

It Was a Long Time Before

Poem by Leslie Marmon Silko

Abuelito Who

Poem by Sandra Cisneros

What do we learn from our **ELDERS?**

COMMON CORE

RL 3 Analyze how particular elements of a story or drama interact. **RL 5** Analyze how a poem's form or structure contributes to its meaning.

Between you, your parents, and your grandparents, the generations of your family may span a hundred years or more. As you move into the future, what will you take with you from the past? What will you take with you from the present? In the poems “It Was a Long Time Before” and “Abuelito Who,” memories and more connect the generations.

LIST IT Think of someone in another generation who spends time with you. Brainstorm a list of the activities you do together. Reread the list; then write one way that person has affected your life or one thing that person has taught you.



Meet the Author

● TEXT ANALYSIS: CHARACTERIZATION IN POETRY

When poets describe people in their writing, they usually **characterize** them in fewer words than fiction writers do. An image, a phrase, or a telling detail—in a poet’s hand, these can suggest an entire personality.

In “Abuelito Who,” Sandra Cisneros characterizes her grandfather as someone “who throws coins like rain.” This statement gives the reader the impression that the grandfather is generous. You might even be able to picture an elderly man making a ritual of tossing bright coins onto the floor for his grandchildren to scoop up. As you read “It Was a Long Time Before” and “Abuelito Who,” pay attention to what else the poets’ language suggests about the people in the poems.

● READING STRATEGY: READING POETRY

Some poems contain complete sentences with standard punctuation. Other poems don’t. But all poems are divided into **lines**, and where they are divided is important to the poems’ meaning and rhythm. For example, read the following lines from “It Was a Long Time Before.” The poet is telling the reader why she affectionately called her grandmother “Grandma A’moo’h.”

*I had been hearing her say
“a’moo’ooh”
which is the Laguna expression of endearment
for a young child
spoken with great feeling and love.*

Notice that all of these words, put together, create a sentence, but each line read separately has its own effect. Since “a’moo’ooh” appears on its own line, the reader lingers on it, letting its cultural and emotional importance sink in. As you read the two poems, pay attention to how each poet uses capital letters, line length, and word position to give meaning to each poem.

Leslie Marmon Silko

born 1948

Native American Storyteller

Leslie Marmon Silko was raised on the Laguna Pueblo reservation in New Mexico. As she grew up, female relatives taught her traditional Native American stories and legends. Today Silko considers herself part of the global community. She says, “I am writing to the world, not to the United States alone.”



Sandra Cisneros

born 1954

Latina Writer

When Sandra Cisneros was a child, she and her family moved frequently between Chicago and her father’s birthplace in Mexico. She often spoke English to her Mexican-American mother and Spanish to her father. For Cisneros, writing is a way to deal with the poverty, loneliness, and instability she faced in her childhood. She incorporates the Spanish language in her writing “to say things in English that have never been said before.”



Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.

Authors Online



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It Was a Long Time Before

Leslie Marmon Silko



Rosita Johnson (1958), Lee Marmon. Laguna, New Mexico. © Lee Marmon.

It was a long time before
I learned that my Grandma A'mooh's
real name was Marie Anaya Marmon.
I thought her name really was "A'mooh."
5 I realize now it had happened when I was a baby
and she cared for me while my mother worked.
I had been hearing her say
 "a'moo'oooh"
 which is the Laguna¹ expression of endearment
10 for a young child
 spoken with great feeling and love. **A**

Analyze Visuals ▲

What do the **details** in
the photograph tell you
about the woman?

A CHARACTERIZATION IN POETRY

Why was Marie Anaya
Marmon called Grandma
A'mooh? Think about
what the story of her
name tells you about her.

1. **Laguna** (lə-goo'no): dialect of the Keres language spoken by the Laguna people,
whose home is in rural New Mexico.

Her house was next to ours
 and as I grew up
 I spent a lot of time with her
 15 because she was in her eighties
 and they worried about her falling.
 So I would go check up on her—which was really
 an excuse to visit her.
 After I had to go to school
 20 I went to carry in the coal bucket
 which she still insisted on filling.
 I slept with her
 in case she fell getting up in the night. **B**

She still washed her hair with yucca² roots
 25 or “soap weed” as she called it. She said
 it kept white hair like hers from yellowing.
 She kept these yucca roots on her windowsill
 and I remember I was afraid of them for a long time
 because they looked like hairy twisted claws.

30 I watched her make red chili on the grinding stone
 the old way, even though it had gotten difficult for her
 to get down on her knees.
 She used to tell me and my sisters
 about the old days when they didn’t have toothpaste
 35 and cleaned their teeth with juniper³ ash,
 and how, instead of corn flakes, in the old days they ate
 “*maah’tzini*”⁴ crushed up with milk poured over it. **C**

Her last years they took her away to Albuquerque⁵
 to live with her daughter, Aunt Bessie.

40 But there was no fire to start in the morning
 and nobody dropping by.
 She didn’t have anyone to talk to all day
 because Bessie worked.
 She might have lived without watering morning glories
 45 and without kids running through her kitchen
 but she did not last long
 without someone to talk to. **D**

B READING POETRY

Do the sentences in this poem follow standard patterns of grammar and punctuation? Where do the sentences begin and end?

C CHARACTERIZATION IN POETRY

Reread lines 24–37. What do the granddaughter’s descriptions tell you about Grandma A’mooh?

D CHARACTERIZATION IN POETRY

Reread lines 38–47. From this description, what do you learn about Grandma A’mooh after her move to Albuquerque?

2. **yucca** (yŭk’ə): a plant that grows in warm regions, chiefly those of western North America. Yucca have long sword-shaped leaves, a woody base, and white flowers.

3. **juniper** (jŭō’nə-pər): a pleasant-smelling evergreen shrub.

4. **maah’tzini** (mät-zē-nē): *Keres, one of numerous Pueblo languages*: thin, flaky bread made of finely ground blue corn flour.

5. **Albuquerque** (äl’bə-kŭr’kē): the largest city in New Mexico.

Abuelito Who

Sandra Cisneros



Abuelito¹ who throws coins like rain
and asks who loves him
who is dough and feathers
who is a watch and glass of water
5 whose hair is made of fur
is too sad to come downstairs today
who tells me in Spanish you are my diamond
who tells me in English you are my sky
whose little eyes are string
10 can't come out to play
sleeps in his little room all night and day
who used to laugh like the letter k
is sick
is a doorknob tied to a sour stick
15 is tired shut the door
doesn't live here anymore
is hiding underneath the bed
who talks to me inside my head
is blankets and spoons and big brown shoes
20 who snores up and down up and down up and down again
is the rain on the roof that falls like coins
asking who loves him
who loves him who? **E**

E READING POETRY

Reread line 2 and lines 22–23. How does the phrase at the end of the poem differ from the phrase at the beginning?

1. **Abuelito** (ă-bwe-lē'tō) *Spanish*: an affectionate term for a grandfather.

Comprehension

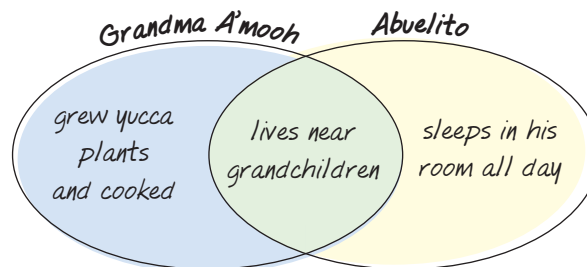
1. **Recall** What language did each grandparent speak to his or her grandchildren?
2. **Recall** In “It Was a Long Time Before,” why did Grandma A’mooh take care of her grandchild?
3. **Clarify** By the end of each poem, what has happened to each grandparent?



RL 3 Analyze how particular elements of a story or drama interact. **RL 5** Analyze how a poem’s form or structure contributes to its meaning.

Text Analysis

4. **Make Inferences** In “It Was a Long Time Before,” why did Grandma A’mooh still insist on filling the coal bucket?
5. **Recognize Characterization** Reread lines 3, 9, and 12 of “Abuelito Who.” What do these descriptions tell you about Abuelito?
6. **Analyze Point of View** From what point of view is each of these poems written? How does the point of view affect the meaning of each poem?
7. **Examine Poetry** Note the differences in the ways each poet uses sentences and punctuation. How does the use of lines, sentences, and punctuation affect the way you read and understand the poems?
8. **Compare and Contrast** Using a Venn diagram like the one shown, compare and contrast Grandma A’mooh with Abuelito. To complete the diagram, draw on inferences you made about the characters as well as on details from the poems.



Extension and Challenge

9. **SOCIAL STUDIES CONNECTION** Laguna Pueblo is one of many Pueblo communities located in New Mexico. Do some research to find out more about the Pueblo people. Look for information about their traditional culture and values and how they are reflected today.

What do we learn from our ELDERS?

Review the list you created for the activity on page 288. Now that you have read the poems, what new thoughts do you have about the person in your notes?