

Summer Reading Assignment
English III
Zachary High School 2010

The first unit of the comprehensive curriculum begins with a brief study of Native American oral traditions. Students will analyze **archetypes** drawn from myth and tradition, as well as **cultural characteristics** in literary traditions. All cultures have always asked questions about the origins of the world and about their place in the natural order of things. To answer these questions, people have told themselves stories that explain the world and their traditions. These stories, also called **myths**, comfort people when they are afraid and give them a sense of cultural identity.

Most myths contain **archetypes**, an old imaginative pattern that has appeared in literature throughout the ages. Archetypes cross cultural and national boundaries. An archetype can be a **plot** (the death of a hero, boy wins girl, the quest), a **character** (the trickster, the savior, the rescued maiden), or an **image** (a place where people never die, a golden cup, a hoarded treasure).

Read each of the following short myths and answer the corresponding questions:

“The Sky Tree”

as retold by Joseph Bruchac

In the beginning, Earth was covered with water. In Sky Land, there were people living as they do now on Earth. In the middle of that land was the great Sky Tree. All of the food which the people in that Sky Land ate came from the great tree.

The old chief of that land lived with his wife, whose name was Aataentsic, meaning “Ancient Woman,” in their long house near the great tree. It came to be that the old chief became sick, and nothing could cure him. He grew weaker and weaker until it seemed he would die. Then a dream came to him, and he called Aataentsic to him.

“I have dreamed,” he said, “and in my dream I saw how I can be healed. I must be given the fruit which grows at the very top of Sky Tree. You must cut it down and bring that fruit to me.”

Aataentsic took her husband’s stone ax and went to the great tree. As soon as she struck it, it split in half and toppled over. As it fell, a hole opened in Sky Land, and the tree fell through the hole. Aataentsic returned to the place where the old chief waited.

“My husband,” she said, “when I cut the tree, it split in half and then fell through a great hole. Without the tree, there can be no life. I must follow it.”

Then, leaving her husband, she went back to the hole in Sky Land and threw herself after the great tree.

As Aataentsic fell, Turtle looked up and saw her. Immediately Turtle called together all the water animals and told them what she had seen.

“What should be done?” Turtle said.

Beaver answered her. “You are the one who saw this happen. Tell us what to do.”

“All of you must dive down,” Turtle said. “Bring up soil from the bottom, and place it on my back.”

Immediately all of the water animals began to dive down and bring up soil. Beaver, Mink, Muskrat, and Otter each brought up pawfuls of wet soil and placed the soil on Turtle’s back until they had made an island of great size. When they were through, Aataentsic settled down gently on the new Earth, and the pieces of the great tree fell beside her and took root.

Reading Check Questions for “The Sky Tree”:

1. According to this myth, what was the world like in the beginning?
 2. What happens when Aataentsic cuts the tree?
 3. How does this myth explain the origin of the earth as we know it today?
 4. Would the people who told this myth feel hostile or supportive toward the natural world? Why?
 5. What aspects of the settings in this **myth** are **archetypes**? What other stories have used the same archetypes?
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“Coyote Finishes His Work”

from the Nez Percé tradition, retold by Barry Lopez

From the very beginning, Coyote was traveling around all over the earth. He did many wonderful things when he went along. He killed the monsters and the evil spirits that preyed on the people. He made the Indians, and put them out in tribes all over the world because Old Man Above wanted the earth to be inhabited all over, not just in one or two places.

He gave all the people different names and taught them different languages. This is why Indians live all over the country now and speak in different ways.

He taught the people how to eat and how to hunt the buffalo and catch eagles. He taught them what roots to eat and how to make a good lodge and what to wear. He taught them how to dance. Sometimes he made mistakes, and even though he was wise and powerful, he did many foolish things. But that was his way.

Coyote liked to play tricks. He thought about himself all the time, and told everyone he was a great warrior, but he was not. Sometimes he would go too far with some trick and get someone killed. Other times, he would have a trick played on himself by someone else. He got killed this way so many times that Fox and the birds got tired of bringing

him back to life. Another way he got in trouble was trying to do what someone else did. This is how he came to be called Imitator.

Coyote was ugly too. The girls did not like him. But he was smart. He could change himself around and trick the women. Coyote got the girls when he wanted.

One time, Coyote had done everything he could think of and was traveling from one place to another place, looking for other things that needed to be done. Old Man saw him going along and said to himself, "Coyote has now done almost everything he is capable of doing. His work is almost done. It is time to bring him back to the place where he started."

So Great Spirit came down and traveled in the shape of an old man. He met Coyote. Coyote said, "I am Coyote. Who are you?"

Old Man said, "I am Chief of the earth. It was I who sent you to set the world right."

"No," Coyote said, "you never sent me. I don't know you. If you are the Chief, take that lake over there and move it to the side of that mountain."

"No. If you are Coyote, let me see you do it."

Coyote did it.

"Now, move it back."

Coyote tried, but he could not do it. He thought this was strange. He tried again, but he could not do it.

Chief moved the lake back.

Coyote said, "Now I know you are the Chief."

Old Man said, "Your work is finished, Coyote. You have traveled far and done much good. Now you will go to where I have prepared a home for you."

Then Coyote disappeared. Now no one knows where he is anymore.

Old Man got ready to leave, too. He said to the Indians, "I will send messages to the earth by the spirits of the people who reach me but whose time to die has not yet come. They will carry messages to you from time to time. When their spirits come back into their bodies, they will revive and tell you their experiences.

"Coyote and myself, we will not be seen again until Earthwoman is very old. Then we shall return to earth, for it will require a change by that time. Coyote will come along first, and when you see him you will know I am coming. When I come along, all the

spirits of the dead will be with me. There will be no more Other Side Camp. All the people will live together. Earthmother will go back to her first shape and live as a mother among her children. Then things will be made right.”

Now they are waiting for Coyote.

Reading Check Questions for “Coyote Finishes His Work”:

1. What aspects of life on earth are explained in this myth?
 2. **Metamorphoses**, or shape changes, are common in myths of all cultures. What **metamorphoses** take place in this myth?
 3. What does this myth promise for the future?
 4. Old Man says that when he returns, earth “will require a change.” What do you think he means?
 5. What does the **archetype** of the Earth-mother in this story reveal about the Nez Perce vision of nature?
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Culminating Activity:

Read three additional Native American myths that contain strong life lessons. Good examples may be found online at <http://www.angelfire.com/ca/Indian/stories.html>.

During reading, record at least one “life lesson” displayed in each myth. List the life lesson in the first column. List supporting evidence of this life lesson from the text in the second column. List a corresponding contemporary example, possibly from a story, a film, or a television show, in the third column.

<u>Title of Myth</u>	<u>Life Lesson</u>	<u>Textual Evidence</u>	<u>Contemporary Example</u>

Select one of the life lessons and use it as a topic for a journal entry, discussing how you could apply it to your personal life or to a time when you learned this lesson the hard way.

JOURNAL ENTRY

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, occupying most of the page below the title. It is intended for the user to write their journal entry.