

Their Eyes Were Watching God

Question 3 – Sample Papers re: Cultural, physical, or geographical surrounds shape psychological or moral traits in a character

What is the deeper meaning of what happened?

What is higher-level analysis: what does this mean?

Sample R

In The Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad and Ceremony by Leslie Marmon Silko, both authors use setting to create an isolated environment in which the protagonist must complete his journey of self-discovery.

Culturally, both settings deal with race relations. Conrad's novel set in the European-imperialized African region of the Congo presents Marlow with one of the most challenging ethical questions of all: the validity and justification of the subjugation of one race to another. Far away from the structure and law of the white civilized world, Marlow is left alone in his quest for the truth. Tayo suffers through a similar racial division, though his is even more internal because of his mixed heritage. Tayo is no longer accepted by his Caucasian father's kind now that he is no longer in the army, but he also feels alienated by his fellow Laguna because of pureblooded characters like Auntie and Emo that constantly attempt to isolate him from others. Tayo's ceremony allows him to break past the boundaries of his blood and find a place in society where he belongs.

Geographically, the African jungle and the Southwest desert both emphasize each protagonist's solitude. Marlow is surrounded by greedy and apathetic white men, aimless pilgrims, and suffering Africans. He cannot connect with any of these groups, nor can he escape from them; the jungle is engulfed in a dense fog and undergrowth. Therefore, Marlow is left with no real companions save for his own thoughts. This physical isolation hastens his process of psychological introspection. Tayo is similarly left to his own musings as he cares for the land and treks after lost spotted cattle, often accompanied by no more than a horse or an old, blind mule. The harsh desert bakes Tayo's misery into a palpable substance that seeks to destroy him, providing a source of conflict for the time when he progresses through the steps of his healing ceremony.

Apart from the traits emphasized by their surroundings, the protagonists possess innate personalities that both help and hinder them in their internal battles. Marlow is a logical man with a strong work ethic and reflective nature. At the Outer Station's grove of death, he conclusively acts on the assumption that European imperialism is inherently wrong by feeding the dying African. Marlow is able to observe and evaluate the horrid events he witnesses without being automatically biased for his own race. This ability allows Marlow to consider the possible fallacy of the White Man's Burden, though it also eradicates his entire foundation of knowledge he has before leaving for the dark continent. Tayo feels an unnatural amount of guilt for the death of Rocky, which perpetuates his self-destructive behavior. However, this harmful pattern is

necessary because it makes Tayo's ceremony that much more important and impressive; Tayo must reach rock bottom before climbing his way to the point where he can touch the sky.

Other characters in these novels present obstacles to the protagonists' successful attainment of self-knowledge. The instinctive admiration Marlow has for Kurtz risks the possibility of Marlow surrendering to the darkness and falling into a similar downward spiral. Kurtz's psychotic and avaricious nature represent the evil that exists within all man, not just those of a particular color. Kurtz's fate foreshadows possible circumstances that could befall Marlow if he does not take precaution. Emo is another hateful character whose purity was decimated by colonialism. He constantly provokes Tayo, and on many occasions succeeds in driving Tayo to violence. If Tayo were to relinquish all hope and sentiment, he could become as cold, cruel, and unforgiving as Emo. Emo is not lucky enough to undergo a ceremony, though, so Tayo just barely manages to escape a similar fate.

Both authors' structure of time is based on the setting. Conrad skips through entire days and weeks, making the unknown hazy like the fog that surrounds Marlow. In Native American culture, time follows a cyclical pattern, and the past is not considered separate from the present. In this way, the Indianness of Tayo's surroundings are emphasized by the novel beginning and ending with the sunrise, as well as his vivid recollections of far away memories.

Through tools like setting, character, and time, Joseph Conrad and Leslie Marmon Silko create detailed environments that present challenges but also a clear path for the protagonists to follow in order to achieve self-identity.