Build Background

The story depicts funeral ceremonies held among the Laguna people of western New Mexico, like the Towa, the Laguna are a Pueblo group, but they speak a Keresan language. Pueblo groups had settled in the Southwest thousands of years before the first Spanish conquistadors arrived in 1540. The Spanish came to establish a colony and to convert the Pueblos to Catholicism but were driven away in 1680 during the Pueblo Rebellion. The Spanish soon returned, however, completing their re-conquest of New Mexico in 1692. The Laguna pueblo was founded in 1699 by migrants from other pueblos to the north. In the 1700s and 1800s, the Laguna and other Pueblo groups were harassed by Mexican soldiers; raids from the Navajo, Apache, and Ute tribes; and Protestant settlers from the United States.

Despite being influenced by outside cultures, the Laguna have kept many of their values and beliefs. For example, they perform traditional ceremonies when a person dies because they believe that dead persons’ spirits will become Shiwanna—Cloud People—who bring the precious gift of rain.

Focus Your Reading

Literary Analysis: Conflict

A conflict is a struggle between opposing forces that is the basis of a story’s plot. A character can be in conflict with an outside force, such as nature, society, or another character. One of the conflicts in this story is between the characters Leon and Father Paul. Conflict can also occur within a character. Notice the different kinds of conflict in this story.

Reading: Making Inferences

An inference is a logical guess based on evidence. By using information from your reading and from your own experience, you can make inferences about things left unstated in a work of literature.

Reader’s Notebook

Use a chart like the one below to record the ceremonies, or prescribed acts, that people either perform or want performed after Teofilo’s death. Use the second or third column to indicate which tradition you infer that the ceremony belongs to, Laguna or European.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ceremony</th>
<th>Laguna</th>
<th>European</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>burning</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pinching</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

They found him under a big cottonwood tree.

His Levi jacket and pants were faded light-blue so that he had been easy to find.

The big cottonwood tree stood apart from a small grove of winterbare cottonwoods which grew in the wide, sandy arroyo. He had been dead for a day or more, and the sheep had wandered and scattered up and down the arroyo. Leon and his brother-in-law, Ken, gathered the sheep and left them in the pen at the sheep camp before they returned to the cottonwood tree. Leon waited under the tree while Ken drove the truck through the deep sand to the edge of the arroyo. He squinted up at the sun and unzipped his jacket—it sure was hot for this time of year. But high and northwest the blue mountains were still deep in snow. Ken came sliding down the low, crumbling bank about fifty yards down, and he was bringing the red blanket.

Before they wrapped the old man, Leon took a piece of string out of his pocket and tied a small gray feather in the old man’s long white hair. Ken gave him the paint. Across the brown, wrinkled forehead he drew a streak of white and along the high cheekbones he drew a strip of blue paint. He paused and watched Ken throw pinches of corn meal and pollen into the wind that fluttered the small gray feather. Then Leon painted with yellow under the old man’s broad nose, and finally, when he had painted green across the chin, he smiled.

“Send us rain clouds, Grandfather.” They laid the bundle in the back of the pickup and covered it with a heavy tarp before they started back to the pueblo.

They turned off the highway onto the sandy pueblo road. Not long after they passed the store and post office they saw Father Paul’s car coming toward them. When he recognized their faces he slowed his car and waved for them to stop. The young priest rolled down the car window.

“Did you find old Teofilo?” he asked loudly.

Leon stopped the truck. “Good morning. Father. We were just out to the sheep camp. Everything is O.K. now.”
“Thank God for that. Teofilo is a very old man. You really shouldn’t allow him to stay at the sheep camp alone.”

“No, he won’t do that any more now.”

“Well, I’m glad you understand. I hope I’ll be seeing you at Mass this week—we missed you last Sunday. See if you can get old Teofilo to come with you.” The priest smiled and waved at them as they drove away.

Louise and Teresa were waiting. The table was set for lunch, and the coffee was boiling on the black iron stove. Leon looked at Louise and then at Teresa.

“We found him under a cottonwood tree in the big arroyo near sheep camp. I guess he sat down to rest in the shade and never got up again.” Leon walked toward the old man’s bed.

The red plaid shawl had been shaken and spread carefully over the bed, and a brown flannel shirt and pair of stiff new Levis were arranged neatly beside the pillow. Louise held the screen door open while Leon and Ken carried in the red blanket. He looked small and shrewd, and after they dressed him in the new shirt and pants he seemed more shrunken.

It was not time now because the church bells rang the Angelus. 1 They ate the beans with hot bread, and nobody said anything until after Teresa poured the coffee.

Ken stood up and put on his jacket. “I’ll see about the grave diggers. Only the top layer of soil is frozen. I think it can be ready before dark.”

Leon nodded his head and finished his coffee. After Ken had been gone for a while, the neighbors and clanspeople came quietly to embrace Teofilo’s family and to leave food on the table because the grave diggers would come to eat when they were finished.

The sky in the west was full of pale-yellow light. Louise stood outside with her hands in the pockets of Leon’s green army jacket that was too big for her. The funeral was over, and the old men had taken their candles and medicine bags and were gone. She waited until the body was laid into the pickup before she said anything to Leon. She touched his arm, and he noticed that her hands were still dusty from the corn meal that she had sprinkled around the old man. When she spoke, Leon could not hear her.

“What did you say? I didn’t hear you.”

“I said that I had been thinking about something.”

“About what?”

“About the priest sprinkling holy water 2 for Grandpa. So he won’t be thirsty.”

Leon started at the new mocassins that Teofilo had made for the ceremonial dances in the summer. They were nearly hidden by the red blanket. It was getting colder, and the wind pushed gray dust down the narrow pueblo road. The sun was approaching the long mesa where it disappeared during the winter. Louise stood there shivering and watching his face. Then he zipped up his jacket and opened the truck door. “I’ll see if he’s there.”

Ken stopped the pickup at the church, and Leon got out; and then Ken drove down the hill to the graveyard where people were waiting. Leon knocked at the old carved door with its symbols of the Lamb. While he waited he looked up at the twin bells from the king of Spain with the last sunlight pouring around them in their tower.

The priest opened the door and smiled when he saw who it was. “Come in! What brings you here this evening?”

The priest walked toward the kitchen, and

Leon stood with his cap in his hand, playing with the earflaps and examining the living room—the brown sofa, the green armchair, and the brass lamp that hung down from the ceiling by links of chain. The priest dragged a chair out of the kitchen and offered it to Leon.

“No thank you, Father. I only came to ask you if you would bring your holy water to the graveyard.”

The priest turned away from Leon and looked out the window at the patio full of shadows and the dining-room windows of the nuns’ cloister across the patio. The curtains were heavy, and the light from within faintly penetrated; it was impossible to see the nuns inside eating supper.

“Why didn’t you tell me he was dead? I could have brought the Last Rites anyway.”

Leon smiled. “It wasn’t necessary, Father.”

The priest stood at the arched brown loaves and the worn hem of his cassock. “For a Christian burial it was necessary.”

His voice was distant, and Leon thought that his blue eyes looked tired.

“It’s O.K., Father, we just want him to have plenty of water.”

1. Angelus [an-jel-us] is a prayer in commemoration of the Annunciation, the archangel Gabriel’s announcement to the Virgin Mary that she had conceived Jesus, the Son of God.
2. holy water: water blessed by a priest and used for religious purposes.
He felt good because it was finished, and he was happy about the sprinkling of the holy water; now the old man could send them big thunderclouds for sure.

The priest sank down into the green chair and picked up a glossy missionary magazine. He turned the colored pages full of lepers and pagans without looking at them. "You know I can't do that, Leon. There should have been the Last Rites and a funeral Mass at the very least," Leon put on his green cap and pulled the flaps down over his ears. "It's getting late, Father. I've got to go."

When Leon opened the door Father Paul stood up and said, "Wait." He left the room and came back wearing a long brown overcoat. He followed Leon out the door and across the dim churchyard to the adobe steps in front of the church. They both stooped to fit through the low adobe entrance. And when they started down the hill to the graveyard only half of the sun was visible above the mesa.

The priest approached the grave slowly, wondering how they had managed to dig into the frozen ground, and then he remembered that this was New Mexico, and saw the pile of cold loose sand beside the hole. The people stood close to each other with little clouds of steam puffing from their faces. The priest looked at them and saw a pile of jackets, gloves, and scarves in the yellow, dry tumbleweeds that grew in the graveyard. He looked at the red blanket, not sure that Teofilo was so small, wondering if it wasn't some perverse Indian trick—something they did in March to ensure a good harvest—wondering if maybe old Teofilo was actually at sheep camp corralling the sheep for the night. But there he was, facing into a cold dry wind and squinting at the last sunlight, ready to bury a red wool blanket while the faces of his parishioners were in shadow with the last warmth of the sun on their backs. His fingers were stiff, and it took him a long time to twist the lid off the holy water. Drops of water fell on the red blanket and soaked into dark icy spots. He sprinkled the grave and the water disappeared almost before it touched the dim, cold sand; it reminded him of something—he tried to remember what it was, because he thought if he could remember he might understand this. He sprinkled more water; he shook the container until it was empty, and the water fell through the light from sundown like August rain that fell while the sun was still shining, almost evaporating before it touched the wilted squash flowers.

The wind pulled at the priest's brown Franciscan robe and swirled away the corn meal and pollen that had been sprinkled on the blanket. They lowered the bundle into the ground, and they didn't bother to untie the stiff pieces of new rope that were tied around the ends of the blanket. The sun was gone, and over on the highway the eastbound lane was full of headlights. The priest walked away slowly. Leon watched him climb the hill, and when he had disappeared within the tall, thick walls, Leon turned to look up at the high blue mountains in the deep snow that reflected a faint red light from the west. He felt good because it was finished, and he was happy about the sprinkling of the holy water; now the old man could send them big thunderclouds for sure.

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5. Franciscan robe: the distinctive garment of a Roman Catholic religious order founded by Saint Francis of Assisi in 1209. After Spain established a colony in New Mexico in 1598, Franciscan missionaries began to settle there and build churches in the pueblos.

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CONNECT TO THE LITERATURE

1. What Do You Think? Did Teofilo have a "good" funeral? Share your impressions.

2. Think Critically.
   1. Why do you think Leon and Ken do not tell Father Paul about Teofilo's death right away?
   2. Louise and Leon want Father Paul to sprinkle holy water on Teofilo's grave. Why do you think this act is so important to them?
   3.active reading: Making inferences: Of the two kinds of ceremonies surrounding Teofilo's death—Laguna and European—which do you think is more important to his people? Refer to the chart you were asked to make in your Reader's notebook.
   4. In your opinion, does Father Paul do the right thing at the end of the story? Consider the evidence.

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THINK ABOUT IT

- his attitude toward Laguna ceremonies
- his attitude toward Christian burial
- possible reasons for his decision

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EXTEND INTERPRETATIONS

6. What if? Suppose Father Paul had been a Laguna man who had lived in the pueblo as a youth, left to study for the priesthood, and then returned. How might the conflicts in this story be different?

7. Connect to Life. Name important ceremonies in your own culture; for example, the passing out of diplomas at graduation. What do you believe is the function of ceremonies? When do you think a ceremony should be changed, if ever?

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7. Points of Comparison: Judging from this story, how would you describe the Laguna people's spiritual views and relationship to nature? Compare their beliefs with those of the Incas, Tewa, or Navajo.

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LITERARY ANALYSIS

Conflict: As you recall, the basis of a story's plot is conflict, or a struggle between opposing forces. An external conflict pits a character against nature, society, or another character. An internal conflict is between opposing forces within a character. In "Coyote and the Buffalo," for example, Coyote's struggle to keep Buffalo Bull from killing him is an external conflict, whereas Coyote's struggle to decide whether to kill and eat the buffalo cow is an internal conflict.

Cooperative Learning Activity: In a small group, discuss the conflicts you see in "The Man to Send Rain Clouds." Summarize them on a chart like the one below and classify each as external or internal. Are the conflicts resolved? If so, tell how.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conflict</th>
<th>Internal or External?</th>
<th>How Resolved</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

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