

Exploring Folklore

The Nez Perce

Native
American
Heritage
Month

Commemorate Native American Heritage Month with our article about Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce (pp. 8-11). Then use the lesson below to learn more about the Nez Perce through their folklore. This lesson was written for JS by contributor Karen Kellaheer.

OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- identify important themes in a Nez Perce creation story.
- use traditional characters from Nez Perce legends to write original legends.

ENGAGE

Read pp. 8-11, then have students highlight the origin of the conflict between the Nez Perce and the white settlers. (Page 8: *Whites were about to force the Nez Perce from their homeland.*) Explain that students will hear a legend that will help them better understand this conflict.

TEACH

1. Explain that a legend is a story that has been handed down through generations and holds important truths for a people. Legends are one way in which all peoples—including the Nez Perce and other Native American groups—keep alive their cultures, beliefs, and values.
2. Read aloud or distribute copies of the *Nimi'ipuu* (Nez Perce) legend at right. Explain that it is a creation story—a legend that explains how the world or humanity began.
3. Have students work in small groups to discuss:
 - What questions does this legend answer for the Nez Perce? (*how humans got their start and why the Nez Perce lived where they did*)
 - What does it tell us about how the Nez Perce view themselves and their land? (*They were special and pure. They were meant to live on that area of land.*)
 - How do you think the Nez Perce felt when settlers arrived? (*They were desperate to keep the land that was sacred to them.*)
4. List some traditional characters on the board (Coyote, Fox, Meadowlark, Porcupine, Rabbit, Raccoon, Turtle, Wolf). Challenge students to use them to write their own legends. Students may write a creation story or another kind of “why” story. Sample topics may include why the seasons change or why Turtle has a shell.

Coyote and the Monster

One day, Coyote noticed that he was all alone. He searched high and low, but he did not spot another animal. Finally, he heard a cry. It was Meadowlark. Coyote had stepped on the poor bird's leg and broken it.

“Where is everyone?” Coyote asked Meadowlark. “I will make you a new wooden leg if you tell me where they have gone.”

“They have been swallowed up by a great monster,” Meadowlark said, wailing. She pointed in the direction in which the monster had gone.

After Coyote had fixed Meadowlark's leg, he collected some supplies and set off to find the monster. Finally he saw it: a fearsome beast as big as the hills. Determined to help his friends, Coyote approached the beast.

“I am lonely,” he told the monster. “You have swallowed my friends. Now you must swallow me too.”

The monster swallowed Coyote without hesitation. As soon as he entered the beast's belly, Coyote got to work. He set a fire in the belly and cut out the beast's heart. Before long, the beast was dead and the animals trapped inside were free.

To celebrate, Coyote carved up the body of the slain beast and threw each piece in a different direction. Wherever a piece of the monster landed, a tribe of people came to be.

As Coyote finished, his friend Fox spoke. “Coyote, you have done a good job creating humans, but you have forgotten this very spot. Who will live here, where we have fought the monster?”

Coyote looked at his blood-spattered hands. Then he sprinkled drops of the monster's blood on the ground. This blood turned into the Nimi'ipuu, the purest tribe of all.