

Native American Literature





Before the first Europeans arrived...

- There was *no written literature* among the more than 500 different Indian languages and tribal cultures that existed in North America. Literatures were primarily oral.
- Because of this, the literature is quite diverse.



Religion

- Tribes maintained their own religion.
- They worshipped gods, animals, plants or sacred persons.
- There are no long, standardized religious cycles about one supreme divinity.



Governments

- Systems of government ranged from democracies to councils of elders to theocracies*.

*Theocracy: government of a state by immediate divine guidance or by officials who are regarded as divinely guided.



Generalizations among tribes..

- Native American stories glow with reverence for nature as a spiritual as well as physical mother.
- Term to know:
Earth Mother – the earth viewed (as in primitive theology) as the divine source of terrestrial life.



Generalizations, con't...

- Nature is alive and endowed with spiritual forces
- Main characters may be animals or plants, often totems* associated with a tribe, group or individual

* Totem - an object (as an animal or plant) serving as the emblem of a family or clan and often as a reminder of its ancestry; *also* : a usually carved or painted representation of such an object



Culture Heroes

- There are stories about culture heroes such as the Ojibwa tribe's Manabozho or the Navajo tribe's Coyote, tricksters that are treated with varying degrees of respect.
- Term to know:
Trickster tales – folk tales that feature an animal or human character who engages in deceit, violence, and magic.



More about tricksters...

- Often trickster tales are mythic, explaining features of the world.
- A trickster usually has contradictory qualities: he is foolish yet clever, greedy yet helpful, immoral yet moral.



Types of Literature...

- Examples of almost every oral genre can be found in Native American literature:
 - Lyrics
 - Chants
 - Myths
 - Fairy tales
 - Humorous anecdotes
 - Incantations
 - Riddles
 - Proverbs
 - Epics
 - Legendary histories



Creation Myths

- Terms to know:

Myth – A traditional story, passed down through generations, that explains why the world is the way it is. In myths, events usually result from the actions of supernatural beings.

Creation Myth – explains how the universe, earth, and life began.



More Terms to Know...

- **Legend** - a story coming down from the past, *especially* one popularly regarded as historical although not verifiable, i.e. the Fountain of Youth or Big Foot.
- **Folktale** - a characteristically anonymous, timeless, and placeless tale circulated orally among a people, i.e. Goldilocks and the Three Bears.



Things we will read...

- “The World on the Turtle’s Back”
(Creation Myth)
- The Coyote Stories (Trickster Tales)
- Other various myths and tales.
- *The Absolutely True Story of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie