Learning Objectives

For pages 1–16
In studying these texts, you will focus on the following objective:

Literary Study: Comparing cultural context.

The Sky Tree
by Joseph Bruchac

How the Leopard Got His Claws
by Chinua Achebe and John Iroaganachi

Prayer to the Pacific
by Leslie Marmon Silko


Connect to the Myth
Two of the three selections you are about to read are part of the Native American and West African oral traditions. Oral cultures use storytelling to pass on ancient traditions, moral lessons, and beliefs about the world and its origin. Think about stories you have heard about your family’s history. How would you respond to the following statements about the value of oral tradition? Circle your responses.

1. Families should pass along their history to each generation.
   yes    no    maybe

2. It is important for young people to understand the culture from which they came.
   yes    no    maybe

3. Young people should listen carefully to stories told by their elders so that they can pass them along to the next generation.
   yes    no    maybe

Build Background
• “The Sky Tree” is a Huron creation myth. The Huron people were members of a confederacy of tribes who lived northeast of the Great Lakes. They believed that Earth was an island resting on the back of a Great Turtle that swam in the primal waters.

• “How the Leopard Got His Claws” is a Nigerian myth. In this retelling, the storyteller introduces dark undertones that may reflect a civil war and other struggles that have stalled Nigeria’s progress toward unity, peace, and stability.

• “Prayer to the Pacific” is a Native American poem that draws a comparison between the west-to-east movement of rain clouds and the migration of early peoples to America.

Without looking at what you just read, write down several things that you think you will be reading about in the selections.

Comparing Literature
A myth is a traditional story that explains a culture’s beliefs, customs, and attitudes about nature. Myths often contain elements such as gods, superhuman creatures, personified animals, and extraordinary events to explain how the world was created or why the world is the way that it is. As you read the selections, jot down mythic elements in each story. Think about whether each element reflects a belief, a description of a custom, or an explanation about the world. What morals or lessons might each myth have been used to teach?
Literary Element  Oral Tradition

Oral tradition is information that passes by word of mouth from one generation to the next. Why do you think that some peoples, such as the Huron, created an oral culture? Why would they consider a story important enough to pass on to other generations? Write your responses on the lines below.

____________________________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________________________

Reading Strategy  Question

Questioning is stopping at regular intervals as you read and asking yourself whether you have understood what you read. As you read the selections, write down questions that puzzle you in the left-hand column of a chart like the one below. When you have finished each selection, return to your questions and try to answer them in the right-hand column.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Why is the Sky Tree so important?</td>
<td>The Sky Tree is the source of life.</td>
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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 longhouse 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.”

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1. **Aataentsic** was the Earth-mother in Huron mythology. The Huron believed that they were the children of Aataentsic.

2. A **longhouse** was a bark-covered Native American shared dwelling. It could have space for multiple families as well as rooms for tribal ceremonies.
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 the 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.
Comparing Literature

Reread the opening sentence in "The Sky Tree" and "How the Leopard Got His Claws." What does each line suggest or foretell about the purpose of the story? Write your answer on the lines below.

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_______________________________
_______________________________
_______________________________
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Comparing Literature

Based on the descriptions of the animals, complete the following sentence.

I think that the _____________ will be the villain of the story because

_______________________________
_______________________________

If you look at the world in terms of storytelling, you have, first of all, the man who agitates, the man who drums up the people—I call him the drummer. Then you have the warrior, who goes forward and fights. But you also have the storyteller who recounts the event, and this is the one who survives, who outlives all the others. It is the storyteller who makes us what we are, who creates history. The storyteller creates the memory that the survivors must have; otherwise, their surviving would have no meaning.

—Chinua Achebe

In the beginning...all the animals in the forest lived as friends. Their king was the leopard. He was strong, but gentle and wise. He ruled the animals well, and they all liked him.

At that time the animals did not fight one another. Most of them had no sharp teeth or claws. They did not need them. Even King Leopard had only small teeth. He had no claws at all.

Only the dog had big, sharp teeth. The other animals said he was ugly, and they laughed at him.

“It is foolish to carry sharp things in the mouth,” said the tortoise.

“I think so, too,” said the goat.

The monkey jumped in and began to tease the dog.

“Don’t worry, my dear friend,” said the monkey. “You need your teeth to clear your farm.”

The animals laughed at the monkey’s joke.

When the farming season came round, King Leopard led the animals to their farmland. They all worked hard to prepare their plots. At the end of the day they returned home tired. They sat on log benches in the village square. As they rested they told stories and drank palm wine.

1. Palm wine is made from the sap of a palm tree.
But soon it would be the rainy season, and the animals would have no shelter from the rain.

The deer took this problem to King Leopard. They talked about it for a long time. King Leopard decided to call the animals together to discuss it.

One bright morning... King Leopard beat his royal drum. When the animals heard the drum, they gathered at the village square. The tortoise was there. The goat was there, too. The sheep, the grass-cutter, the monkey, the hedgehog, the baboon, the dog and many others were there.

King Leopard greeted them and said, “I have called you together to plan how we can make ourselves a common shelter.”

“This is a good idea,” said the giraffe.

“Yes, a very good idea,” said many other animals.

“But why do we need a common house?” said the dog. He had never liked King Leopard.

“The dog has asked a good question,” said the duck. “Why do we need a common shelter?”

“We do need somewhere to rest when we return from our farms,” replied King Leopard.

“And besides,” said the goat, “we need a shelter from the rain.”

“I don’t mind being wet,” said the duck. “In fact, I like it. I know that the goat does not like water on his body. Let him go and build a shelter.”

“We need a shelter,” said the monkey, jumping up and down in excitement.

“Perhaps we need one, perhaps we don’t,” said the lazy baboon sitting on the low fence of the square.

The dog spoke again. “We are wasting our time. Those who need a shelter should build it. I live in a cave, and it is enough for me.” Then he walked away. The duck followed him out.

“Does anyone else want to leave?” asked King Leopard. No one answered or made a move to go.

“Very well,” said King Leopard. “Let the rest of us build the village hall.”

The animals soon scattered about to find building materials. The tortoise copied the pattern on his back and made the plan of the roof. The giant rat and mouse dug the foundations. Some animals brought sticks, some ropes, others made roof-mats.

As they built the house, they sang many happy songs. They also told many jokes. Although they worked very hard, everyone was merry.

After many weeks they finished the building.

It was a fine building. The animals were pleased with it. They agreed to open it with a very special meeting.
On the opening day the animals, their wives and children gathered in the hall. King Leopard then made a short speech. He said: “This hall is yours to enjoy. You worked very hard together to build it. I am proud of you.”

The animals clapped their hands and gave three cheers to their king. From that day they rested in their new hall whenever they returned from their farm.

But the dog and the duck kept away from the hall.

One morning the animals went to their farms as usual. King Leopard went to visit a chief in another village.

At first the sun was shining. Then strong winds began to blow. Dark clouds hid the sun. The first rain was coming. The songbirds stopped their singing. The humming insects became quiet. Lightning flashed across the dark clouds. Claps of thunder sounded. The rain poured and poured.

The animals in their farms saw the rain coming and began to hurry to the village hall.

The dog also saw the rain coming and returned to his cave. But it was a very, very heavy rain. Water began to enter the cave. Soon it was flooded.

The dog ran from one end of his cave to the other. But the water followed him everywhere. At last he ran out of the cave altogether and made straight for the hall of the animals.

The deer was already there. He was surprised to see the dog enter the hall.

“What do you want here?” said the deer to the dog.

“It is none of your business,” replied the dog.

“It is my business,” said the deer. “Please go out, this hall is for those who built it.”

Then the dog attacked the deer and bit him with his big, sharp teeth. The deer cried with pain. The dog seized him by the neck and threw him out into the rain.

The other animals came in one after the other. The dog barked and threw each of them out. They stood together shivering and crying in the rain. The dog kept barking and showing his teeth.

Then the deer cried out:

O Leopard our noble king,
Where are you?
Spotted king of the forest,
Where are you?
Even if you are far away
Come, hurry home:
The worst has happened to us
The worst has happened to us…
The house the animals built
The cruel dog keeps us from it,
The common shelter we built
The cruel dog keeps us from it,
The worst has happened to us
The worst has happened to us…

The cry of the deer rang out loud and clear. It was carried by the wind. King Leopard heard it on his way back from his journey and began to run toward the village hall.

As he got near, he saw the animals, wet and sheltering under a tree. They were all crying. As he got nearer still, he could see the dog walking up and down inside the hall.

King Leopard was very angry. “Come out of the hall at once,” he said to the dog. The dog barked and rushed at him. They began to fight. The dog bit the leopard and tore his skin with his claws. King Leopard was covered with blood. The dog went back to the hall. He stood at the door barking and barking. “Who is next? Who! Who!” he barked.

King Leopard turned to the animals and said: “Let us go in together and drive out the enemy. He is strong, but he is alone. We are many. Together we can drive him out of our house.”

But the goat said: “We cannot face him. Look at his strong teeth! He will only tear us to pieces!”

“The goat is right,” said the animals. “He is too strong for us.”

### Comparing Literature

Which statement accurately describes the relationship between the animals in “The Sky Tree” and the animals in this story? Circle the letter of the best response.

a. The animals in “The Sky Tree” work together, but in this story, the strongest animal takes over.

b. The animals in both stories work together to help one another and humans.

c. The animals in both stories compete with one another and with humans.

Underline the part of the story that represents people who want other people to stand up for their rights so it doesn’t cause any trouble for them. Then think of examples of this attitude in the real world. Write an example on the lines below.
The tortoise stood up and said: “I am sure we are all sorry about what has happened to the leopard. But he was foolish to talk to the dog the way he did. It is foolish to annoy such a powerful person as the dog. Let us make peace with him. I don’t know what you others think. But I think he should have been our king all along. He is strong; he is handsome. Let us go on our knees and salute him.”

“How! How!” said all the animals. “Hail the dog!”

Tears began to roll down the face of the leopard. His heart was heavy. He loved the animals greatly. But they had turned their backs on him. Now he knew they were cowards. So he turned his back on them and went away. Because of his many wounds he was weak and tired. So he lay down after a while to rest under a tree, far from the village.

The animals saw him go. But they did not care. They were too busy praising their new king, the dog. The tortoise carved a new staff for him. The toad made a new song in his praise:

The dog is great
The dog is good
The dog gives us our daily food.
We love his head, we love his jaws
We love his feet and all his claws.
The dog looked round the circle of animals and asked, “Where is the leopard?”

“We think he has gone away, O King,” said the goat.
“Why? He has no right to go away,” said the dog. “Nobody has a right to leave our village and its beautiful hall. We must all stay together.”

“Indeed,” shouted the animals. “We must stay together! The leopard must return to the village! Our wise king has spoken! It is good to have a wise king!”

The dog then called out the names of six strong animals and said to them: “Go at once and bring back the leopard. If he should refuse to follow you, you must drag him along. If we let him go, others may soon follow his wicked example until there is no one left in our village. That would be a very bad thing indeed. It is my duty as your king to make sure that we all live together. The leopard is a wicked animal. That is why he wants to go away and live by himself. It is our duty to stop him. Nobody has a right to go away from our village and our beautiful hall.”
“Nobody has a right to go away from the village,” sang all the animals as the six messengers went to look for the leopard.

They found him resting under the tree beyond the village. Although he was wounded and weak he still looked like a king. So the six messengers stood at a little distance and spoke to him.

“Our new king, the dog, has ordered you to return to the village,” they said.

“He says that no one has a right to leave the village,” said the pig.
“Yes, no one has a right to leave our village and its beautiful hall,” said the others.

The leopard looked at them with contempt. Then he got up slowly. The six animals fell back. But the leopard did not go toward them. He turned his back on them and began to go away—slowly and painfully. One of the animals picked up a stone and threw it at him. Then all the others immediately picked up stones and began to throw. As they threw they chanted: “No one has a right to leave our village! No one has a right to leave our village!”

Although some of the stones hit the leopard and hurt him, he did not turn round even once. He continued walking until he no longer heard the noise of the animals.

The leopard traveled seven days and seven nights. Then he came to the house of the blacksmith. The old man was sitting at his forge. The leopard said to him: “I want the strongest teeth you can make from iron. And I want the most deadly claws you can make from bronze.”

The blacksmith said: “Why do you need such terrible things?” The leopard told his story. Then the blacksmith said: “I do not blame you.”

The blacksmith worked a whole day on the teeth, and another full day on the claws. The leopard was pleased with them. He put them on and thanked the blacksmith. Then he left and went to the house of Thunder.

The leopard knocked at the door and Thunder roared across the sky.
“I want some of your sound in my voice,” said the leopard. “Even a little bit.”

“Why do you want my sound in your voice?” asked Thunder. “And why have you got those terrible teeth and claws?”
The leopard told his story. “I do not blame you,” said Thunder. He gave the sound to the leopard. “Thank you for the gift,” said the leopard. And he began his journey home.
Comparing Literature

In what way is the destruction of the village in this story similar to Aataentsic chopping down the Sky Tree? Which action do you think had the most positive outcome? Explain your answers on the lines below.

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The leopard journeyed for seven days and seven nights and returned to the village of the animals. There he found the animals dancing in a circle round the dog. He stood for a while watching them with contempt and great anger. They were too busy to notice his presence. He made a deep, terrifying roar. At the same time he sprang into the center of the circle. The animals stopped their song. The dog dropped his staff. The leopard seized him and bit and clawed him without mercy. Then he threw him out of the circle.

All the animals trembled.

But they were too afraid to run. The leopard turned to them and said:

“You miserable worms. You shameless cowards. I was a kind and gentle king, but you turned against me. From today I shall rule the forest with terror. The life of our village is ended.”

“What about our hall?” asked the tortoise with a trembling voice.

“Let everyone take from the hall what he put into it,” said the leopard.

The animals began to weep as they had wept long ago in the rain. “Please forgive us, O Leopard,” they cried.

“Let everyone take from the hall what he put into it,” repeated the leopard. “And hurry up!” he thundered.

So the animals pulled their hall apart. Some carried away the wood, and some took the roofmats. Others took away doors and windows. The toad brought his talking drum and began to beat it to the leopard and to sing:

Alive or dead the leopard is king.
Beware my friend, don’t twist his tail.
But the leopard roared like thunder and the toad dropped his drum and the animals scattered in the forest.

The dog had already run a long way when the leopard roared. Now he ran faster and faster. His body was covered with blood, and he was very, very weak. He wanted to stop and rest a little. But the fear of the leopard was greater than his weakness. So he staggered and fell and got up and staggered on and on and on…

After many days the dog came to the house of the hunter.

“Please protect me from the leopard,” he cried.

“What will you do for me in return?” asked the hunter.

“I will be your slave,” said the dog. “Any day you are hungry for meat I shall show you the way to the forest. There we can hunt together and kill my fellow animals.”

“All right, come in,” said the hunter.

Today the animals are no longer friends, but enemies. The strong among them attack and kill the weak. The leopard, full of anger, eats up anyone he can lay his hands on. The hunter, led by the dog, goes to the forest from time to time and shoots any animals he can find. Perhaps the animals will make peace among themselves someday and live together again. Then they can keep away the hunter who is their common enemy.
I traveled to the ocean
distant
from my southwest land of sandrock
to the moving blue water
Big as the myth of origin.
Pale
pale water in the yellow-white light of
sun floating west
to China
where ocean herself was born.
Clouds that blow across the sand are wet.

Squat in the wet sand and speak to the Ocean:
I return to you	turquoise	the red coral you sent us,
sister spirit of Earth.
Four round stones in my pocket I carry back the ocean
to suck and to taste.

Thirty thousand years ago
Indians came riding across the ocean
carried by giant sea turtles.
Waves were high that day
great sea turtles waded	slowly out
from the gray sundown sea.

Grandfather Turtle rolled in the sand	four times
and disappeared
swimming into the sun.

Comparing Literature
Complete the Venn diagram to compare and contrast the role of water in “The Sky Tree” and this poem.

Water is an important element in both origin myths.

Comparing Literature
Underline places in the poem where the speaker personifies the natural world. What does this suggest about how the speaker views the natural world? Write your response on the lines below.
Prayer to the Pacific

Comparing Literature
How does the role of the turtle differ in “The Sky Tree” and this poem? Write your response on the lines below.

Comparing Literature
What part of the poem lets you know that this origin myth is part of the oral tradition of the people? Write your response on the lines below.

And so from that time immemorial, as the old people say, rain clouds drift from the west gift from the ocean.

Green leaves in the wind Wet earth on my feet swallowing raindrops clear from China.

1. *Immemorial* means “extending back beyond memory or record.”

**READING CHECK**

*Clarify*
Why do you think the poem is called “Prayer to the Sea”?

______________________________________________________
______________________________________________________
______________________________________________________
______________________________________________________
______________________________________________________
Connect to Myth

Look back at the answers you selected on page 2. After reading the three selections, which of the selections do you think would influence young people the most if they heard the stories as they grew up? Give examples from the selection to support your answer.

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_________________________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________________________

Comparing Literature

In a small group, how does the personification of animals contribute to each of the selections? Write your response on the lines below.

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_________________________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________________________

Literary Element  Oral Tradition

Oral tradition often personifies animals by giving them human qualities. Give three examples from the story that show animals behaving like people. Write your response on the lines below.

_________________________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________________________

Reading Strategy  Question

With a partner, compare the questions you each wrote on page 3 as you read the selections. Work with your partner to answer your questions.
Cause-and-Effect Diagram

“The Sky Tree” and “How the Leopard Got His Claws” each describe a series of actions that can be expressed as a chain of causes and effects. Complete the cause-effect diagram for each story. Begin with the first major event that set the other actions in motion. Add more circles to the diagrams if you need them.

**The Sky Tree**

1. **THE CAUSE**
2. **THE EFFECT**

**How the Leopard Got His Claws**

1. **THE CAUSE**
2. **THE EFFECT**