

# ***Eleventh Grade English 1***

**ENGH 039 059**

**Course Syllabus**

**By**

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## LESSON 1

# TRIBAL VOICES



The texts in this lesson depict how Native American tribes viewed the natural world and how they conceptualized its formation. As will be easy to detect, these tribes—the Iroquois in New York, the Modoc in Oregon, and the Navajo in the Southwest—held nature and the Earth in high regard as a source of spiritual strength. These origin myths were passed down through the generations as oral traditions, and they often contained references to specific animals, forces of nature, and geographical features that symbolize greater spiritual beings.

The myths are also peppered with archetypes; that is, patterns, symbols, or character types that repeat across cultures. Some well-known archetypal characters include a dashing hero figure (Robin Hood), an able, quick-witted sidekick (Batman's sidekick, Robin), and the star-crossed lovers who share a deep bond, but are undone by circumstances (Romeo and Juliet). Situations and symbols are also commonly archetypal, such as the hero's quest, which produces continuous obstacles in a long, arduous journey, and the symbol of flying birds as a representation of freedom. Some of the archetypes you will encounter still may have symbolic meaning in our own contemporary culture,

while others might be more prevalent in Native American tribes. Above all, these writings display a reference for the natural world as the giver of life.

*The Iroquois Constitution* also makes use of symbols and tribal tradition, but in the service of political unification and etiquette. This political document creates a structure for Iroquois society not entirely dissimilar to the political documents and speeches we will encounter in the American Revolution lesson in our next unit. This text will also ask you to consider philosophical beliefs present in the writing.

Instead of scientific observations based on data, Native American tribes often grounded their understanding of the world in terms of otherworldly spirits. Try to notice what natural features and phenomena are created through the various spirits the texts feature. Also, pay attention to which animals are included in the myths. Why might these animals carry special importance to Native Americans?

## Objectives

Upon completion of this lesson you should be able to:

- Identify and explain the use of archetypes in Native American myths and *The Iroquois Constitution*.
- Define characteristics of origin myths.
- Compare and contrast creation ideas in Onondaga, Modoc, and Navajo myths.
- Synthesize Native American perspectives on the natural world as depicted in their writing.

## Reading Assignment

Read the following sections in *The American Experience*:

“Before You Read,” pages 18–19

“The Earth on Turtle’s Back,” pages 20–23

“When Grizzlies Walked Upright,” pages 24–26

“from *The Navajo Origin Legend*,” pages 27–28

material about the Iroquois Constitution pages 40–44

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### THOUGHT QUESTION

Brainstorm any number of archetypes you can think of from popular culture, literature, or any other facet of life. Make a list, separating the characters, symbols, and situations. Are the majority of your examples from contemporary culture, or do you think they can be traced back to stories and myths of old?

# Self Check 1-1



## Part A: Multiple-Choice

Select the **best** answer for each question.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. In “The Earth on Turtle’s Back,” why does the Ancient Chief decide to uproot The Great Tree?
- a. the roots were spreading too far
  - b. the Chief’s wife had a dream wherein the tree was uprooted
  - c. the tiny Muskrat told the Chief to uproot it
  - d. he thought the tree was ugly and vile
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. In “The Earth on Turtle’s Back,” why do the animals decide to drag the Earth up from beneath the water?
- a. so the Ancient Chief can have a place to stand
  - b. so the Ancient Chief can plant flowers and trees
  - c. so the Woman From The Sky has a place to stand
  - d. so the animals can have a place to live
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Which of the following is a characteristic prevalent in origin myths?
- a. references to geographical features the myth claims were created by spirits
  - b. references to specific animals and how they interact with spirits/nature
  - c. reverence for the natural world
  - d. all of the above
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. According to *The Navajo Origin Legend*, what gives life?
- a. ears of corn
  - b. buckskins
  - c. grizzly bears
  - d. the wind
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. What best describes the tone set by *The Iroquois Constitution*?
- a. confrontational and threatening to enemy tribes
  - b. instructive and inviting to fellow Iroquois
  - c. sappy and inspiring
  - d. funny and awkward

## Part B: Matching

Match each description with the appropriate character/being. You may use an answer more than once or not at all.

- a. punished for creating a new race
- b. provided two ears of corn for the creation of life
- c. prophet who helped unite the Iroquois
- d. swept away by the wind
- e. succeeded in bringing Earth up from the sea

\_\_\_\_\_ 1. Sky Spirit's daughter

\_\_\_\_\_ 2. The Muskrat

\_\_\_\_\_ 3. Grizzlies

\_\_\_\_\_ 4. Dekanawidah

\_\_\_\_\_ 5. White Body

***Check your answers with the key.***

## Let's Discuss Origin Myths



A key characteristic of Native American writing and storytelling is an emphasis on, and reverence for, the natural world—plants, animals, water, sky, etc. Often, spirits and gods were embodied in parts of nature (Wind Spirit, Sky Spirit, etc.), merging the physical with the spiritual. Lacking scientific advancements, Native Americans looked to their gods' interactions with the world as reasons for geographical phenomena they couldn't otherwise explain (similar to Greek Mythology), such as the creation of a mountain or, in "When Grizzlies Walked Upright," the way certain animals walk. Origin myths incorporate these ideas frequently, as you've surely noticed.

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### THOUGHT QUESTION

Look outside. What physical characteristics or features can you imagine being created by "otherworldly" forces? Provide a brief "myth" in a short paragraph.

Another common strain in Native American writing is the anthropomorphic—the attribution of uniquely human qualities to something nonhuman—nature of animals and forces of nature. In "The Earth on Turtle's Back," for instance, several different animals speak to one another as if conversation were an everyday occurrence. Furthermore, the animals use advanced reasoning and compassion in deciding to bring Earth up from the sea so that the Woman From The Sky has a place to live. This is reminiscent of Native American belief that animals have souls and can cooperate with humans for the betterment of all forms of life.



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## MULTIMEDIA ACTIVITY

Access the online version of your course. Use the navigation panel to go to the “Let’s Discuss Origin Myths” topic in Lesson 1. Watch the video, which discusses the tradition of storytelling. Can you remember a folk tale or story that you heard when you were young? Did it affect your beliefs or your understanding of the world in which you live? If so, how?

Animals are so entwined with Native American myths that some stories portray animals as the genetic ancestors to all Native tribes. In “When Grizzlies Walked Upright,” the animals of Earth are created by the Sky Spirit in magical fashion:

The Sky Spirit broke off the small end of his giant stick and threw the pieces into the rivers. The longer pieces turned into beaver and otter; the smaller pieces became fish. When the leaves dropped from the trees, he picked them up, blew upon them, and so made the birds. Then he took the big end of his giant stick and made all the animals that walked on the earth, the biggest of which were the grizzly bears.

The myth generates compassion for the grizzlies that eventually bear (no pun intended) the burden of raising the Chief Sky Spirit’s daughter, and yet the Chief displays anger (you might say intolerance) toward the new race of creatures that his daughter and the grizzlies form. This myth casts the Divine Creator as one who maintains tight reins on all forms of life and even exacts revenge on those who displease him. The irony, of course, is that the resulting grandchildren wind up as the very first Native Americans, ancestors to all Native tribes.

Though still an origin myth in the same vein as the others, *The Navajo Origin Legend* utilizes different archetypes to spin its tale of the beginning of life. Instead of animals figuring prominently in the creation of life and/or human beings, this myth includes other aspects of the natural world the Native Americans held in high esteem, such as corn and the wind.

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## THOUGHT QUESTION

In *The Navajo Origin Legend*, corn and the wind are given special attention. Why do you think Native America tribes would have held corn and the wind in such regard? Explain. Also, the myth claims “In the skin at the tips of our fingers we see the trail of the wind.” To what do you think this refers?

# ***The Iroquois Constitution***

As your textbook explains, the Iroquois are a group of Native American tribes that were closely related in language and culture. Geographically, the various tribes shared land in what is now upstate New York, but it was *The Iroquois Constitution* that united the once-bickering tribes under one binding peace. Supposedly spoken and spread by a traveling prophet named Dekanawidah, the text wisely utilizes Native American archetypes—such as the Tree of the Great Peace,



which would have significant meaning across all Iroquois tribes—to emphasize the bonds Native Americans share. This consolidation of power would have particular importance during the colonial era, as several European countries looked to expand their hold on the New World and systematically flush out Native peoples. The Six Nations (the name given to those tribes eventually united by the *Iroquois Constitution*) stood as the most politically organized Native American body during this period, and much can be owed to this text.

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## **SKILL BUILDER 1-1**

Answer each of the following questions, using your text:

In how many directions do the roots of the Tree of Great Peace spread?

What animal features prominently in *The Iroquois Constitution*?

When a new lord is installed in the Confederacy, what must he furnish as a pledge to the other lords?

*The Iroquois Constitution* reiterates Native respect for and kinship with the natural world as evidenced in the long passage explaining the obligatory opening remarks at the start of each council. Among other things, the lords are required to give thanks to “the earth where men may dwell, to the streams of water, the pools, the springs and the lakes, to the maize and the fruits, to the medicinal herbs and trees...” and so on . An implicit philosophical belief on display in such passages is that nature is the giver of life, the provider of wellness and health, and the essence of all existence. In addition, note the emphasis on order in the text. There is a time and place for the members of the confederacy to speak and a ritual that must be followed, reinforcing the themes of cooperation and mutual respect. This is not to say that heated arguments did not break out from time to time (just look at the political squabbles that go on today).

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## MULTIMEDIA ACTIVITY

Access the online version of your course. Use the navigation panel to go to the “*The Iroquois Constitution*” topic in Lesson 1. Watch the video, which shows different images of government. What similarities do you see between *The Iroquois Constitution* and governments of today?

In a vein similar to other political documents we will encounter, *The Iroquois Constitution* demands from its participant tribes an adherence to “the greater good” instead of following self-interest: “In all your deliberations in the confederate council, in your efforts at law making, in all your official acts, self-interest shall be cast into oblivion.” The welfare of the entire Confederacy should be paramount to trivial quarrels between individual tribes. (This idea will come into play again when we reach our discussion of the American Revolution.)

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## THOUGHT QUESTION

Reread the last paragraph of *The Iroquois Constitution*. Based on the details in this passage, what beliefs did the Iroquois hold about the qualities that make one a good leader?

# Self Check 1-2



## Part A: True or False

Determine whether each statement is true or false.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. The animals in “The Earth on Turtle’s Back” are content to let The Woman From The Sky fend for herself when she falls from Skyland.
  - a. true
  - b. false
  
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Volcanoes are one natural feature alluded to in “When Grizzlies Walked Upright.”
  - a. true
  - b. false
  
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. The Chief Sky Spirit in “When Grizzlies Walked Upright” is open to the idea of new races being created without his knowledge.
  - a. true
  - b. false
  
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Many Iroquois tribes were hostile toward *The Iroquois Constitution*.
  - a. true
  - b. false
  
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. *The Iroquois Constitution* stresses that its adhering members put the collective good of Native peoples ahead of self-interest.
  - a. true
  - b. false

## Part B: Fill in the Blank

Complete the following sentences with one of the two given choices.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Many Native American origin myths depict animals as having a \_\_\_\_\_ role in the creation of life.
  - a. major
  - b. minor

- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Judging from *The Iroquois Constitution*, we can assume that the Iroquois attitudes toward ritual and etiquette were \_\_\_\_\_.  
a. strict  
b. lax
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. The Muskrat's ability to dive down and carry the Earth up from the sea when larger animals failed in "The Earth on Turtle's Back" is an example of extreme \_\_\_\_\_.  
a. archetype  
b. irony
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. According to *The Navajo Origin Legend*, \_\_\_\_\_ is the source of all life.  
a. corn  
b. wind
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. A dominant characteristic in origin myths is that animals are \_\_\_\_\_.  
a. considerate  
b. destructive

## Part C: Short Answer

Answer each question in a short paragraph, using complete sentences.

1. Explain a probable reason why Native Americans looked to origin myths to explain natural geographical features.
2. Explain what "anthropomorphic" means and give two examples of it from the origin myths.
3. After reading *The Iroquois Constitution* what can we infer is the ideal relationship between a lord and their people in Iroquois society?

**Check your answers with the key.**