too extreme, we could say the coldness goes away as soon as the white clouds are blown away by the wind.

What's intriguing about this stanza is that she uses words that do not represent the coldness or winter or whatsoever. Instead, in this stanza, she introduces words of warmth and, more importantly, she uses more words that indicate life. Furthermore, she's now saying now that the clouds are blown away and the sun's appeared, the sky is no longer co-dependent to the earth. Instead, the sky is now an individual. The word *membrane* means *a lining to inner organ*; moreover, she also gave the sky *skin*. Finally, if we connect this to the last sentence of the poem: *you see the sky*, it just might be that the *real* sky is now seen. It is not as *dense and white* and you can see that inside of its white skin (clouds) is sunny and blue.

I chose this poem because of the title. And knowing that *How to Write a Poem about the Sky* was really dedicated to students gives such a new perspective on what to write and how to write it. Silko's poem taught us not only to start from the basic things like the sky and other elements in nature, but also to write honestly and simply. To write about what you see is an important lesson for us to be able to start writing; and finally, she taught us that sometimes big is beautiful, but at other times *less is more*.

Perhaps the interpretation I'm offering here is too simple, but Leslie Marmon Silko and other Native American poets are known for simple language and meanings. Native American literature offers a clear understanding and a sincere appreciation of land, air, water and the interconnectedness of all to human beings. They tend not to play with interpretation because what they write is sincere. They write about what they know best: nature, and nature never lies.