

Braiding Sweetgrass Lesson Plan 1

Creation Stories: “Skywoman Falling”

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Overview:

This lesson is designed to introduce students to *Braiding Sweetgrass* and its call for readers to incorporate an Indigenous perspective into their understanding of human interactions with the environment. Furthermore, the lesson will encourage students to think about the influence that different creation stories have on societies. The lesson focuses on content from the first chapter of *Braiding Sweetgrass*, “Skywoman Falling.” For this reason, it is best suited for the first day of discussion.

The Close Reading portion of this lesson is adapted from the “Blow Up” exercise included in Diana Fuss and William A. Gleason’s *The Pocket Instructor, Literature: 101 exercises for the college classroom* (Fuss and Gleason 29-31).

Objectives:

By the end of class, students will be able to:

1. Compare the story of Skywoman Falling to other creation stories with which they are already familiar.
2. Perform a close reading of the Skywoman narrative in order to analyze the reciprocal relationship between humans, animals, and the environment that Kimmerer centers.
3. Discuss how the human-environment relationship at the heart of the Skywoman story differs from their own assumptions about the relationship between humans, animals, and the environment.

Class Structure (50 minutes):

10 minutes: Framing Activity

- Ask students to briefly summarize the Skywoman story. Record the main points of the class summary on a board or slide.
- Ask students to discuss other creation stories with which they are familiar. Record their answers.
- Open up the discussion: What are some similarities between all of these stories? What differences can you identify? If possible, use a board or large sheets of paper to have students create Venn Diagrams in small groups.

15 minutes: Close Reading Activity

- Provide students with the handout located at the end of this lesson plan. Ask for a volunteer to read the passage aloud for the class. If time allows, ask for a second volunteer (preferably a student with a very different speaking voice) to read aloud the passage a second time. Then instruct students to mark up the passage, paying careful attention to words and phrases that are repeated or stand out to them.
- Once students have finished marking their passages, bring the class back together to discuss their findings. Direct the conversation with the following prompts:

- What words or phrases stood out to you?
- Did any words or ideas repeat?
- What are the key elements of this story?
- How does the story of Skywoman portray the relationship between humans, animals, and the environment?
- Having reread this story, can you think of any further points of comparison or contrast with the creation stories we discussed at the beginning of class?

15 minutes: Small group activity

- Place students into groups of 3-5. Ask the groups to re-read page 6, where Kimmerer describes her students' understanding of the interactions between humans and the environment.
 - “On one otherwise unremarkable morning I gave the students in my General Ecology class a survey. Among other things, they were asked to rate their understanding of the negative interactions between humans and the environment. Nearly every one of the two hundred students said confidently that humans and nature are a bad mix. These were third-year students who had selected a career in environmental protection, so the response was, in a way, not very surprising. They were well schooled in the mechanics of climate change, toxins in the land and water, and the crisis of habitat loss. Later in the survey, they were asked to rate their knowledge of positive interactions between people and land. The median response was ‘none’” (Kimmerer 6). Kimmerer then expresses shock that, despite years of education, her students could not think of any beneficial relationships between humans and the environment.
 - Ask students to discuss and complete the following prompts in their groups:
 - List 2-3 **negative** interactions between humans and the environment.
 - List 2-3 **positive** interactions between humans and the environment.
 - Is it easier for you to come up with examples for the positive interactions or the negative interactions? Why do you think that is?
 - In what contexts do you tend to read and/or hear about humans and the environment? What are the impacts of the stories you consume?
 - What are 1-2 things that you could personally do to have an interaction with nature that is beneficial to both you and the environment?

10 minutes: Class discussion

- Use the end of class to discuss the implications of creation stories, asking students to consider if (and how) their own worldviews would change if the principles in the Skywoman story were included in the creation stories they know best. Ask students to discuss the following:

- At the beginning of class, we compared different creation stories we've heard. How do the other stories compare to Skywoman in their understanding of the relationships between humans, animals, and the environment?
 - Kimmerer draws a comparison between Skywoman and Eve. "On one side of the world were people whose relationship with the living world was shaped by Skywoman, who created a garden for the well-being of all. On the other side was another woman with a garden and a tree. But for tasting its fruit, she was banished from the garden and the gates clanged shut behind her. That mother of men was made to wander in the wilderness and earn her bread by the sweat of her brow, not by filling her mouth with the sweet juicy fruits that bend the branches low. In order to eat, she was instructed to subdue the wilderness into which she was cast. Same species, same earth, different stories." (Kimmerer 7)
 - Which story best reflects your own understanding of your relationship with animals and the environment? What do you think would change if you aligned more with the other perspective?
 - How much influence do you think creation stories have over a culture?
 - Returning to the activity from earlier, does anyone have any ideas that they want to share for what they can implement in their own lives to have a more reciprocal relationship with what Kimmerer calls "the living world?"
 - Beginnings are important for books. How does "Skywoman Falling" set the tone for the rest of *Braiding Sweetgrass*? What expectations do you have after reading this chapter?
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Note: If your course schedule allows, consider adding a day to take students to an art studio or the [Purdue Knowledge Lab](#) to create artwork that combines elements of multiple creation stories. Afterwards, have students write a 1-2 page reflection that addresses the following:

- What did you learn about yourself through this project?
- What did you learn about the role of creation stories in shaping worldviews?
- How was the experience of turning a story you read for class into a visual project? What was easy? What was challenging?

Sources:

Fuss, Diana, and William A. Gleason, editors. *The Pocket Instructor, Literature: 101 Exercises for the College Classroom*. Princeton UP, 2016.

Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Milkweed Editions, 2016.

Close Reading Handout

She fell like a maple seed, pirouetting on an autumn breeze. A column of light streamed from a hole in the Skyworld, marking her path where only darkness had been before. It took her a long time to fall. In fear, or maybe hope, she clutched a bundle tightly in her hand.

Hurling downward, she saw only dark water below. But in that emptiness there were many eyes gazing up at the sudden shaft of light. They saw there a small object, a mere dust mote in the beam. As it grew closer, they could see that it was a woman, arms outstretched, long black hair billowing behind as she spiraled toward them.

The geese nodded at one another and rose together from the water in a wave of goose music. She felt the beat of their wings as they flew beneath to break her fall. Far from the only home she'd ever known, she caught her breath at the warm embrace of soft feathers as they gently carried her downward. And so it began.

The geese could not hold the woman above the water for much longer, so they called a council to decide what to do. Resting on their wings, she saw them all gather: loons, otters, swans, beavers, fish of all kinds. A great turtle floated in their midst and offered his back for her to rest upon. Gratefully, she stepped from the goose wings onto the dome of his shell. The others understood that she needed land for her home and discussed how they might serve her need. The deep divers among them had heard of mud at the bottom of the water and agreed to go find some.

Loon dove first, but the distance was too far and after a long while he surfaced with nothing to show for his efforts. One by one, the other animals offered to help—Otter, Beaver, Sturgeon—but the depth, the darkness, and the pressures were too great for even the strongest of swimmers. They returned gasping for air with their heads ringing. Some did not return at all. Soon only little Muskrat was left, the weakest diver of all. He volunteered to go while the others looked on doubtfully. His small legs flailed as he worked his way downward and he was gone a very long time.

They waited and waited for him to return, fearing the worst for their relative, and, before long, a stream of bubbles rose with the small, limp body of the muskrat. He had given his life to aid this helpless human. But then the others noticed that his paw was tightly clenched and, when they opened it, there was a small handful of mud. Turtle said, "Here, put it on my back and I will hold it."

Skywoman bent and spread the mud with her hands across the shell of the turtle. Moved by the extraordinary gifts of the animals, she sang in thanksgiving and then began to dance, her feet caressing the earth. The land grew and grew as she danced her thanks, from the dab of mud on Turtle's back until the whole earth was made. Not by Skywoman alone, but from the alchemy of all the animals' gifts coupled with her deep gratitude. Together they formed what we know today as Turtle Island, our home.

Like any good guest, Skywoman had not come empty-handed. The bundle was still clutched in her hand. When she toppled from the hole in the Skyworld she had reached out to grab onto the Tree of Life that grew there. In her grasp were branches—fruits and seeds of all kinds of plants. These she scattered onto the new ground and carefully tended each one until the world turned from brown to green. Sunlight streamed through the hole from the Skyworld, allowing the seeds to flourish. Wild grasses, flowers, trees, and medicines spread everywhere. And now that the animals, too, had plenty to eat, many came to live with her on Turtle Island. (Kimmerer 3-5)