

AN "AUTHORLESS" TEXT: THE USEFULNESS OF MYTHOLOGICAL  
STRUCTURES IN LESLIE MARMON SILKO'S *CEREMONY* (1977)

Native Americans writing today face one important challenge, that of making themselves understood in literary forms foreign to their traditional oral and communal discourse. Their response has been to defy European-American genre limits and blur all distinctions between fiction and fact, poetry and prose, myth and history, realism and romance; and to draw on the language and symbolism of oral traditions, at base connected to tribal rituals, mataphysics and mysticism.

*Ceremony* (1977), Silko's first novel, is the story of a half-breed Laguna outcast, ostracized from family and community, returned from World War II. Tayo suffers from the familiar malaise of mixedblood alienation and feels as an empty space with no voice.

'He can't talk to you,' he tells an Anglo doctor. 'He is invisible. His words are formed with an invisible tongue, they have no sound.' He reached into his mouth and felt his own tongue; it was dry and dead, the carcass of a tiny rodent. (Silko, 1986: 15)

Tayo considers himself responsible for the drought that plagues his people and their motherland, because he cursed the rain in the Philippine jungles -a hint that he is aware of the power of words and stories-; for the death of his cousin Rocky, because he had promised to bring him alive; for the death of his uncle Josiah, because he should not have enlisted but stayed home and helped him; and for the Japanese soldiers whom he might have killed. He also feels guilty for his fellow veterans who try to drink back the feelings of respect and belonging experienced when they were soldiers in Southern California. His anguish and remorse are manifested in his nightmares, his horrifying hallucinations, his hearing bodiless voices, his crying, his vomiting and his lost sense of time, which moves forward and backward in flashes of memory and consciousness. The doctors at the Veterans Administration hospital in Los Angeles believe that he suffers from battle fatigue and other psychosomatic disorders, and treat his illness with Western medical techniques, which prove ineffectual. All they can finally do is send him home to the Pueblo. Tayo can be cured only by Indian medicine.

At the reservation Ku'oosh, a traditional medical practitioner, is summoned for Tayo by his grandmother. The medicine man is at once aware of the problem and comments: "'I'm afraid of what will happen to all of us if you and the others don't get well'" (Silko, 1986: 38) No one within the cosmos has its existence and meaning alone: "'It is important to all of us. Not only for your sake, but for this fragile world.'" (Silko, 1986: 36)

According to Pueblo cosmology everything in the universe -whether animate or inanimate- is significant and has its ordered place. Men and women have immense responsibility for the

world we inhabit, all men and women are one, and, concomitantly, the individual has little significance alone. An individual such as Tayo has identity and a coherent self only insofar as he is an integral part of the larger community.

Although Tayo is made to understand his responsibility to his community and to all creation, yet he cannot be treated successfully with the scalp ceremony Ku'oosh prescribes.<sup>1</sup> Tayo and the veterans have been changed by the war, and the consequent contact with a society outside their culture and ways of life, therefore the traditional ceremonies are no longer helpful because they have not changed to meet the new conditions of the world.

If Ku'oosh ceremony proves ineffectual, Betonie's *sandpainting* will eventually help Tayo's return to a healthy balance within himself and between himself and his community. Within Navajo Indian ritual, *sandpainting* or *dry-painting* is a ceremonial ritual used for healing purposes, i. e., for restoring the spiritual, emotional, physical and psychological health of an individual, by becoming united with the wholeness of the spiritual and physical world.<sup>2</sup>

Betonie,<sup>3</sup> seen as a caretaker of "things which have stories alive in them" (Silko, 1986: 127), informs Tayo, as Ku'oosh had earlier instructed the younger man, that there are delicate harmonies and balances to maintain within each person, community, the earth and the sky. However, unlike old Ku'oosh, he believes things are always shifting so that people, their ceremonies, stories and even their existence must change accordingly, or else they will become static and thereby become eventually extinct: "Things which don't shift and grow are dead things." (Silko, 1986: 133).

Betonie's rituals propitiate Tayo's recovery and healing process because they have been altered to meet the new situations of Christianity, alcohol and mechanization that have made a new world around the old one of the Pueblo and its people. Betonie confirms the sense that Tayo has had all along, that he is involved in a story much larger than himself:

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<sup>1</sup> A traditional ceremony for putting the souls of dead warriors to rest, performed in the old days for any warrior who had killed or touched a dead enemy.

<sup>2</sup> *Sandpainting* is a rite commonly performed in Navajo healing ceremonials and essential to those classified as *Holyway*. It is performed on the last four days of an eight-day, nine-night healing rite. A clean sand base is prepared in the centre of the ceremonial hogan. On this base, colored crushed minerals are strewn to construct pictures associated with the mythology of the ceremonial. The completed painting is blessed by strewing cornmeal or pollen on it from the four cardinal directions. The person for whom the ceremonial is being performed, *the one-sung-over*, walks on the painting and sits in the middle of it. *The one-sung-over* is then identified with the sandpainting and all the figures on it by having it applied to her or his body in the ritual sequence: feet, legs, body, and head. The singer moistens his hands with a medicine infusion and uses the moisture to transfer sands from the figures in the painting to the corresponding body parts of the one-sung-over, in the process destroying the sandpainting. Through this identification with the sandpainting and the stories recalled by songs sung during this rite, *the one-sung-over's* suffering is identified with that of the great Navajo heroes and with the way of the world. The rite concludes with the sands being scraped together and carried out of the hogan to be deposited in the appropriate location. This information has been taken from Gill & Sullivan, 1992, 260-261.

<sup>3</sup> Betonie is an old mixed-blood Navajo. There is irony in having a Navajo cure at Laguna, because the Navajo and Laguna tribes were traditional enemies. In the XVIII century, in fact, the Laguna made an alliance with the Spanish to protect themselves from Navajo raids. The raids continued until late in the XIX century, and the animosity lasted long afterward, although Silko makes no mention of it.

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'You've been doing something all along. All this time, and now you are at an important place in the story.' He paused. 'The Japanese, 'the medicine man went on, as though he were trying to remember something. 'It isn't surprising you saw him (Josiah) with them. You saw who they were. Thirty thousand years ago they were not strangers. You saw what the evil had done: you saw the witchery ranging as wide as this world.' (Silko, 1986: 124)

The story of the primordial meeting between witches from all parts of the world, when the arch sorcerer unleashed through a story the division and destruction of the earth is told by Betonie at this stage. Witchery and its stories have distorted human beings' perceptions so that they now believe that other creatures -insects, beasts, half-breeds, whites, Indians and Japanese- are enemies rather than part of one being we all share, and thus should be destroyed.<sup>1</sup>

In the book witchery ceremonies are conducted by the veterans within the bar. The ritual of telling stories is still Tayo's and Tayo's friends means of sustenance, but since these tales are profane they offer only a temporary respite in forgetting:

They repeated the stories about good times in Oakland and San Diego, they repeated them like medicine chants, the beer bottles pounding on the counter tops like drums. (Silko, 1986: 43)

Although the story Silko tells is on the surface about a male character, deep down the book is dealing with the battle between the death force of witchery that tries to prevent balance from being restored within Tayo and the Pueblo universe, and the Southwest feminine creative forces of regeneration -Night-Swan; Tseh, Ts'its'tsi'nako; THought Woman; Grandmother Spider, Old Spider Woman.<sup>2</sup>

Night-Swan, who appears out of the southeast one day -drawn to the vicinity of the sacred mountain, Tse-pi'na ("the woman veiled in clouds")-, takes up residence in Cubero, on the southern slope of the mountain, and disappears mysteriously after Josiah is buried, is surrounded with emblems of the mountain rain, which disclose her role as helper. She is associated with Old Spider Woman by her circumstances and the colors with which she surrounds herself: the color of her eyes, hazel, that results from the melding of blue -rain- and yellow-pollen; her implication in the matter of the spotted (half-breed) cattle -associated with deer and antelope; Auntie's dislike of her, and her mysterious words to Tayo when he leaves her. Additionally, her room is filled with blue: a blue armchair, curtains "feeling colored by the blue flowers painted in a border around the wals," blue sheets, a cup made of blue pottery

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<sup>1</sup> Witches in Southwest Indian culture are very similar to those of medieval Europe, they are human beings who oppose the divine sources of good and devote themselves to the worship and performance of evil through their sorcery. Witchery stories, like mythic-traditional tales passed down among the people and the day-to-day narrations of events, do make things happen.

<sup>2</sup> The Pueblo culture is matrilineal and not a symbol in the tale is not connected with womanness.

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painted with yellow flowers, and she is dressed in a blue kimono and wears blue slippers (Silko, 1986: 98) when Tayo enters her room. Louis Owens asserts:

In Laguna Pueblo mythology, colors are associated with the fourfold underworld from which the people emerged through an opening the Laguna refer to as shipap and which is conceived of as filled with water. The lowest level of these worlds is white, and the succeeding levels red, blue, and yellow. Similarly, the Keresan Pueblos associate the six sacred directions with distinct colors, with north represented by yellow, west by blue, south by red, and east by white. The zenith is associated with darkness or black, while the nadir is identified as all colors. (Owens, 1992: 180-1)

If Night-Swan is one kind of thought force, the other is Ts'eh Montaña, the mountain spirit woman and central character in the drama of the ancient battle between two forces, as it is played out in contemporary times. She is connected through the land to Reed Woman and the nurturing powers of water, to the Mother earth and the generating powers of the land, and, ultimately, to Spider Woman, the life power itself from which everything is created via her thoughts. With Tayo's love for Ts'eh comes wholeness and health for him. At this point his land blooms again:

The valley was green, from the yellow sandstone mesas in the northwest to the black lava hills in the south. But it was not the green color of the jungles, suffocating and strangling the earth. The new growth covered the earth lightly, each blade of grass, each leaf and stem with space between as if planted by a thin summer wind. There were no dusty red winds spinning across the flats this year. (Silko, 1986: 219)

Tayo recognizes the mythic narrative that determines his experience, understands that "his being is within and outside him" (Silko, 1986: 234), and cries:

at the relief he felt at finally seeing the pattern, the way all stories fit together ... to become the story that was 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. (Silko, 1986: 246)

Tayo learns the Indian ways. He acquires a special ritualistic attitude towards language - words now become for him the means by which reality is brought under control; he realizes he has a unique relationship to the landscape, whereby the outer world is seen to reflect the inner world; he starts to view time as eternal recurrence rather than as historical progression, and, finally, he begins to be aware of the importance of ceremony as a healing process.

His recovery is manifested in his acceptance of family responsibility, obligation to community and respect for others. He takes responsibility for locating Josiah's lost herd, he fulfills Ts'eh request of the plants and pollen, and he resists the influences of destruction represented by the rifle butt and the screw driver, denying himself the opportunity to puncture one of his former friends' skull.

Like virtually every novel by an American Indian, *Ceremony* describes a circular journey toward home and identity. When the recovery has been completed, Tayo finds himself in a new relationship to his people. As a final act, the returning culture hero must deliver his new knowledge to the people, and Tayo does this when he is invited into the kiva by the elders. The spiritual center of the pueblo, the kiva, indicates that Tayo has indeed come home, no longer alienated or schizophrenic:

For Tayo, wholeness consists of sowing plants and nurturing them, caring for the spotted cattle, and especially knowing that he belongs exactly where he is, that he is always and always has been home. The story that is capable of healing his mind is the story that the land has always signified. (Silko, 1986: 238)

The values in *Ceremony* are Indian, and the message is that the old gods have still power and that Indians are best off when they remain within their traditional culture, even though that is constantly changing.

We have so far referred to *Ceremony* belonging to the tradition of Indian narratives, but there is a parallel worth mentioning, and that is the book's belonging to the tradition of the Grail romance. Silko was not familiar with the grail legend at the time she wrote *Ceremony*, but her novel is similar to the legend in the sense that they are both based on the fundamental idea that a man's health and behaviour have grave consequences for his land.

Many versions of the story of the Grail appear in medieval romance, but essentially the legend tells about a maimed Fisher King who has been gravely wounded in the groin. As the king languishes, his land suffers as well and becomes a wasteland. In the Fisher King's castle there is a mysterious Holy Grail, the cup used by Jesus during the last supper. A knight-Gawain, Percival or Galahad- comes to the castle in search of the Grail, and cures the king while he is there. When the king recovers, his land blooms. Not all the versions contain the same details, this being just a composite of the story in its different forms. In *From Ritual to Romance* Jessie Weston concludes:

To sum up the result of the analysis, I hold that we have solid grounds for the belief that the story postulates a close connection between the vitality of a certain king and the prosperity of his kingdom; the forces of the ruler being weakened or destroyed, the land becomes waste, and the task of the hero is that of restoration. (Weston, 1920: 23)

The chief similarity between *Ceremony* and the Grail legend -and it is a fundamental one- is that there is a link between Tayo's condition and the state of his land. Tayo plays the role of the wounded king, his sacred quest being finding uncle Josiah's cattle and bringing them home. Betonie is the healer, analogous to Gawain, who was a healer as well as a fighter. The Laguna reservation is the waste land, and, as for parallels to Ts'eh, there is no shortage of

women with supernatural powers in the Arthurian grail romances, they vary from the Hideous Cundrie in *Parzifal* to the Beautiful Morgan Le Fay who tempts Gawain.

There is no problem in finding correspondences between *Ceremony* and the Grail legends, but what is most important is the point that the two stories are based on the same myth or motif: when a man falls ill, his land becomes afflicted by drought. When he is cured, by a combination of ritual and the accomplishment of a sacred task, his land blooms again. Jessie Weston has shown that this motif has its roots in ancient fertility myths and that exists in all corners of the world.

## CONCLUSION

In the beginning of the novel we are told that all tales are born in the mind of Spider Woman or Thought-Woman, the supreme Creator, and all creation exists as a result of her naming. By announcing her own subordination as author to the story-making authority of Thought-Woman and placing her novel within the context of oral tradition, Silko rejects the egocentric attitude of the modern author and turns her text into a transmitter rather than originator of voices and meanings.<sup>1</sup>

Although Silko includes a variety of traditional stories in various permutations in the course of the novel, the unifying myth is the story of the people's failure to pay proper respect to the Corn Mother altar and the resulting anger of "Our mother / Nau'ts'ity." Drought and sterility are the result, and the people must seek help from Hummingbird and Fly in order to propitiate the Corn Mother and restore the rain and fertility to the earth. Like the mythic persons, the indians of Silko's novel have failed to pay the proper respect and understanding in relation to mother earth. Perhaps because of the pressures from the dominant Euramerican culture, they have forgotten the stories that serve to reinforce correct behavior, and are to recover and reevaluate their personal relationships with their own myths in order to know who and where they are.

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<sup>1</sup> In the oral tradition stories are never original. The very absence of author illuminates their authenticity.

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