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Abstract

An essay examining how Leslie M. Silko utilizes the relationship between Nature and Native American Mystic Arts to create a full and vibrant world in her novel *Ceremony*.

Keywords

Magic, Native American, Healing, Writing, Nature

Disciplines

American Literature | Indigenous Studies | Literature in English, North America, Ethnic and Cultural Minority

Comments

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Nature, Magic, and Healing: How Leslie Silko builds her native world

In Leslie Silko's magnum opus *Ceremony*, she utilizes the remarkable relationship between nature and the mystical arts in Native culture to develop a world that lives up to her cultural heritage. This work contains some of the most beautiful and impactful writing ever seen in the English language, and a large reason for this is Silko's dedication to describing the majesty of the earth and her many beautiful parts. She does this by demonstrating the power nature holds in the ceremonies of healing, the brutal pain that comes from breaking the sacred bond with nature, and the role nature plays in fulfilling one's existence.

Throughout the entirety of the novel, the sequence of events surrounding the ceremony Betonie performs on Tayo may be the most impactful example of the way Silko demonstrates the power nature holds over the ceremonies used to heal the sick. This ceremony also does a splendid job at expanding upon the mystic power integral to Native culture. She fills these pages with descriptions of many different forms of nature, from the mundane to the unimaginable. Silko begins Tayo's experience by explaining how nature was assisting in his current state, which was one of exhaustion and rejection "He stared at the dry yellow grass by the old man's feet. The sun's heat was draining his strength away; there was no place to now except back to the hospital in Los Angeles" (Silko 118). As Tayo meets Betonie and enters his hogan, he is clearly uneasy and even fearful of what the old man may do to him "this would be the end of him. The Gallup police would find his body

in the bushes along the big arroyo” (Silko 122), yet the whole time is subconsciously beginning to pick up on the natural undertones this medicine man possessed “He could smell its contents; a great variety of herb and root odors were almost hidden by the smell of mountain sage and something as ordinary as curry powder” (119). Silko is utilizing these natural elements and plants that hold a calming and revitalizing effect to explain Tayo’s slow and subtle transition from cowardice to confidence. She is also using these natural things to make a clear point, which she elaborates further with Tayo’s thoughts “The leftover things the whites didn’t want. All Betonie owned in the world was in this room. What kind of healing power was this?” (127). To Tayo, he has been raised by an aunt and cousin who throw away their own culture for what the Euro-American culture deems appropriate, yet the only one who seems to be able to aid Tayo is keeping exactly the sorts of things Tayo’s aunt would have thrown out without a second guess. These things include many aspects of nature, from herbs and spices to bags of skin and animal feet, all of which play immense roles in Betonie’s power. As the medicine man slowly begins to zero in on Tayo’s struggles, he decides on a course of action. As the duo depart the hogan, Tayo’s mood is changing, represented by the refreshing sensations nature is providing “He walked into the evening air, which was cool and smelled like juniper smoke for the old man’s fire” (127). Immediately, a new character, vital to the ceremony, arrives. This character, named Shush, represents a mirror image of Tayo’s journey, a soul who drifted away from himself and needed the help of the natural magic of a medicine man to return to himself. Tayo picks up on this, and describes Shush’s state of being as “There was something strange about the boy, something remote in his eyes, as if he were on a distant mountaintop alone and the fire and hogan and the lights of the town below them did not exist” (128), which is again an example of Silko using incredible examples of nature to describe the unique mystical elements of Native culture. As the

formal ceremony approaches, Silko fills Tayo's thoughts with a sense of respect for nature, and an almost majestic tone; with lines like "The night air of the high mountains was chilled by the light of the stars and the shadows of the moon" (Silko 138), "He smelled pinon and sage in the wind that blew across the stony backbone of the ridge" (138), and "This was the highest place on the earth: he could feel it. It had nothing to do with measurements or height. It was a special place. He was smiling. He felt strong" (139). This establishes a sense of awe for the might of these natural forces being used in this ceremony. When the ceremony is performed, it too is full of natural forces. The entire setup of the ceremony involves incredible sand paintings which depict beautiful natural scenes. The sand paintings are set up to depict a natural flow of energy, which is set up by the mountain ranges. Betonie paints "The old man painted a dark mountain range beside the farthest hoop, the next closer, he painted blue, and moving toward him, he knelt and made the yellow mountains; and in front of him, Betonie painted the white mountain range" (142). Additionally, Tayo's area is described as "He sat at the center of the white corn sand painting. The rainbows crossed were in the painting behind him" (141), which directly correlates with a native legend that depicts the unquestionable power of nature. This ceremony boils down to a way to worship the flow of nature and bring one out of their natural place back to it, and Tayo's journey through the ceremony is carefully planned to do just that "They plotted the course of the ceremony by the direction of dark night winds and by the colors of the clay in drought-ridden valleys" (151). Ultimately, this ceremony was a demonstration of the Native understanding of nature and the unique way it is used by Leslie Silko to explain the principles of Native mystic arts.

The positive impacts of the bond between nature and the mystic arts are undeniable, however the cost of breaking the sacred bond with nature is incredibly high in Silko's work.

There is no better example of the negative consequences Silko attributes to the abuse of nature using mystic arts than Tayo's constant guilt at causing the drought that is causing immense suffering throughout the book. The scenario that causes Tayo to use his untapped mystic power is a truly crushing moment in the book, which takes place during the Baton death march "Tayo hated this unending rain as if it were the jungle green rain and not the miles of marching or the Japanese grenade that was killing Rocky" (Silko 11). Tayo is truly suffering, and at the end of his proverbial rope, and Silko only continues to build this sense of indescribable discomfort and slow descent into utter desperation "The sound of the rain got louder, pondering on the leaves, splashing into the ruts; it splattered on his head, and the sound echoed inside his skull" (12). Eventually, Tayo makes a tragic mistake, one that fails to save his cousin or his fellow soldiers, and instead does more harm than he could have ever imagined "So he prayed the rain away, and for the sixth year it was dry" (14). Tayo does not realize the consequences of his actions right away, or the power of the forces he was tampering with, yet the results were disastrous, and Silko captures the results of a drought perfectly in one of the many poems in *Ceremony* "And there was no more rain then. Everything dried up all the plants the corn the beans they all dried up and started blowing away in the wind. The people and the animals were thirsty. They were starving" (13). After Tayo returns home, he "could see the consequences of his praying" (14), and ultimately he saw the effects that come with tampering with nature. An additional moment in the novel where Silko captures the immense consequences of tampering with natural forces for evil intent is the witches' conference. Here, witches, who "crawl into skins of dead animals, but they can do nothing but play around with objects and bodies" (131), meet to show off their immensely evil creations and impress the other witches. Silko describes the setting of this meeting "Way up in the lava rock hills north of Canoncito they got together to fool around in caves with their

animal skins. Fox, badger, bobcat, and wolf they circled the fire” (Silko 133), which develops a sense of forbidding and unnatural feelings. Evidently, these witches are tampering with forces they should not be, they are poisoning the collective spiritual energy of humanity and as a result, they bring about the apocalypse for the culture “Stolen rivers and mountains the stolen land will eat their hearts and jerk their mouths from the Mother. The people will starve” (136). This quote comes from the tale of the origins of the white people who came and obliterated everything in their path, destroying the natural ways of the natives, for they will “poison the water/they will spin the water away and there will be drought the people will starve” (136). These white people come as a direct result of the witchery being committed by these individuals, witchery that involves forsaking the natural way and the proper mystic path, abusing both for one’s gain and directly causing other’s suffering. Ultimately, their actions bring about the destruction of their society and people. This is a pattern in many of the poems Silko includes in *Ceremony*, each featuring a different sort of mystic art or natural engagement that violates the laws of nature, and as a result, a catastrophic event occurs that decimates the Native way of life. This, to Silko, is the direct result of abusing the gift of the mystic arts to hurt the forces of nature, and thus the consequences Tayo faces are the same as the many characters in the poem, and he must go through a healing process to correct his great error.

Beyond the positive and negative role nature holds in the mystic arts of Native culture, Silko also incorporates the immense power Nature has to help an individual feel fulfilled, to ensure their soul finds value in the world. This theme of nature fueling one’s soul is incredibly central to Tayo’s journey of recovery and placation of the natural forces he abused. Unlike the positive and negative application of mystic arts on nature, nature’s effect on the mystic aspects of oneself does not feature one or two incredibly significant moments that contribute to most of the

major ideas related to it, but instead, Silko feels the entire novel with language and descriptions of the power of nature. During a conversation Josiah has with Tayo, he says “This sand, this stone, these trees, the vines, all the wildflowers. This earth keeps us going” (Silko 45), which encapsulates the idea that the power of nature is what fulfills humans, what makes one feel more than an individual, and instead become a part of something deeper and more meaningful. Tayo often drifts through the novel, attempting to put one foot in front of the other and find a way to continue living. From the perspective of a broken man, nature is shown to slowly fill the many cracks in his soul, not erasing them, but instead sealing the broken parts of him back together. In a moment of true connection with nature, Tayo goes out into the desert to pray before departing for war and connecting with nature. During his journey, the predawn desert has a certain ambiance “The water oozed out from the dark orange sandstone at the base of the long mesa. He waited for the sun to come over the hills” (93), which contributes to the wonder at Tayo’s incredible moment of cultural connection when performing a sunrise prayer “the things he did seemed right, as he imagined with his heart the rituals the cloud priest performed during a drought” (94). While this sequence certainly displays Tayo’s innate connection with the traditions of his people, it also develops the influence nature has on Tayo, filling him with a sense of purpose and belonging, even if he does not yet feel that within himself. Even beyond individuals, Silko brings nature and its many aspects to life, such as when she describes rain “It was spinning out of the thunderclouds like gray spider webs and tangling against the foothills of the mountain” (96), which contributes to the sense of power nature holds. While humans certainly have the capacity to use nature for healing and harming many aspects of their lives, and many do, nature itself has the capacity to do the same to humans. This power and influence is what gave Tayo purpose and allowed him to once again feel that “being alive was all right then:

he had not breathed like that for a long time” (Silko 181). Tayo has found peace once more, and nature has welcomed him back into its flow for he has earned his return through careful prayer and practice, as well as allowing his wounds to heal. Ultimately, the very power the medicine men and witches use for their magic is held by nature itself, and nature uses this power to maintain the proper flow of life throughout the world.

Overall, Leslie Silko uses the relationship between nature and the mystics arts to build a proper understanding of Native spiritualism and natural power. The use of natural power during healing ceremonies demonstrates how useful a proper connection with nature can be, and how healing takes an ability to connect with the natural flow. The discussion on the consequences of tampering with the natural flow of energy describes the immense weight one holds when wielding natural forces, and how delicate one must be. The consistent use of the relationship between nature and an individual goes to show how nature itself has immense power over every human and having a positive relationship with nature will be very beneficial for anyone. Silko’s masterful writing and inspiring connection with her culture is immensely clear throughout this novel and the worldbuilding that the relationship between nature and the mystic arts conveys is second to none in literature.

Works Cited

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