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### The Power of the American Indian Grandmother: Leslie Silko's Ceremony and James Welch's Winter in the Blood

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The Power of the American Indian Grandmother:  
Leslie Silko's *Ceremony* and James Welch's *Winter in the Blood*

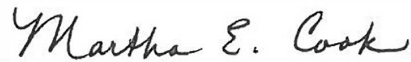
by

Lorie Southall Keener

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of  
Master of Arts in English

Longwood University

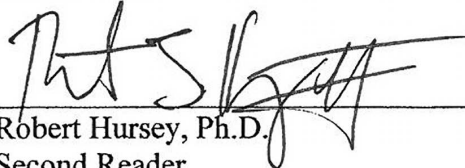
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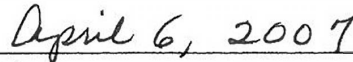
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In Loving Memory of my Grandmothers and Great-Grandmothers:  
Magdalene, Helen, Lizzie, Lily, Mary, and Edna

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## Introduction

While African and Latin American communities in the United States engaged in political activism in the 1960s, American Indians banded together to fight for their civil rights. A literary renaissance accompanied this political activism, and from this turmoil emerged a new generation of American Indian writers led by Scott Momaday. The publication of Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* in 1968 and the book's subsequent Pulitzer Prize the following year ushered in a renaissance of American Indian literature during which Indian writers produced unprecedented works of poetry and prose. Unlike the publication boom of the Twenties and Thirties, which subsided with the beginning of World War II, the American Indian Renaissance of the late Sixties, with its ever increasing numbers of writers, poets, and critics, continues to thrive. Reasons for the renaissance's duration are complex and multiple.

A reawakened consciousness stirred in the United States after the suburban fixations of the 1950s. As a result, the Sixties proved to be a time of rebellion; hippies, civil rights, the peace movement, Kennedy's Manpower Act, Johnson's War on Poverty, and especially the GI Bill, which educated thousands of Indian vets from the Second World War and the Korean and Vietnam Wars, all contributed to the decade's cultural ferment. Relocation and termination laws forced Indians to make their social and economic way in the cities, such that America's first people again wrestled with feelings of alienation and loss. Additionally, as more American Indians began to attend college, they realized that their people were not accurately or sufficiently represented in canonical literature. As Rayna Green has observed, "History was often filtered through the eyes and sensibilities

of non-Indian men, who possessed potentially biased versions” (29). As a result of this misrepresentation, American Indians attempted to find their voice in college curricula; thus a new interest in the Indian experience developed. Subsequently, prominent Indian writers including James Welch, Leslie Silko, Simon Ortiz, Paula Allen, Sherman Alexie, and Louise Erdrich emerged during this time and added their voices to the literary movement.

These new voices represent the content and style of the oral traditions that nurtured them, such that a correlation between the oral tradition and Indian identity was established. The American Indian novel became more than just a vehicle for educating non-Indian readers in Indians’ history; it became a source of preventative medicine. In other words, since storytellers preserve the history of their people, they prolong life. Therefore, preventative medicine is a gift handed down from generation to generation, and one often beginning with the grandmother.

The grandmother is the most influential figure in American Indian literature because, according to most Indian creation stories, Grandmother Spider, the great Goddess of most Indian tribes, first made creatures appear on earth and light appear in the sky; even now she looks after her children when their well-being is threatened (Allen, *Studies in American Indian Literature* 100). Grandmother Spider is the very origin of intelligence; she thinks things into being and, for her, thought and action are one. All her thoughts are realized, affirming the creative power of the world. Being maternal, she never abandons her creations; usually she saves those in distress. Additionally, as a



keeper of sacred traditional knowledge, she is a powerful transmitter of culture. By teaching the young the traditions of their culture, she practices preventative medicine, assuring that through her good advice and knowledge of the old ways, she enables the people to help themselves. In turn, the people respect her great longevity because it testifies that she knows the secrets of survival.

Like most powerful deities, Grandmother Spider has multiple identities, assumes many forms, and is known by various names. This ancient earth deity, the original earth mother, is widely known throughout the Southwest as Spider Woman; and she is an aspect of the supreme intelligence of the universe. Although highly respected for her life-giving ability and for literally bringing light to the people, she often gives of herself in other ways, too. Having the power to alter events, she frequently intervenes in human affairs. If the people are threatened, she can rescue those in danger or she can lure them to the underworld, depending upon whether they exhibit acceptable behavior. According to Alice Marriott and Carol Rachlin, "Grandmother Spider is all of womankind, Eve and Lilith in one, old to begin with wherever we meet her although she is capable of transforming herself into a young and beautiful woman when she wishes" (32). Because of the sacred gifts with which Grandmother Spider has blessed her children, they, in return, must show her the same courtesy by loving and honoring her with offerings. Those who neglect her, however, are lured away by witchery, thus causing an imbalance in the tribe. This imbalance can only be rejuvenated by a ceremony that reunites the people with their mother, the earth, with that which Grandmother Spider represents.

Spider Woman also protects the people in more subtle ways through the gifts of weaving and basketry. Although these gifts seem like simple crafts, they are actually complex and procreative. Grandmother Spider shares these handcrafts with her children because they are a means of teaching critical thinking. Thus, by participating in activities that require analytical thought, her children will master the art of survival and be better equipped to recognize the seductive charm of witchery. Paula Gunn Allen cites a comment by the daughter of a Navajo family: “The Spider Woman taught us all these designs as a way of helping us think” (qtd. in Allen, *Studies in American Indian Literature* 103). The close connection between weaving and thinking is especially apparent in Navajo rug workmanship. The web in its circularity and durability suggests the continuity of a living tradition. While a web is something that is spun, weaving is symbolic of creation in that it brings something into being. Therefore, this theme is used frequently by many Southwest Indian writers, including Simon Ortiz and Leslie Silko, as a means of reiterating Grandmother Spider’s life-giving ability.

Even though Grandmother Spider prides herself in educating her children so they can help themselves, she also realizes that women and men make mistakes. In light of this human weakness, she forgives those who find themselves outsmarted by witchery. Accordingly, she will intervene and assist her children in unraveling a pattern that will lead them home, as she is always nearby. While the spider through its spinning and killing symbolizes the balance between the forces of creation and destruction on which life depends, the web itself represents wholeness, balance, and beauty. Just as Grandmother Spider has given the arts to her children as an expression of her love, she

expects them to share their talents with one another. Since weaving knits the people together, it is considered in most American Indian cultures as the central metaphor for life.

Although men and women are considered equals in Indian society, women are recognized as the ultimate living deities—the givers of life and creative life forces that keep their people alive. However, the American Indian idea of life involves not just the physical act of giving birth—in fact, this idea would constitute a disservice to Indian women, particularly since Grandmother Spider creates life through the process of thought. Consequently, women are respected for their intellect as well as their ability to give birth physically, serving as links between one generation and the next. If women fail to teach their children and pass on their contributions, the circle of life is broken; thus they fail themselves and their tribe. But, if women pass on both good and bad knowledge to their children, they are seen as procreative. Women are, in essence, the source of wisdom, strength, inspiration, healing, and life. Paula Gunn Allen states:

In the beginning was thought, and her name was woman. The mother, the Grandmother, recognized from earliest times into the present among these peoples of the Americas who kept to the eldest traditions, is celebrated in social structures, architecture, law, custom, and the oral tradition. To her we owe our lives, and from her comes our ability to endure, regardless of the concerted assaults on our, on Her, being, for the past five hundred years of colonization.

*(The Sacred Hoop 11)*

Most non-Indian readers, because of their lack of instruction in Indian myth, have stressed the negative power of Spider Woman, seeing her web as a net or weapon that she uses to entrap unwary men, and her loom as a symbol of fate and death. However, most Indian cultures have stressed her positive life-creating power, recognizing that she uses her powers to protect her people. In this dual role of creator and protector deity, Grandmother Spider, or Thought-Woman, serves as an archetype for Indian poets and storytellers, thus empowering them with her procreative wisdom.

Several critics, such as Paula Allen, Clifford Trafzer, and Gerald Vizenor, have addressed the power of women in Indian literature, and specifically their healing abilities, but they have failed to examine the grandmother in her complexity. In order to fully understand this complex and powerful woman, one should examine her positive as well as her negative influence, that is, her ability to create life on the one hand and to destroy it on the other hand. Recognizing this duality results in a more accurate assessment of her influence.

Based on these assertions, I explore two novels, Leslie Silko's *Ceremony* (1974) and James Welch's *Winter in the Blood* (1977). These two American Indian authors are from two distinct cultures, Laguna Pueblo and Blackfeet Gros Ventre. Despite critics' assertions that Leslie Silko's *Ceremony* is too romantic and that James Welch's *Winter in the Blood* is too realistic, I use these novels to show that the grandmother is both creator and destroyer and, as a result, the tribe is dependent upon her traditional wisdom for survival. If she shares this knowledge, the tribe flourishes. But, if she withholds it, the tribe deteriorates.

Although *Ceremony* and *Winter in the Blood* portray their central figures differently, they both include a grandmother character and a male protagonist. Additionally, each novel shows a correlation between tradition and survival through the role the grandmother plays in each protagonist's life. Since the grandmother in *Ceremony* possesses a strong voice and is willing to do what is necessary to remain procreative, tradition prevails. Therefore, the protagonist, Tayo, learns to heal and become a productive member of society. On the other hand, tradition is lacking in *Winter in the Blood* because of the grandmother's weak voice and her inability to remain procreative. Consequently, the nameless protagonist cannot live a harmonious life. Sidner Larson asserts that possible problems can arise from juxtaposing two similar, yet different, American Indian voices. He explains: "The result is Laguna Pueblo Leslie Silko's criticism of Chippewa-Cree writer Louise Erdrich's work. The resulting clash and conversation illustrates an essential element in the trajectory of modern Indian criticism, that of Indians and non-Indians alike assuming that all Indians are the same" (142). In light of Larson's allegations, it makes sense that if Silko and Welch's work were aligned, *Ceremony* would appear romantic and nostalgic, while *Winter in the Blood* would seem realistic and modern, particularly since the works demonstrate two very different Indian experiences—one positive and the other negative. However, by examining the culture and history that shaped both authors and keeping their distinctive cultures in mind, one can more accurately assess their works, thus avoiding simplistic conclusions. Additionally, incorporating distinct tribal authors who also represent both genders preserves objectivity in one's argument.

*Ceremony*, published in 1977, established Leslie Silko as the first recognized female American Indian novelist. She was born in 1948 in Albuquerque, New Mexico, of mixed ancestry: Laguna Pueblo, Mexican, and white. Reared on the Laguna Pueblo Reservation, where members of her family had lived for generations, she learned traditional stories and legends about Grandmother Spider, Yellow Woman, and Corn Woman from her grandmother and great grandmother. Her love of Laguna Pueblo stories and her belief that storytelling is more than entertainment or a way to pass values or traditions is the result of a strong sense of self that she herself discovered after returning to her own Indian roots. Silko's conviction that storytelling is a ritual ceremony that links people with the mystical demonstrates tribal influence and respect for tradition, both of which are reflected in her work (Silko, "Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit" 60-72).

Although *Ceremony* received wide critical attention and is considered Silko's best work, Arnold Krupat contends that, for non-Indians, "reference to the 'oral tradition' usually represents a loose and vague way of expressing nostalgia for some aboriginal authenticity or wisdom, a golden age of wholeness and harmony." He further notes that Indians view the oral tradition as "a rhetorical device, a strategic invocation of what David Murray has called the discourse of Indianness, a discourse that has currency in both the economic and the political sense of the United States" (38). It is easy to see how ideas of the oral tradition, both for Indians and non-Indians, might clash since both possess different world views, best noted in their religious beliefs. Because religion is

reflected in mythology and plays such a vital role in Indian literature, one must consider it when analyzing an author's work.

Because Indian literature relies on the oral tradition for historical reference, myth is the basis of Indian writing. For that reason, Indian literature is often categorized as romantic or nostalgic, as Lynn Ross-Bryant acknowledges: "Myths are commonly identified as stories that are not true and, lacking truth, they are no longer authoritative models for our lives" (14). In light of this assessment, one might arguably lose the true value of Silko's *Ceremony* as the mythic portions of the novel, those that render it romantic and nostalgic, invite skepticism. Since *Ceremony* relies heavily on the American Indian conception of the Great Mystery, or myth, of which Grandmother Spider is the foundation, it challenges modern skepticism. By offering tradition as a solution for social and tribal survival, Silko is suggesting an alternative to a disillusioned society, one that is untrusting and cynical as a result of World Wars I and II. Perhaps for this reason Silko's work is sometimes mislabeled as romantic or nostalgic. Sidner Larson proposes that Indian novels require readers to possess the power of Keats' negative capability, that is, the imaginative power to remain open to mystery, uncertainties, and doubts (3).

The idea that tradition can revive a tribe, let alone a whole nation, is a concept modern critics have difficulty accepting because it appears too simple a solution for such an enormous objective. Lynn Ross-Bryant argues that "People tend to rely on human solutions to problems. They look to technology or to science rather than to supernatural beings to regulate their world" (16). Since modern society has become so far removed

from tradition, it has difficulty placing value in ancient traditions that rely on the unknown for guidance. This may be a possible explanation as to why Grandmother Spider has not been the basis of more literary criticism that recognizes her as the source of American Indian survival. On the other hand, Silko's *Ceremony* illustrates that tradition still carries weight in modern times—in fact, she claims that “As long as food-family relations are maintained, then the sky will continue to bless her sister, the Earth, with rain, and the Earth's children will continue to survive” (“Interior and Exterior Landscapes” 29). Silko is noting the importance of relationships to the continuation of life. If one balances and maintains relationships, one can achieve harmony (the ultimate goal of American Indians).

No American Indian literary or religious tradition recognizes the concept of woman created from man; instead, each presents both sexes as being present in the original creation, an idea that underscores a pervasive belief in the ontological necessity for balance in every aspect of universal being. Accordingly, male supremacy remains uncongenial to traditional American Indian thought or social systems. To American Indians there is no absolute good or absolute bad; there are only balances and harmonies that ebb and flow. Consequently, they do not fear death, instead recognizing the beauty and harmony in all things and the fundamental need for balance.

These beliefs are a result of American Indians' religious traditions, which are reflected in their literature. Larson confirms this point by relying on the expertise of Vine Deloria, a Sioux Indian historian: “The singular aspect of Indian tribal religions was that almost universally they produced people unafraid of death. It was not simply the status



of warrior in the tribal life that created a fearlessness of death. Rather the integrity of communal life did not create an artificial sense of personal identity that had to be protected or preserved at all costs” (qtd. in Larson 62).

As Larson and Deloria’s research indicates, American Indians possess the power of Keats’ negative capability, a power not as easily obtainable in non-Indian cultures or in modern society. Given that modern society consists largely of people who are afraid of the unknown, and that death itself is a big part of the unknown, these people are for the most part incapable of maintaining balances when reading multifaceted works.

Consequently, literary analysis of American Indian literature becomes unbalanced, thus leading to false conclusions. Larson’s solution to this problem is education. He states: “since American Indians have already lived through the worst imaginable suffering, they have already experienced a cultural death; therefore, others can learn from their experience” (32). Larson is suggesting that by confronting the issues of fear, suppression, and lost identity through literature, Indians may finally move forward to create for themselves a better future, serving as models for similarly fractured cultures found throughout the world today.

Despite the critical skepticism *Ceremony* inspires, it asserts the procreative power of a tradition embodied in the grandmother. Silko respects and honors that tradition in her novel; therefore, her protagonist, Tayo, is able to achieve harmony in modern society. On the other hand, James Welch’s protagonist in *Winter in the Blood* is the victim of an unhealthy tradition that breeds destruction.

James Welch published *Winter in the Blood* in 1974. Born in Browning, Montana, he is a poet and novelist of Blackfeet Gros Ventre heritage and one of the most important and accomplished Indian writers of the post-1968 generation. Even though Scott Momaday received recognition for establishing the Indian renaissance, Welch was instrumental in helping to launch its literary movement. His first two novels, *Winter in the Blood* and *The Death of Jim Loney*, were not received well by critics largely because of their pessimistic portrayal of Indian life. David Murray, for example, views *The Death of Jim Loney* as “pessimistic and emphasizing rootlessness” (qtd. in Weaver 134). On the other hand, *Fools Crow* won the Los Angeles Times Award for fiction in 1986 and is considered by Alan Velie as Welch’s most popular work because “it ends on a positive, indeed triumphant and defiant note, the hallmark of romance” (“The Indian Historical Novel” 199).

While most non-Indian readers and critics do not like the depressing nature of *Winter in the Blood*, Indian readers and critics find it to be an accurate account of their culture. Peter Beidler conducted a survey in a special Welch issue of the *American Indian Quarterly* and found that “early reviewers of the novel reported they tended to feel that the novel was a negative expression, an exploration of an American Indian wasteland from which no traveler could return” (qtd. in Larson 105). Based on this survey, it appears that critics were drawing parallels between Welch’s work and T. S. Eliot’s.

Both *Winter in the Blood* and “The Waste Land” include an alienated protagonist, a fragmented cultural context, an experimental narrative, and a mythic structure, all of which are characteristics of the modernist canon. Although these literary observations

are logical, they are also deficient because critics failed to address the actual lived experiences of American Indian people. During an interview with William Bevis, Welch acknowledges exploration of history, sociology, and politics, stating, “Their [Plains Indians’] relationship to whites is still one of distrust. I’ve seen it all my life. You know I’m not just guessing—this is observation” (qtd. in Larson 106). Larson suggests, however, that since *Winter in the Blood* corresponds to the American myth of the “Vanishing Indian,” with an unnamed narrator, mired in the most basic considerations of survival, he is much easier to eulogize than the potent warriors of yesteryear found in some of Welch’s later works, most notably, *Fools Crow* (105). For that reason, it appears that critics are more interested in simply labeling the novel as a modernist work, forcing the work to conform with the literary expectations of the time, than participating in a more thorough and accurate investigation that would recognize the novel’s cultural and historical influence.

Because stories shape values and morals, one must consider tribal differences when examining a work. Even though Welch’s novel is not as influenced by myth as Silko’s, its roots lie in the oral tradition. Blackfoot roots, which are reflected in *Winter in the Blood*, demonstrate tribal influence on Welch’s idea of the grandmother. Unlike Silko, who grew up listening to stories of Grandmother Spider told to her by her grandmother, Welch was influenced by his grandfather and the Blackfoot legends of Napi, Old Man, and First Man and First Woman. Napi, the chief deity and culture hero of the Blackfeet, who is often depicted as a fool, is a trickster, a complex figure who is alternately creator and destroyer, savior and menace, prankster and buffoon. First Man and First Woman,

also key figures in the Blackfeet creation myth, are similar to the Adam and Eve in the Christian story. Like Eve, First Woman's quest for knowledge resulted in death for all people rather than First Man's initial idea of eternal life. Additionally, *Winter in the Blood* is influenced by a Blackfeet creation story that isolates women from men as opposed to their living together in harmony.

Based on these creation stories, which lend themselves to dualities, death, alienation, fear, and imbalance, it is easy to see why Welch's grandmother in *Winter in the Blood* is depicted as a destroyer rather than as a creator. Although Grandmother Spider, and women in general, are viewed in Blackfeet tradition as strong and powerful and are respected for their knowledge and life-giving abilities, the tradition also recognizes them both as trickster figures who can possess bad medicine and as the creators of death. Welch's *Winter in the Blood* reflects the history and culture that shaped his tribe; and, because of that tradition, the grandmother manipulates the truth, thus destroying the lives of both her daughter and her grandson, the male protagonist.

Whereas Silko's work replicates a strong sense of collective identity that continues to live, Welch's work exposes a collective identity so alienated from tradition that it is dying. However, both *Ceremony* and *Winter in the Blood* demonstrate a correlation between the grandmother's voice and the continuation of life. As the keeper of sacred traditional knowledge, the grandmother is the most powerful influence in American Indian literature. Depending upon whether she chooses to fulfill her role as the transmitter of culture, she can continue the life cycle, as established in Silko's *Ceremony*, or she can limit its possibilities, as portrayed in Welch's *Winter in the Blood*. Either way,

Silko and Welch illustrate that the traditions embodied in the grandmother are needed in modern times, whether those traditions are the source of Laguna Pueblo or Blackfeet Gros Ventre heritage. As Alma Hogan Snell, a Crow Indian, notes, her grandmother “demonstrated the value of using the past as a means of living in the present,” thus enabling her to survive (12).

# The Creative Power of the Laguna Pueblo Grandmother

Leslie Silko's tribute to Grandmother Spider in the opening lines of *Ceremony* indicates that tradition will play a vital role in the author's novel:

Ts'its'tsinako, Thought - Woman,  
is sitting in her room  
and whatever she thinks about  
appears.  
I'm telling you the story  
she is thinking. (1)

*Ceremony* begins with the Laguna Pueblo creation story because it is the heart, or womb, of identity. Because Silko grew up listening to creation stories about Grandmother Spider told to her by her own grandmother, A'mooh, and her great-grandmother, Lily, it is no surprise that the Great Goddess creates the novel, as all tales are formed in her mind and as creation exists as a result of her naming. Shamoan Zamir claims that in *Ceremony* "Silko suggests that she herself is re-telling Grandmother Spider's story and that this story in fact constitutes the novel as a whole" (400). Zamir's observation derives from the idea that Grandmother Spider is the center of the Laguna Pueblo people because she is responsible for their creation; without her existence, there would be no stories to tell and no novels to write.

*Ceremony*, structured like a spider's web, begins with Grandmother Spider as its center. Human identity, imagination, and storytelling are linked to her, just as the strands of the spider's web radiate from the center of the web. All stories result from this center,

which Grandmother Spider represents. Silko begins with the Laguna Pueblo creation myth, establishing the foundation of truth for her culture. Everything in this world partakes of the original creation, including plants, animals, and rocks; therefore, each of these living beings makes up the universe, just as all stories constitute Grandmother Spider's web. Silko acknowledges in her essay, "Interior and Exterior Landscapes: The Pueblo Migration Stories," that "Pueblo people depended upon collective memory through successive generations to maintain and transmit an entire culture, a worldview complete with proven strategies for survival" (30). Stories, then, are a communal effort to which everyone contributes in order to form a unified web of meaning. Silko explains that "The ancient Pueblo people sought a communal truth, not an absolute truth" (32), an observation which suggests that meaning derives from differences rather than similarities. In other words, each person's version of the same story is important and must be told, as all versions work together to generate meaning. Accordingly, storytelling is something that originates from a shared experience and understanding of that original view of creation – that we are all part of a whole. This perspective on narrative – of story within story, the idea that one story is only the beginning of many stories and the sense that stories, therefore, never truly end – is a unique concept that represents an important contribution of American Indian cultures to the English language. Silko utilizes this concept in *Ceremony*: she honors tradition with the re-telling of Grandmother Spider's story, remains procreative by weaving her own story to suit modern times, and spins Tayo's story into existence as the ancient stories are being told. By incorporating traditional mythic stories about Grandmother Spider in *Ceremony*, Silko both honors her

powerful influence and ensures that Laguna Pueblo people remain blessed with her procreative gift of storytelling. Thus, Silko offers the transmitter of culture, Grandmother Spider, the greatest gift of all – the gift of knowing that she has taught her children well.

According to Laguna Pueblo theology, Thought-Woman and her dormant sisters, Uretsete and Naotsete, existed in the beginning. Thought-Woman thinks creation and sings her sisters into life. After they are formed, she instructs them to sing over the items in their baskets (medicine bundles) in such a way that those items will have life. After that crucial task is accomplished, the creatures, thus vitalized, assume the power to regenerate themselves—that is, they can reproduce others of their kind. But these new creations are not in and of themselves self-sufficient; they depend for their being on the great creatrixes, Thought-Woman, Uretsete, and Naotsete. There is never a time when Thought-Woman did not exist; she has two bundles in her power, and these bundles contain Uretsete and Naotsete. The twin sisters are not viewed as her daughters but as her twin sisters, her coequals, who possess the medicine power to vitalize the creatures who will inhabit the earth. Additionally, they have the power to create the firmament, the skies, the galaxies, and the seas through the use of ritual magic. Thought-Woman, in effect, empowers Uretsete and Naotsete, serving as their advisor. That they are twins is also important because they represent the dual forces of good and evil, which exist in the universe. The theme of duality is continued as Uretsete gives birth to twin boys, known as the Sacred Twins, who along with Uretsete and Naotsete appear and reappear in Pueblo stories in various guises and under various names. These guises



include the ability to change gender, because according to the Laguna Pueblo creation story, Uretsete becomes male at some point (Allen, *The Sacred Hoop* 13-50).

The theme of dualities is significant in *Ceremony* because unity can only be a function or an offspring of diversity. Diversity, however, does not need to be created but is inherent in the primordial condition of things. In this diversity there is a primary dualism of static and active. The generation of life and the creation of beauty involve the transformation of the static condition into the active form; but the cyclical nature of movement, life, and creation always returns movement to rest, life to death, and beauty to plainness. It is not surprising, then, that Grandmother Spider, the very essence and personification of regeneration, rejuvenation, renewal, and dynamic beauty, is the supreme mother of the Navajos and is the most blessed, the most revered, and the most benevolent of all the holy people. Paula Allen confirms this assessment and explains that “transformation of this kind is common in American Indian lore and the transformation processes embedded in the tales about the spirit beings and their alternative aspects point to the regenerative powers embodied in diversity” (*The Sacred Hoop* 19-20). The grandmother remains procreative in *Ceremony* through alteration; therefore, change symbolizes life.

Grandmother Spider represents alteration in various ways. She creates, maintains, and restores life to her people. Therefore, in Silko’s *Ceremony* she is the central figure who informs right balance and right harmony; and these in turn order all relationships in conformity with her law. This spirit, this power of intelligence, has many names and many emblems. Often referred to as Thought-Woman, Grandmother Spider, Spider

Woman and Ts'its'tsi'nako, she appears on the plains, in the forests, in the canyons, on the mesas, and beneath the seas. She embodies Earth Woman, Corn Woman, and Yellow Woman. Thought-Woman is not limited to a female role; since she is the supreme Spirit, she is both Mother and Father to all people and to all creatures. She is the only creator of thought, and thought precedes creation. Therefore, Laguna Pueblo people owe her their breath. To show their appreciation for her generosity, they offer prayers and gifts of pollen, tobacco, blue and yellow cornmeal, and turquoise. Her variety and multiplicity testify to her complexity: she is the true creatrix, for she is thought itself from which all else is born. Because tribal people respect and understand relationships that occur between the human and nonhuman worlds, they are spiritual people, and it is this essence that enables magical things to happen (Allen, *The Sacred Hoop* 13-29).

Among these magical things are transformation of objects from one form to another; their movement from one place to another by teleportation; the curing of the sick, and conversely, creating sickness in people, animals, or plants; communication with animals and nonphysical beings, such as spirit Katsinas and Goddesses; and the stealing or storing of souls. All these attributes embody Grandmother Spider. Both through her wisdom and her body she is able to transform Tayo, the protagonist of *Ceremony*, from a disconnected, invisible human being to a whole healthy person. Because of Grandmother Spider's love and wisdom, Tayo finds his identity; consequently, he can live a harmonious life.

*Ceremony's* narrative is an instructional aid that transmits Grandmother Spider's wisdom to Tayo, which enables him to survive in modern society. Silko claims in her

essay, "The People and the Land ARE Inseparable," that "The old folks and the old stories say that animals and other living beings have a great deal to teach us if we will only pay attention" (85). Tayo, lacerated by the desertion and death of his mother, the contempt of the aunt who raised him, the deaths of his cousin Rocky and Uncle Josiah, and the trauma he experienced as a soldier in World War II, has severe mental problems. His illness results from his alienation from community. Having lost the significance of traditional stories, he has consequently lost his personal identity; therefore, "He is invisible. His words are formed with an invisible tongue, they have no sound" (15). However, he admits that "he had believed in the stories for a long time, until the teachers at Indian school taught him not to believe in that kind of 'nonsense'" (19).

Tayo's healing depends upon his being reunited with his traditional roots, for at one time, he believed that "if a person wanted to get to the moon, there is a way; it all depended on whether you knew the story of how others before you had gone" (19). Stories are more than a form of entertainment for Laguna Pueblo people; they are a source of preventative medicine. The old stories recall incidents in which troublesome spirits or beings threatened the earth; knowing these stories, the Pueblo people learn how to survive. By realizing the mistakes and triumphs of others before them, valuable lessons are taught and relationships are strengthened. Thus, stories hold the community together during difficult times. From the opening pages of *Ceremony*, we learn about the energy of stories, their ability to cure, and their capacity to counter the witchery of destruction. Silko writes:

You don't have anything

if you don't have the stories.

Their evil is mighty

but it can't stand up to our stories.

So they try to destroy the stories

let the stories be confused or forgotten.

They would like that

They would be happy

Because we would be defenseless then. (2)

The author, in effect, is emphasizing that stories are also agents of healing and that the healing process occurs as part of a communal effort because people can not recover alone.

Silko has observed that "storytelling ha[s] the effect of placing an incident in the wider context of Pueblo history so that individual loss or failure are less personalized and became part of the village's eternal narratives about loss and failure" ("The People and the Land ARE Inseparable" 91). Therefore, stories about the creation and emergence of human beings and animals into this world continue to be retold each year for four days and four nights during the winter solstice to reiterate the power of story and its relation to community survival. By re-telling Grandmother Spider's story, Silko continues this tradition in her novel.

Traumatic experiences, such as Tayo's, often lead to separation of self from the community. This separation not only endangers the individual or the group but also the land. Old Ku'oosh explains: "You understand, don't you? It is important to all of us.

Not only for your sake, but for this fragile world” (36). As Tayo is sick, so is the land. The earth which Grandmother Spider represents is suffering from the alienation of part of herself; her children have been torn from her in their minds so that their unified awareness of and with her has been destroyed, partially or totally. That destruction similarly characterizes the lives of Tayo and his mother, Auntie and Rocky, Pinky and Harley, and all those who are tricked into believing not only that the land is beyond and separate from themselves but also that material possessions are more valuable. Silko notes this destruction in the text when Emo states: “Look what is here for us. Look. Here’s the Indians’ mother earth! Old dried-up thing!” (25). Because of the separation of her children, Grandmother Spider is angry; as a result, she creates a drought.

The healing of Tayo and the land depends upon their reunification. Tayo recovers when he understands through Grandmother Spider’s guidance that his being is within and outside himself, that it includes his mother Laura, Night Swan, Ts’eh, Old Grandma, the Hunter, the mountain lion, the spotted cattle, the deer, hope, love and the starry universe of Betonie’s ceremony. Tayo is a vital part of the earth; his departure from his roots has caused an imbalance in tribal community. Harmony can only be reinstated once he reconnects with the earth, his mother. Their relationship begins to develop as Tayo lives the stories—those ancient and those new. Through the ancient stories, Grandmother Spider communicates the history of the Laguna Pueblo people, and the gap between isolated human beings and landscape is closed. Tayo is able to understand the truth of his people’s situation. Lynn Ross-Bryant believes that “through the imaginative mode universal patterns of human experience are revealed and, because we share in these

archetypal patterns, meaning for our lives is confirmed. Storytelling is again important, but it is now the re-telling of mythic dreams that is central” (159). Ross-Bryant’s observation underscores Native American belief that modern society has become so far removed from tradition that it lacks identity, particularly since emphasis is now placed on the individual rather than the community. Contemporary society’s alienation results from a lack of convention; therefore, the general population requires the re-telling of myths, because these ancient stories relate to our current existence. Bronislaw Malinowski confirms this assessment when he notes that “Myth in its living, primitive form is not merely a story told but a reality lived” (qtd. in Erdoes and Ortiz xv).

Myth is important, particularly in contemporary life, because it provides a center that affords meaning to people’s lives. In other words, myth offers possibilities and allows people to imagine better futures. Additionally, these stories reveal how crises are handled and problems solved. Through Tayo, Silko demonstrates a correlation between traditional stories and healing. Therefore, she incorporates verse narratives in her novel that reveal Grandmother Spider’s wisdom and employs a prose narrative that tells Tayo’s story, thus emphasizing that both traditional and modern stories work together to restore harmony. After re-connecting with the old stories, Tayo lives harmoniously in contemporary society.

Silko’s narrative is complicated because she illustrates that solving the mysteries of life is never easy. Where there is goodness there is also evil. Consequently, through her fragmented and tangled narrative, she shows that some stories are important and have value in modern society but others are useless and the basis for witchery. For that reason,

her narrative resembles something like a spider's web – with many little threads radiating from the center, crisscrossing one another. As with the web, structure emerges as it is made, and one must simply listen and trust that meaning will appear. According to Grandmother Spider,

It isn't very easy  
to fix up things again.  
  
Remember that  
  
next time  
  
some ck'o'yo magician  
  
comes to town. (256)

Silko's involved narrative is modeled after Grandmother Spider's ideas that weaving and basketry are skills that require critical thinking and that creation occurs through the process of thought; weaving and knitting thus become metaphors for life.

In American Indian cultures Grandmother Spider weaves the web of life and spins the threads of the old ways, which in turn bear upon the new ways. Silko uses these concepts to show that her grandmother character is procreative. She writes of Tayo: "He could get no rest as long as the memories were tangled with the present, tangled up like colored threads from old Grandma's wicker sewing basket when he was a child" (6). Silko, with Grandmother Spider's assistance, spins webs of old and new stories into intricate patterns throughout *Ceremony*, making the novel an amalgamation of the supernatural and the physical worlds as well as the traditional and contemporary worlds. Although many types of narrative function in *Ceremony*, including jokes, personal

experience stories, rumor, and gossip, two major narrative types shape the events of the novel and affect the way the other types interweave as they lead to different kinds of perception. These two types are the mythic and contemporary tellings, the timeless and the time-bound narratives. The two are not independent of each other in that they constantly shape each other, but finding out how they interact is complicated by the fact that all which occurs in the time-bound framework is confused because the ways of knowing, the various kinds of narrative, are entangled.

Silko uses poetic form to reveal the mythic portions of the story and a prose style to divulge contemporary events, both of which work together to create meaning. However, the mythic portions of *Ceremony*, which reflect the ancient wisdom of Grandmother Spider, inform Tayo and teach him how to use the past as a means of living in the present. As the first poetic section suggests, the mythic story is the source of inspiration and gives rise to ritual and ceremony, situations in which words bring things into being:

See, it is moving

There is life here

for the people.

And in the belly of this story

the rituals and the ceremony

are still growing. (2)

Silko asserts that, contrary to modern skepticism, tradition is a source of life for her people and that the old stories remain just as powerful in modern society as they were in the past. She challenges modern skepticism by rendering myth as the foundation



of her novel. One way Silko demonstrates the usefulness of the old stories is by making them become Tayo's reality as they are being told.

The primary event that relates the power of story occurs when Tayo is a soldier. The dense jungle rain, so different from the desert, seems malevolent and Tayo curses it: "He damned the rain until the words were a chant" (12). When Tayo returns home, he assumes responsibility for the drought, believing that his curse has caused it. At the beginning of the novel, Tayo is sufficiently in touch with the nature of mythic life to recognize the potential significance of his cursing the rain. In fact, while he is fighting in the Philippines in the midst of the jungle rain, "Tayo began to understand what Josiah had said. Nothing was all good or all bad either; it all depended" (11). This realization demonstrates that Tayo was once influenced by traditional storytelling. He understands both the power and destructiveness of words, his cursing the rain and causing the drought; but he does not realize that the drought is the sum of something much larger with which he is connected. Silko attempts to rectify this dilemma, thus demonstrating that traditional stories are agents of wisdom needed during modern crises. She re-tells Grandmother Spider's story of the quarrel between Reed Woman and Corn Woman, the next poetic portion of the novel.

This particular story is important because it is similar to Tayo's in that it presents a conflict that ends with a drought. Corn Woman becomes angry with her sister, Reed Woman, for bathing all day instead of helping her do hard labor. As a result of this argument, Reed Woman returns to the underworld and takes the rain with her. This story parallels Tayo's situation and informs him that he is not alone in his calamity; others

before him have experienced similar circumstances. This revelation is significant in several ways. Firstly, it acts as a buffer by assuring Tayo that he is not the only one who has made this mistake. Secondly, it offers a solution as to why natural disasters occur. Silko notes in her essay, "Language and Literature From a Pueblo Perspective," that "Keeping track of all the stories within the community gives us all a certain distance, a useful perspective, that brings incidents down to a level we can deal with. If others have done it before, it cannot be terrible. If others have endured, so can we" (52). Therefore, traditional storytelling acts as an antidote for modern alienation.

The story of Reed Woman and Corn Woman explains the penalties involved with greed and quarrelling but, more importantly, helps Tayo discover that one person can cause the world to be imbalanced. His abandonment of the earth, his mother, has severe consequences. By knowing the story of Corn Woman and her sister, Reed Woman, Tayo better understands his own actions. The sisters quarrel and separate, and a drought occurs; Tayo detaches himself from the land and suddenly the rain disappears. The ancient stories also trigger Tayo's memory and he begins to remember his past. He finally acknowledges that "He was tired of fighting off the dreams and the voices; he was tired of guarding himself against places and things which evoke the memories" (26). Tayo's memory loss is a common problem that occurs during times of crisis, but it has also developed over time as he became separated from his tribal community. He realizes, however, as he becomes better acquainted with the traditional stories, that remembering and being a part of something is much healthier than losing himself in the emptiness of alcohol and separation. He remembers, "Josiah said that only humans had

to endure anything, because only humans resisted what they saw outside themselves. Animals did not resist. But they persisted, because they became part of the wind” (27). As Tayo is reconnecting with Grandmother Spider’s stories, he remembers other stories from his childhood and is able to relate them to his present situation.

Although these stories help Tayo, he remains sick. He needs a ceremony, a story that participants act out so it can reposition him into the world. In the words of Grandmother Spider, “the only cure / I know / is a good ceremony” (3). Paula Allen explains that the purpose of a ceremony is to “fuse the individual with his or her community of people, the community of people with that of the other kingdoms, and this larger communal group with the worlds beyond this one. A raising or expansion of individual consciousness naturally accompanies this process. The person sheds the isolated, individual personality and is restored to conscious harmony with the universe” (*Studies in American Indian Literature* 10). Sensing Tayo’s need, Old Grandma reacts accordingly and sends for a tribal medicine man, realizing that the white doctors can not cure what ails Tayo.

After Tayo’s encounter with the medicine man, Silko inserts another Laguna poem, this one concerning the Scalp Society for warriors who killed or touched dead enemies. K’oo’ko, a demoness with great fangs who threatens the earth and its creatures, haunted these warriors. This ancient story corresponds to contemporary events, demonstrating a correlation between quarrelling and the lack of rain. However, as noted by Gregory Salyer in *Leslie Marmon Silko*, killing others is not what has caused Tayo’s illness; Silko reveals earlier on in *Ceremony* that he does not kill anyone (39). For that reason, the

reader senses the old-world ceremony performed by Ku'oosh will not cure Tayo. This assessment is supported in the text as the traditional medicine man utters, "There are some things we can't cure like we used to, not since the white people came" (38). Old Ku'oosh does, however, temporarily stop Tayo's physical symptoms: "He could eat regular food. He seldom vomited any more. Some nights he even slept all night without the dreams" (39), but he is still ill. The ceremony is not a waste, moreover, because Tayo realizes that his own destructive power is greater than he imagined: "The old man only made him certain of something he had feared all along, something in the old stories. It took only one person to tear away the delicate strands of the web, spilling the rays of sun into the sand, and the fragile world would be injured" (38).

Tayo also learns from the old ceremony that the world is fragile, depending upon everything for harmony, particularly Grandmother Spider. Old Ku'oosh confirms this assessment when he testifies: "'But you know, grandson, this world is fragile.' The word he chose to express 'fragile' was filled with the intricacies of a continuing process, and with a strength inherent in spider webs woven across paths through sand hills where early in the morning the sun becomes entangled in each filament of web" (35). This narrative notes the importance of relationships, how they must be nurtured in order to complete the world. The reference to the strength of spider webs implies that the people's relationship to Grandmother Spider must be maintained, as she is their source of strength and wisdom. Old Ku'oosh refers again to Grandmother Spider as he describes the intricate details of storytelling: "the story behind each word must be told so there could be no mistake in the meaning of what had been said; and this demanded great

patience and love” (36). Although the spider by its spinning and killing symbolizes the alternation of the forces of creation and destruction on which life depends, the web itself represents wholeness, balance, and beauty. Its circularity and durability suggest the continuity of a living tradition. Silko is noting again the procreative nature of Grandmother Spider.

The next ancient story of *Ceremony* – that of the arrival of Pa’caya’nyi, a magician from Reedleaf town up north – most closely resembles Tayo’s own journey. Pa’caya’nyi succeeds in luring the twins Ma’see’wi and Ou’yu’ye’wi away from caring for the mother Corn Altar by enticing them with magic. The twins assume that the magic will provide a new source of life and that corn and animals can be created with it, but they do not realize it remains all just a trick. The mother becomes very angry and says to herself, “If they like that magic so much / let them live off it” (48), and then the rain clouds disappear.

Grandmother Spider demonstrates again the consequences that people must suffer for abandoning her. Although similar in theme, this story provides a broader view of the same moral. American Indian writers are known for using repetition in their works, claiming that through repetition people will remember. Silko uses this technique in *Ceremony* to demonstrate the importance of Grandmother Spider’s story. Therefore, several stories are presented with the same theme as a means of ensuring their permanence. The moral to this story reiterates the harsh realities involved with deserting Grandmother Spider; however, it suggests a different type of quarrelling as noted in the previous story between the two sisters.

This story establishes the penalties for people who abandon the earth, their mother, to participate in material things, such as the war. Silko is again drawing parallels to Tayo's situation, as he was tricked by the deceptive profits of war. Nourishment for physical and emotional life comes not from material possessions or powerful people but from the source of life, the earth. Josiah reminds Tayo that "there are some things more important than money. He pointed his chin at the springs and around at the narrow canyon. 'This is where we come from, see. This sand, these trees, the vines, all the wildflowers. This earth keeps us going'" (45). Silko inserts this story of the Ck'o'yo medicine man and his seduction of the people by magic for several reasons. Firstly, to confirm the symbiotic relationship between archaic and contemporary events. Secondly, to demonstrate the influence of Grandmother Spider. Silko reveals from the story that began earlier in verse form that Corn Mother, who is angry at her people for playing with magic, has caused the drought. They notice that hummingbird is not suffering at all, and he tells them that in the underworld everything is verdant and fruitful, so he goes down there to eat.

This story implies that there is a source of life unaffected by magic and the mother is the source of life and health. Gregory Salyer confirms this observation when he states:

This is one of the most important stories of *Ceremony*; namely, in creation hope is present in spite of the power of destruction . . . Tayo is looking for life, and because life exists in the worlds below, we have hope for Tayo that he can find its source. Tayo is confident, too; he knows the stories are powerful. What he needs is another ceremony, a story more suited for modern times that will

reorient him. Later on when he sees a hummingbird, he thinks: “as long as the hummingbird had not abandoned the land, somewhere there were still flowers, and they could all go on.” (42)

Before life can be restored to both Tayo and the land, however, the protagonist must be cleansed of the evil that has possessed him. Grandmother Spider confirms this evaluation as she demands: “You get old Buzzard to purify / your town first / and then, maybe, I will send you people / food and rain again” (105). Accordingly, Old Grandma sends for another medicine man, despite his reputation, a gesture that restates her procreative nature, thus illustrating Grandmother Spider’s influence. The grandmother is willing to change in order that her grandson might live; therefore, she allows a less traditional medicine man to perform a new ceremony.

The ceremony proper is a Navajo sand painting ritual where the suffering individual is placed in the center and a pattern drawn around him that represents the journey backward to his origins and forward to his healing. Several stages occur in the ceremony, but the ending has special meaning. Betonie, the person in charge of the ceremony, chants on behalf of Tayo, “I’m walking back to belonging / I’m walking home to happiness / I’m walking back to long life” (144). Then the medicine man spins him around “sunwise / and he recovered.” But according to Grandmother Spider, limits are present in this ceremony; therefore, a larger rite needs to be performed because “All kinds of evil were still on him” (144). Betonie confirms her prediction. He also believes that “the ceremony isn’t finished yet” (152). He advises Tayo to “Remember these stars” (152), declaring, “I’ve seen them and I’ve seen the spotted cattle; I’ve seen a mountain

and I've seen a woman" (152). Having completed the ritual that initiates him into the larger ceremony, Tayo begins to see and feel better. Boundaries disappear and identities begin to merge: "He took a deep breath of cold mountain air: there were no boundaries; the world below and the sand paintings inside became gathered there that night" (145).

Tayo learns yet another important lesson from Grandmother Spider as Silko incorporates in verse the story of Kaup'a'ta, the gambler. Kaup'a'ta is a *ck'o'yo* magician who tricks people into gambling with him and gains power over his duped victims by feeding them blue cornmeal into which he has mixed human blood. All the victims eventually gamble away their lives and are themselves sacrificed to make the blue cornmeal mixture that will overpower other victims. When Kaup'a'ta captures the storm clouds, thus causing a drought, the sun, their father, takes gifts of blue and yellow pollen, tobacco, and coral beads to Grandmother Spider to find a way of freeing the clouds. Spider Woman advises him about the most useful strategy against Kaup'a'ta. Sun Man knows what to do and succeeds in his mission because "It happened / just the way Spiderwoman said" (175). As an act of triumph, the Sun does not kill Kaup'a'ta but cuts out his eyes and throws them into the sky where they become "the horizon stars of autumn" (176). Immediately after this story is told, Tayo, in "late September," sees the stars drawn by Betonie to mark the final stage of Tayo's curative ceremony (178). Tayo thus becomes Sun Man, as he is sent to his mother, the earth, to bring back the rain clouds. This story is significant because it illustrates the parallel between the old stories and the story in which Tayo himself is participating. As the former are being told, Tayo is living them. Therefore, he is now a part of the story and his own story will serve as a



guide for others in the future, just as his ancestors' stories have instructed him. He finally recognizes the pattern: "he had watched the sky every night, looking for the pattern of stars the old man drew on the ground that night. Late in September he saw them in the north" (178).

The poetic narrative, which contains Grandmother Spider's wisdom, teaches Tayo how to live in modern society. These stories deliver powerful messages of how others before him have dealt with similar crises. Tayo learns through the stories the consequences of greed, quarrelling, abandonment, neglect, and material possessions. He knows now that it only takes one person to cause an imbalance in the universe and that he is a vital part of that universe, just like the animals, the plants, and the rocks. Tayo mentions that "Everywhere he looked, he saw a world made of stories, the long ago, time immemorial stories, as old Grandma called them. It was a world alive, always changing and moving; and if you knew where to look, you could see it, sometimes almost imperceptible, like the motion of the stars across the sky" (95). As the ancient stories have brought Tayo closer to Grandmother Spider, the heart of Laguna Pueblo tradition, they have also reconnected him with his own grandmother, Old Grandma. Because tradition is embodied in the grandmother, she is the most influential person in American Indian literature.

Old Grandma, through prose narrative, also aids Tayo during his quest for harmony, demonstrating that ancient and contemporary stories are equally important and simultaneously healing. Old Grandma through her intuitive, nurturing, and loving ways continues Grandmother Spider's tradition in modern society. Therefore, her wisdom is

vital to Tayo's healing process because she not only embodies ancient tradition, she also exemplifies modern society. Consequently, as Grandmother Spider physically alters herself to assist Tayo, Old Grandma remains procreative by updating her traditional beliefs to suit modern times. However, she does not change for the sake of change but, rather, transforms for the purpose of improvement and enhancement. Gary Witherspoon has observed that this concept of alteration is characteristic of Pueblo Indians, claiming that "when they do change, it does not usually involve the wholesale and unaltered adoption of alien ways, but a creative synthesis of alien ways with traditional modes" (189). This philosophy is the basis of *Ceremony*, as demonstrated through the verse and prose sections of the novel; it ensures equipoise. Old Grandma embodies this tradition.

Silko, mirroring her own strong affection for her Grandma A'mooh, which she amplified in *Storyteller*, captures the nurturing relationship between grandmother and grandchild in *Ceremony*. She writes of Tayo's grandmother: "She sat down on the edge of the bed and she reached out for him. She held his head on her lap and she cried with him, saying 'A'moo'oh, a'moo'ohh' over and over again" (33). Old Grandma's love, along with her respect for traditional native teachings, is instrumental in healing the protagonist. Edith Swan captures the essence of Tayo's grandmother:

She is convinced of the dignity and efficacious nature of tribal methods for curing and sanity – precepts undergirding her insistence that medicine men Ku'oosh and Betonie treat her grandson Tayo. As maternal figurehead, Grandma is the living reference point for the "good family name." She is as stubbornly persistent in her survival strategies as she is a powerful force in

determining family affairs. (Swan)

Silko's *Ceremony* acknowledges Old Grandma's respect for tradition in various ways; this respect is instrumental to saving Tayo's life.

Because the grandmother is a source of strength and wisdom in Laguna Pueblo, she has the ability to create and destroy life, depending upon whether she fulfills her role as the transmitter of culture. Old Grandma remains procreative throughout Silko's novel because she is intuitive and willing to change her beliefs in order that her grandson might live. For instance, she is the first person who recognizes that the white doctors are incapable of curing Tayo. Upon this discovery, she acts accordingly and sends for an old medicine doctor in spite of the resistance she receives from Tayo's Aunt. Unlike Auntie, Old Grandma does not care what others think of her family. She states: "He's my grandson. If I send for old Ku'oosh, he'll come. Let them talk if they want to" (33). Tayo realizes the differences between Old Grandma and Auntie when he claims that "Grandma didn't care what anyone said. She liked to sit by her stove and gossip about the people who were talking about their family" (89).

Being intuitive, Old Grandma realizes that the ancient ceremony performed by old Ku'oosh has not cured Tayo. As a result, she decides to risk sending him to a less traditional medicine man, Betonie. Auntie resists the idea, but Old Grandma does not waver. She knows that Betonie, despite his reputation, is Tayo's only chance for survival; thus she remains procreative. Her response to Auntie is direct: "Never mind. Old man Ku'oosh knows him, and he thinks this man Betonie might help him" (116). Old Grandma's respect for tradition as opposed to Auntie's embarrassment is responsible

for Tayo's recovery. Despite the opposition she encounters in choosing the methods of Tayo's treatment, she stands her ground, thus ensuring her grandson's health. These attributes demonstrate the nurturing and protective influence of Grandmother Spider. Old Grandma is procreative in that she is willing to do what is necessary to restore her grandson's health; consequently, she continues the life cycle.

Old Grandma's faith in Grandmother Spider, which she instills in Tayo, is another procreative characteristic that assists the protagonist in his journey. This faith is most evident in Grandmother Spider's influence on Old Grandma when Tayo notices a spider while praying for rain. Silko writes: "The spider came out first. She drank from the edge of the pool, careful to keep the delicate egg sacs on her abdomen out of the water" (94). As Tayo sees this image, he recalls the stories his grandma used to tell him of Grandmother Spider. He remembers that "Spider Woman had told Sun Man how to win the storm clouds back from the Gambler so they would be free again to bring rain and snow to the people" (94). This revelation is significant because it illustrates that Tayo's grandmother is traditional. Women in Indian society are expected to be transmitters of culture; it is their responsibility to instill the history of their people in their children. Old Grandma has thus fulfilled her duty as the educator. However, Silko reveals that the modern science books Tayo was forced to read have caused him to be skeptical of the old stories, a skepticism which has contributed to his alienation and resulted in his illness. The significance of Tayo's remembering Grandmother Spider is that the stories never left him completely; they are still a part of him. He never forgot that his grandma used to say, "Back in time immemorial, things were different, the animals could talk to human

beings and many magical things still happened” (94-95). Because Tayo was raised believing in and respecting the old traditions of his people, he has a chance of surviving.

Old Grandma’s respect for traditional ritual is another procreative characteristic that ultimately prolongs the protagonist’s life. The reverence bequeathed to deer by the Laguna people is illustrated in *Ceremony*. Tayo describes the ceremony that will be performed on the deer slain by Rocky and Tayo:

He knew when they took the deer home, it would be laid out on a Navajo blanket, and Old Grandma would put a string of turquoise around its neck and put silver and turquoise rings around the tips of the antler. Josiah would prepare a little bowl of cornmeal and place it by the deer's head so that anyone who went near could leave some on the nose. (52)

The deer are honored, not exploited, by the Laguna people. Silko honors this ritual in *Ceremony* to illustrate the power of tradition. Old Grandma remains procreative because she infuses in Tayo the idea that the spirits of the deer return and give their lives as sustenance to the people, if proper ceremonies are performed.

This ritual is portrayed in the novel when Josiah and Tayo kneel beside the deer's body: “They sprinkled cornmeal on the nose and fed the deer's spirit. They had to show their love and respect, their appreciation; otherwise the deer would be offended, and they would not come and die for them the following year” (51). Because of the ritual respect given to animals, Tayo’s life is spared when he encounters a mountain lion. His chant, “‘Mountain lion,’ ‘mountain lion,’ becoming what you are with each breath, your substance changing with earth and sky. Mountain lion, the hunter’s helper” (196),

invokes the connection between animals and humans. Correspondingly, the mountain lion leaves; Tayo honors him by sprinkling yellow pollen into his footprints (196). This incident is noteworthy because immediately after this ritual is performed, Tayo meets two Texans who contemplate turning him over to the authorities, thinking he is in the woods to steal cattle. They abandon this notion, however, when they see the mountain lion's footprints. Shortly after this event, Tayo meets a hunter whose "... face was wide and brown, and the skin was smooth and soft like an old woman's" (207). The simile used to describe the hunter implies Old Grandma's influence. Additionally, the "long strands of sky blue turquoise in his ears, and silver rings on four fingers of each hand" (207) relate the hunter to the deer ritual. Turquoise and silver rings are gifts bestowed on deer after they are hunted and killed in order to honor their spirit. Moreover, Silko links the hunter to a mountain lion as evinced by the fact that "the cap he wore over his ears was made from tawny thick fur which shone when the wind ruffled through it; it looked like mountain-lion skin" (207). These descriptions, which compare animals to humans and humans to animals, illustrate the importance of tradition. Old Grandma's respect for honoring the deer's spirit proves that tradition is needed in modern society. Because she has instilled this convention in her grandson, the mountain lion spares his life. Accordingly, the protagonist honors him by sprinkling his tracks with pollen. As a result, he escapes the wrath of the Texans, who are led astray by the mountain lion's trail. Then, he meets the hunter, who helps him find the spotted cattle and his way home.

Silko notes the significance of relationships to Laguna Pueblo and the power of the grandmother. Not only is Tayo's life saved because of Old Grandma's instruction in

traditional ritual but it is also quite possible that his life is spared because Grandmother Spider's spirit embodies both the mountain lion and the hunter. Regardless, the fact remains that respect for traditional ritual continues the life cycle in Silko's *Ceremony*.

By reuniting Tayo with Grandmother Spider and Old Grandma, Silko is demonstrating the value of balance. The protagonist's life is imbalanced in the beginning of the novel because he has abandoned his tradition. Somewhere along the way he loses the stories and rituals of his ancestors; therefore, he cannot live harmoniously in modern society. After reliving the stories of the past and allowing tradition back in his life, Tayo has restored a balance between tradition and innovation. However, according to Paula Allen, his life remains imbalanced because he has lost touch with his feminine side. The mother who bore him has abandoned him; he is treated like an outsider by Auntie, the woman who raised him; and he is separated from Mother Earth (qtd. in Swan). Because of the domination of Tayo's life by males, which is an unhealthy condition in Indian society, he must be initiated into motherhood before reconnecting with his feminine side. According to Robert Nelson, "three dimensions of life, each reflecting the other, are affected by sickness or imbalance, namely, Tayo himself, Laguna society (as seen in Emo, Auntie, and Others), and the earth. Those three dimensions are brought into balance and focus by appropriate—that is, ritual—interaction with particular women" (qtd. in Salyer 52).

By participating in a ritual reuniting him with his birth mother, Laura, and his spiritual mother, Grandmother Spider, the protagonist achieves balance through a figurative rebirth. Thus, Grandmother Spider continues Tayo's healing process in

physical form. Tayo is eventually cured through an elaborate ceremony that involves several women, all of whom represent Grandmother Spider. Paula Allen observes: “The women at Laguna are individual personifications condensing into a central being, Grandmother Spider. The figures of Laura, Night Swan, Grandmother, Betonie’s Grandmother, and Ts’eh belong to the earth spirit and live in harmony with her, even though this attunement may lead to tragedy” (*The Sacred Hoop* 118). Tayo’s initiation into motherhood begins with Night Swan, another aspect of Grandmother Spider. Silko portrays their likeness by associating Night Swan with symbols typically characteristic of Spider Woman, such as the color blue, which represents Mount Taylor, with which Grandmother Spider is always associated. Night Swan’s maternal instincts also link her to Spider Woman. She tells Tayo that “‘I have been watching you for a long time’” (99). The protagonist returns her sentiment when he confesses his insecurities of being a half-breed. He professes that “[h]e had not talked about [that] before with anyone” (99). Night Swan’s reply, “They are fools. They blame us, the ones who look different. That way they don’t have to think about what has happened inside themselves” (100), reiterates her wisdom and nurturing ability. Therefore, she is an extension of Grandmother Spider; through her body she reconnects Tayo to his mother, the earth, and restores balance to both Tayo and the universe.

Night Swan and Tayo’s lovemaking is healing in two ways. Firstly, the drought of Laguna Pueblo is relieved: “She moved under him, her rhythm merging into the sound of the rain in the tree” (99). Secondly, Ts’eh’s love is transmitted to Tayo. Paula Allen explains:



The encounter with Night Swan sets the seal of Tayo's destiny in those moments. Through her body the love that Ts'eh bears for him is transmitted. Night Swan is aware of the significance of her act and tells Tayo, "You don't have to understand what is happening. But remember this day. You will recognize it later. You are a part of it now." (*The Sacred Hoop* 122)

Now that Grandmother Spider has transmitted Ts'eh's love to Tayo through Night Swan, he is ready for his final phase of initiation into motherhood, which Ts'eh completes.

As Night Swan has predicted, Tayo does recognize this day later when he meets Ts'eh, the woman who concludes his ceremony. Ts'eh is likened to Grandmother Spider by the symbols of Mount Taylor. She lives on this mountain, and is nicknamed, Ts'eh Montano for Tse-pi'na, the Laguna name for Mount Taylor. Ts'eh is also linked to Yellow Woman and Corn Mother, embodiments of Grandmother Spider, as she is surrounded by the color yellow. Yellow Woman's significance in *Ceremony* resides in her being a role model; she is, one might say, the Spirit of Woman. Silko draws a parallel between Ts'eh and Yellow Woman by surrounding her with the color yellow and outfitting her in "a man's shirt tucked into a yellow skirt that hung below her knees and pale buckskin moccasins with rainbirds carved on them" (177), all of which are typical attire for "Yellow Woman." Additionally, the place where Ts'eh and Tayo first make love is likened to a riverbank, which is the location where Yellow Woman makes love to Silva, her abductor, in Silko's traditional short stories of "Yellow Woman." Silko makes these connections to demonstrate that Ts'eh is also Tayo's birth mother, Laura.

Laura is depicted as a Yellow Woman early in the novel. A symbolic element in Silko's "Yellow Woman" stories is a cottonwood tree, and Silko associates this symbol with Tayo's mother in *Ceremony*. Additionally, Laura's sexuality and her interest in adventures with strange men are other characteristics similar to the traditional "Yellow Woman" stories. In some respects, Laura is like the Corn Mother who went away, such that Tayo's search for healing is a quest for his own mother. Therefore, Tayo must be reunited with his birth mother before he can be healed. Elizabeth Nelson and Malcolm Nelson acknowledge that "Tayo has completed Betonie's ceremony, but he is still unsure of himself and his place in the world" (128). They suggest, however, that the erotic and passionate lovemaking scene between Ts'eh and Tayo ends all uncertainty:

He eased himself deeper within her and felt the warmth close around him like river sand, softly giving way under foot, then closing firmly around the ankle in cloudy warm water. But he did not get lost, and he smiled at her as she held his hips and pulled him closer. He let the motion carry him, and he could feel the momentum within, at first almost imperceptible, gathering in his belly.

When it came, it was the edge of a steep riverbank crumbling under the downpour until suddenly it all broke loose and collapsed itself. (180-81)

The love scene is symbolic of a spiritual rebirth. The references to belly, water, and sand are symbolic of Sand Alter Woman, who is also known as Childbirth Water Woman. In Sand Alter Woman the mystical relationship between water, worship, and woman is established; she is also said to be the mother of the Katsinas, those powerful messengers

who relate the spirit world to the world of humankind and vice versa. Therefore, Tayo, through Ts'eh's body, is reunited with Laura, his birth mother.

Like Yellow Woman, Ts'eh is lover, mother, and mother earth. The images of sand associated with Ts'eh indicate that Tayo is being absorbed into the earth: "He felt the warm sand on his toes and knees; he felt her body, and it was warm as the sand, and he couldn't feel where her body ended and the sand began" (232). Grandmother Spider's procreative influence is noted the next morning after Ts'eh and Tayo make love. Tayo smiles and claims that "being alive was all right then: he had not breathed like that for a long time" (181).

Ts'eh nurtures the protagonist in other ways besides with her body. She teaches him valuable lessons of how to care for the earth: "He went with her to learn about the roots and plants she had gathered" (224). She also teaches him about love and the power of stories: "As long as you remember, it is part of this story we have together" (231). Finally, Ts'eh teaches Tayo about resisting witchery: "The end of the story. They want to change it. They want it to end here, the way all their stories end, encircling slowly to choke the life away" (231-32). In body and spirit Ts'eh restores Tayo's life.

Because the protagonist has allowed women to love him, he has achieved equipoise. Through Ts'eh, he creates for himself a new life filled with love, hope, and prosperity. Neither his birth mother nor his spiritual mothers have ever abandoned him, for Tayo finally realizes "They had always been loved. He thought of her then; she had always loved him, she had never left him; she had always been there. He crossed the river at sunrise" (255). Ts'eh reawakens Tayo's belief in a balanced world which he dimly

remembers from tribal stories. She is representative of earth, rain, wind, and sky, but also of the thought power that controls the elements. Her "storm-pattern blanket" indicates her ordered strength.

Tayo's ability to overcome the split between body and mind, which Westerners have trained into him, completes his ceremony. By having him experience Spider Woman's wholeness through Ts'eh, Silko reinstates her protagonist's belief in magic. On one level, he thinks Ts'eh is just an apparition or superstition, that she means nothing at all, that it is all in his own head. Her lineage or family seems to be unknown. Her voice can be as unreal as an echo (222). On another level, however, he thinks she is very real: "He had not dreamed her; she was there as certainly as the sparrows had been there, leaving spindly scratches in the mud" (222). According to Kristin Herzog,

this double vision on a physical and a metaphysical level is alien to Western readers. They find it difficult to comprehend that a real crawling spider coming up after the rain is, seen from another aspect, Spider-Woman, the divine creatrix; that Tayo's mother, the long-dead prostitute, can mythologically and poetically merge into Mother Earth or Mother Corn; that Ts'eh, the woman that Tayo makes love to, is a manifestation of Thought-Woman, the balance of the universe. (Herzog)

Silko portrays Tayo's uncertainty of Ts'eh to demonstrate that modern society has lost faith in supernatural beings. However, through an elaborate ceremony with Night Swan and Ts'eh, she proves that miracles can happen. Tayo is not completely healed until he embraces the unknown. Once he allows Grandmother Spider to reenter his life – body

and soul – he is cured. Therefore, tradition overrides modern skepticism. Grandmother Spider, through Old Grandma, Night Swan, Ts’eh, the mountain lion and the Hunter, protects, guides, loves, educates, and rejuvenates Tayo. The protagonist feels himself connected once again to a fertile and nurturing earth. He loses himself in the unity of all life and is no longer an invisible outcast.

Grandmother Spider is procreative in *Ceremony*; however, certain events of the novel might be construed as destructive or non-procreative. As the creator through thought, everything Grandmother Spider thinks about is realized; therefore, she is essentially responsible for all creation, including witchery, war, natural disasters, and death. Correspondingly, she possesses both qualities. Death and chaos are present in Silko’s *Ceremony*, as well as life and harmony. American Indians’ belief that balances are needed in life is useful because this conviction is essential to harmony. Binary oppositions, such as life and death, men and women, old stories and new stories, sickness and health, hot and cold, and light and dark both complement and depend upon one another for survival. If one area is lacking, an imbalance occurs, and harmony is unobtainable. In light of this viewpoint, Pueblos respect everything that makes up the universe – good or bad. Louis Owens explains further: “In this vein, the rattlesnake is respected and feared by the Pueblo peoples and is considered a powerful, dangerous presence, but it is to be acknowledged and avoided, never killed” (qtd. in Larson 141).

Allowing both good and evil to exist in Laguna Pueblo society is preventative medicine. It maintains harmony. Sidner Larson confirms this statement when he states that “Pueblo people view the world as a dangerous place where good and evil, both of

which are necessary, exist in a precarious balance” (140). Larson’s observation is key to understanding American Indian literature. The world of the Pueblo Indians is characterized by movements in space and transformations in states of being through time. None of these movements or transformations, however, is inherently good or evil; but both are potentially good and evil. Control is what distinguishes the good from the evil. All powers of motion and transformation can be used for the good of man if they can be controlled by man. Gary Witherspoon explains further: “All things and beings outside of man’s control are dangerous and potentially evil. For the Pueblo Indians, evil is not negative in a moral or ethical sense but negative in a pragmatic or realistic sense. Evil is misfortune, illness, premature death, drought, famine, or some other tragedy, all of which may be caused by things and beings out of control” (186). Therefore, Pueblos are interested in controlling both themselves and their environment for their safety, health, and well-being by avoiding excess since overindulgence causes imbalances.

On the other hand, when imbalances do occur, Pueblos refer to ancient tradition for guidance. Geertz substantiates this assessment when he states that “By exercising the powers of the mind and by utilizing ritual knowledge a Navajo believes he can avoid tragedies, overcome evil, and insure a long and happy life” (187). Grandmother Spider, in effect, is the ambivalent center who controls good and evil for harmony’s sake. Because of this procreative responsibility, Grandmother Spider has to teach harsh lessons for the better of the universe.

Harley’s brutal death in *Ceremony* is an unfortunate event that logically questions Grandmother Spider’s procreative nature. However, Grandmother Spider, through Ts’eh,

warns Tayo that evil forces want the story to end with destruction. Consequently, she confirms her procreative nature by discouraging the protagonist from fighting violence with violence. Accordingly, Tayo resists the temptation to kill Harley's attackers and thus defeats the evil spirits. On the other hand, by refusing to fight violence with violence, the protagonist has to watch a brutal death. Therefore, Harley's death could be interpreted as sacrificial. Then again, Shamoon Zamir claims that "By the end of the novel it is the stories of gift and reciprocity that seem to triumph. It is not blood sacrifice that regenerates the land, at least not at first. The hero is cured and the rain comes before the crucifixion of Harley" (405).

Based on Zamir's analysis, Grandmother Spider is not suggesting that blood sacrifice has to occur for harmony to exist. Even though the scene in the uranium mine is a suspenseful moment of the novel, it is not the main idea. *Ceremony* concludes with the oral gift narrative where Corn Mother accepts the gifts brought her by Hummingbird and Fly and returns to the human world (405). Consequently, Grandmother Spider is recommending that salvation can transpire from mutual love and respect. Silko confirms this statement in the text:

The mountain outdistanced their destruction, just as love had outdistanced death. The mountain could not be lost to them, because it was in their bones; Josiah and Rocky were not far away. They were close; they had always been close. And he loved them as he had always loved them, the feeling pulsing over him as it had always been. They loved him that way; he could feel the love they had for him. The damage that they had done had never reached this feeling.

This feeling was their life, vitality locked deep in blood memory, and the people were strong, and the fifth world endured, and nothing was ever lost as long as the love remained. (219-20)

Harley's death is a harsh reality that Tayo has to accept in order for peace and harmony to occur; Grandmother Spider uses his death to illustrate the consequences of abandoning and disrespecting the earth while demonstrating that blood sacrifice is not the solution for salvation.

Natural disasters are another frequent occurrence in *Ceremony*. Since there is an imbalance created by the separation of Mother Earth from her children, rain either occurs in torrential downpours or it ceases to exist at all. Grandmother Spider is again using education as a means of maintaining balance. If she fails to teach these harsh lessons, the world will remain in a constant state of chaos. Natural disasters attune people to universal problems as opposed to individual concerns. Sidner Larson explains: "Examination of contemporary American Indian literature also reveals a strong connection to the past in the form of a pragmatic and humanist authorial personality determined to constitute and preserve American Indian individuals in balance with collective communities" (140). Pueblo worldview teaches that every individual has immense responsibility for the world that he or she inhabits. Within this worldview there are no bad politicians, bad parents, or failed relationships to be blamed. Each individual assumes complete responsibility for the survival of all things in the world, animate and inanimate; and it is only with acceptance of this responsibility that the individual reaches maturity. This lesson is the most valuable one that Tayo learns from Grandmother



Spider in *Ceremony*. Only after this realization is his sickness cured and the world at peace once again. Silko writes: “It is dead for now / It is dead for now / It is dead for now / It is dead for now” (261). Tayo, with Grandmother Spider’s help, has combated the witchery. Therefore, tradition prevails.

Despite the severe lessons Grandmother Spider teaches, her wisdom and love are responsible for Tayo’s recovery. The protagonist admits that “if he had not known about their witchery, they might have fooled him” (250). Grandmother Spider is the center that sustains Laguna Pueblo people; therefore, her mission is to maintain harmony. Through both her intellect and her body, she teaches Tayo the secrets of survival. He is now blessed, as he has been reunited with Grandmother Spider, body and soul. Silko notes Grandmother Spider’s procreative influence: “Yet at that moment in the sunrise, it was all so beautiful, everything, from all directions, evenly perfectly, balancing day with night, summer months with winter. The valley was closing this totality, like the mind holding all thoughts together in a single moment” (237). Grandmother Spider is the mastermind behind all thoughts, all creation, and all love – she is a single strand that holds all other strands together, thus forming a universal and constant web of meaning.

### The Destructive Power of the Blackfeet Gros Ventre Grandmother

James Welch's *Winter in the Blood* is a story about the lack of story. The narrator, who is also the protagonist of the novel, suffers the malaise of modern man; he is alienated from his family, his community, his land, and his own past. Because he has lost the story of who he is and where he has come from, he is ineffective in relationships and at odds with his environment. The essence of his dilemma is captured early in the text:

The country had created a distance as deep as it was empty, and the people accepted and treated each other with distance. But the distance I felt came not from country or people; it came from within me. I was as distant from myself as a hawk from the moon. And that was why I had no particular feelings toward my mother and grandmother. (2)

Based on Janet St. Clair's theory that "Being and becoming . . . are derived from relationships: a meaningful sense of self evolves from connections to family, place, community and language" (151), the deliberately nameless narrator in *Winter in the Blood* has lost both personal and tribal identity. Like Silko's Tayo in *Ceremony*, he is isolated from tradition, is plagued by the deaths of loved ones, has difficulty remembering past events, and has lost touch with his feminine side. While the deaths of First Raise and Mose, his father and brother, contribute to his isolation, they are not the direct cause. Lavonne Ruoff puts the situation in perspective when she claims that "the chain of circumstances that ultimately leads to the narrator's feeling of separateness begins with his grandmother, who is at once the unwitting cause of the family's isolation from the Blackfeet tribe and the means by which the narrator can partially learn about them and his

family” (136). Because the American Indian grandmother embodies the survival skills of traditional wisdom, she is irreplaceable; therefore, she is the foundation to which her people adhere. However, the narrator in *Winter in the Blood* lacks this foundation.

Since Blackfeet tradition establishes the grandmother as a vital source of life, children usually feel closer to her than their mother. Indian grandmothers, according to Carolyn Niethammer, are themselves considered an integral part of Mother Earth. By accepting this role, they strongly influence the continuation of their race. She also points out that “Among the Gros Ventres, in Montana, grandmothers were responsible for the teaching and training of their granddaughters from about age seven until marriage” (250). Contrary to this view, however, is Welch’s portrayal of the grandmother. Welch purposely gives her little or no voice to demonstrate the damaging effects of a lost tradition. Her inactive role is noted when the narrator mentions that she ““has gone to seed. There is no fertilizer in her bones”” (9). Unable to communicate, she is silent now, only able to murmur an occasional ““Ai, ai”” (11), as she is haunted by the past and confined by her own physical frailties. Welch emphasizes damaged familial relationships, as the grandmother is subjected to ridicule by both her grandson and Lame Bull throughout much of the novel.

Given that the nameless narrator is distanced from his grandmother, he cannot know himself. For that reason, he mocks her existence – frequently referring to her as the “old lady” (12) and suggesting to his mother that they butcher one of the heifers so his grandmother can eat steak for the rest of her life. Teresa’s reply, ““She’ll be gone soon enough without you rushing things”” (3-4), illustrates further this unhealthy relationship.

Lavonne Ruoff claims that mockery and distance “is a deviation from the traditional respect children were expected to show their elders,” and Lame Bull’s behavior is “in violation of the old Blackfeet taboo that a man should not speak to his mother-in-law or even look at her, which was equally binding on her” (138- 39 ). Likewise, Carolyn Niethammer remarks that “Old age was equated with wisdom and learning in most Native American societies, and aged persons were treated with deference and respect” (249). Welch’s deliberate departure from and parody of tradition demonstrate the extent of alienation in *Winter in the Blood*. Although Teresa “didn’t like the way [Lame Bull] teased the old lady,” she overlooks it (23), thus suggesting that dishonor is a behavior to which she has grown accustomed. The final funeral scene reiterates this interpretation.

While the grandmother tries to respect the customs of her tribe, Teresa denies her them in death, insisting that her mother be properly prepared for burial by the undertaker in nearby Harlem. Ironically, the mortician seals her up in her shiny coffin without a viewing so that no one gets to see his handiwork. Her funeral is neither Catholic nor traditional Blackfeet. Only her grandson preserves a bit of the old burial custom by throwing onto her grave her one surviving possession from the old life—the tobacco pouch with its arrowhead. This traditional gesture is offered more as an attempt to end the curse of bad medicine that he believes his grandmother embodies, rather than an expression of traditional respect. The satiric tone of this final event confirms the magnitude of separation by Blackfeet Indians from their tradition, and the damage they sustained as a result. While humor may be an important factor in Indian culture, modern skepticism pervades it here.

Humor, a defense mechanism employed by Welch in *Winter in the Blood* to shield human emotion, is a bandage for modern alienation. Although satire is liberating in that it provides an outlet for stressful situations, it can also be debilitating if it becomes the solution to modern alienation. In other words, since humor often disguises emotion, it is only a temporary solution. However, given that tradition embodies preventative medicine, it is the only remedy powerful enough to sustain life. Stagnation occurs when tradition is reduced to nothing more than comic relief. When tradition becomes a scapegoat for modern defeat, as opposed to a foundation for modern survival, harmony is unobtainable. Therefore, recognizing and respecting the symbiotic relationship between antiquity and modernity, which is most prevalent in Silko's *Ceremony* but strategically absent in Welch's *Winter in the Blood*, is key to modern survival.

As evinced in Silko's *Ceremony*, storytelling creates a cultural matrix that allows a continuum from past to present and future. However, in Welch's novel isolation is so extreme, only the chaos of disconnected memories, desperate actions, and useless conversation remains. Attempting to tell his story, the nameless narrator captures the essence of his existence: "Coming home was not easy any more" (2). The land he crosses is empty and abandoned: "the Earthboys were gone" (1). The ranch buildings have caved in. Even at his own ranch there is a sense of emptiness, especially in his relationships with his family: "none of them counted; not one meant anything to me. And for no reason. I felt no hatred, no love, no guilt, no conscience, nothing but a distance that had grown through the years" (2). The story of the narrator's life is

disordered, chaotic, and finally, to him, meaningless. As the grandmother is broken, so also is the protagonist, and so are their narratives.

The initial confused narrative exists between Lame Bull and the narrator. Lame Bull recalls a time when a flood influenced their region; during his recollection he tells the protagonist that he was too young to remember. The protagonist counters, “I was almost twenty” (8). Lame Bull replies, “You were not much more than a gleam in your old man’s eye” (8). The story is brief and terse; conflicting versions result in a separation of the men rather than a sharing of a common event. The story does not work because it fails to develop from a shared perception.

Another confused narrative occurs when Teresa and the narrator disagree about Amos, the one duck that survived the neglected water tub. Teresa reveals that they ate the duck for Christmas dinner, but the protagonist thought it was the pet turkey they ate. There is also a question of who killed the duck. Welch notes the narrator’s confusion in the text: “It was he, I thought, who had killed the turkey. But now it was my mother who had killed the turkey while First Raise was in town making the white men laugh” (18). Confusion leads to more confusion as the narrator and his mother continue to debate Amos’s fate: “Now the bobcat killed Amos . . . ‘No! The bobcat killed the big turkey,’ she said, then added quietly, as though Lame Bull might hear over the grinding of steel, as though Bird might hear over the sound of the bawling calf, as though the fish that were never in the river might hear: ‘I killed Amos’” (18). The retelling of the events creates chaos rather than clarity. Additionally, when the narrator asks his

mother why his father stayed away so much, she is defensive and abrupt, switching the focus of the conversation to a recollection of First Raise's death. The narrator admits that he has little memory of this event. The episode results not in shared grief or comfort, but in Teresa accusing her son of being a drifter too. The narrator is alienated again: "I never expected much from Teresa and I never got it. But neither did anybody else. Maybe that's why First Raise stayed away so much" (21). This statement is a bitter resolution to the question that prompted the brief discussion, which reiterates the magnitude of miscommunication.

According to Lynn Ross-Bryant, Welch's dialogue is typical of modern literature:

In these examples of modern literature we see revealed the pain of human consciousness and anxiety, alienation and loneliness, emptiness and the threat of meaninglessness. Dialogue is threatened; the story can hardly be told. The writers are not, of course, simply writing their individual stories. They believe that to some extent this is the story of our time – that we cannot tell our story or we have forgotten how or we do not have a story at all, which leaves us alone in a meaningless universe. (148-49)

Although Ross-Bryant's assessment is accurate, merely concluding that Welch's novel is another example of modern alienation, a replication of T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," would be as premature and simplistic as labeling *Ceremony* a romantic recounting of the past. *Winter in the Blood* is not an attempt by Welch to fit the mold of modern alienation; its purpose is to represent the Blackfeet Indian experience – a narrative that

happens to be distinguishable from the Laguna Pueblo tradition. Simply characterizing *Winter in the Blood* as modernist would be painting an unrealistic picture of human life for peoples whose entire histories have been filled with hardship, disease, and death. This mistaken view leads readers to believe that all American Indians are static in their views of reality, closed to change and locked into changeless and timeless traditions. While they do hold an image of beauty and harmony, it is a goal tempered with the hard facts of reality: that beauty and harmony can only exist among ugliness and death. An examination of American Indian history will offer support for a contrasting interpretation, that historical processes are among the distinctively important aspects of tribal religious traditions.

The history of American Indian religions is complex and difficult to piece together because the short span of recorded history prevents us from detailing the long story. What history exists is, in almost all cases, limited to European interests in tribal cultures, which consists of native “superstitions” and attempts to Christianize the natives. However, Sam Gill’s *Native American Religions* reminds us that “the degree and intensity of the oppressive forces is met by differing kinds of cultural responses; but at every level, religion plays a central role, for it is through religion that the world view and broad, meaning-giving perspectives are taught, effected, and developed” (172). Gill’s belief that oppressiveness can and will intensify unity and identity is proven by the Pueblo peoples’ encounter with other cultures. According to history, this encounter strengthened their traditions because it forced them to retrench through their religious organizations and actions, which became their protective and isolationist mechanisms. However,



history also reveals that when external oppressive pressures were reduced, acculturative processes were often accelerated for northern Plains peoples. Therefore, the openness of a tradition to change is a distinguishing factor in assessing tribal cultures. Gill concludes that although Pueblo cultures appeared less open to the incorporation of change than other tribal cultures, when borrowing did occur, it was usually accomplished in direct continuity with the Pueblo tradition (172). Perez Castillo, agreeing with this point, claims that "It is significant that [Silko] grew up in a tribe which is almost unique in that it has succeeded to a notable degree in maintaining its collective identity while adapting to change" (qtd. in Larson 143). Since literature reflects history and history shapes religious traditions and beliefs that establish both tribal and personal identity, an exploration of Welch's past helps clarify Gill and Castillo's arguments.

An interview conducted by creative writing students reveals that Welch's grandmother character mirrors his great-grandmother's lived experience. When asked if he uses oral tradition or written stories as research for his novels, Welch replies:

"Both. My great grandmother lived during the time of the 1860s, and in 1870 when the Massacre on the Maria happened she would have been fourteen or fifteen, and she was in that massacre and she survived. She and a small group of people managed to sneak up the river under a cutbank. That's how they escaped. She is one of the survivors Fools Crow comes upon. She told my dad many stories of life during that time. He told those stories to me. A lot of them form the basis for parts of the book. On the other hand, I read five books that were quite helpful to me, dealing with the Blackfeet." (qtd. in Welch and

Robbins)

Welch's acknowledgement of his great-grandmother's experience, obviously the motivation behind his grandmother character, illustrates historical and traditional influence. It should be noted, however, that this inclusion is not an attempt to demonize white people. Peter Wild reminds us that he "does not point a finger of blame at white men's depredations on the innocent. Rather, evil exists in all people, and the agony of a culture overwhelmed by invaders is more of a recurring fact of history, unfortunate but to be accepted, than a morality play" (Wild). Welch's mention of the massacre in both *Winter in the Blood* and *Fools Crow* attests to its relevance. Despite the painful memory this event evokes, it is essential to understanding the Blackfeet Indian experience. Through his grandmother character, Welch demonstrates that past events can be so traumatic they lead to an unhealthy tradition of distance and isolation.

Given that as a young woman, Welch's grandmother figure experienced death, starvation, ridicule, isolation, and fear, she is bitter. Consequently, she is unable to love and nurture her daughter and grandson. Welch captures her hostility in the text:

The old lady imagined that the girl [the narrator has brought home] was Cree and an enemy and plotted ways to slit her throat. One day the flint striker would do; another day she favored the paring knife she kept hidden in her legging. Day after day, these two sat across from each other until the pile of movie magazines spread halfway across the room and the paring knife grew heavy in the old lady's eyes. (5)

Consumed with hatred and unwilling to forgive, the grandmother in *Winter in the Blood*

transmits her hatred of the Crees to her grandson's Cree girlfriend. Her decline began with the migration of her husband's band of Blackfeet from their traditional hunting grounds. After moving into Gros Ventre territory, they endured one of the hardest winters in memory. However, details of the starvation in the winter of 1883-84 come from Yellow Calf and are not revealed until the end of the novel.

He discloses to the narrator that she, his grandmother, was forced to marry Standing Bear, a man thirty years her senior, who already had two wives. Before the age of twenty, she became a widow and an outcast, because she possessed a dark beauty that the other women in the band envied. Yellow Calf explains the band's reasoning for shunning the grandmother: "She had not been with us more than a month or two, maybe three. You must understand the thinking. In that time the soldiers came, the people had to leave their home up near the mountains, then the starvation and death of their leaders. She had brought them bad medicine'" (154). The grandmother's beauty, which was a source of pride for the band while Standing Bear was living, worked against her after his death. The band considered it a mockery of their situation. Furthermore, they believed the grandmother was the cause of their misfortune. Accordingly, they accused her of possessing bad medicine, leaving her to starve as the Cree soldiers drove the band like cows to their new Blackfeet reservation. Had it not been for Yellow Calf, who stayed behind to hunt for her so she would not starve and to sleep with her so she would not freeze, she probably would have died.

While the grandmother's strength is proven by her ability to survive during such harsh conditions, her weakness is affirmed by her inability to transcend from surviving to

thriving. According to Clarissa Estes's *Women Who Run With the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype*, this error is crucial because while survivorship is good, it can be static if afforded too much pride. She explains:

[There] comes a time in the individuation process when the threat or trauma is significantly past. Then is the time to go to the next stage after survivorship, to healing and thriving. If we stay as survivors only without moving to thriving, we limit ourselves and cut our energy to ourselves and our power in the world to less than half. One can take so much pride in being a survivor that it becomes a hazard to further creative development. (197)

Estes's observation is applicable to Welch's grandmother character. While she may have endured one of the hardest winters and massacres known to her people, she allowed the experience to control her life. Unable to forgive the Crees for their Blackfeet assault, she is consumed with hatred, becoming a victim of the past. Estes reminds us that strength is gained from survivorship; however, she is quick to assert that "It is not good to base the soul identity solely on the feats and losses and victories of the bad times. While survivorship can make a woman tough as beef jerky, at some point it begins to inhibit new development" (197). Welch's grandmother character is non-procreative because she cannot envision future possibilities. Instead, she conforms to society's expectations, thus destroying her life as well as her daughter's and grandson's. Since ritual is both Silko's and Estes' remedy for modern survival, the future looks grim for Welch's protagonist.

Ritual is a vital part of life in *Ceremony* and it is through this process of

reconnecting with the past that Tayo survives. On a similar note, Estes' study attests to the fact that convention is the transition from surviving to thriving. Religious forms of expression – symbols, rituals, and stories – have histories. While these forms are expressed in language of primordality, the “in the beginning” time, they are nonetheless survivals in the sense of being witness to some ancient past. These symbols, rituals, and stories arise in the history of a tradition and are constantly subject to revision and alteration. Estes' argument that this process of change must be identified as a living tradition, supports the idea that Laguna Pueblo peoples are a living tradition. Silko's grandmother character exemplifies this view as she intuitively senses the ineffectiveness of her tribe's traditional ceremony and alters it accordingly to save her grandson's life. Additionally, she transmits to him her faith in Grandmother Spider. Because the grandmother assumes her traditional role in *Ceremony*, the protagonist achieves equipoise. Through this lens, myth is an invaluable resource that Silko utilizes to promote continuity. However, unrelenting mistakes of Welch's nameless narrator in *Winter in the Blood* imply that his fate is doomed somehow by his ancestors.

While Welch does not incorporate ancient ceremonies and vision quests in *Winter in the Blood*, there is still a strong undercurrent of Blackfeet mythology present. He does not, however, utilize it in the same manner as Silko; the didactic element of myth is missing. Sidner Larson claims that this crucial error distinguishes Plains Indians from other tribes. Based on the Gros Ventre story, which contends that bad behavior is said to have caused the destruction of the world, and the people are admonished not to repeat their mistakes, Larson hypothesizes that Plains Indians created their own defeat. He

correlates “bad behavior,” which is most notable in Plains Indian life, to their present circumstances and adds that Indians were culturally and militarily superior during much of their early interactions with Europeans. Drawing from these facts, he concludes that since greed and violence constitute the most serious forms of bad behavior, inappropriate behavior of this kind is responsible for destroying Blackfeet culture – not defeat by Europeans (138-140). Larson’s observation is influenced by the stories contained in Regina Flannery’s *Gros Ventres of Montana*.

According to the story, Nix’ant, also known as Napi, became unhappy with the way people were living so he created a flood. Everyone drowned except the Crow, who flew above, and Nix’ant, who floated on buffalo chips. Then, Nix’ant told the people that if they were good there would be no more water and no more fire, because before the water rose, the world had been burned. In addition, Nix’ant informs them that there would be another world after this one (Larson 137). This myth acknowledges the role greed and violence played in Plains Indian life. Correlating to modern times, wherein individuals worldwide are consistently subordinated to nationalism, capitalism, and other forms of individual and collective egotism in ways that have produced a chronic imbalance, Welch exposes the devastating outcome of conformity. Because the protagonist’s ancestors sacrificed their traditions for materialistic values, he is doomed to a life of chaos.

Deterioration for Blackfeet Indians began with the introduction of the horse. Subsequently, Plains Indian men were said to have abused their power, particularly toward women and other less powerful tribal members. John Ewers claims that “Men were the undisputed lords of their households. They expected their wives to wait upon

them hand and foot, to bring them food when they wanted it, to light their pipes and remove their moccasins. Some men beat their wives unmercifully with their riding whips" (100). Based on this research, Plains Indians were corrupted by money and power; according to Gill everything had a price – even sacred events such as "Blackfeet visions" were for sale. Since visions are representative of wealth, Gill concludes that economic factors also determine tribal spirituality: A subsistence economy encourages and even requires a closely unified community that may, with relative ease, avoid extensive contact with other cultures. Status, prestige, and human value are not linked to economic factors nearly as much as to knowledge, clan and society membership, and religious roles (173). Blackfeet history reveals a pattern of conformity that contributes to the present situation of the protagonist in *Winter in the Blood*. Both Silko and Estes agree that ritual is the solution to the problem. Unfortunately, Plains Indians are not afforded this luxury because tradition was de-centered by modernization. As John Ewers claims, "Elderly Blackfoot men and women who grew to adulthood in buffalo days had no doubts about the origin of their people. They knew, because their grandparents had told them, that Napi, the Old Man, was the creator of the world and everything in it" (3).

Although Welch alludes to Napi in *Winter in the Blood*, he is not the life-affirming character of wisdom that Grandmother Spider represents in *Ceremony*. According to Alan Velie, "Every Blackfeet Welch's age no doubt grew up with a steady diet of Napi stories, and the shape of the peripatetic god who is both a fool and a philanderer lurks in the background of much of Welch's work, like the figures in his poems and the hero of *Winter in the Blood*" (*Four American Indian Literary Masters* 80). Napi, or Old Man,

is both creator and destroyer; according to Jarold Ramsey, he is a human reminder that chaos does exist. Circumstances leading to Blackfeet creation proceeds on a trial-and-error basis rather than some divine cosmogonic plan. After making several blunders, Old Man finally creates human life, a woman and child (8). Unlike Grandmother Spider, Napi exemplifies chaos; therefore, he models what not to do. The moral and religious implications of this trickster figure are just as important as Grandmother Spider's. David Leeming and Jake Page insist that Napi stories teach morality to children by negative example (48). In this vein, they are as vital to Blackfeet survival as Grandmother Spider stories are to Laguna Pueblo. Welch's narrative validates this argument when the nameless protagonist blames Teresa for his father's wandering habits, Ferdinand Horn's wife for her "turquoise sunglasses" and "stupid grape pop"(169), and Agnes for her sexuality. This conduct, incongruent to the formal apology he recites to Bird, and his frequent defense of First Raise, mimics the inappropriate behavior of his ancestors. Therefore, unlike Tayo in *Ceremony*, he does not learn from past mistakes because his grandmother deprives him of the survival skills embodied in tradition. For that reason, he repeats the abusive behavior toward women initiated by his ancestors.

A correlation between the deities and the protagonist's outcomes is obvious. Grandmother Spider is a manifestation of wholeness for Tayo. Napi is a representation of disorder that leads to the nameless narrator's inability to find peace. However, these figures of myth are not the determining factor. Inevitably, modern survival is dependent upon tradition, which is embodied in the grandmother. There are no ceremonies that



reconnect the nameless narrator to the past, as they do for Tayo. Procreative role models who offer wisdom and tradition as preventative medicine for modern society are missing in *Winter in the Blood*. This deficiency prevents the narrator from achieving an identity. The narrator's father is a wanderer, offering no stability to his son's life. For that reason, he is likened to Napi, the trickster figure, who is alternately creator and destroyer, savior and menace, prankster and buffoon. This correlation is noted in the text when Teresa claims that "[First Raise] was a foolish man" (19) and "a wanderer" (20). The narrator inherits this title as well, as his mother reminds him in the same conversation that he is just like his father (20). However, since women have not assumed their traditional nurturing and loving roles, the protagonist feels closer to his father and brother. Accordingly, the text recalls their nurturing abilities. Yet this impression is negated when the protagonist remembers his past.

Once the narrator recalls his father's death, he realizes what only Teresa had known – that First Raise had a negative side. The narrator tries initially to convince himself otherwise by exclaiming: "But that was a different figure in the ditch, not First Raise, not the man who fixed machinery, who planned his hunt, with such care that he never made it. Unlike Teresa, I didn't know the man who froze in the borrow pit. Maybe that was why I felt nothing until after the funeral" (20). According to the text, the protagonist never knew his father either. He only knew him as a part time father. He showed up as he desired and played the nurturing, fun-loving soul; then as he got bored and fatherhood became too tough, he left. The narrator claims: "He never really stayed and he never left all together. He was always in transit" (21). The protagonist has fond memories of his

father; he acknowledges that “We meant something to him, although he would never say it” (21). The protagonist exclaims further: “It was apparent that he enjoyed the way we grew up and learned to do things, drive tractor, ride calves, clean rabbits and pheasants. He would never say it, though, and after Mose got killed, he never showed it. He stayed away more than ever, a week or two at a time” (21). Because the protagonist never knows his father’s true character, he mimics the same behavior. Reared without proper male or female influence, he fumbles his way through life in a constant state of chaos, just like Napi.

Another Napi folly to which Welch alludes is the separation myth. According to the story, Napi attempts to separate men and women, thinking the distance will alleviate quarrelling. He realizes, however, that he is mistaken because both sexes are dependent upon one another for survival. Mimicking Napi’s folly, Welch establishes a pattern of separation in the relationships between the grandmother and Yellow Calf, Teresa and First Raise, and the narrator and his Cree girlfriend. From the time the grandmother is abandoned by the Blackfeet band and the time she cohabitates with Doagie, she continues to live in isolation, separated by three miles from Yellow Calf, her secret visitor. Also, Teresa and First Raise live most of their married lives apart; and the protagonist continues this tradition as he and his girlfriend are separated during most of the novel. Whereas myth is used as an instructional aid in *Ceremony* and therefore as preventative medicine, it is reduced to comic relief in *Winter in the Blood*. Although cynicism pervades most of the novel, the grandmother’s narrative is distinguished from the other broken stories, thus signifying its vitality.

Memory does not fail the narrator, as he recalls vivid descriptions of the circumstances of the telling and the events of his grandmother's story: "When the old lady had related this story, many years ago, her eyes were not filmy; they were black like a spider's belly and the small black hands drew triumphant pictures in the air" (36). The simile used in this passage refers to Grandmother Spider, the great Goddess of the Laguna Pueblo Indians. Serving as an archetype for most Indian poets, she personifies equipoise. By drawing parallels between the woman responsible for bringing life to Laguna Pueblo Indians and his grandmother character, Welch is indicating the procreative nature of her story. The protagonist, in recalling his grandmother's story, is struck with a kind of awe because "she revealed a life we never knew, this woman who was our own kin" (34). The memory is incomplete, however, because the grandmother only tells part of her story; but it is not cause for confusion or recrimination. Her story is the single intact thread in the torn fabric of his history; it holds a promise of some continuity with the past, of pride in his Blackfeet ancestry. The narrator's recollections take on the color, logical sequence, and vitality of the traditional tale; all are stylistic characteristics which Welch withholds from the other disturbing episodes between Teresa, Lame Bull, and the narrator.

Despite the grandmother's efforts to participate in the oral tradition, she fails because she manipulates the truth. Welch illustrates her deficiency by having the narrator discover the significance of the oral tradition on his own. After visiting First Raise and Mose's graves, he realizes that First Raise's headstone only tells part of a story: "A rectangular piece of granite lay at the head of the grave. On it was written the name, John First Raise, and a pair of dates between which he had managed to stay alive. It said

nothing about how he had liked to fix machines and laugh with the white men of Dodson, or how he came to be frozen stiff as a plank in the borrow pit by Earthboy's" (137).

Comprehending that the intimate details of First Raise's life, such as his enjoyment of fixing machines and laughing with white folks, are lost, unless the narrator shares them with others, awakens him to the power of story. If life is to continue for his people, he must rejuvenate the oral tradition. Mose's grave has the same effect. Mose, the only other man to whom the narrator feels a connection, had no grave marker. All that is left is the protagonist's memory, which is fragmented at best. Indicating that a bad story is better than no story, Welch exemplifies the significance of history. Reiterating this point, the protagonist after returning home remembers his brother's death, and a vital part of that recollection is forgiveness.

The narrator, who has subconsciously blamed Bird all these years for his brother's death, is finally able to forgive. His apology is noted in the text: "No, don't think it was your fault—when that calf broke, you reacted as they trained you . . . I didn't even see it break, then I felt your weight settle on your hind legs and the power . . ." (146). At last there is no blame; the narrator exonerates both himself and the horse. Finally, he can grieve: "'What use,' I whispered, cried for no one in the world to hear, not even Bird, for no one but my soul, as though the words would rid it of the final burden of guilt, and I found myself a child again" (146). A burden does remain, but it is the burden of grief not guilt; the story has created a catharsis. The narrator has confronted and endured through the eloquence of the language and the merging of emotion, landscape, and tragedy. Confronting the past, despite its ugliness, is healthy. Denial and blame cannot bring

Mose back, but retelling the story of his death can, in memory. Because the protagonist managed to graduate from surviving to healing, something his grandmother failed to accomplish, he is closer to living a fruitful life. The nameless narrator's story, however, is not complete until his grandmother and grandfather's stories are united.

Illustrating further the correlation between the oral tradition and identity, Welch has the narrator discover through story, his maternal grandfather. The protagonist is finally told at the end of the novel that Yellow Calf and his grandmother were both Blackfeet; for twenty-five years they had met and loved; Teresa was their child; and he was their grandson. The story that his grandmother had told previously meshed with the one completed by Yellow Calf, and with the completion, the narrator knows himself. He replies: "I began to laugh, at first quietly, with neither bitterness nor humor. It was the laughter of one who understands a moment in his life, of one who has been let in on a secret through luck and circumstance" (158). The fact that Yellow Calf, the grandfather, tells the story is significant because Welch, unlike Silko, grew up listening to stories told by his grandfather. Also, the grandmother does not redeem herself in the end; she takes her secret, literally, to the grave. If the nameless narrator had not asked the right questions and taken the liberty to guess their answers, he would still be oblivious to his grandfather's identity. Despite the circumstances of this event, the reader sees the power of story. The account of Yellow Calf's life not only awards the narrator with a personal identity: it provides him a tribal name.

The oral tradition of the people has been passed on to the alienated, isolated, Blackfeet man and given him continuity of place and character. The story merges the past

with the present, and the language is detailed and descriptive, at times poetic, meant to make the images indelible in the narrator's mind, thus distinguishing it from the other broken narratives and proving its value. The grandparents' story has invested the land with history and meaning, for Yellow Calf still lives in that place of the bitter winter, dwelling in the harmony of the earth. The old man makes explicit the continuity of history and the land: "Sometimes in the winter, when the wind has packed the snow and blown the clouds away, I can still hear the muttering of the people in their tepees. It was a very bad time" (153). Yet it was also a memorable time, a time of such suffering that the land has taken on a sacred meaning for the old hunter, and, in turn for the young man. Like the grandmother's story, Yellow Calf's story is "literary" in style. Welch employs this rich style only in two narrations in the novel, the grandmother's story and Yellow Calf's, proving what Napi discovered the hard way – that both men and women are needed for harmony to exist.

While tribal history plays its part in defining Welch's grandmother figure, Blackfeet culture also influences the character. Culture can create fear, such that it causes further isolation, as demonstrated in *Winter in the Blood*. The grandmother's motive for manipulating the truth of her daughter's paternity derives from fear. The severe consequences of violating a Blackfeet taboo against intermarriage within the band are a determining factor in her deception; because the male members of the band are considered relatives. The grandmother and Yellow Calf conceive a child, but they violate a custom. Afraid to acknowledge their act, they remain apart and hide the paternity of their daughter. Since Doogie is not a part of the same band, he is a logical solution to

their dilemma. The grandmother, whom her tribe had already accused of possessing bad medicine, could not risk further ridicule; therefore, she succumbs to society. Catering to its expectations, she makes detrimental decisions. Whereas conformity is a fatal flaw of Welch's grandmother character, Silko's does not permit others to influence her actions. Welch's idea of the grandmother character in *Winter in the Blood* concurs with the history and culture that shaped his tribe. The Blackfeet myth of how death came to be is useful in understanding her because it associates women with death.

According to the story, after creating Old Woman and a child from clay, Old Man asks Old Woman's advice on whether people should have eternal life. She responds by proposing that if her stone floats, people will have eternal life; but if it sinks, they will experience death. The stone sinks; therefore, eternal life is not possible for Blackfeet Indians. While death is not considered bad because it allows people to feel sympathy, which is the motivation behind Old Woman's actions, this myth equates Blackfeet women with death. Similarly, the Adam and Eve story plagues Christian women, as Eve is blamed for man's downfall. Ancient stories are the foundations that shape women's lives. For that reason, women are often misunderstood and reduced to evil temptresses or possessors of bad medicine. Welch's portrayal of the grandmother character and the narrator's nickname for his grandmother, "Old Woman" (11) and his confession, "I threw the pouch into the grave" (176), coincides with the possibility that men's perceptions of women are influenced by myth. Despite the likeliness of this injustice, the fact remains that Welch's grandmother character is responsible for the protagonist's fate.

Reared without an oral tradition, the nameless narrator is scarred for life. Since

wholeness of being is derived from others, he cannot know himself. The narrator's coming to terms with the harsh conditions in which his grandmother survived during her youth proves this assessment. Only after knowing her experience does he show any signs of emotion or respect for others. He states: "I tried to understand the medicine, the power that directed the people to single out a young woman, to leave her to fend for herself in the middle of a cruel winter. I tried to understand the thinking, the hatred of the women, the shame of the men" (155). The narrator is trying to imagine his grandmother's experience and it is through this knowing that he cares enough to ask, "'How could she survive alone?'" (156). Only after he discovers his grandmother's secret, recognizes Yellow Calf as his grandfather, and thus sympathizes with his grandmother's situation, is he capable of contemplating his future. However, the text reveals that isolation is still in his blood: "some people will never know how pleasant it is to be distant in a clean rain" (172). Ross-Bryant, explaining the reasoning behind this statement, avows that "To be understood by another is to have one's individuality destroyed! Thus, there is safety in being cut off from others. It may be better to stutter and live destructively than to communicate and be destroyed by another" (143). Even though the narrator claims that "this woman who was Teresa's mother had told me many things, many stories from her early life" (34), she remains a stranger. Fearing the uncertainty of the truth, thus incapable of advancing from surviving to thriving, Welch's grandmother character alienates her daughter and grandson to the critical moment.

Although the grandmother attempts to participate in the oral tradition, she fails because she manipulates the truth. Her dishonesty is a non-procreative trait that destroys



her grandson's life. He lives thirty years without knowing the true identity of his grandfather. Welch acknowledges that, even as a child, the narrator "had known the old man was important, but he had been too young then to ask the right questions" (156). The narrator as a small child vaguely remembers Yellow Calf; however, he questions even then the importance of this man. Therefore, he has lived most of his fragile years without an identity. Signs of life are evident in the protagonist's efforts to save the cow, contemplate marriage, and ponder knee surgery; however, uncertainty overrides him. In the same breath, he talks himself out of the knee surgery, claiming recovery would take a year, and out of marriage: "by that time the girl who had stolen my gun and electric razor would have forgotten me" (175). Additionally, the narrator's idea of proposing to Agnes consists of buying her a couple of crèmes de menthe, a symptomatic gesture of alcohol dependency. The concluding deaths of Bird and the cow are also indicative that winter has not thawed, particularly since they are so obliquely mentioned. In other words, death needs no distinction for the protagonist because life for him is death.

Andrew Widget, countering this argument, states: "In the mock-epic struggle to rescue the mired cow, are signs of commitment to life to replace the internationalized distance" (qtd. in Vizenor 78-79). Conversely, Gerald Vizenor, author of *Manifest Manners*, challenges Widget's hopeful assessment of *Winter in the Blood*, alleging:

[It is] a denial of tragic wisdom and seems to be a social science paradise of the antiselves in manifest manners. "She was lying on her side, up to her chest in mud," said the unnamed narrator in the *Winter in the Blood*. The cow "had

earned this fate by being stupid, and now no one could help her . . . . As she stared at me, I saw beyond the immediate panic that hatred, that crazy hatred that made me aware of a quick hatred in my own heart. Her horns seemed tipped with blood, the dark blood of catastrophe.” She turned her head in the mud, one eye to the clouds. That laconic sense of chance and death bears tribal ironies and tragic wisdom; the postindian characters and scenes are more than victims and mock separations. (78-79)

Vizenor’s accusation that Widget is ignoring the healing elements embodied in humor is based on the fact that the trickster is the most important mythic figure in the majority of Indian tribes; therefore, it is a major archetype in contemporary Indian fiction. As Aristotle recognizes pity and fear as therapeutic effects of tragedy, Vizner establishes the liberating elements of laughter and humor. They are alternative ways of healing one’s wounds from tragedy, thereby creating a new understanding of life.

While *Winter in the Blood* demonstrates the brilliant ability of Plains Indians to understand the liberating aspects of comedy, it also reveals their inability to remain procreative. Although Welch’s grandmother character may have physically given birth, a fruitful event, childbirth alone cannot guarantee survival. Estes’s research reminds us that simple survivorship eventually wears out its welcome, then tradition must be the bridge to modern life. Although the grandmother, in failing to assume her traditional role, initiates a spiritual death that plagues her family, her story holds promise. The oral tradition is preventative medicine. If the protagonist re-tells his grandmother’s story, he can bridge the gap between antiquity and innovation, and, quite possibly, revive his

people. However, based on Ian Barbour's premise that "the present determines the range of future possibilities" (qtd. in Ross-Bryant 99), and Carl Jung's theory that archetypes are inherited (qtd. in Ross-Bryant 167), the grandmother, breeding only distance, hinders the life cycle in *Winter in the Blood*.

### Conclusion

Leslie Silko and James Welch revitalize their creation deities in *Ceremony* and *Winter in the Blood*, because they provide the foundation for life. The genesis story affords one an identity, as it reveals how life began. In light of this information, it stands to reason that it is the grandmother's responsibility to tell this story, along with other stories, both good and bad, to ensure life. Because the oral tradition is the vehicle to the collective unconscious, and the grandmother's voice begins this process, she is irreplaceable. The grandmother is the most influential figure in American Indian literature because she has the extraordinary ability to either create or destroy life, depending upon whether she assumes her traditional role as the transmitter of culture. Because Silko's grandmother character assumes this role, she is a creator. Conversely, Welch's grandmother character is a destroyer, because she rejects her traditional role. Through this lens, the American Indian grandmother is analogous to a creation deity.

Silko's tribe, unlike Welch's, managed to maintain its collective identity while adapting to change. This observation is noted by the respect and tribute shown to elders throughout *Ceremony*. For instance, Grandmother Spider, the Laguna Pueblo creation deity, is the foundation of the novel. Although tradition is the center that affords meaning for Laguna Pueblo, Silko acknowledges the symbiotic relationship between antiquity and innovation by weaving Grandmother Spider's story with Old Grandma's. Because Silko's grandmother character was once influenced by myth, she is able to assume her traditional role as the transmitter of culture. Her active role in the protagonist's life, along with her willingness to change in order to remain procreative,

produces harmony. Tayo is finally able to live a harmonious life, because he is reconnected to his past. Since the oral tradition is the agent responsible for this reconciliation, tradition is a necessary part of modern life. Silko's grandmother character represents the positive life force of a creation deity, because her ancient wisdom continues the life cycle.

On the other hand, Welch's grandmother character symbolizes the negative aspects of a creation deity, because she is a stagnant deterrent in Blackfeet society. Like Napi, Welch teaches the value of tradition through negative example. He purposefully gives his grandmother character no voice so the reader will recognize the consequences associated with abandoning tradition. In addition, he subjects her to mockery and ridicule. The extent of modern alienation, however, is revealed by the chaotic and confused narratives. While confusion dominates much of the dialogue in *Winter in the Blood*, the grandmother's narrative is unique.

Welch distinguishes her story from the other confusing attempts at conversation, to prove its vitality. He does, however, make it clear that her story is incomplete because she manipulates the truth. In other words, both good and bad stories are useful, despite their content. Because Welch's grandmother figure manipulates the truth, the protagonist lives his most fragile years without an identity. The inactive role of the grandmother is congruent to the uncertainty that permeates *Winter in the Blood*. Harmony remains remote from the nameless narrator, because he lacks a traditional upbringing. The only positive event that Welch alludes to is the grandmother's story. While the

grandmother's non-procreative actions have left permanent scars, her story has the power to heal and prevent future damage.

In her study, Clarissa Estes continues the work created by Silko and Welch when she writes:

Fairy tales, myths, and stories provide understandings which sharpen our sight so that we can pick out and pick up the path left by the wildish nature. The instruction found in story reassures us that the path has not run out, but still leads women deeper, and more deeply still, into their own knowing. The tracks which we are all following are those of the Wild Women archetype, the innate instinctual self. (6)

Estes associates the "Wild Woman archetype" with figures such as Grandmother Spider and the trickster because they embody a keen-sensing, playful spirit, and a heightened capacity for devotion. Her research shows that these figures need to be revived because they inspire creative thought. Contemporary society's deprivation of intuitive thought and obsession with reason has had devastating consequences. Like Silko and Welch, Estes understands the symbiotic relationship between opposites. Her research also exposes the problematic relationship between extraordinary figures and modern skeptics.

Because these archetypes possess animalistic instincts, immense wisdom, and sexuality, they instill fear; therefore, harassment becomes society's method of controlling the unfamiliar. Welch portrays this point in *Winter in the Blood* when his grandmother figure is shunned because of her dark beauty. This rejection causes her to

manipulate the truth; thus she limits her grandson's life. Her inability to graduate from surviving to thriving weighs heavily upon the protagonist's present situation, along with the historical consequences of abandoning tradition for money and power. However, Welch emphasizes through absence of tradition that these mistakes could have been avoided if Blackfeet Indians had not abandoned convention. Uncertainty resides in *Winter in the Blood* because the tribe does not utilize the oral tradition. The protagonist cannot learn from past mistakes because he does not know the story of his ancestors. Unlike Tayo in *Ceremony*, Welch's protagonist does not know how his people came to be. He is unfamiliar with Napi's follies. As Albert Einstein has said, "The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and all science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed" (qtd. in Harrison).

Because creation deities embody intuitive thought, as opposed to reason, the oral tradition is spoken, not written, and elders embody ancient wisdom, instead of modern technology, these conventions are viewed as obsolete in contemporary life. Conversely, modern skeptics believe that reason is the only reliable means of knowing reality. As a consequence, the rational approach to meaning has marginalized the discovery of meaning through qualitative observation and the value of community over the individual, treating it as unreliable or even malevolent. The currency of meaning in modern society has become quantity, not quality; and the spiritual underpinnings of culture have been devastated. Jerry Mander's statement that "What is romantic is to believe . . . that technology itself can liberate us from the problems it has created . . . [I]t

is native societies, not our own, that hold the key to future survival” is a good indication that American Indian literature is speaking the truth. According to Mander, “We need the Native Mind’s bold assurance that while much of the universe is accessible to human sensibilities, it possesses dimensions that remain forever beyond human logic and reason, and that the cosmic forces of mystery, chaos, and uncertainty are eternal” (qtd. in Parkhill 115).

Silko exposes modern skepticism in *Ceremony* when she writes that “[Tayo] had believed in the stories for a long time, until the teachers at Indian school taught him to not believe in that kind of nonsense” (19). Tayo’s faith in Grandmother Spider is restored; however, thanks to the strong sense of self he obtained from tradition. Myth rewards Tayo with invaluable survival skills that afford him equipoise – the highest form of living and the ultimate goal of American Indians. On the other hand, Welch captures the essence of contemporary society in *Winter in the Blood* when he reduces tradition to comic relief, thus making it a scapegoat for modern alienation. This level of disrespect for tradition shatters all hope of living a meaningful existence, since the source of such knowledge is isolated from reality. The outcome of satire is temporary relief. The oral tradition is the only solution capable of creating a constant web of meaning.

Since the oral tradition is the voice that unites the past, the present, and the future, it is the most vital gift of tradition. This offering is embodied in the grandmother, the most influential figure in American Indian literature.



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