The Evolution of the Yellow Woman

The concept of the transformation and longevity of the fairy tale (or myth) is well illustrated in the story “Yellow Woman” by Leslie Silko. Not only is the story a modern interpretation of a traditional Native American myth, but the style that Silko uses to tell it evokes and adapts the oral transmission style that those old myths were passed down with. The story is also very self-consciously aware of its place as a modern adaptation of a myth, and makes many internal references to this aspect of itself. “Yellow Woman” becomes, in effect, the modern version of a Native American myths or legend, and therefore is a perfect example of the way in which old tales are made new.

Stories like this one had been passed down through Native American oral tradition for hundreds of years, and as Indians began to write many of them turned to these traditional myths as inspiration for their work. The concept of taking an old myth and placing it in a modern setting, or even just retelling it with a modern outlook, is not new. Many Indian writers have been doing this for years, starting with such pioneers as N. Scott Momaday, who wrote a collection of Kiowa myths that revitalized a new genre of Native writing. The cleverness with which many of these modern Native authors re-envision these old stories is always fascinating. If one analyzes “Yellow Woman” from this angle, one can see that Silko was attempting to explore the origins of these myths and what they mean in a modern context. The narrator of the story talks about how her grandfather used to tell her stories of the ka’tsina, or mountain spirits, and the Yellow Woman, both of whom would seduce and kidnap lonely travelers. These stories may have arisen as cautionary tales, but Silko claims that they might be explanations of actual abductions or seductions in the past. Silva, who claims to be a ka’tsina spirit, at one point replies to the narrator’s incredulity about them being ka’tsina and Yellow Woman by saying “But
someday they will talk about us, and they will say, ‘Those two lived long ago when things like that happened.’” Silko is making the case through Silva that these myths and legends could have had mundane origins, as people looked for answers to where their family members went when they disappeared. It’s possible that people back home on the reservation might make the narrator’s disappearance into a story to pass down to their children, and thus it would enter the realm of the oral tradition.

The oral tradition in this story is alive and well, and is referenced several times in the text. As cultures that developed with no need for writing, the Native Americans transmitted all of their knowledge, myths, religion and culture through stories told from one generation to the next. Many tribes had one or a few specialized storytellers who made it their profession to memorize and tell these stories; this was quite a task, as some of these tales could be eight hours long, and there could be dozens of them on top of all of the shorter stories. The telling of these legends was a major event. In addition, families would have their own stories for children or personal ancestor legends, and it was typical for children to grow up hearing their grandparents tell them. These would often become a major socializing factor for Indian children and would create powerful memories of childhood for years to come. Even though modern Indian writers often attend universities and study European and British literature, many would return to these old stories for their own writing. The oral tradition is losing ground in the face of written history, and many Indian writers have chosen to preserve its style and function in their writing. They know that it will disappear soon if it’s not recorded, and it’s typical for Indian writers to retell their childhood myths in an attempt to pass them on to their future generations, and also to establish the oral tradition as a viable literary form. The narrator in the story mentions her grandfather telling her about the ka’tsina, and she says, referencing her own disappearance, that
if “old Grandpa weren’t dead he would tell [the family] what happened – he would laugh and say, ‘Stolen by a ka’tsina, a mountain spirit. She’ll come home – they usually do.” Silko laments the death of this tradition, but it’s also clear that she is aware of the formation and evolution of new myths out of the old ones. Silva frequently mentions these old stories, but in a way that means to reinforce their validity. He refuses to tell her where he comes from, and he repeatedly calls her Yellow Woman as a way of invoking the old myths. He would have the narrator believe that she really is a modern Yellow Woman, just as he is an ancient mountain spirit. The narrator is not quite ready to believe this herself, though, and she frequently denies the possibility of her being Yellow Woman. At one point she says that she can’t be Yellow Woman, “Because she is from out of time past and I live now and I’ve been to school and there are highways and pickup trucks that Yellow Woman never saw.” She makes similar comments often, but it only serves to remind us how aware she is of the old myths, and how they influence her own thoughts and reactions to modern life.

This self-aware conception of retelling an old myth with modern sensibilities is noticeable all throughout the story. Silko is quoted in the introduction by the editor as saying “I like seeing how I can translate [a] sort of feeling or flavor or sense of a story that’s told and heard onto the page.” This references the oral tradition, but more importantly it shows that she’s mindful of adapting an old story to a new medium. The narrator is constantly thinking about what it means if she is a new Yellow Woman, and thinks about how her situation might be similar to the women in the old stories. She even thinks about how the old Yellow Woman could be a person just like her, “I was wondering if Yellow Woman had known who she was – if she knew that she would become part of the stories. Maybe she’d had another name that her husband and relatives called her so that only the ka’tsina from the north and the storytellers would know
her as Yellow Woman.” This self-consciousness is widespread throughout the story, and it illustrates the altering of the old stories even while there is an essential bond of the core subject. While the theme of the story is an old one, it’s told in a new voice about a new generation of people and in that respect it must be different. What hasn’t changed is perhaps of more note than what has. The narrator feels compelled beyond her will to stay with Silva, despite how that might impact her life. If this is true, than one cannot fault the Yellow Woman of old, or even ka’tsina himself. They are forces of nature in that sense, and as such they are subject to their fate just as the narrator is now. The essential catalyst of their destiny is the same, and in this way there will always be a Yellow Woman and a ka’tsina as long as there is a story to carry and create it.

“Yellow Woman” is a great example of an old myth or tale reconstructed and adapted for a modern audience in a new medium. It is a progression on one hand in its use of modern language, setting, and style but it is also the product of the old myths in that it is essentially the same on the thematic level. In addition, the level of self-awareness on the part of the narrator and, by extension, the author marks it out as an illustration of the very notion of evolutionary changes of myths and fairy tales. It wouldn’t be a stretch to imagine that Neil Phillips had this story in mind when he said “Transformation is the key to the fairy tale, and fairy tales have been endlessly transforming themselves throughout history and, by some strange alchemy endlessly staying the same.”