



World Literature: The World

About the Author

Virginia Hamilton (b. 1936) was born in Ohio. Both of her parents were accomplished storytellers, and her delight in their tales led her to major in writing during college. She first traveled to Africa in the mid-1950s. African and African American history and culture are major themes in her work. Hamilton's first young-adult novel, *Zeely*, was published in 1967. She quickly became one of America's most popular and respected authors of children's fiction, nonfiction, and folktales. This excerpt is taken from a creation story from the Yoruba people of Nigeria.

GUIDED READING As you read this excerpt from "Owner of the Sky," think about what it has in common with other creation stories you have read or heard.

from "Owner of the Sky: Olorun the Creator"

Olorun was the Owner of the Sky and the Highest Being. He lived in the sky with other spirits. In the beginning, the earth was all watery, just a marshy place, a waste.

Sometimes, Olorun and the other gods came down to play about in the marsh-waste. There were long spiders' webs hanging from the sky. They draped across sweeping spaces like graceful silk bridges.

Yet there was no solid land anywhere. No ground on which to stand. There could be no human beings under the sky until there was a hard place for them to plant their feet.

Olorun, Owner of the Sky and the Highest Being, called the chief of the divine ones to him. This chief was Great God.

Olorun told Great God, "I want you to make some firm ground down below, right away. Here," Olorun went on, "take this."

He gave Great God a shell. There was a small amount of earth in the shell. And there was also a pigeon in there and a hen with five toes.

Great God did as he was told. He went down to the marsh land, sliding down the spider silks. Then he threw the earth out from the shell and spread it around him. He put the pigeon and the hen down on the bit of earth from the shell.

The pigeon and the hen began scratching and scratching the earth with their feet. It didn't take long for them to scratch the soil over the whole marsh-waste. That was how the firm, hard ground came to be.

Great God went back up to the sky. There he found Olorun waiting.

"It is done. I've formed the ground, and it is solid and true," Great God said.

Olorun sent down Chameleon to take a look at the work of Great God.

Now, Chameleon took his time about most things. He walked slowly, and he went down the spider line from the sky carefully. He rolled his big eyes around, looking at everything. And slowly he changed his color from sky blue to earth brown as he walked the land Great God had made.

"Well, the earth is plenty wide," Chameleon told Olorun when he had returned, "but it's not quite dry enough."

"Go again," Olorun commanded. And Chameleon went down from the sky a second time.

He came back to report once more to the Owner of the Sky.

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UNIT 1

"It is well," Chameleon said "The earth is wide, and it is dry this time"

"Good," Olorun said He named the place Ifé, and that meant wide Ile was brought to stand on Ifé, and Ile meant house. All other houses came from that first one that stood at Ifé And to this day, the city of Ile-Ifé is the most sacred to Olorun's people.

It took four days to make the earth. On the fifth day, Great God was to be worshipped as the Maker.

Then Olorun sent Great God back to Ifé to plant trees and to feed humans when they came, and to give them goods He planted palm trees with palm nuts The humans would drink their juice More trees were planted there, and rain was made to fall and water them.

The first people came from heaven Olorun sent them down to earth to live. Great God made some of the people's parts out of the earth

He molded their bodies and their heads.

Bringing these still figures to life was left to Olorun, Owner of the Sky, the Creator

Great God was jealous of Olorun's work He wanted to bring life to the earth figures he had made.

"I will watch Olorun to see how he does it," thought Great God.

So he stayed there with the figures and hid amongst them so that he might see the work of Olorun firsthand

But Olorun knew everything He knew whenever there were watchers. He saw Great God there where he had hidden And he put Great God into a very deep sleep

Great God slept and slept. When he woke up again, all of the people had come to life He never saw it happen.

DIRECTIONS: Use the information from the reading to answer the following questions. If necessary, use a separate sheet of paper.

INTERPRETING THE READING

1. Why did Olorun want to add solid land to the Earth?

2. Who created the first people?

3. What roles do animals play in this story? What does this suggest about their importance to the Yoruba who first told this story?

CRITICAL THINKING

4. **Comparing and Contrasting** Which aspects of this creation story remind you of other creation stories you know? Which aspects are unique?