

## ANALYSIS

### *Ceremony* (1977)



Leslie Marmon Silko

(1948- )

“Although *Ceremony* derives from 1977, it fits well into the 90s scene, inasmuch as it accommodates well the politically correct context which has overwhelmed one sector of American culture. Yet the Silko book at the same time goes beyond political correctness; it becomes a valid way of looking at American life in the last two decades from the perspective of someone who belongs to two worlds and not quite to either.

Tayo, a Native-American, has fought in World War II, seen the worst mankind can do, and, having survived as a Japanese prisoner, returns to America a vegetable, having lost those closest to him. His condition is closer to what we find in Vietnam War literature than in Second World War fiction; but his post-traumatic stress disorder leaves him—as it did so many survivors of the later war—self-destructive and destructive. He is a ticking time bomb, mainly in his denial of life, just another ‘drunken Indian,’ as he perceives himself and others view him. But slowly he comes into touch with himself through ‘ceremonies’ (of the title), those Native rites that bring him back to roots and to something meaningful.

The ceremonies are holistic, in fact, and he comes to recognize that Japanese voices link with Laguna voices. When he sees that Los Alamos is on land taken from the Pueblo Indians, he ‘arrives at the point of convergence,’ wherein all voices are connected. Friends Josiah and Rocky and their lives, their line of cultures and worlds, all, are linked. ‘From that time on,’ Silko writes, ‘human beings were one clan, united by the fate the destroyers planned for all of them, for all living things; united by a circle of death that devoured people in cities twelve thousand miles away, victims who had never known these mesas, who had never seen the delicate colors of the rocks which boiled up their slaughter.’ With this convergence of cultures and worlds, Tayo is on his way to recovery. He sees a pattern in the world that establishes the opposition between those voices (ceremonial) that save and those (mainly in the white world) that destroy.

This is an advocacy novel, but its chief component for the 80s and 90s is its plaint that we are destroying ourselves. These are not New Age ceremonies, not the mumbo-jumbo of Iron John, but the ancient ceremonies revived for those who need restoratives. These are not the ancient rites and traditions that infuse

D. H. Lawrence's *The Plumed Serpent*, where ceremonies are merely a façade for a new fascistic order. In the Native-American version, the modern world kills, while ceremonies can possibly restore. With death, destruction, and modern life linked, salvation takes the form of returning to the older ways, eschewing the new and modern, and fitting oneself not into a new skin but into a former skin, which awaits the individual prepared to try it on."

Frederick R. Karl  
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