

# NATIVE AMERICAN LITERATURE

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*"The Earth does not belong to us.  
We belong to the earth."*

**A**merican Literature begins with the myths, legends, poems, and songs of the Native Americans or American Indians as they came to be called. When the white European explorers first landed in the New World, they found it already occupied by many different native tribes. It is estimated that over 500 different cultures and languages existed among the millions of natives who occupied North America. Yet in all of these, there was no written literature. All information was transmitted orally. This caused each tribe to have traditions that varied greatly from their neighbors. Many tribes had their own unique religious traditions—not to mention unique stories and legends. Yet amid all this diversity, there are common threads that run through Native American literature.



The native people of North America spoke of their relationship to the earth in terms of family. To them the earth was not something to be bought and sold, something to be used and mistreated. It was, quite simply, the source of their lives—their mother. And the rest of creation, all around them, shared in that family relationship. All living things had a spirit and were worthy of respect. In fact, humans and animals are basically interchangeable in Indian storytelling. The Native Americans did not see themselves as rulers of creation, but as beings entrusted with a very special mission—to maintain the natural balance, to take care of their mother, to be keepers of the earth. Life was seen as a great circle. Each person had a place in that circle, and their life affected everyone and everything. Even an individual life could be seen as a circle, beginning with creation and ending, not with death, but with a return to creation itself. The very old and the very young were close to each other in that circle because the beginning and the end of a life were near each other in the cycle—just as winter is close to spring.

Native Americans had the benefit of thousands of years living *with*, not just *on*, the place they called Turtle Island (their name for America), a land they imagined to be balanced on the back of a great turtle. They developed ways of living that enabled them to blend into the land, to sustain not just themselves, but generations to come. It was a common native thought to think: How will my actions affect those seven generations from now? But this philosophy was not taught to their people in classrooms or in books. Instead it was taught in two powerful ways. The first way is through experience and the second through oral tradition—especially the telling of stories.

The impact of Native American culture is felt everywhere. Hundreds of Indian words, such as *canoe*, *tobacco*, *potato*, *persimmon*, *moose*, *raccoon*, abound in everyday American English. Many place names have their origin in Indian words as well. But in order to appreciate the culture of the Native Americans, you must read their stories. As you read, imagine for a moment the world as it was before men from over the sea brought rapid change. Imagine a world that had been untouched for hundreds of years. Imagine native America.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. What do you find interesting about Native American culture? Explain.
2. Does modern society value nature the same as the Native Americans did? Explain.