

Leslie marmon silko's ceremony essay sample



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Tayo, the main character in the story, has always maintained a belief in the Native American traditions although he was educated in white schools. Completely conscious of the social realities surrounding Native American life inside and outside the reservation — and Native American participation in World War II — Tayo is able to make use of his double consciousness (of white and Native American life) to heal himself and his community. Tayo represents the convergence of Native American and white cultures, both present in his lineage, and in his experience, which brings him from the reservation, to the US army, to the Philippines, to a Veteran's Hospital, and back to the reservation. Bearing the signs of the cultural mixing in his green eyes often makes Tayo tolerate the impact of a whole society's confusion at the ways in which the world is evolving. Tayo encounters great difficulty in negotiating his mixed identity and experience especially since he never knew his father and was abandoned by his mother at the age of four. This is aggravated by his Auntie who raises him with the constant reminder of his difference. Like most of his peers, Tayo is educated in white-run schools.

However, unlike his friends, he often finds the white ways of life flawed and continues to respect and to believe in the Native American traditions he learns from his family. This realization led to his lifelong desperation to belong in his family and his community, along with his deep-seated belief in the power of the old traditions. It also allows Tayo to take up the challenge offered by Betonie and to undertake the completion of the ceremony, which can cure both himself and his people. Although he often falters along the path, Tayo's acceptance of the Native American mythical world allows him to benefit from the aid of accidents, animals, spirits, and the elements.

One of the most dominant features of Silko's *Ceremony* is the manner in which Silko introduces significant themes and issues into the text without explicitly stating them. By weaving in just a few key words and phrases into a single passage she is able to capture the essence of an entire theme. This paper aims to show how Silko weaves tradition and worldviews in *Ceremony* in order to pass invaluable messages across the boundaries of culture by examining the themes and texts in the story.

Circular and Non-linear Structure

" Ts'its'tsi'nako, Thought-Woman,

is sitting in her room

and whatever she thinks about

appears.

She thought of her sisters,

Nau'ts'ityi and I'tcts'ity'i,

and together they created the Universe

this world

and the four worlds below.

Thought-Woman, the spider,

named things and

as she named them

they appeared.

She is sitting in her room

thinking of a story now

I'm telling you the story

she is thinking" (Silko 1).

This poem or song serves its purposes. Foremost, it elucidates the concept of time in Native American expressions, where the past, present and future are interweaved and indistinguishable. Secondly, it reveals Silko's novel as a representation of the human memory, where ideas are not regarded and conjured in a methodical, orderly manner but materialize from random connections and motivation. Thirdly, Silko's use of poetry invokes the rhythmic, communal storytelling patterns of the Native Americans, while her use of prose belongs to a Western narrative tradition. By mingling the two in her novel, Silko stresses that the form as well as the content of the story is about the blending of the two cultures. In reality, white and Native American cultures conflict with each other more often than they complement each other, but the prose and poetry weave together effortlessly. In more ways, they tell the same story; "only thing is," as Grandma says at the end, "the names sound different." The entire stories sound different as well, as versification (the division of the verses), rhyming, alliteration (the repetition of the first letter of a word), and repetition give the poems a distinctive rhythm. The poem at the end of the novel as well completes the line on the <https://assignbuster.com/leslie-marmon-silkos-ceremony-essay-sample/>

page before the first prose section, enclosing the entire novel within a poem. In other words, just as whites are said to be an invention of Native American witchcraft, so is a Western form of storytelling shown to be enclosed within a Native American form of storytelling.

Tayo's Search for His Identity

...contours and niches that Tayo's bones did not fit...

Lack of personal identity is part of Tayo's struggle throughout Ceremony. As a person of "mixed ancestry", he is lost, swinging in between the boundaries of cultures without firm ground underneath. All throughout his life he is reminded by Auntie that he does not belong in the community and that he is not entirely one of them. This meaning is strengthened time and time again by his peers and family. He relays these pain and confusion it has caused him to the Night Swan in this way: "Mexican eyes," he said, "the other kids used to tease me...When they look at me they remember things that happened. My mother..." But the Night Swan remarked: "They are afraid, Tayo. They feel something happening around them and it scares them. Indians or Mexicans or whites—most people are afraid of change. They think that if their children have the same color of skin, the same color of eyes that nothing is changing. 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" (Silko 99).

Silko, in these passages, elucidates the plight of bicultural individuals, where society can be cruel and discriminating to those who are perceived as 'other.' Tayo, as a Native American, is marginalized by the hegemonic white

culture. As part Mexican, he is rendered an even lower status in the Native American culture. Likewise, Night Swan presents a discerning interpretation for such discriminating actions by describing the fear that is tangled within the web of dilemma in the Native American culture. People are threatened by the change that has transformed Native American society into a weak and vulnerable culture on the verge of destruction. The people believe that if they maintain pure lineage and do not mix Indian blood with other races that they will be able to preserve the culture. Hence, persons like Tayo are seen as representations of the dismantling of the culture. What is significant however, is the fact that Tayo, a supposed threat, grows into a strong and vibrant force eager to nourish and revitalize the Native American culture by the close of the novel.

Tayo's Healing and Self-Realization

"—nothing was lost; all was retained, without regard to titles of ownership or white ranchers who thought they possessed it" (Silko 219).

Tayo's "healing" and his endeavor to re-establish harmony in nature required a realization that he had not lost anything. This passage refers to the land that had belonged to them and had been taken by white ranchers and settlers. The idea is analogous in Tayo's mind with himself and his identity. His identity cannot be eradicated, however murky and shameful his birth and origin was, and no matter how feeble and uncertain his connections were with his family and community.

In Summary

" I must be getting old . . . , because these goings-on around Laguna don't get me excited any more. It seems like I already heard these stories before . . . , only thing is, the names sound different" (Silko 273).

With these words of Grandma, Silko was able to send the message regarding her pervasive belief in the principle of *eadem sed aliter* , alike but differently, the eternal recurrence and eternal relevance of the old stories and the old ceremonies. The old stories are, for her, the means by which those who have gone before have made their experiences comprehensible. The ceremonies are the means by which these experiences can be revived and made essential to the life of the celebrant. The myths and ceremonies, alone, are capable of giving order and meaning to the confusion of ordinary life.

Alienation, anomie, chaos, all those problems which threaten the native in the modern world lose their importance when viewed as factors that can be dealt with by a controlling myth. Thematically, white and Native American cultures clash with each other more often than they complement each other. As Grandma puts it succinctly, they tell the same story " only thing is the names sound differently."

Reference:

Silko, Leslie Marmon (1977). *Ceremony* . New York: Viking.