2012 AP Literature and Composition
Selected Student Journal Responses from the reading of Silko’s Ceremony

General Response

At first, I was completely against reading [this novel] and could not wrap my head around the idea of which story was going on where and how it even mattered and even who was dead and alive. In getting more into the book, I found that it was completely amazing. The struggles of Tayo, internally and externally, were very profound. I felt that through Leslie Marmon Silko’s writing I was able to take steps back in time and into the future with Tayo which was extremely different and refreshing. I thought it was really cool how each little story/poem was all connected, not only to the context in which it was placed, but to another mini story in the novel itself that ran all the way through.

Analysis of Gallup

Gallup is described as a run-down, hopeless town. The people are slouched against dirty walls, staring at the ground. The shelters are more like shanties, the buckets are empty. Basically, people are just existing and struggling to get by. … There are buzzing flies around many people in Gallup. The flies are an integral part of the Laguna poems but the people ignore them, too busy with money, dreaming of wine, or waiting to do business. They ignore the sun. … This situation reveals an important truth of the emotional effects of a culture being forced to live like another culture. Tourists come into the town to buy souvenirs or find women, but then leave. This shows the way the native people aren’t seen as a living, growing culture, but a piece of trivia, a lost, museum-like culture of the past. In Gallup, this view has infiltrated the view of the natives themselves.

Thoughts on Ts’eh

Ts’eh brought Tayo back. She’s a symbol of peace and trust. She helped him find the cattle, reclaim his life. She represents beauty and the healing power of nature. She is the first person to truly love Tayo. She gave him a new story: “The breaking and crushing were gone and the love pushed inside his chest, and when he cried now it was because she loved him so much.” (211) She represents the power of love and how it can heal. Her love helps Tayo remember the good stories rather than the dismal. The depiction of the pregnant she-elk represents Tayo’s rebirth. He was reborn through love. His story, held in the belly, was cleansed. She reminds Tayo to remember the story for it cannot be taken away. The memories create a different ending, Tayo holds the memories close and believes “he might make it after all” (221). He had found someone to trust and with it, a reason to live.

On Witchery

Witchery is the discord wrought by human pride and greed. In Betonie’s story, each of the witches thought that their dark and twisted misdeeds and collections was the most vile, the most wicked. Each dark object they collected done so because of each witch’s desire to be the most evil, because of their lust for power. The result of this is witchery—discord, turmoil, pain. Betonie’s story says that witchery began with the Indians, with the world’s first people. So, in other words, witchery was born with mankind, always growing with
man’s faults and misdeeds. It feeds off of itself, widening the disconnect between man and nature as man destroys the earth. Witchery is capable of spawning enemies, of making people turn their backs on each other. It can make them hate one another for the color of their skin or for the actions of others of their race. It breeds destruction, tearing apart people and the world itself, the proverbial spark that can start a fire, a terrible inferno. In Betonie's story, witchery causes starvation and disease, suffering, agony, deformity, and death, often through its tool of choice and the white man, for since the dawn of their era, white men have been pushed by witchery, by greed and discord, and have trampled any in their way, leaving a trail of destruction in their wake.

On the ending

The stars represented stories and how they were all tied together like the people. Tayo’s refusal to give in to temptation by killing Emo breaks the cycle. He unites the stars: “Every evil” was “cut to pieces” (240). Tayo brought hope for peace and saved himself in the process. It is interesting that the book both begins and ends with a story. Although the story ends relatively happily, the final story has a dark undertone. It warns that the witchery “is dead for now” (243) It could return quite easily and we must be careful. It’s a warning to society, a reminder that trust, unity, respect, and love are necessary to our survival.

Final Impressions

One of the most important or the most powerful messages that I got from Ceremony was the interaction of the world. There are different levels, different worlds that all blend together, influencing the other worlds. These worlds involve the past, present, and future, the land, history, characters, animals, witchery, love and so much more, but they are all circling and whirling around at the same time. When they are out of balance, there’s grief almost like the nausea that Tayo experiences. Balance is achieved when these worlds align. The cycle continues in a circle, over and over, like the star picture in the book! The culture’s view of an individual as a part of the word rather than as a separate, detached being is striking.