

## Ceremony- Leslie Marmon Silko

### Summary

Leslie Marmon Silko is a celebrated American writer of Laguna Pueblo descent. She is a key writer in what literary critic Kenneth Lincoln called the “Native American Renaissance”—a movement of Indigenous writers in the late 20th century who brought Native voices and stories to the forefront of American literature. Silko is widely known for her novels, poems, and essays that explore Native American identity, traditions, and the struggles of Indigenous people in modern America.

Silko has always remained rooted in her cultural heritage. Her writing reflects a deep desire to preserve Native traditions and to highlight the ongoing effects of colonization, racism, and cultural erasure. Much of her work also focuses on women’s experiences and the power of storytelling to heal and empower.

Silko’s most famous novel, Ceremony, was published in 1977. It blends Native American oral traditions especially from the Pueblo and Navajo cultures with the story of a modern war veteran named Tayo.

Ceremony is not just a novel; it is a continuation of an ancient ceremony, passed down through generations and reshaped in a modern context. The title itself connects to the sacred rituals of the Pueblo and Navajo people, which are meant to restore balance and healing. In the novel, Silko brings these ceremonial ideas into the modern world, showing how stories can still guide people through trauma and help them reconnect with their heritage and the land.

Ceremony weaves together the story of a Pueblo war veteran named Tayo with ancient Native American myths and ceremonial traditions. Originally, Silko planned for Harley, a fellow veteran, to be the protagonist in a series of funny stories about his family trying to keep him away from alcohol. But as the narrative evolved, Silko realized the story demanded more emotional depth. Tayo took center stage, and Ceremony became a powerful exploration of trauma, healing, and the importance of storytelling.

The novel opens not with Tayo, but with a poem about Ts’its’tsi’nako, the Thought-Woman, who is telling this entire story. In the Laguna Pueblo tradition, stories are sacred, they are how people survive illness, death, and evil.

Tayo, a man of mixed Pueblo and white heritage, returns from World War II deeply scarred by his experiences. He is haunted by the memory of his cousin Rocky, who died during the Bataan Death March, and by the death of his Uncle Josiah, who passed away while Tayo was at war. Tayo feels immense guilt, especially because he once prayed for rain to stop while stationed in the rainy jungles of the Philippines. Back home in New Mexico, the land is now suffering from a terrible drought, and Tayo believes his prayer caused it.

Tayo tries to heal, but traditional medicine doesn’t seem to work. His grandmother brings in Ku’oosh, a traditional medicine man, but Ku’oosh’s

ceremony isn't strong enough to cure what the war has done to Tayo. The world has changed too much. Eventually, Tayo visits Betonie, a more modern medicine man who blends traditional Pueblo rituals with elements of modern life. Betonie tells Tayo that the ceremony needed to heal him must also heal the land and that Tayo must complete it himself. This ceremony becomes the central journey of the novel.

Tayo's healing begins when he decides to fulfil a promise to his uncle: to recover Josiah's lost hybrid cattle, which were stolen by a white rancher. Along the way, he meets Ts'eh, a mysterious woman who offers him shelter and guidance. It is heavily implied that Ts'eh is a spirit being—a Reed Woman—who has returned to help restore balance to the world. With her help and that of her brother, Tayo manages to find and recover the cattle, a symbolic step toward healing both himself and the land.

Throughout the novel, Silko intertwines Tayo's story with mythic stories from Pueblo traditions. In one story, Corn Woman scolds her sister, Reed Woman, who takes the rain away in anger. In another, Hummingbird and Fly must journey to the Fourth World to find the Reed Woman and restore harmony. These myths parallel Tayo's journey, showing that personal healing and cultural survival are deeply connected.

Tayo also struggles with the influence of fellow veterans like Emo, Harley, and Leroy, who drown their trauma in alcohol and rage. At one point, Tayo attacks Emo with a broken bottle after Emo mocks him and boasts about collecting teeth from dead Japanese soldiers. Later, Tayo faces a final test: when Emo tortures Harley in a uranium mine near the site of the atomic bomb test, Tayo must decide whether to take revenge. In choosing not to kill Emo, Tayo completes the ceremony—he chooses peace, not more destruction.

In the end, Tayo returns home to tell his story. The drought ends, just as it does in the myth, and the people begin to heal. Harley and Leroy are found dead, and Emo is banished from the community. The elders recognize that Tayo has completed an important ceremony, one that brings together ancient tradition with modern struggle. Ts'eh is revealed to be the Reed Woman, a sacred figure who has guided him all along.

Ceremony ends just as it began, with a sunrise. This closing symbolizes renewal and the ongoing cycle of life, healing, and storytelling. As Tayo's grandmother says, she has heard this story before, though with different names. Through its poetic structure, its blend of myth and realism, and its deep respect for Indigenous storytelling, Ceremony reminds us that stories are not just entertainment but they are medicines. Silko's novel is itself a ceremony, one that invites readers to witness the power of tradition, land, and story in restoring balance to both individuals and communities.