Reader's Guide

The Wooden People: from the Popol Vuh

Background

Popol Vuh (pŏ'pal vŭ'), or The Book of Counsel, is the Quiché (kē-chā') Mayan book of creation. Called the Mayan Bible by poet Carlos Fuentes, the Popol Vuh is one of the most important sources of pre-Columbian myth in Central America.

The Quiché Mayans settled in the highlands of Guatemala in about the ninth century A.D. Their great work, the Popol Vuh, tells the story of their origins and destiny. The Quiché Mayans believed that the Popol Vuh was a gift from the gods that could help people to see beyond the obvious and to become aware of mysteries and secrets that would otherwise be beyond the range of human insight.

The Quiché Mayan creation myth that follows, "The Wooden People," comes from the first part of the Popol Vuh. This episode is the third creation story in a sequence of four. At this point in the mythic cycle, the gods have failed in two attempts to create suitable human beings. The first two attempts resulted in the creation of the animal kingdom and a being made of mud that disintegrated almost as soon as it was formed. Now the gods have made beings out of a more substantial material: wood. These wooden people, or manikins, become the world's first people.

Writer's Response

"The Wooden People" includes an account of a devastating flood. Before you read this myth, write your ideas about why a flood might have been seen by early people as both a destructive and a creative force.

In what ways can a flood be "cleansing"?

Literary Focus

A plot is the series of connected events that make up a story. The most suspenseful or exciting point in a plot is the climax. In the climax, something happens to resolve the story's central conflict. The climax brings about a change in the situation presented in the story or results in a change in the main character or characters. As you read "The Wooden People," determine what the climax of the story is.
THE WOODEN PEOPLE

from the Popol Vuh
A Quiché Mayan Myth

translated by
Dennis Tedlock

Pay special attention to the behavior of the manikins—the wooden people. In what ways are they like us?

This was the peopling of the face of the earth:
They came into being, they multiplied, they had daughters, they had sons, these manikins, woodcarvings. But there was nothing in their hearts and nothing in their minds, no memory of their mason and builder. They just went and walked wherever they wanted. Now they did not remember the Heart of Sky.¹

And so they fell, just an experiment and just a cut-out for humankind. They were talking at first but their faces were dry. They were not yet developed in the legs and arms. They had no blood, no lymph. They had no sweat, no fat. Their complexions were dry, their faces were crusty. They flailed their legs and arms, their bodies were deformed.

And so they accomplished nothing before the Maker. Modeler² who gave them birth, gave them heart. They became the first numerous people here on the face of the earth.

Again there comes a humiliation, destruction, and demolition. The manikins, woodcarvings were killed when the Heart of Sky devised a flood for them. A great flood was made; it came down on the heads of the manikins, woodcarvings.

The man’s body was carved from the wood of the coral tree by the Maker, Modeler. And as for the woman, the Maker, Modeler needed the pith of reeds for the woman’s body. They were not competent, nor did they speak before the builder and sculptor who made them and brought them forth, and so they were killed, done in by a flood:

¹ Heart of Sky: the father god of the Quiché Mayans.
² Maker, Modeler: the Quiché Mayan god of creation.
There came a rain of resin from the sky. 
There came the one named Gouger of 
Faces: he gouged out their eyeballs. 
There came Sudden Bloodletter: he 
snapped off their heads. 
There came Crunching Jaguar: he ate their 
flesh. 
There came Tearing Jaguar: he tore them 
open.

They were pounded down to the bones 
and tendons, smashed and pulverized even 
to the bones. Their faces were smashed be-
cause they were incompetent before their 
mother and their father, the Heart of Sky, 
named Hurricane. The earth was blackened 
because of this: the black rainstorm began, 
rain all day and rain all night. Into their 
houses came the animals, small and great. 
Their faces were crushed by things of wood 
and stone. Everything spoke: their water 
jars, their tortilla griddles, their plates, their 
cooking pots, their dogs, their grinding 
stones, each and every thing crushed their 
faces. Their dogs and turkeys told them: 
“You caused us pain, you are us, but now 
it is you whom we shall eat.” And this is the 
grinding stone:

“We were undone because of you. 
Every day, every day, 
in the dark, in the dawn, forever, 
r-r-rip, r-r-rip, 
r-r-rub, r-r-rub, 
right in our faces, because of you.

This was the service we gave you at first. 
when you were still people, but today you 
will learn of our power. We shall pound and 
we shall grind your flesh,” their grinding 
stones told them.

And this is what their dogs said, when 
they spoke in their turn:

“Why is it you can’t seem to give us our 
food? We just watch and you just keep us 
down, and you throw us around. You keep 
a stick ready when you eat, just so you can 
hit us. We don’t talk, so we’ve received noth-
ing from you. How could you not have 
known? You did know that we were wasting 
away there, behind you.

“So, this very day you will taste the teeth 
in our mouths. We shall eat you,” their dogs 
told them, and their faces were crushed.

And then their tortilla griddles and cook-
ing pots spoke to them in turn:

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“Pain! That’s all you’ve done for us. Our mouths are sooty, our faces are sooty. By setting us on the fire all the time, you burn us. Since we felt no pain, you try it. We shall burn you,” all their cooking pots said, crushing their faces.

The stones, their hearthstones were shooting out, coming right out of the fire, going for their heads, causing them pain. Now they run for it, helter-skelter.

They want to climb up on the houses, but they fall as the houses collapse.

They want to climb the trees; they’re thrown off by the trees.

They want to get inside caves, but the caves slam shut in their faces.

Such was the scattering of the human work, the human design. The people were ground down, overthrown. The mouths and faces of all of them were destroyed and crushed. And it used to be said that the monkeys in the forests today are a sign of this. They were left as a sign because wood alone was used for their flesh by the builder and sculptor.

**First Thoughts**

What is the most exciting or dramatic part of this myth to you?

**Identifying Facts**

1. **Describe** the wooden people. In what ways are they just a “cutout,” or preliminary design, for human beings? In what ways are they like us?

2. Why does the god Heart of Sky punish the wooden people? How does he punish them?

3. What origin does this myth explain?

**Interpreting Meanings**

1. What do you consider the climax, or point of greatest suspense, in this story? Does the climax occur in a brief moment, or does it take up a longer portion of the story? Explain.

2. The word *competent* means “having the right qualities or abilities to fulfill a function.” In what way were the wooden people “not competent”—that is, unable to act as the Mayan gods expected?

3. The gods in the Popol Vuh tried to create humans three times, and three
times they failed. What does this tell you about the way the Quiché Mayans viewed their gods?

**Applying Meanings**

How do the wooden people fail the gods? How might this myth have served to teach the Quiché Mayan people proper behavior?

**Creative Writing Response**

**Narrating a Series of Events.** One of the most amazing incidents in this myth is the revenge of the pots, pans, and tortilla griddles against the wooden people. Write a one- or two-paragraph narrative in which you describe an inanimate object or objects coming to life and interacting with people. For example, what might your television say about your viewing habits? Tell what happens, where it happens, when it happens, and who is involved. Include vivid imagery to bring the fantastic situation to life for your readers. What is the climax of your narrative?

**Language and Vocabulary**

**Imagery**

Imagery is language that appeals to the senses. Most images in literature are visual—that is, they create pictures in the reader's mind by appealing to the sense of sight. But imagery can also appeal to the senses of hearing, touch, taste, or smell. In fact, an effective image may appeal to several senses at once.

Dennis Tedlock’s translation of the Popol Vuh is full of powerful imagery. Reread these passages from “The Wooden People.” Then make a list of which sense each passage appeals to: sight, hearing, taste, touch, smell, or a combination of several.

1. “They were talking at first but their faces were dry. They were not yet developed in the legs and arms. They had no blood, no lymph. They had no sweat, no fat. Their complexions were dry, their faces were crusty.”

2. “They were pounded down to the bones and tendons, smashed and pulverized even to the bones.”

3. “The earth was blackened because of this; the black rainstorm began, rain all day and rain all night.”

4. “Everything spoke: their water jars, their tortilla griddles, their plates, their cooking pots, their dogs, their grinding stones, each and every thing crushed their faces.”

5. “‘Our mouths are sooty, our faces are sooty. By setting us on the fire all the time, you burn us.’”

Find other examples of imagery in this myth. How would you describe the overall effect of the imagery?