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Authors

Biedler, Peter G.
Nelson, Robert M.

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Grandma's Wicker Sewing Basket: Untangling the Narrative Threads in Silko's *Ceremony*

PETER G. BEIDLER AND ROBERT M. NELSON

Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* is a novel about a young man named Tayo who returns to the Laguna Reservation, probably in 1948, after horrifying experiences on the Pacific front in World War II and an unspecified period of time in a Veteran's Administration hospital in California. He comes home a psychological mess after being released from a prisoner of war camp, probably in the Philippines. In one sense, Tayo's story is straightforward enough. A man grows from confusion to clarity, from being lost to being found, from being muddleheaded to being clearheaded, from being alone to getting connected, from feeling afraid to feeling confident, from thinking of himself as a villain to realizing that he may just be a hero. Why, then, do so many first-time readers of *Ceremony* get so confused by this narrative? The central reason is that most of the novel takes place in the consciousness of Tayo, who, for the first hundred or so pages, has no idea who he is or where he is going.

Part of Tayo's problem is that he cannot sort things out properly; part of his madness is that he cannot distinguish past from present.¹ And just as his mind is a jumble of events, the opening of the novel portrays unsorted, jumbled events. On the second page of the novel Tayo speaks of the tangle of events and memories in his mind:

Peter G. Beidler is the Lucy G. Moses Distinguished Professor of English at Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. He has published widely on Native American literature, as well as on Chaucer and Henry James. Robert M. Nelson is a professor of English at the University of Richmond, where he teaches a variety of courses in Native American literatures. He is a former co-editor of the journal *Studies in American Indian Literatures* and has published a book and many essays on the work of contemporary American Indian authors; he is currently working on a full-length study of the relationship between the prose narrative and the embedded texts in Leslie Silko's *Ceremony*.

The memories were tangled with the present, tangled up like colored threads from old Grandma's wicker sewing basket when he was a child, and he had carried them outside to play and they had spilled out of his arms into the summer weeds and rolled away in all directions, and then he had hurried to pick them up before Auntie found him. He could feel it inside his skull, the tension of little threads being pulled and how it was with tangled things, things tied together, and as he tried to pull them apart and rewind them into their places, they snagged and tangled even more.²

The narrative confusion is heightened by the interspersed throughout Tayo's story of a series of connected traditional Pueblo stories that reflect in various ways Tayo's own story, or that place his adventures against a mythic backdrop.

This brief article is designed to enable teachers to help first-time readers untangle the various narrative threads in *Ceremony*. To this end, we have provided photographs of some of the various locations mentioned in the novel and a chronological timeline of the main events. The novel is made up of three intersecting sequences, what could be called (1) *present action* (starting with the sunrise of pages 4–5 of the novel), (2) *past action* (events that are remembered, dreamed about, or merely referred to), and (3) *mythic action* (the old stories from time immemorial that are interspersed, mostly in short, centered lines, throughout the larger narrative). In the first section of this essay, we sketch the five episodes of present action in the novel; in the second section, we rearrange the events of past action into roughly chronological order so that students can identify particular sections that puzzle them by locating the page numbers. Silko situates events within the year (by month), but figuring out *which* year often requires informed guesswork.³ In the third section we gather together the various mythic stories that are part of the larger narrative of Tayo's recovery, labeling each according to which of the four major Laguna ceremonial motifs (creation, departure, recovery, transformation) it reactivates. In various ways these embedded stories foreshadow, mirror, and serve as formal templates for understanding Tayo's own series of departures (from Laguna village, from community identity, and from the Laguna way) and recoveries (both in the sense of "returns" and in the sense of "healings"), each of which involves also a process of transformation (of place, of psychological state, of spiritual awareness). All these several motions are also moments in a process of creation, parts of a process extending out from the moment when the original Laguna Grandmother, Ts'its'tsi'nako, sets life in motion (1).

1. PRESENT ACTION OF *CEREMONY*

A. May, 1948. Tayo, in bed at the ranch shack near the southwest corner of the Laguna Reservation, has had bad dreams and memories. Harley arrives on a burro, after which the two ride the burro and a blind mule to a bar. Tayo walks alone to Cubero and revisits Night Swan's room over Lalo's place (5–105).



FIGURE 1. Looking north-northwest from the front gate of the Marmon ranch, a few hundred yards south of the southwest corner of the Laguna Reservation, where Harley picks up Tayo at the beginning and where Tayo stands before going to find Ts'eh at the Dripping Springs near the end. To the left is Pa'to'ch Butte, "standing high and clear; months and years had no relation to the colors of gray slate and yellow sandstone circling it" (220); to the right is (blue) Mt. Taylor; exactly halfway between them, as seen from this spot, is the break in the line of mesa, "where the mesa plateau ended in crumbling shale above the red clay flats" (220), which leads to the Dripping Springs, where Tayo reencounters Ts'eh: "I'm camped up by the spring," she said, pointing at the canyon ahead of them. 'Here, this way. I'll show you'" (221).

- B. Late July, 1948.** Tayo tells Robert he is better, but Robert says "the old men are thinking" that he needs a stronger ceremony. They go to Gallup to see Betonie, who performs a sand-painting ceremony in the dark Chuska Mountains. Tayo leaves Betonie and hitchhikes in an oil truck as far as San Fidel, where he is picked up by Leroy, Harley, and Helen Jean. He gets drunk at the Y bar, then vomits out "everything, all the past, all his life," and walks home from Mesita (106–69).
- C. Late September, 1948.** Tayo visits Mt. Taylor on his quest for the spotted cattle, makes love with Ts'eh, cuts the fence, and brings the cattle home (169–218).
- D. Winter, 1948–Summer, 1949.** Tayo lives with Auntie, Robert, and Grandma. In the spring he returns to the "ranch" near Pa'to'ch Butte to look after his cattle. While there he meets Ts'eh by a spring and spends the summer with her. He gets a yellow bull to breed his cattle. At the end of the summer Ts'eh warns him that "they" will be wanting to end it soon. Tayo leaves the spring and heads back (218–35).
- E. Late September, 1949.** During the day and night of the autumnal equinox, Tayo rides with Leroy and Emo, escapes from them, has his final confrontation with Emo at the Jackpile uranium mine; he then tells his story to old Ku'oosh and the other elders in the kiva at old Laguna (235–62).



FIGURE 2. *The Jackpile Mine, as it appears looking north one mile southeast of Paguate Village. “These were the hills northwest of Cañoncito. . . . The sandstone and dirt they had taken from inside the mesa was piled in mounds, in long rows, like fresh graves” (Ceremony 241, 245).*



FIGURE 3. *Looking down into one of the Jackpile pits. “They had enough of what they needed, and the mine was closed. . . . They left behind only the barbed-wire fences, the watchman’s shack, and the hole in the earth” (Ceremony 244).*



FIGURE 4. *Paguete Village as seen looking northwest from the pit in figure 3. “Before the days of the mining companies, the people of Paguete village had fields of corn and melons and beans scattered throughout the little flood plains below the yellow sandstone mesas southeast of the village. Apple and apricot orchards flourished there too. . . . Now, the orchards and fields of melons are gone. Nearly all the land to the east and south of Paguete village has been swallowed by the mine; its open pit gapes within two hundred yards of the village” (Silko, *Yellow Woman and A Beauty of the Spirit* [New York: Simon & Schuster, 1966] 127).*

2. PAST ACTION OF CEREMONY

A. Tayo's youth.

[Tayo born around 1922?]

Drought animals sold (10).

Tayo scrounges for food in the bar, in alleys, and along the river in Gallup (108–13).

Laura takes Tayo, aged four, to Aunt Thelma (29, 34, 64).

Tayo spills Grandma's wicker sewing basket (6–7).

Tayo, age eight, tries to ride Siow's pinto (25–26).

Tayo takes colts to the mountain with Josiah (6).

Tayo and Rocky learn, to Josiah's amusement, that they cannot control the old black gelding (93).

Josiah brings fever medicine to Tayo (6).

Tayo helps Josiah siphon water from the spring (45–46).

Tayo and Rocky climb Bone Mesa (19).

Josiah explains to Tayo about flies (101–02).

Laura (Tayo's mother) dies (73, 93).

Tayo learns in school to dissect frogs (194–95).

Tayo and Rocky drink Benny's wine (20–21).

B. Tayo's early manhood.

Tayo goes to the Indian school (19).

White teachers make fun of the "superstitions" of the Indian children (194-95).

Tayo, Rocky, Robert, and Josiah go hunting on the mountain. They kill a deer (7, 50-52, 190).

Josiah tells Tayo that only humans resist (27).

Thelma tells Tayo about his mother's naked escapade [Is this the night she conceived Tayo?] (69-71).

Rocky plays heroic football in school (28).

Josiah has an affair with the Night Swan (30, 81-93).

Josiah buys spotted cattle from Ulibarri. Tayo promises to stay and help with them (30, 73-81, 124).

Tayo has first sex with the Night Swan (5, 6, 93-100).

C. Tayo in the Army.

Tayo and Rocky enlist as "brothers" in the U.S. Army. Tayo promises to bring Rocky back; 1941 (64-65, 72-73, 124).

Tayo and Rocky blessed by old white woman in Oakland, California, just before they ship out (41).

Harley, Emo, and Leroy at Wake Island; December 1941 (20, 40).

Tayo sees corpses in war; cannot kill Josiah-like prisoners (7-8, 246).

Josiah dies back in New Mexico, and the Night Swan leaves town (104).

Tayo oils rifle with Rocky on "some nameless Pacific Island" (Philippines).

They surrender and are taken prisoner (6, 7, 198).

Rocky is wounded and dies on Bataan Death March. Tayo curses the rain and the flies; April-May 1942 (11-14, 28, 40, 43-44, 56, 102).

Drought begins in New Mexico (11).

Tayo is placed in a prisoner of war camp (44).

Iwo Jima (shell shock); 1945 (40).

Atomic test at Trinity Site, New Mexico; 16 July 1945 (245).

D. Tayo returns from war.

Tayo in Veteran's hospital in Los Angeles for an indeterminate period; perhaps 1945-48. Eventually he is sent home. Train station incident (14-18, 123).

Tayo returns to pueblo on train from Los Angeles (29-32).

Harley abandons sheep at Montaña (22).

Emo tells the Mattuci story (57-59).

Tayo goes drinking in Dixie Bar with Emo, Pinkie, Leroy, and Harley. Tayo attacks Emo with a beer bottle (39-43, 55-61).

Tayo has bad dreams. Grandma enlists old Ku'oosh's aid for Tayo, but the cure is not successful (34-39).

Grandma gets a new kerosene heater (27-28).

3. MYTHIC ACTION IN *CEREMONY*⁴

- A. Creation.** Ts'its'tsi'nako and her daughter/sisters Nau'ts'ity'i and I'cts'ity'i set life in motion (1).
- B. Recovery/transformation.** Tayo remembers the Kurena (Dawn People) prayer for sunrise (4, 182, 262).
- C. Departure.** Corn Woman (Iyetiko) scolds her sister Reed Woman-Iktoa'ak'o'ya. Reed Woman departs and drought ensues (13–14).
- D. Departure and recovery of our mother Nau'ts'ity'i.**
1. Pa'caya'nyi comes from the north and introduces Ck'o'yo medicine to the People, distracting the twin brothers Ma'see'wi and Ou'yu'ye'we from their duty of taking care of our mother. Nau'ts'ity'i departs and drought ensues (46–49).
 2. People must send someone to ask forgiveness. Hummingbird appears fat and sleek and tells of seeing our mother Nau'ts'ity'i in the fourth world below (53–54).
 3. Hummingbird teaches the people how to make Green Fly function as a messenger (71–72).
 4. Hummingbird and Green Fly together travel south to the “fourth world / below” (82).
 5. Nau'ts'ity'i tells Hummingbird and Green Fly they must get Buzzard to purify the town (105–06).
 6. Hummingbird and Green Fly take gifts east to old Buzzard, who asks for tobacco (113).
 7. Hummingbird and Green Fly return to Nau'ts'ity'i to find out what tobacco is. She directs them to visit Caterpillar in the west (151–52).
 8. Caterpillar gives tobacco to Hummingbird and Green Fly (180).
 9. Buzzard purifies the town, Nau'ts'ity'i returns, and “the storm clouds returned” (255–56).
- E. Recovery.** Ku'oosh's preamble to Laguna Scalp Ceremony (37–38).
- F. Departure and (partial) recovery.** Small child accidentally transforms into Bear. He is called back into human identity by medicine men, “but he wasn't quite the same / after that” (128–30).
- G. Creation.** Betonie's story about the origins of Ck'o'yo witchery (132–38).
- H. Departure and recovery.** Navajo hunter who has been malevolently transformed into a Coyote is restored by being ritually conducted through five hoops, accompanied by chants.
1. Departure-transformation chant (142).
 2. Recovery-transformation chant (143–44).
 3. Transformation: unraveling the dead coyote skin (153).
 4. Transformation: unraveling the dead coyote skin (258).
 5. Departure chant for the witchery (260–61).
- I. Departure and recovery.** Kaup'a'ta the Gambler (like Pa'caya'nyi, a practitioner of Ck'o'yo medicine) captures and locks up the Storm Clouds, and drought ensues. Aided by the story he receives from Spider Grandmother (Ts'its'tsi'nako), Sun Man liberates his children the Storm Clouds and transforms Kaup'a'ta's eyes into the horizon stars of autumn (94–95, 170–76).

J. **Recovery.** Mountain Lion Man's deer song (206).

K. **[Anti-]transformation.** Arrowboy spies on Ck'o'yo witches. Their medicine won't work while he's watching (247).

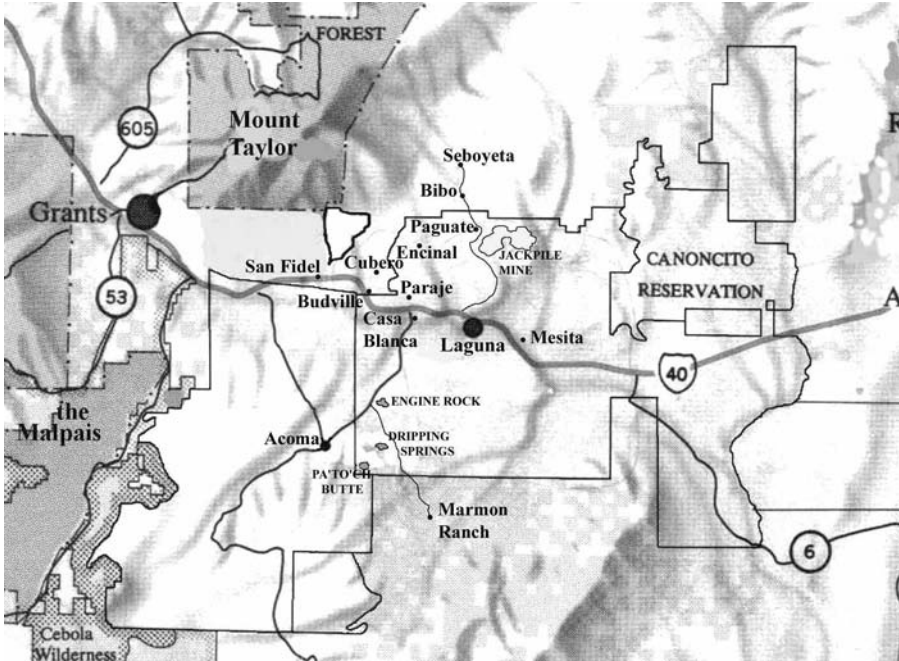


FIGURE 5. This map of Laguna Pueblo and environs highlights places mentioned in *Ceremony*, including six of the Pueblo of Laguna's seven villages (Laguna, New Laguna, Paguato, Paraje, Mesita, Casa Blanca) and some of the villages lying just off the reservation (Budville, Cubero, Grants, San Fidel, Seboyeta).

The map above shows a number of place names mentioned in *Ceremony*. For readers interested in the geographical setting of the novel, here is a list of the place names mentioned along with the page(s) on which each place is mentioned.

Bibo (217).

Budville (King's Bar, Dixie Tavern) (49, 52, 100, 217).

Cañoncito (79, 216).

Casa Blanca (105).

Cubero (Lalo's place, where the Night Swan lives upstairs)
(81–105 *passim*).

Dripping Springs (145, 221–235).

Enchanted Mesa (236).

Jackpile Mine (244–54).

Los Cerritos (102, 155, 217).

Mesita (158, 168).

Mt. Taylor (Tse-pi'na) (87, 96, 167, 176–214, 219).
 New Laguna (218).
 Paguate (81, 92, 254).
 Paraje (45)
 Pa'to'ch Butte (145, 220, 230).
 San Fidel (153–54, 217).
 Seboyeta (Cebolleta) (244).

It is always dangerous, of course, to try to untangle a work of fiction whose very brilliance is its layered interconnectedness, but Silko helps the reader put the spilled threads back into Grandma's wicker sewing basket. One of the signs of Tayo's growth is that he becomes capable of telling his story to the men in the kiva. Another is that he becomes capable of "finally seeing the pattern, the way all the stories fit together—the old stories, the war stories, their stories—to become the story that was still being told. He was not crazy; he had never been crazy. He had only seen and heard the world as it always was: no boundaries, only transitions through all distances and time" (246). The narrative is constructed to allow readers to understand the various threads and how they can be woven into a narrative that, for all of its initial confusion, is patterned as deliberately as the stars that Tayo sees in the night sky above Mount Taylor—and again in the night sky above the uranium mine.

NOTES

1. That this is madness is, of course, the Army psychiatrist's diagnosis, and most Western readers might be inclined to agree. In conventional Laguna cosmogeny, however, things past and things present are not, finally, separate in time from one another but rather connected by time (and personal vision) to one another.

2. Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (1977; New York: Penguin, 1986), 6–7. All subsequent quotations, cited parenthetically in the text of the paper, are from this edition.

3. We date the opening "present" events in 1948 because of Silko's statement on page 14 that the drought had lasted six years since he had "prayed the rain away" during the Bataan Death March. That march took place in April 1942. For more on the Bataan Death March, see Beidler's "Bloody Mud" essay, pages 23–33 in this issue. Interestingly, the opening "present" action of the novel coincides with Silko's birth in the spring of 1948.

4. For a fuller treatment of the relationships between some of these mythic storylines and the storyline of the prose narrative, see Robert Bell, "Circular Design in *Ceremony*," *American Indian Quarterly* 5.1 (February 1979): 47–62; and the following by Robert M. Nelson: "Settling for Vision in *Ceremony*: Sun Man, Arrowboy, and Tayo" (pages 67–73 in this volume); "Rewriting Ethnography: Embedded Texts in Leslie Silko's *Ceremony*," in *Telling the Stories: Essays on American Indian Literatures and Cultures*, eds. Elizabeth Hoffman Nelson and Malcolm Nelson (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 47–58; "The Kaupata Motif in Silko's *Ceremony*: A Study of a Literary Homology," in *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 11, 3 (Fall 1999): 2–21; "Sunrise and Ceremony," in *Native Realities* 1, 2 (Summer 2001), available at <http://oncampus.richmond.edu/~rnelson/sunrise.html>.

