

Workshop 8

Ceremonial Artifacts

Introduction

This workshop session introduces the analysis of ceremonial artifacts as a tool in the literature classroom. Greg Sarris, literature professor at Loyola Marymount University, uses the examples of Native American Pomo baskets to help teachers enhance their reading of American literature texts. He discusses the ways to understand how ceremonial artifacts influence the works of American literature.

By looking at two intellectual products produced by members of different Native American tribes—two Pomo Indian gift baskets and Leslie Marmon Silko’s novel *Ceremony*—you will better understand the beliefs and values of two distinct Native American cultures.

During the course of the session, you will learn how to search for ceremonial artifacts to help teach American literature.

In the onscreen classroom, Greg discusses how he uses ceremonial artifacts to illuminate the discipline of literature in his own classroom. He provides high school teachers with ideas how to read ceremonial artifacts; he also suggests specific lesson plans.

We then follow the onscreen teachers into the computer lab where they will work with Greg, Lois Leveen (Reed College English professor), and each other to find artifacts that supplement the themes and context of the literature they are currently teaching. Next, we follow Marc Jolley—a teacher at Southridge High School in Portland, Oregon—into his own high school classroom. We watch as he models a similar lesson with his students. Finally, we hear Marc’s reflections on his own teaching practices.

Before the Session

Before watching the “Ceremonial Artifacts” video, be sure to:

- Guide: Read the Ceremonial Artifacts Reading.
- Video: Watch the *American Passages* episode “Native Voices.” (The episode can be viewed on the *American Passages* Web site at www.learner.org. Click on “Video on Demand” or go to <http://www.learner.org/resources/series164.html> and click on the VoD icon next to the appropriate program title.)
- Web: Download the image of the *Pomo Gift Basket* (serial #6303) from the *American Passages* archive site at http://www.learner.org/amerpass/slideshow/archive_search.php.
- Literature: Read pages 1–50 in Leslie Marmon Silko’s novel *Ceremony*.

As you read, consider the following close reading questions. See the Teacher Resources section in the Appendix for instructions on effective close reading.

- In what ways does Silko’s text differ from other post-World War II novels that you have read, both in terms of theme and style?
- What traditional elements of her culture does Silko weave into *Ceremony*? How does this shape a reader’s understanding of the text?

Synopsis of Greg Sarris’s Presentation

- Greg begins by discussing ways to use myth in literature classes. He talks about the importance of asking questions and avoiding trying to find “one right answer” when dealing with Native American texts. Using religious ceremonial artifacts with literature is one way to avoid having students marginalize an unfamiliar text.
- Greg delivers a lesson on myth* that he uses with his own students. He discusses the importance of challenging the linear ways students may approach a text; he shares how he leads them to ask questions, rather than search for specific answers. Greg then looks at his ceremonial artifacts, two Pomo Indian gift baskets, and talks about how these ceremonial baskets are often seen as living, breathing things.
- Greg and the teachers make connections between the baskets and the text, particularly noticing the common theme of circularity. Greg points out that neither the story nor the basket has a concrete beginning, middle, or end. The purpose of this circular construction is to connect the object to you; it is meant to affect you through this connection. Greg reads another Pomo gift basket and points out the distinctions between the two. He and the teachers then make further connections between the baskets and Silko’s text.
- Greg concludes his discussion with the assertion that we must not generalize about different Native American tribes and their cultures. He also encourages teachers to bring ceremonial artifacts into the classroom and apply them to a wide variety of literature from any period or culture.

* indicates a reference in the Glossary.

Relating the Literary Movement to the Artifacts

Facilitators:

- Before this workshop session, you will need to download the image of the *Pomo Gift Basket* (serial #6303) from the *American Passages* archive and print out copies for all your participants. Be sure to print and copy the descriptive information that accompanies the image. (For further information on how to navigate the archive, see instructions in the front matter.)
- Begin the workshop by watching program 8: “Ceremonial Artifacts” through the *American Passages* excerpted clip. Watch for approximately 11:30 minutes.
- Follow up with the discussion activity below. The discussion should take approximately 10 minutes.

Activity 1: Discussion of the Literary Movement

1. As a whole group, discuss what literature you have taught or are currently teaching from this literary movement. If you don't currently teach anything from this movement, how might you add it to your curriculum?

Other authors and literature from *American Passages*' "Native Voices" for potential discussion:

- **Leslie Marmon Silko** (1948–) Poet, novelist, and short story writer, Silko grew up on the Laguna Pueblo Reservation. She is well-known for her multi-genre novel, *Ceremony*.
- **Louise Erdrich** (1954–) Of Native American and German descent, Erdrich is a poet, novelist, and short story writer. She wrote the composite novel *Love Medicine*.
- **Chippewa Songs** (1907–1909) These songs reflect the culture of the Chippewa (also called Ojibwa) peoples. They once lived along the shores of Lake Huron and Lake Superior, across Minnesota, and west to North Dakota. Some songs were sung in a ceremonial context, but others were not. At the most basic, the three levels of songs are old songs and singers; old ceremonial and medicine songs; and modern songs—these include love songs.
- **John Neihardt** (1881–1973) and **Black Elk** (1863–1950) Born into the Oglala Lakota, Black Elk was an important Sioux visionary who passed on his vision of the Six Grandfathers—the powers of the West, the North, the East, the South, the Sky, and the Earth—to poet John Neihardt. The record of this interaction became the book *Black Elk Speaks*, published in 1932.
- **Ghost Dance Songs** (1890) A religious movement begun after a Paiute man Wovoka had a vision in 1889. God told Wovoka the people should prepare for His coming and dance a ghost dance that would hasten the return of the old world. This prophecy spread amongst the Plains Indians and before long 20,000 Sioux were engaged in the dance. The fear evoked amongst US officials eventually reached the breaking point at Wounded Knee, the tragic massacre of 200 Native American men, women, and children.
- **Roger Williams** (1603–1683) A Puritan who lived amongst the Algonquian Indians, thus alienating himself from both the Massachusetts Bay and Plymouth colonies. His most famous text is *A Key Into the Language of America*.
- **Thomas Harriot** (1560–1621) Author of *A Brief and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia*. Harriot's account, though optimistic, is some of the only information about the Roanoke people.

For more information on these authors, visit the *American Passages* Web site at www.learner.org.

2. How did the Ceremonial Artifacts Reading change or enhance your view of Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* or other Native American literary works you have read?

Relating the Literary Movement to the Artifacts, cont'd.

Facilitators:

- Continue watching the video until the point where Greg Sarris finishes reading the first artifact (*Pomo Gift Basket*, serial #6303). Begin at the title First Artifact Reading and watch for approximately 9:30 minutes.
- Divide the session participants into groups of three and hand out the previously downloaded artifact. This activity should take approximately 20 minutes.

Activity 2: Reading the First Artifact

1. In your group, analyze the image that your facilitator provides for you. First, make some initial observations about the artifact:

- What do you initially notice about this basket? What types of patterns are in the basket?
- Considering its size (fits easily into the palm of your hand), what would this basket be used for?

2. Next, read the artifact more closely; use the CAATS acronym below, along with the Ceremonial Artifacts Reading and synopsis of Greg Sarris's lesson.

CAATS

Creator: Who created this artifact? What do we know about the person(s) who created it? How did it influence his/her life at the time it was created? Would the creator find relevant connections to the literature you are pairing with this artifact?

Assumptions: What do you know about the context of this artifact? What assumptions can you make based on prior information that you bring to this analysis?

Audience/User: Who was the audience for this object when it was originally created? What leads you to this assumption?

Time and Place: When and where was this artifact created?

Significance: Why is this artifact important? How does it help explain the literature you are teaching with it? Does the context of the artifact parallel the context of your literature?

Relating the Literary Movement to the Artifacts, cont'd.

Facilitators:

- After discussing the *Pomo Gift Basket*, spend five to seven minutes discussing the excerpt from Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*. Use the close reading questions from the Before the Session section as a starting point for discussion.
- Continue watching the video of Greg reading and making connections to the second Pomo gift basket. Begin at the title Second Artifact Reading and watch for approximately 8:30 minutes. Stop the video after this second artifact reading, before the title Lesson Planning.
- Then do the activity below. This activity should take approximately 20 minutes.

Activity 3: Connecting Literature to the Artifact

1. Whole-Group Discussion Question:

- What is the first step that Greg Sarris takes with the onscreen teachers to discuss the ceremonial artifacts? How does he move them from the artifact analysis to connecting it to the excerpt from *Ceremony*?

2. Return to small groups. Begin to draw connections between the *Pomo Gift Basket* and Silko's text. Use the following guiding questions:

- How are the design of the text and the design of the Pomo basket similar? How do they differ?
- In his discussion, Greg talks about how each Pomo basket weaver deliberately breaks the pattern at some point in the design. How does Silko use the motif of patterns in her text?

Facilitators:

- Watch the Lesson Planning and In the Classroom portions of the video. Begin at the title Lesson Planning and watch for approximately 34:30 minutes.
- Then do the next activity. This activity should take approximately 20 minutes.

Activity 4: Classroom Strategies Discussion/Create Lesson Plan

1. Whole-Group Discussion Questions: You just watched Marc Jolley apply what he had learned about connecting artifacts and literature to his own classroom. Take 10–15 minutes to discuss the following questions:

- What methods did Marc use to help his students understand the contextual connections between the images of Pomo baskets and the two Native American myths they read?
- How might Marc approach this lesson differently using different ceremonial artifacts from those Greg Sarris used? What other ceremonial artifacts would work with the myths he is teaching?

2. In your same small groups, brainstorm different literary movements/pieces of literature that you could use with the Pomo gift baskets. What are some other ceremonial artifacts that would supplement the literature you are currently teaching?

Facilitators:

- Watch Marc Jolley's reflective interview. Begin at the title Reflection and watch for approximately three minutes.
- Ask session participants to comment on what Marc felt worked in his classroom. Did this parallel what they thought worked as they were watching?

Building a Lesson Plan and Teaching With Artifacts

For the detailed six-step process for artifact selection, see the Teacher Resources section in the Appendix.

Homework

1. Create a lesson plan using a ceremonial artifact with a piece of literature you are currently teaching.

For example: In Raymond Carver's short story *Cathedral*, the protagonist in the story has to explain to a blind man what a cathedral looks like and what it is used for. Individually or in groups, have your students look for images of cathedrals on the Library of Congress Web site or select a cathedral in their own city. Have each group select a different image and research the religious and ceremonial parts of the cathedral (i.e., the altar, the bishop's chair). Taking on the role of Carver's protagonist, have them write up conversations where they explain the designs and religious significance of their cathedrals to the blind man in the story.

Artifacts and Literature Pairings: Ceremonial Artifacts

The following ceremonial artifacts can be found in the *American Passages* archive at http://www.learner.org/amerpass/slideshow/archive_search.php. Enter the serial number to view a picture of the item and a detailed description.

Artifact and Serial

Nuestra Senora
De Guadalupe: Our Lady
of Guadalupe
(1848) (#9061)

Allegorical
Representation of
The Dying Christian
(1847) (#2651)

Huron Funerary Practices
(1619) (#2846)

Literary Movement and Literature

Search for Identity:
Sandra Cisneros's
Guadalupe the Sex Goddess

Gothic Undercurrents:
Nathaniel Hawthorne's
Young Goodman Brown

Native Voices:
Roger Williams's
A Key Into the Language of America

Teaching Tips

- Greg Sarris begins the session by sharing an effective teaching strategy from his own classroom. This strategy begins when he shares a Native American creation story orally on the first day of class. On the following day, he asks each student to write the story from memory. He then asks the students to share their versions of the myths with the rest of the class. This sharing usually leads to fruitful discussions of parallels between the biblical creation story and Native American creation stories. Many students use their own knowledge of creation stories in conjunction with Greg's story to re-create the myth.
- Mark Jolley makes allowances for the major obstacle to many teachers' plans—time. To ensure that his students understand the connections between the Pomo baskets and the Native American myths, he extends this lesson over the course of a few days. Taking this time allows his students to spend a day focusing solely on the stereotypes concerning Native American tribes and myths, thus dispelling any misinformation about the important differences between diverse tribes.

Session Reading

Ceremonial Artifacts Reading

What do we mean by ceremonial artifacts?

Religious ceremonies provide a way for individuals and groups to affirm and transmit their religious views. By prescribing particular physical behaviors or activities, these ceremonies tie the spiritual world to the physical world. Ceremonial artifacts—whether they are chants, prayers, or tangible objects such as communion wafers—are imbued with a symbolic significance through their use in particular spiritual ceremonies.

Why are they useful to bring into a literature classroom?

In his famous essay *Religion as a Cultural System*, anthropologist Clifford Geertz defines religion as a system of symbols comprising a worldview that influences human moods and motivations. Religious ceremonial artifacts can help students understand how ceremonies reflect and manifest particular moods, motivations and beliefs. Whether they are considering ceremonial artifacts from their own culture or from an unfamiliar one, students can better understand the belief systems held by characters in a literary text.

Contextualizing ritual artifacts and literary texts: The case of Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*

Greg Sarris introduces the study of Native American literature to his students by having them listen to a creation story from the Miwok tribe, then asking the students to retell the story themselves. The exercise underscores how ideas about narrative form and religious content differ from one culture to another; students approach the assignment with expectations shaped by their own cultures and religions.

While the creation story Sarris uses is much older than Silko's 1977 novel, and the Miwok are culturally distinct from the Laguna Pueblo people in that book, comparing the two proves useful when readers encounter *Ceremony*. The text is formally different from most American fiction: It is crafted in a style that draws on oral Native American literary traditions* and alludes to specific sacred stories. But this novel is also influenced by other sources, including late twentieth-century literary postmodernism. Tayo, the novel's protagonist, must learn to adapt traditional Laguna ceremonial practices. This adaptation is necessary to mediate the cultural dissonance he experiences both in his departure from the Laguna Pueblo reservation and upon his return there. As a novel, *Ceremony* enacts a similar process of mediation, drawing on multiple cultural sources to offer a literary equivalent of Tayo's ceremonial cure.

Readers most familiar with Anglo-American literature may at first find the idea of literature as ceremony rather alien. Examining non-literary ceremonial artifacts, such as the Pomo baskets presented in the video, can be a useful way to introduce the concept of ceremony as expression of spiritual beliefs. Students may find it easier to explore the religious values and practices associated with a non-literary artifact. The understanding they glean from that artifact can help them look for similar values and analogous practices in the literary text.

* indicates a reference in the Glossary.

Ceremonial Artifacts Reading, cont'd.

Contextualizing ritual artifacts and literary texts: The cases of the Huron story *The Sky Tree* and the Lenni Lenape story *How Kishelemukong Made the People*

When high school teacher Marc Jolley brings ceremonial baskets into his classroom, he uses them to help students understand two different creation stories. In many cultures, utilitarian objects such as baskets are considered separate from spiritually significant ceremonial objects. But in the Pomo culture that produced these baskets, such a distinction does not hold—basket-making falls within the realm of spiritual practice for the Pomo. A similar infusion of the spiritual occurs with literature as well. Just as basket design is not merely decorative, traditional Native American storytelling is not merely a form of entertainment. The traditional transmission of Huron or Lenni Lenape creation stories would be a religious ceremony in which community members participate equally as speakers and as listeners.

Although this approach emphasizes shared concerns and styles among Native American tribes, it is important to note the major cultural differences between the tribes whose literature the students have read and whose baskets they have examined. Even within a single culture, religious ceremonies evolve over time, as Silko's novel shows. Working with ceremonial artifacts can offer an opportunity to examine such differences over time and between cultures, thereby encouraging a more sophisticated understanding of the literature discussed alongside the artifacts.

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