

**Learning Modalities****Logical/Mathematical Learners**

When they read the excerpt from “The Navajo Origin Legend,” have students look for number patterns and offer logical explanations for them. For instance, students may notice that the ceremony in this myth begins on the *twelfth* day. Twelve is a number often used in literature to indicate a year, a complete life cycle, or an indeterminate period of long waiting. Ask students to speculate about what the use of such number patterns meant to the myth’s creators.

**1 About the Selection**

This myth from the Onondaga people relates a story about the creation of the world. In this version, the Earth forms as an offshoot of a celestial place called Skyland.

**2 Critical Viewing**

**Answer:** The marks on the turtle’s shell are explained as muddy paw prints left by Muskrat.

# The Earth on Turtle’s Back

## Michael J. Caduto and Joseph Bruchac

*Retold by Michael J. Caduto and Joseph Bruchac*

**Background** Native Americans have great respect for the natural world. They believe that each creature has its own power by which it maintains itself and affects others. Each Native American culture has its own name for this power, but many Native American cultures recognize a Great Spirit—an invisible power that is the source of life and good for humans. Many of the animals that helped feed and clothe the early Native Americans are also highly revered. Native American folklore, much of which portrays animals, reflects this great respect.

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**Differentiated****Instruction**

Solutions for All Learners

**Accessibility at a Glance**

	The Earth on Turtle’s Back	When Grizzlies Walked	Navajo Origin Legend	Iroquois Constitution
<b>Context</b>	Creation Myth	Creation Myth	Creation Myth	Government document
<b>Language</b>	Accessible vocabulary; some dialogue	Accessible vocabulary	Some difficult vocabulary; complicated sentences	Formal, complicated sentences
<b>Concept Level</b>	Accessible (simple plot)	Challenging (complicated plot)	Abstract (religious ceremony)	Abstract (organization of government)
<b>Literary Merit</b>	Cross-cultural experience	Cross-cultural experience	Cross-cultural experience	Cross-curricular: government
<b>Lexile</b>	740	1070	900	1510
<b>Overall Rating</b>	More accessible	More accessible	More accessible	Average

**3** Before this Earth existed, there was only water. It stretched as far as one could see, and in that water there were birds and animals swimming around. Far above, in the clouds, there was a Skyland. In that Skyland there was a great and beautiful tree. It had four white roots which stretched to each of the sacred directions,<sup>1</sup> and from its branches all kinds of fruits and flowers grew.

There was an ancient chief in the Skyland. His young wife was expecting a child, and one night she dreamed that she saw the Great Tree uprooted. The next day she told her husband the story.

**4** He nodded as she finished telling her dream. “My wife,” he said, “I am sad that you had this dream. It is clearly a dream of great power and, as is our way, when one has such a powerful dream we must do all we can to make it true. The Great Tree must be uprooted.”

Then the Ancient Chief called the young men together and told them that they must pull up the tree. But the roots of the tree were so deep, so strong, that they could not budge it. At last the Ancient Chief himself came to the tree. He wrapped his arms around it, bent his knees and strained. At last, with one great effort, he uprooted the tree and placed it on its side. Where the tree’s roots had gone deep into the Skyland there was now a big hole. The wife of the chief came close and leaned over to look down, grasping the tip of one of the Great Tree’s branches to steady her. It seemed as if she saw something down there, far below, glittering like water. She leaned out further to look and, as she leaned, she lost her balance and fell into the hole. Her grasp slipped off the tip of the branch, leaving her with only a handful of seeds as she fell, down, down, down, down.

Far below, in the waters, some of the birds and animals looked up.

“Someone is falling toward us from the sky,” said one of the birds.

“We must do something to help her,” said another. Then two Swans flew up. They caught the Woman From The Sky between their wide wings. Slowly, they began to bring her down toward the water, where the birds and animals were watching.

“She is not like us,” said one of the animals. “Look, she doesn’t have webbed feet. I don’t think she can live in the water.”


“What shall we do, then?” said another of the water animals.

“I know,” said one of the water birds. “I have heard that there is Earth far below the waters. If we dive down and bring up Earth, then she will have a place to stand.”

So the birds and animals decided that someone would have to bring up Earth. One by one they tried.

The Duck dove first, some say. He swam down and down, far beneath the surface, but could not reach the bottom and floated back up. Then the Beaver tried. He went even deeper, so deep that it all was

1. the sacred directions North, South, East, and West.

**2**  **Critical Viewing** What characteristics of this turtle are explained in this origin myth? [Connect]

### Literary Analysis

**Origin Myths** How do the opening words of this story identify it as an origin myth?

### Reading Strategy

**Recognizing Cultural Details** What do the chief’s words to his wife tell you about the beliefs of the Onondaga?

### **3** Literary Analysis

#### Origin Myths

- Explain to students that origin myths can be seen as a mixture of science and religion—they explain how the world and the things in it came to be.
- Read the story’s first sentence aloud with students.
- Then, **ask** them the Literary Analysis question: How do the opening words of this story identify it as an origin myth?  
**Answer:** The first sentence describes what existed before the creation of the earth.

### **4** Reading Strategy

#### Recognizing Cultural Details

- Read the second and third paragraphs aloud with students.
- Then, write a list on the chalkboard as students identify cultural details or topics that appear in this passage. Encourage students to note the references to marriage, childbirth, respect for age, and the role of dreams.
- Then, **ask** students the Reading Strategy question: What do the chief’s words to his wife tell you about the beliefs of the Onondaga?  
**Answer:** The Onondaga believe that dreams are powerful, influential messages and that the dreams must be obeyed.

### **5** Reading Check

**Answer:** She dreams that she sees the Great Tree uprooted.

### **5** Reading Check

What does the Skyland Chief’s wife dream?

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## Differentiated Instruction

Solutions for All Learners

### Strategy for Less Proficient Readers

Have students participate in a choral reading of this origin myth. Then, invite them to form groups in order to discuss what the myth reveals about the people who created it. How do students think the Onondaga viewed their environment?


### Enrichment for Advanced Readers

Ask students to note details about how the Onondaga pictured the time before the creation of Earth. Have students discuss whether they know of any other origin stories that seem similar, such as that in the Bible’s book of Genesis. Can students find further parallels between these narratives and scientific thinking about the formation of life on earth?

## 6 Literary Analysis

### Origin Myths and Oral Tradition

- Read aloud with students the paragraphs in which various animals dive down in the ocean.
- Invite students to identify the unusual aspect of the animals' names. If necessary, draw students' attention to the "generic" quality of each name.

 **Monitor Progress:** Ask students the Literary Analysis question: In oral literature, why might characters have generic names like "Loon" or "Muskrat"?

**Answer:** Often, characters in oral literature are symbolic or archetypal figures that embody important cultural ideas rather than complex personalities.

### ASSESS

#### Answers

1. Students may say that they would be obliged to take the dream seriously and follow tradition, as the chief did; others may say that they would not have let a dream persuade them to alter or remove a sacred tree.
2. (a) In trying to look down the hole left by the uprooted tree, she leans too far and falls into the hole. (b) After the animals rescue her, they realize that she cannot live in the water, as they do.
3. (a) Each animal attempts (and fails) to dive deep enough to retrieve some earth. (b) As they take these actions, the animals exhibit concern, kindness, generosity, and heroism. None of the animals is fearful or selfish.
4. (a) They credit the animals of the waters, as well as the Sky Woman. (b) The myth suggests that the Onondaga felt respect and even affection for nature. They recognize that the world belonged to the animals first.
5. Often substantive achievements require bold action. Society benefits by enjoying the results of such brave efforts.

dark, but he could not reach the bottom, either. The Loon tried, swimming with his strong wings. He was gone a long long time, but he, too, failed to bring up Earth. Soon it seemed that all had tried and all had failed. Then a small voice spoke.

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"I will bring up Earth or die trying."  
They looked to see who it was. It was the tiny Muskrat. She dove down and swam and swam. She was not as strong or as swift as the others, but she was determined. She went so deep that it was all dark, and still she swam deeper. She swam so deep that her lungs felt ready to burst, but she swam deeper still. At last, just as she was becoming unconscious, she reached out one small paw and grasped at the bottom, barely touching it before she floated up, almost dead.

When the other animals saw her break the surface they thought she had failed. Then they saw her right paw was held tightly shut.

"She has the Earth," they said. "Now where can we put it?"

"Place it on my back," said a deep voice. It was the Great Turtle, who had come up from the depths.


They brought the Muskrat over to the Great Turtle and placed her paw against his back. To this day there are marks at the back of the Turtle's shell which were made by the Muskrat's paw. The tiny bit of Earth fell on the back of the Turtle. Almost immediately, it began to grow larger and larger and larger until it became the whole world.

Then the two Swans brought the Sky Woman down. She stepped onto the new Earth and opened her hand, letting the seeds fall onto the bare soil. From those seeds the trees and the grass sprang up. Life on Earth had begun.

### Critical Reading

1. **Respond:** If you had been the Great Chief, would you have pulled up the Great Tree? Explain your answer.
2. (a) **Recall:** Explain what happened to the wife of the chief when the young men uprooted the Great Tree. (b) **Interpret:** Why did this action generate concern among the animals?
3. (a) **Recall:** Describe the actions of the swans, the beaver, and the duck. (b) **Analyze:** How do these actions exhibit the best aspects of human nature?
4. (a) **Infer:** Whom do the Onondaga credit with bringing Earth into existence? (b) **Analyze:** From this myth, what can you conclude about the relationship between the Onondaga and their natural environment? Explain your answer.
5. **Generalize:** Muskrat makes a risky and desperate swim. How does society benefit from brave actions like this?

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 **Go Online** For additional information about the

Onondaga, have students type in the Web Code, then select O from the alphabet, and then select Onondaga.

**Literary Analysis**  
**Origin Myths and the Oral Tradition** In oral literature, why might characters have generic names like "Loon" or "Muskrat"?

 **Go Online**  
**Author Link**

**For:** More about the Onondaga  
**Visit:** [www.PHSchool.com](http://www.PHSchool.com)  
**Web Code:** ere-9101