

Study Guide for ***Ceremony***
By Leslie Marmon Silko

Before you begin reading:

Ceremony is structured quite differently than most novels, therefore, understanding the author's purpose might be useful to help readers reduce potential confusion. The author is presenting a modern novel about the Native American experience and telling a story in the Native American mythological tradition. These two purposes are interwoven throughout the novel. In the modern story line there are no numbered chapter divisions, but rather sections designated by deep indents of the first line. The myths or spiritual stories are inserted as centered text and have a distinctive poetic quality. This structure artfully paints a wash of spiritual hope over the loss of purpose and holistic sickness sometimes experienced in modern Native American life.

As scholars of myth, you know that many older cultures integrated the spiritual into daily life in ways rarely practiced in modernity. In *Ceremony*, what might be perceived as disconnected and illogical to the average reader should make sense to you through the lens of world mythology. By inserting "old stories" into the narrative, the author provides a sharp contrast to the degradation of Native American life and a clear case for revival of traditions as a cure for cultural and individual deterioration.

Characters:

Tayo- a Native American man who returns home to his Laguna Pueblo reservation after serving as a soldier in WWII.

Grandma, Auntie and Robert, Rocky - the most stable members of Tayo's family

Laura- Tayo's mother, the family outcast who "sleeps around" (Tayo's father is unknown.)

Josiah- Tayo's childless uncle who has a relationship with the mysterious woman, the "night swan."

"Old Ku' oosh"- a Laguna medicine man who sends Tayo to Betonie for help.

Harley and Leroy- Tayo's Laguna war buddies who are mostly friendly toward Tayo.

Pinkie and Emo- Tayo's Laguna war buddies who are hostile to Tayo.

Betonie- a Navajo medicine man who conducts the ceremony that forms the heart of the novel.

Shush- Betonie's mute assistant

Ts'eh- the mysterious young woman who helps Tayo on separate occasions.

Themes and ideas:

- good v. evil within the context of native American life.
 - how are good and evil represented in the story?
 - how does evil function?
 - why is evil powerful in the modern world? think about the relationship between humans and the natural world.
- the issues and challenges of mixed bloodlines.
- N.A. traditional concept of integrated self: body + soul + mind.
- power and purpose of spirit applied to modern life.
- necessary flexibility of tradition in order to persist.
- role of women/feminine powers in native American culture

Guide to:

prayers and traditional stories

Thought Woman, the power of the stories; sunrise (pp. 1-4)

Reed Woman goes "below" after being neglected by Corn Woman (pp.13-14)

the Scalp Society (pp. 37-38)

People learn tricks from Pa'caya'nyi, the Ck'o'yo medicine man and neglect corn altars 'Nau'ts'ity'i takes away the plants and rainclouds. (pp.46-49; 53-54)

Laguna WWII "heroes" (pp.57-59)

Hummingbird and Fly go "below" to bring mother Nau'ts'ity'i back (pp. 71-72; continues on pps. 82; 105-106; 113; 151; 180.)

Shush's story (pp. 128-130.)
origins of witchery (pp. 132-138.)

young man captured by Coyote-the prototype for Tayo's ceremony (pp.139-141; 153; resolution on 258.)

script for Tayo's ceremony (pp. 142-144.)

healing begins (p. 153.)

the Sun goes to find his children the Rainclouds who have been captured by Kaup'a'ta the ck'o'yo magician in his house in the Zuni Mountains (pp.170-176.)

traditional prayers:

- Ka't'sina singing to sunrise (p. 182.)
- hunter's prayer (p. 206.)

Arrowboy catches sight of a Ck'o'yo witchman changing into a wolf (p. 247.)

Hummingbird and Fly bring mother Nau'ts'ity'i back to earth (pp. 255-256.)
song to amoo'ooh (p.257.)

"whirling darkness" of witchery dying out and then sunrise (pp, 260-262.)

prose storyline

Tayo on a desert ranch remembers Rocky's death in the jungle during wwii. tayo cursed the jungle rain, and now there has been a drought in the desert for several years. (pp. 5-12; 14)

Harley comes by and Tayo goes with him to find a bar; tayo has memories of a mental hospital and meeting Old Ku'oosh after returning from the war. (pp. 14-37.)

Tayo remembers: drinking with Emo, Harley and other veterans, more on Rocky's death, the enlistment and how he and Rocky were different. (pp.64-71; 73.)

Before the war, uncle Josiah obtains a sturdy breed of cattle capable of surviving the drought. Josiah and "night swan." (pp. 93-105)

Tayo prays for rain; Tayo and the 'night swan.'" (pp.93-105.)

Tayo's memories are unbearable. He is taken to Betonie who performs a ceremony for him, and discusses the necessary nature of ceremonies. Betonie explains how Tayo's ceremony is unfinished (pp.107-152)

Tayo starts drinking again (pp. 153-169)

Tayo tracks Josiah's lost cattle herd with the help of stars, ts'eh, a mountain lion and a hunter. (pp. 169-213.)

Tayo returns the cattle to the ranch, returns to the desert and finds Ts'eh who warns him about Emo and the others. (pp.214-235)

Tayo flees and accidentally stumbles onto the uranium mines at Cebolleta. He hides and witnesses Emo and Pinky torturing harley to death, but feels driven to complete the ceremony. (pp. 235-254.)

Tayo is welcomed home by old Ku'oosh. Pinky dies and Emo leaves for California. (pp. 256-260)