Europeans arrived in the Western Hemisphere in the late 1400s, claiming that they had discovered a new world; however, the continent of North America was already inhabited by hundreds of Native Americans. Many of their ancestors had come there from Asia by crossing the Bering Strait, a land bridge that connected Asia to Alaska. These descendants spread throughout the land, adapting to the areas they settled in; as a result, these inhabitants were not all alike. While some settled in Mexico and Central America and created complex societies, others remained in what is now known as the United States. Here, these Native Americans hunted buffalo, lived simply in portable dwellings, and passed on their knowledge through oral tradition.

Native Americans believed that the entire earth and all of the living things that inhabited it were sacred, and they cared deeply about the natural world. This respect was handed down through generations orally. As a result, speakers and storytellers were valued members of Native American communities. The Native Americans' attitude toward the earth and all its creations formed their religious beliefs. They believed that all living things, as well as all forces of nature, were part of a great cycle of life that must be respected, and all of their religious ceremonies revolved around the events of this natural cycle. They also saw spiritual value in the natural world, and they contacted these spirits through their dreams and visions. These people's view of the sacredness of the natural world is evident in their tales and songs.

Since the Native Americans believed that the natural world was sacred, they felt that no one should own land; instead, land should belong to all living things that inhabited it. As a result of this belief, they conflicted with the early European settlers who insisted on owning their own land. This disagreement often led to the Native Americans signing treaties with the white settlers that they didn't understand which resulted in open land for white settlement.

Native American stories have been passed down orally for thousands of years, were often a mix of myth and reality, and were thought to link the spirits of Hunters and Animals.

As European explorers set off for this New World, they kept reports of the hardships they encountered on their journeys. Once Europeans began creating settlements, conflicts started to develop between them and the American Indians, which led to war. However, the Europeans were able to overcome the Native Americans due to their superior weapons. This combined with the rapid spread of illness among the Native Americans by diseases brought by the Europeans caused few Native Americans to survive past the end of the 1600s.

Oral Literature: stories that were passed down from one generation to the next as they were told and retold in households and in tribal ceremonies

Primarily oral literature [Why?]
- Much of it was set to music
- These stories needed repetition
- used in ceremonial situations
- aided in memorization
- provided narrative cohesion
- Participatory

The Tradition
Myth: an anonymous traditional story that relies on the supernatural to explain a natural phenomenon, an aspect of human behavior, or a mystery of the universe

What is the purpose of a myth?
1. To explain how things came to be
2. To teach lessons or values
3. To unify a group or define its identity
4. To explain social or religious rituals
5. To entertain

Origin Myth: explains how natural phenomena came to be or why a society has certain beliefs and customs
The literature emphasizes
- the importance of living in harmony with the natural world
- a kinship with nature as part of a sacred whole
- human beings are a part of nature and must act to maintain a right relationship with the world around them

Creation Myths
- Explain the beginning of the world/origin of man
- Similar to the account in The Bible
- Contained aspects of the tribe’s beliefs
- about relationships between people and nature
- Rituals and Songs
- Tales of Heroes and Tricksters (archetypes)

Creation Myth Characteristics
- Characteristics include:
  - A creator, the medium for creation, and supernatural power
  - The trickster
    - sometimes a negative force
    - sometimes a hero who dives to the depths of nothingness to find form
  - The first man and woman whose job it is to continue to create both offspring and plants and animals
  - The flood hero who saves mankind from the great waters and begins again

Archetype
- a symbol, story pattern, or character type that is found in literature of many cultures

Trickster Tales
- One form of creation story
- Tricksters are more than deceivers and sources of humor
- Tricksters cross social boundaries and break rules while at the same time showing how important rules are
- A trickster is a creator in his own right