



World Literature Reading B

BEFORE YOU READ

About the Selection

The *Popol Vuh*, or "Council Book," is an important source of information about the history and culture of the ancient Maya. The book contains stories about mythological heroes and an account of how gods created the Earth and humans.

Reader's Dictionary

meditate: to think; consider

rivulet: small stream

warble: to sing with rapid changes in volume

invoke: to pray to a god

venerate: honor

Guided Reading

As you read, note what aspects of the natural world are explained. Then answer the questions that follow.

Maya Creation Myth

From the *Popol Vuh* "Creation Hymn"

This is the first account, the first narrative. There was neither man, nor animal, birds, fishes, crabs, trees, stones, caves, ravines, grasses, nor forests; there was only the sky.

The surface of the earth had not appeared. There was only the calm sea and the great expanse of the sky.

There was only immobility and silence in the darkness, in the night. Only the creator, the Maker, Tepeu, Gucumatz, the Forefathers, were in the water surrounded with light.

Then while they meditated, it became clear to them that when dawn would break, man must appear. Then they planned the creation, and the growth of the trees and the thickets and the birth of life and the creation of man.

Then the earth was created by them. So it was, in truth, that they created the earth. Earth! they said, and instantly it was made.

First the earth was formed, the mountains and the valleys; the currents of water were divided, the rivulets were running freely

between the hills, and the water was separated when the high mountains appeared.

Then they made the small wild animals, the guardians of the woods, the spirits of the mountains, the deer, the birds, pumas, jaguars, serpents, snakes, vipers, guardians of the thickets.

And the creation of all the four-footed animals and the birds being finished, they were told by the Creator and the Maker and the Forefathers: "Speak, cry, warble, call, speak each one according to your variety, each, according to your kind." So was it said to the deer, the birds, pumas, jaguars, and serpents.

"Speak, then, our names, praise us, your mother, your father . . . speak, invoke us, adore us," they were told.

But they could not make them speak like men; they only hissed and screamed and cackled; they were unable to make words, and each screamed in a different way.

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continued

When the Creator and the Maker saw that it was impossible for them to talk to each other, they said: "It is impossible for them to say our names, the names of us, their Creators and Makers. This is not well," said the Forefathers to each other.

Then they said to them: "Because it has not been possible for you to talk, you shall be changed. We have changed our minds: Your food, your pasture, your homes, and your nests you shall have; they shall be the ravines and the woods, because it has not been possible for you to adore us or invoke us. There shall be those who adore us, we shall make other [beings] who shall be obedient. Accept your destiny: your flesh shall be torn to pieces. So shall it be. This shall be your lot."

"Let us try again! Already dawn draws near: Let us make him who shall nourish and sustain us! What shall we do to be invoked, in order to be remembered on earth? We have already tried with our first creations, our first creatures; but we could not make them praise and venerate us. So, then, let us try to make obedient, respectful beings who will nourish and sustain us." Thus they spoke.

Then was the creation and the formation. Of earth, of mud, they made [man's] flesh. But

they saw that it was not good. It melted away, it was soft, did not move, had no strength, it fell down, it was limp, it could not move its head, its face fell to one side, its sight was blurred, it could not look behind. At first it spoke, but had no mind. Quickly it soaked in the water and could not stand.

And the Creator and the Maker said: "Let us try again because our creatures will not be able to walk nor multiply. Let us consider this," they said.

Then they broke up and destroyed their work and their creation. And they said: "What shall we do to perfect it, in order that our worshipers, our invokers, will be successful?"

And instantly the figures were made of wood. They looked like men, talked like men, and populated the surface of the earth.

They existed and multiplied; they had daughters, they had sons, these wooden figures; but they did not have souls, nor minds, they did not remember their Creator, their Maker; they walked on all fours, aimlessly.

Source: *Popol Vuh*. Delia Goetz and Sylvanus Griswold Morley, from Adrián Recino's translation from Quiché into Spanish, 1954. www.sacred-texts.com/nam/maya/pvgnm/



Literary Response and Analysis

1. **Describing** How did the Creators fill the emptiness and silence of the world?

2. **Explaining** Why did the Creators condemn the animals to be killed and eaten?

3. **Identifying** What happened when the Creators first attempted to make human beings from mud?

4. **Predicting** The Creators then made humans from wood. Predict what you think will happen to the wooden figures.

Speaking and Listening Skills Activity

continued

Practicing the Skill

Directions: Myths, like other narratives, have a beginning, a middle, and an ending. The myth below is from the Zapotec people of Mexico. The Zapotec civilization was eventually absorbed by the Aztec Empire. Read the tale, and then complete the activity that follows.

The Bat

The butterflies we see today, ethereal, resting on the flowers, on the surface of the water, and even on the tremulous air, are only the shadows of what the bat once was: the most beautiful bird in creation! However, there was a time when he was not.

When Light and Darkness began, the bat was just as we know him today, and was called *biguidibela* in Zapotec, from *beguidi* meaning butterfly, and *bela*, fresh: that is, a butterfly in the flesh, or bare-winged. The poor bat was the ugliest and the most unhappy of all creatures.

One day, tormented by the cold weather, he went up to Heaven and said to God, "I'm dying of cold: I need a few feathers." But God, although he never stops working, never revises the creatures He has finished, and so had not a single feather to offer the bat. He told the bat to go back to Earth and to beg a feather in His name from every bird. Thus God always gives more than is asked of Him.

The bat, back on Earth, sought out the birds of most colorful plumage. A green feather from the parrot's neck, a blue feather from the blue pigeon, a white feather from the dove, an iridescent feather from the humming-bird. All these and more the bat obtained. Proudly he would fly across the brow of the Morning, and all the other birds would pause in their flight to admire him. And a new glory spread over the Earth. . . . At dusk, flying with the West Wind,

the bat colored the horizon. And once, coming from beyond the clouds, he left behind a rainbow as an echo of his flight.

Seated on a branch of a tree, the bat would spread out his wings coquettishly, and alternately shake them, first the right and then the left, in a flutter that thrilled the air. The birds began to feel envious, and to hate him as unanimously as they had once admired him.

One day, a flock of birds winged its way to Heaven, led by the humming-bird. God heard their complaint: the bat was mocking them; besides, each, with one feather less, was cold. And the birds themselves brought back the message from Heaven summoning the bat.

When he had entered the Lord's house, the bat was asked to repeat the gestures which had so offended his companions. And fluttering his wings he was left as naked as before, because for a whole day his feathers rained from Heaven, they say.

Ever since then the bat flies only alone and at night, and in swift gyrations, diving at imaginary feathers. He does not pause so no one will notice his ugliness.

Source: Retold by Andrés Henestrosa. Translated from the Spanish by Zolla Nelken. World Literature, Macmillan Literature Series. The Glencoe Division of Macmillan/McGraw-Hill Publishing Company, 1991.