The Native American Experience

The World on the Turtle’s Back
Iroquois Creation Myth

NOTABLE QUOTE
 “[Native American] stories . . . remind the people of who and what they are, why they are in this particular place, and how they should continue to live here.”

FYI
 Did you know that . . .
 • both the U.S. Constitution and the founding charter of the United Nations are based on ideas found in the Iroquois constitution, known as “The Great Binding Law”?
 • Iroquois women had many more rights than colonial American women?
 • more than 50,000 Iroquois live in the United States today?

The totem, or tribal symbol, of the Iroquois

The World on the Turtle’s Back is an Iroquois (ɪrəˈkwɔɪ/) creation story filled with conflict and compelling characters. The Iroquois passed down this story from one generation to the next by telling it in elaborate performances. In the 1800s, David Cusick, an Iroquois author, recorded one version of the story in print. Today, more than 25 written versions of the story exist.

The Power of Unity The term Iroquois refers to six separate Native American groups—the Seneca, Cayuga, Oneida, Onondaga, Mohawk, and Tuscarora. Five of these groups—all but the Tuscarora—once resided in what is now New York State. They continually waged war with one another, putting themselves at risk of attack from neighboring Algonquin tribes. Troubled by the bloodshed, a Huron named Deganawidah (də-gäˈnə-wēˈdə) joined forces with an Onondaga chief named Hiawatha (hiəˈwōθə) to end the fighting. Sometime between 1570 and 1600, they formed the Iroquois League, a confederacy empowered to negotiate treaties with foreign nations and to resolve conflicts among the five nations. In 1722, the Tuscarora, from North Carolina, joined the league. For the next 175 to 200 years, the Iroquois managed to dominate other Native American groups and to remain free of both British and French rule.

The Iroquois Way of Life The league’s effectiveness stemmed in part from the nations’ shared culture. The groups spoke similar languages, held similar beliefs, and followed similar ways of life. They lived in longhouses made of pole frames covered with elm bark, and they built fences around their villages for protection. Up to 50 people occupied each longhouse, and 300 to 600 people lived in each village. Villages were governed by a chief or chiefs, who received advice from a council of adult males. Groups of women gathered wild fruits and nuts and cultivated corn, beans, and squash. In addition to waging war, the men traded, hunted, fished, and built the longhouses.

The Iroquois Through Time During the American Revolution, the Iroquois nations disagreed about whether to support the rebelling colonists or Great Britain. This dispute severely weakened the Iroquois League. Today, the league shows renewed vigor as it fights for environmental protection and increased recognition by the U.S. government.
**LITERARY ANALYSIS: CREATION MYTHS**

A myth is a traditional story, usually involving supernatural beings or events, that explains how some aspect of human nature or the natural world came to be. Creation myths are a specific kind of myth that typically

- describes how the universe, the earth, and life began
- explains the workings of the natural world
- supports and validates social customs and values
- guides people through the trials of living

As you read “The World on the Turtle’s Back,” note the supernatural explanation it offers of the world’s origin. Think about how this myth serves the functions listed here.

**READING STRATEGY: READING FOLK LITERATURE**

You’re probably already familiar with different types of folk literature, which includes folk tales, myths, fables, and legends passed orally from one generation to the next. The creation myth you are about to read is another example of folk literature. Using the following strategies as you read will help you not only understand and appreciate the myth’s message but also glean information about the culture it comes from:

- Read the myth aloud, or imagine a storyteller’s voice as you read silently.
- Note mysteries of nature and details about creation that the myth explains.
- Make inferences about the social values or customs taught through the characters and situations.
- Look for details that reveal other aspects of Iroquois culture.

As you read, use a chart like the one shown to record your notes and observations about the three kinds of information you find in this myth.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Details About Creation/Nature</th>
<th>Social Values or Customs</th>
<th>Other Cultural Details</th>
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<tr>
<td>Before the earth was created, humans and animals “of the kind that are around us now” did not exist.</td>
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In the beginning there was no world, no land, no creatures of the kind that are around us now, and there were no men. But there was a great ocean which occupied space as far as anyone could see. Above the ocean was a great void of air. And in the air there lived the birds of the sea; in the ocean lived the fish and the creatures of the deep. Far above this unpeopled world, there was a Sky-World. Here lived gods who were like people—like Iroquois.

In the Sky-World there was a man who had a wife, and the wife was expecting a child. The woman became hungry for all kinds of strange delicacies, as women do when they are with child. She kept her husband busy almost to distraction finding delicious things for her to eat.

In the middle of the Sky-World there grew a Great Tree which was not like any of the trees that we know. It was tremendous; it had grown there forever. It had enormous roots that spread out from the floor of the Sky-World. And on its branches there were many different kinds of leaves and different kinds of fruits and flowers. The tree was not supposed to be marked or mutilated by any of the beings who dwelt in the Sky-World. It was a sacred tree that stood at the center of the universe.

The woman decided that she wanted some bark from one of the roots of the Great Tree—perhaps as a food or as a medicine, we don’t know. She told her husband this. He didn’t like the idea. He knew it was wrong. But she insisted, and he gave in. So he dug a hole among the roots of this great sky tree, and he bared some of its roots. But the floor of the Sky-World wasn’t very thick, and he broke a hole through it. He was terrified, for he had never expected to find empty space underneath the world.
aurora (ə-rōr′ə): a shifting, streaming display of light, like those sometimes seen in the sky in the northern and southern regions of the earth.

Chinese boxes: a set of boxes, each of which fits neatly inside the next larger one.

Deutscher (doĭ′char).

Text not available for electronic use. Please refer to the text in the textbook.
4. Lesperance (lës’par-åns).

5. Moses . . . talk with God: According to the Old Testament, God spoke directly to Moses several times in mountainous locations, as when Moses received the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai.

6. antigravity metal: a metal that counteracts the pull of gravity.

**MAKE INFERENCES**

On the basis of details presented so far, what kind of person is Eckels?

**FORESHADOWING**

What might Travis’s warning to the hunters foreshadow? How does his warning create suspense?
He always told the truth, and he always tried to accomplish what seemed to be right and reasonable. The left-handed twin never said what he meant or meant what he said. He always lied, and he always did things backward. You could never tell what he was trying to do because he always made it look as if he were doing the opposite. He was the devious one.

These two brothers, as they grew up, represented two ways of the world which are in all people. The Indians did not call these the right and the wrong. They called them the straight mind and the crooked mind, the upright man and the devious man, the right and the left.

The twins had creative powers. They took clay and modeled it into animals, and they gave these animals life. And in this they contended with one another. The right-handed twin made the deer, and the left-handed twin made the mountain lion which kills the deer. But the right-handed twin knew there would always be more deer than mountain lions. And he made another animal. He made the ground squirrel. The left-handed twin saw that the mountain lion could not get to the ground squirrel, who digs a hole, so he made the weasel. And although the weasel can go into the ground squirrel’s hole and kill him, there are lots of ground squirrels and not so many weasels. Next the right-handed twin decided he would make an animal that the weasel could not kill, so he made the porcupine. But the left-handed twin made the bear, who flips the porcupine over on his back and tears out his belly.

And the right-handed twin made berries and fruits of other kinds for his creatures to live on. The left-handed twin made briars and poison ivy, and the poisonous plants like the baneberry and the dogberry, and the suicide root with which people kill themselves when they go out of their minds. And the left-handed twin made medicines, for good and for evil, for doctoring and for witchcraft.

And finally, the right-handed twin made man. The people do not know just how much the left-handed twin had to do with making man. Man was made of clay, like pottery, and baked in the fire.

The world the twins made was a balanced and orderly world, and this was good. The plant-eating animals created by the right-handed twin would eat up all the vegetation if their number was not kept down by the meat-eating animals, which the left-handed twin created. But if these carnivorous animals ate too many other animals, then they would starve, for they would run out of meat. So the right- and the left-handed twins built balance into the world.

As the twins became men full grown, they still contested with one another. No one had won, and no one had lost. And they knew that the conflict was becoming sharper and sharper, and one of them would have to vanquish the other.

And so they came to the duel. They started with gambling. They took a wooden bowl, and in it they put wild plum pits. One side of the pits was burned black, and by tossing the pits in the bowl and betting on how these would fall, they gambled against one another, as the people still do in the New Year’s
rites. All through the morning they gambled at this game, and all through the afternoon, and the sun went down. And when the sun went down, the game was done, and neither one had won.

So they went on to battle one another at the lacrosse game. And they contested all day, and the sun went down, and the game was done. And neither had won.

And now they battled with clubs, and they fought all day, and the sun went down, and the fight was done. But neither had won.

And they went from one duel to another to see which one would succumb. Each one knew in his deepest mind that there was something, somewhere, that would vanquish the other. But what was it? Where to find it?

Each knew somewhere in his mind what it was that was his own weak point. They talked about this as they contested in these duels, day after day, and somehow the deep mind of each entered into the other. And the deep mind of the right-handed twin lied to his brother, and the deep mind of the left-handed twin told the truth.

On the last day of the duel, as they stood, they at last knew how the right-handed twin was to kill his brother. Each selected his weapon. The left-handed twin chose a mere stick that would do him no good. But the right-handed twin

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2. **New Year’s rites**: various ceremonies to get ready for the New Year. They often included community confession of sins, the replenishing of hearths in the homes, and sacred dances, as well as the gambling ritual.

3. **lacrosse**: a game of Native American origin wherein participants on two teams use long-handled sticks with webbed pouches to maneuver a ball into the opposing team’s goal.
picked out the deer antler, and with one touch he destroyed his brother. And
the left-handed twin died, but he died and he didn’t die. The right-handed twin
picked up the body and cast it off the edge of the earth. And some place below the
world, the left-handed twin still lives and reigns.

When the sun rises from the east and travels in a huge arc along the sky dome,
which rests like a great upside-down cup on the saucer of the earth, the people are
in the daylight realm of the right-handed twin. But when the sun slips down in the
west at nightfall and the dome lifts to let it escape at the western rim, the people are
again in the domain of the left-handed twin—the fearful realm of night.

Having killed his brother, the right-handed twin returned home to his
grandmother. And she met him in anger. She threw the food out of the cabin onto
the ground and said that he was a murderer, for he had killed his brother. He grew
angry and told her she had always helped his brother, who had killed their mother.
In his anger, he grabbed her by the throat and cut her head off. Her body he threw
into the ocean, and her head, into the sky. There, “Our Grandmother, the Moon”
still keeps watch at night over the realm of her favorite grandson.

The right-handed twin has many names. One of them is Sapling. It means
smooth, young, green and fresh and innocent, straightforward, straight-growing,
soft and pliable, teachable and trainable. These are the old ways of describing him.
But since he has gone away, he has other names. He is called “He Holds Up the
Skies,” “Master of Life,” and “Great Creator.”

The left-handed twin also has many names. One of them is Flint. He is called
the devious one, the one covered with boils. Old Warty. He is stubborn. He is
thought of as being dark in color.

These two beings rule the world and keep an eye on the affairs of men. The
right-handed twin, the Master of Life, lives in the Sky-World. He is content with
the world he helped to create and with his favorite creatures, the humans. The
scent of sacred tobacco rising from the earth comes gloriously to his nostrils.

In the world below lives the left-handed twin. He knows the world of men,
and he finds contentment in it. He hears the sounds of warfare and torture, and
he finds them good.

In the daytime, the people have rituals which honor the right-handed twin.
Through the daytime rituals, they thank the Master of Life. In the nighttime,
the people dance and sing for the left-handed twin.
Comprehension

1. Recall  How do the animals help the woman who fell from the sky?

2. Recall  What roles do the grandmother and her daughter play in the earth’s creation?

3. Summarize  What is the outcome of the battles between the twins?

Literary Analysis

4. Compare and Contrast  How does this myth compare with the accounts of the world’s origin you summarized before you read? Use a Venn diagram to record the differences and similarities between “The World on the Turtle’s Back” and one of the accounts you discussed.

5. Analyze a Creation Myth  Reread lines 105–112. Summarize the differences between the right-handed twin and the left-handed twin. Why do you think the Iroquois honor both twins? What elements of human nature are explained by “The World on the Turtle’s Back”?

6. Draw Conclusions from Folk Literature  Folk literature often transmits information about a people’s culture and way of life. Review the details you noted in your chart as you read. From this myth, what did you learn about the Iroquois’
   - attitude toward nature?
   - view of their gods?
   - important food, games, and rituals?
   - beliefs about good and evil?

7. Synthesize Cultural Ideas  How would you relate the Iroquois reverence for both the right-handed and left-handed twins to your own concept of good and evil? Explain your response, citing details and description from the text.

Literary Criticism

8. Critical Interpretations  Creation stories often serve many purposes. According to Larry Evers and Paul Pavich, scholars of Native American literature, such stories “remind the people of who and what they are, why they are in this particular place, and how they should continue to live here.” Do you think that “The World on the Turtle’s Back” fulfills these functions? Explain, citing evidence from the text to support your interpretation.