

WHS Book Rationale

Title: *Ceremony*

Author: Leslie Marmon Silko

- **Intended Audience**

A.P. English Literature and Composition students—this is a college level course.

- **Brief summary and educational significance**

After World War II, the main character, Tayo, must learn to cope with the violence he witnessed, endured, and inflicted. In the process of recovering from the trauma of the war, he must also learn how to navigate the complexities of his “half-blood” status, being the son of a Native American woman and a Mexican man. Tayo seeks help from a traditional medicine man and eventually from a medicine man who combines the old ways with new ones, showing Tayo the way to adjust to his new life, and illustrating for him and for the reader, the interconnectedness of all things. The novel includes not only the prose narrative of Tayo’s story, but also traditional Laguna Pueblo songs and poems, contemporary poems patterned on the Laguna songs, and even visual art. Silko and this novel are central parts of the growth and emergence of Native American literature in the 1970s.

- **Purpose of teaching the work and how it will be used**

Ceremony provides students with an opportunity to examine a piece of literature that is shaped by a different culture, not only thematically but also in terms of character and narrative structure. This allows them to analyze how authors’ work and craft choices are shaped by their culture and traditions. The College Board expects A.P. Literature students to write about cultural and societal issues in literature, and this novel provides a perfect subject for such writing. The non-linear structure of the book, in addition to facilitating discussion of culture differences, is very challenging even for A.P. students, so it is a good test in the spring of students’ readiness for the A.P. exam.

- **Potential problems**

Tayo’s story includes extra-marital sex, excessive drinking, violent imagery, references to witchcraft, and racial prejudice. Attitudes toward sex, in particular, are different from what students may have seen in other literature or from what they may believe personally; for example, in one scene, an older man has sex with a teenage girl and it is considered positive, a way to bring together races.

- **Addressing potential problems**

The obvious cultural differences between most Wyoming students and the main character of this novel (and its author) provide for a rich discussion of how to read and interpret

literature written from such an unfamiliar perspective. Students read various essays on the novel and Silko's background, including essays by other Native Americans who are both positive and negative in their reaction to Silko's work. This is another book that allows students to test and apply Foster's advice on *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*. We also watch videos about the work of Silko and other major Native American writers to provide context for the religious and cultural differences students encounter.