

Symbolic and Sacred Space in Leslie Marmon Silko's Novel Ceremony

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Abstract

The paper focuses on various aspects of symbolic and sacred space in the novel *Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko, discussing the following issues: the Native American versus the Anglo-American attitude towards the land, symbolic geography as a map of the hero's healing and regeneration, the hero's journey on the mountain as Axis Mundi, sacred space as a reflection of the spirit world, the construction of barriers and fences that exclude, such as the exclusion of Natives beyond the garbage dump of Gallup, the Native American slum as a space situated between cultures, the reservation as a symbol of separation; the desert as a metaphor of spiritual emptiness and despair; the uranium mine as a symbolic rape of Mother Earth, the novel *Ceremony* as a ceremonial sacred space of healing comparable to a sand-painting, the hero's return to the kiva at the center of the Pueblo community, as a way of remembering and remembering Native American identity.

Keywords

Sacred Space, Symbolic Interpretation, Native American, Tradition, Cultural Identity

1. Introduction

Leslie Marmon Silko was born in Laguna Pueblo in New Mexico, in the American Southwest, in the year 1948. She is considered a key figure of the Native American Renaissance. Her work addresses a wide range of Native American cultural, political, social, economic, and psychological issues. Her best-known work, the novel *Ceremony*, is the mainstay of many courses of Native American literature and is taught and discussed in American Studies programs worldwide, perhaps because it tries to build a bridge of understanding between the Euro-American culture and

the Native culture of her people. This research paper will focus on the treatment of symbolic and sacred space in Silko's novel *Ceremony*.

2. The Native American Attitude Versus the Anglo-American Attitude Towards Land

For the traditional Native Americans, the land is sacred. It is Mother Earth, life-giver and protector, connected through a web of meaning to all living things: animals, plants, rocks are "all our relatives, some two-legged, some four-legged, some crawling with their belly on the ground", as in the shamanic invocation for creating sacred space. When someone asks a traditional Indian how much Native American land is sacred space, the answer he gives is: "All of it". Native Americans traditionally respect Mother Earth and regard themselves as caretakers and keepers of the land, rather than owners and proprietors. Land cannot become property, because it does not belong to people. People belong to it, in their view. (Akhundov, 1986: pp. 30-54)

Various Native American tribes believe that they can locate their origin in a particular place (Nelson, 2002: p. 170). In Silko's novel *Ceremony*, the place of origin of the Laguna Pueblo people can be located on Mount Taylor, but other tribes locate their place of origin in a cave, in a lake etc. After numerous relocations forced upon Native Americans by the American government, the uprooted tribes sometimes send secret expeditions that travel hundreds of miles or more, to perform rituals and give offerings to their ancestors by stealth, in these places of origin.

By contrast, the Euro-Americans have a cultural imperative to regard land as something to divide, distribute and register, as property measured in acres and fenced-in to be used, exploited and even abused for profit. The fact that they call the soil "dirt" proves that their attitude towards the earth lacks respect. For them, Mother Earth is a thing, an object without a soul, which is not sacred. The first Europeans who arrived in America were possessive individuals who were afraid of "the wilderness" inhabited by demons and Indians. In their minds, there was a conflict between "the wilderness" and culture. They believed that it was necessary "to tame the wilderness" through tillage, enclosure and the building of structures, as a means of certified ownership.

The idea that Native Americans had any prior right to their land seemed absurd to the European settlers. They regarded American land as *terra nullius*, a no man's land. In their eyes, the land was *vacuum domicilium*, i.e., empty of settlement, and it was waiting to be made fruitful by Euro-American cultivation and farming. Puritans and later colonists were dishonest and ruthless in their acquisition or purchase of Native American land, and genocidal in their treatment of the "savages", as they called the local populations. Their treatment of nature was the same. The result was a large-scale destruction of valuable species of animals, deforestation and the despoliation of land, a disruption of ecological balance and the displacement and destruction of entire human and animal populations.

3. The Geography of Exclusion

As the frontier advanced towards the West to take over the *vacuum domicilium* land or free land that belonged to Native Americans, the outer limit of agricultural settlement or urban settlement became the limit of civilization. Frederick Jackson Turner, in *The Frontier in American History*, basically sustains the idea that American democracy depended on the existence of free land as a guarantee of opportunity for the achievement of the American Dream. And the receding frontier presupposed the building of new cultural borders, barriers and fences for the exclusion of Native Americans. Euro-American culture needed to separate and exclude the “non-white” cultures. Borders were on the move on the transitional territories, and the forced displacement of Natives became the policy generally adopted by the American government, to make room for the new American democracy. (Turner, 1920: pp. 6-38)

In the novel *Ceremony*, we repeatedly find borders of cultural exclusion. Let us consider, for example, the situation of the relocated Indians who live outside the city of Gallup, New Mexico. Driven away from the reservation by the governmental programs of the 1940s, these people live in a shanty town situated across the railroad tracks from Gallup, in an area reserved for waste disposal. The Indians live next to the garbage dump. Shantytown is periodically disinfected and burned down by the police, as if the Indians were a species of vermin that needs to be eradicated. The irony is that when they have the yearly festival that attracts tourism, the people of Gallup bring out their Indians and display them for commercial gain. But the seasonally marketable Natives are treated badly the rest of the year (Rainwater, 2002: p. 126).

The people living in Shantytown have been uprooted from the reservation by the government policy to work in the city through a system of education that “kills the Indian to save the man”. However, their only option is menial jobs as surplus laborers, and their employment is not guaranteed. Sadly, the people of Shantytown have nowhere else to go. They no longer belong to the traditional world of reservation, but they are not accepted in the city world. They end up suspended in a symbolic space of exclusion and social invisibility, suffering from homelessness and loss of identity. *Dispossession of home* becomes a primary function of the Native American experience.

Another example of the geography of exclusion in the novel is that of the building of fences around Mount Taylor, the sacred place of origin of Tayo’s people—Tayo is the protagonist of the novel. Legal barriers and fences often prevent natives from accessing their sacred sites, to perform their ceremonies. Therefore, Tayo has no other option than to break illegally through the barbed wire fence that surrounds Mount Taylor. The landowner has built the fence purportedly to keep away wolves and mountain lions, but in fact this barrier has the purpose of reinforcing the concept of private property, keeping away Indians and Chicanos. The fence is a legal stratagem that enables the white man to steal Native land as well as Tayo’s herd of cattle, which has been taken inside the enclosure and is kept

there. But the land itself refuses to be treated like lifeless property without a soul (Stein, 2002: p. 198). The spirit of the land appears in the shape of a mountain lion, to save Tayo when he is apprehended by the guardians of the fence. The guardians run after the mountain lion because they perceive it as a valuable commodity and discard Tayo, because a prisoner has no value in their eyes. However, the fence remains a symbol of exclusion and loss, and Tayo's people wake up every day to see their sacred Mountain still there, but outside their reach. The dominant culture imposes artificial boundaries to separate Native Americans from the mainstream citizens and tension and unrest grip the inhabitants of the borderland like a virus.

4. The Reservation as a Wasteland of Desolation

Indian reservations still exist in the United States. Because the land is often barren and dry, many reservations depend on the government for financial support. The main sources of revenue are tourism and gambling, because of the casinos built on reservation land. Housing is substandard, because the inhabitants of the reservations are usually stuck in a circle of poverty. Living conditions on reservations correspond to a third-world country. Reservations are often located near toxic sites that are hazardous to health, such as nuclear testing grounds or contaminated mines. Poverty and the lack of future perspectives have caused many Natives to lose the hope of ever having a better life and alcoholism has become a widely spread problem, mostly for the male population.

During World War 2, uranium was mined in the Southwest in the Navajo and Hopi reservations. The dangers of radiation exposure were not adequately explained to the Natives who lived close by. As a result, some natives who lived near the uranium exploitation sites used the rock extracted from the strip mines to build their homes. The building materials were radioactive, and many people died of cancer. The mining companies failed to dispose properly of the radioactive waste which contaminated the drinking water.

In the novel *Ceremony*, the reservation land is contaminated by the exploitation of a uranium strip mine. Here, the land has been violated so thoroughly that it appears to be unredeemable. The desecration of the land at the site of the uranium strip mine is compared by Silko to the rape of a woman. Silko also refers to the atomic bomb as the ultimate means of the violation of Mother Earth, as an act of global violation.

Philosopher and anthropologist Mircea Eliade said that there are two ways of existing in the world, one profane, the other one sacred. Eliade draws a clear distinction between "homo religious" and the non-religious people. The Natives' loss of tradition under the influence of white culture and the desecration of their land, have led to the emergence of the wasteland or desert, which symbolizes a life devoid of spirituality and emptied of significance. In this context, the drought signifies loss of meaning and spiritual emptiness (Eliade, 1954: pp. 159-162).

5. The Circular Map of the Hero's Healing

The protagonist of the novel, Tayo, returns from the Pacific front after World War 2 as a broken man. He suffers from posttraumatic stress disorder and the doctors send him home because they can offer no further help. He stays in bed and vomits every day. Trying to help Tayo, his grandmother takes him to a medicine man named Betonie, who treats people by using ceremonies that include elements of the modern world. The medicine man informs Tayo about the Destroyers who want to destabilize the world and says that Tayo must complete a ceremony, to heal himself and save the Pueblo people. (Beck, 1996: p. 101)

The Native American healing ceremonies require the patient to re-enact mythical events as a means of archetypal identification. The individual becomes one with the archetype and the disharmonies are healed in the process. When the hero re-enacts the adventures of the mythical hero, the story within the ceremony brings renewal and restoration, as has always been the case in Native American ceremonies. By observing the correct order of events and re-enacting mythological scenes, the hero is healed and what is more, he can heal the community to which he belongs. (Stonestreet, 1994: pp. 26-31)

Tayo believes that he created disharmony when he cursed the rain on the Pacific front. Because everything is connected, his curse has caused the drought that affects the reservation back home. He also feels guilty because he left Uncle Josiah, who was like a father to him, without help, when he enrolled in the army. His uncle died trying to take care of his herd of cattle, which ran away. Tayo's search for his uncle's spotted cattle becomes the mythical hero's quest for the Holy Grail. He tries to retrieve the cattle because this is what his uncle would have wanted him to do and he wants to redeem himself in his own eyes, as well as in the eyes of his community, after making bad choices. And his quest has a circular design, because he finally returns home with his spiritual gifts. (Bell, 2002: pp. 23-40)

The landscape itself becomes a map of the hero's journey, symbolizing his trials and trajectory. The landscape of *Ceremony* has both a physical and a metaphysical dimension (Campbell, 2012). The story follows the steps of Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey and has a circular structure. The first step is the *Call to Adventure*, when Tayo's cousin Rocky convinces him to enrol in the army and this is how all misfortunes begin, because they are fighting the white man's war, which has no relevance for Native Americans. After that the hero enters the *Crossing the Threshold* stage, when he curses the rain. His cousin Rocky was wounded, and his wound was rotting because of the rain, but Tayo's curse affects the rain pattern back home. The hero returns home as a damaged man, suffering from PTSD. Next, he enters the stage of *The Belly of the Whale*, when he realizes that he needs to confront his inner demons to heal himself. Isolated from his Native American community, he begins his personal quest in search of his uncle's cattle. He is directed in his search by the stars in the sky which reflect the cattle on the ground, in a mirroring process "as above so below".

Then he enters the *Road of Trials* stage, which is basically a series of ordeals

that he undergoes to achieve transformation. His search makes him trespass the white man's land at the feet of Mount Taylor, which is enclosed by a barbed wire fence. He is captured by the guardians but is saved by a mountain lion who is obviously a Kachina spirit sent by the mountain itself. Then he climbs the mountain, experiences sacred sex with a mythical being called T'seh and must pass a series of tests ordained by the Kachina spirits of the mountain. Sacred sex corresponds to the *Meeting the Goddess* stage in Joseph Campbell's diagram.

When he returns home, Tayo meets other war veterans like himself, who enjoy talking about the feminine conquests they had during the war, when they get together and drink at the pub. When Tayo refuses to fall prey to alcoholism and self-pity like them, they hate him. This is the *Temptation* stage, surpassed with flying colors by Tayo. Next there is the *Rescue from Without* stage, when Goddess T'seh warns the hero about the trap set against him by the veterans and he manages to avoid the trap.

In the end, Tayo returns home with the cattle that he managed to retrieve, as well as with other gifts from the spirit world, which corresponds to the *Return Home* stage. He is now a changed man who has corrected his mistakes and matured, and he obtains the prize because he deserves it. *Freedom and Mastery* is the last stage of the Hero's Journey. He has achieved the mastery of two worlds—the outer/material world and the inner/spiritual world, and this is reflected by his return to the kiva, the spiritual center of his community.

The stages of the Hero's Wheel are closely followed by the novel *Ceremony*, and it is hard to believe that Silko, a highly educated professor of English literature at the University of Tucson Arizona, did not follow the Hero's Wheel on purpose when she devised the outline of the plot.

6. Axis Mundi as Symbolic Sacred Space

Most native American tribes have a sacred space—a mountain, lake, river, cave etc.—that works as a gate between the “parallel worlds” in the paradigm adopted by that culture. These sacred places are indispensable for the identity of the tribe. In his search, Tayo climbs Mount Taylor, which functions as a vertical way of access to higher dimensions. The term *axis mundi* was introduced by the anthropologist Mircea Eliade in the 1950s. It represents the connection between Heaven and Earth, between the higher and the lower realms. It is like the symbol of the tree, the mountain, the pillar, the ladder, the tower, the cross, the totem pole etc. The most common symbols associated with *axis mundi* are the gigantic tree and the magical mountain. *Axis mundi* provides the initiate and the seeker of knowledge with a way of accessing other realms, of climbing in “illo tempore” (Eliade, 1954: p. 106).

We could say that Native Americans regard time as vertical, not horizontal. The mythical time of the beginning is conceived by Native Americans as existing right now somewhere in a parallel space. The novel *Ceremony* includes legends written in verse, which mirror Tayo's journey—e.g. the hummingbird is shown travelling

to the higher levels of the Native American cosmos—the tree of life—to bring knowledge and healing to the people on Earth. The hummingbird travels to the upper world to bring these things to the middle world which belongs to humans, and this is a perfect reflection of Tayo’s journey.

The Native American cosmogony is based on a model of the universe with several levels or parallel worlds, and the relationship between space and time is complex. Within this model, the universe consists of overlapping areas. The number varies according to the local beliefs, corresponding in general to the Christian belief in heaven, the world of mortals and the underworld or hell.

The passage between the three zones is accessed through *axis mundi*, which can be assimilated to the sacred mountain of the novel *Ceremony*. Access to mythical time is achieved by shamans and heroes. Native American myths present the bravery and legendary deeds of ancestors or heroes who travelled to the mythical world. For Native Americans, the present looks the way it is because of the deeds of legendary beings from the past. The past belongs to the sacred time of the spiritual world but, paradoxically, this legendary past is also present, and can be accessed, when necessary, by those who are trained and able to do this.

We cannot understand the shamanic landscape of America outside the special significance conferred to sacred space in the Native American cultural context—for example, the mysterious straight roads that cover the ground for miles across North America, the ceremonial Hopewell roads in Chillicothe Ohio, the straight roads in Chaco Canyon in the Four Corners Region, which stop suddenly for no apparent reason or continue through a mountain as if the mountain didn’t exist... These examples of sacred space cannot be understood outside their cultural context, in which they function as maps and ways of access to other dimensions for shamans and for the souls of the dead, if they are approached from the perspective of Native American religion.

The tendency of modern archeology and geography is to assume that there is no difference between the Euro-American cognitive model and the way Native American people perceive time and the environment, but this is incorrect. Time and space create different realities, depending on the perspective of those who experience them.

The protagonist of the novel *Ceremony* transgresses the Euro-American way of looking at the land and embraces the cognitive approach of his people. His journey strips space of governmental rules and designations and follows the pattern of a geographic dialectic of self-remembering and place-remembering informed by myth, which has an integration effect of bringing together—of “remembering” and remembering—cultural identity. Different cultures and world views have different perspectives of land and space.

7. Homing in—The Return to the Center

When Tayo returns from his journey on the mountain, the old men come to inquire what he wants to tell them. Perhaps they recognize that his exploits fall

under the pattern of the Hero's Journey. They listen to his story and recognize its value. Tayo himself has now become an elder, a messenger from the spirit world and a bringer of blessings, because he has met the Goddess who is the carrier of life. His people will be blessed, healed and purified. He returns to the village as a religious initiate. He is now a protector of the Laguna Pueblo people and of the plant world. He is a carrier of knowledge and wisdom. The village people acknowledge him, and he is welcomed in the sacred kiva.

Tayo's healing takes place when he discards his individual identity and embraces his communal, archetypal identity. He no longer identifies with the stereotype of the doomed Indian that the Anglo-American culture projects on him. Instead, he becomes one with the archetype of the hero and in this process, he becomes a cultural hero for his community, to which he brings life and health. (Wallace, 1996: pp. 91-119)

Tayo's journey finally brings him back home, to the center of his rediscovered communal identity. In the Pueblo conception of the world, the orientation is centripetal, directed towards the sacred center, an imaginative construct like the inward-spiraling form of a ceremonial sand painting. This symbolic orientation of sacred space makes an interesting contrast to the centrifugal energies of modern and postmodern European and Euro-American fiction. One could say that the novel *Ceremony* is also a cure for us, as the inhabitants of a Western world are increasingly steeped into fragmentation and deracination, dangerously disconnected from the harmony of the world of nature in which we live.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, Silko presents in her novel the desolating space of deracination and rejection of the Native American slum inhabited by second-hand citizens. She also speaks about the spiritual desert of the reservation and the construction of borders of exclusion in the United States. The uranium strip mine is compared to a symbolic rape of Mother Earth. These symbolic spaces have negative connotations, but the movement of the hero's quest is circular, in the novel *Ceremony*. Sacred space is accessed by the protagonist by climbing Mount Taylor, the Axis Mundi that functions as a way of access to the higher levels of the universe, where wisdom and power become available. The hero's progression on the Hero's Wheel finally brings him home to the center of the sacred space of the Laguna Pueblo community, and the novel itself can be interpreted as a healing ceremony that cures not only the protagonist and his community, but also the readers.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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