

## 19 About the Selection

The Iroquois Constitution tells how and why representatives of the Iroquois nation should hold formal councils to discuss and decide issues of concern to all. When Dekanawidah presented his *Kaianerekowa*, or Great Law of Peace, much of the Iroquois world was beset by persecution, disease, and power struggles. His plan led to the most far-reaching and notable political unit north of the Aztec civilization. The Constitution's sense of mutual respect, cooperation, and ritual among the Iroquois nations may have served as a model for what became the Constitution of the United States of America.

## 20 Literary Analysis Origin Myths and the Oral Tradition

- Explain to students that stories in an oral tradition are not only important for the values and ideas they contain, but also for their style and form. For example, word choice and descriptive language are very important features, as they can help the speaker to remember the text and the listener to visualize the text.
- **Ask** students the Literary Analysis question: How would this visual description facilitate the oral transmission of this constitution?  
**Answer:** The description of a majestic tree vividly conveys the unity and good will enjoyed by the members of the Five Nations.

## 21 Vocabulary Builder The Latin Suffix *-tion*

- Draw students' attention to the word *disposition* and its definition.
- Let students know that the suffix *-tion* forms a noun when added to a modified form of the verb.
- To show students how verbs may be made into nouns by using *-tion*, write the following on the chalkboard:  
Anyone outside the Five Nations who *is disposed* to do so, may join.
- Then, show students how to form the noun using *-tion*:  
Anyone outside the Five Nations who has the *disposition* to do so, may join.

# 19 from The Iroquois Constitution

## Iroquois

Translated by Arthur C. Parker

I am Dekanawidah and with the Five Nations<sup>1</sup> confederate lords I plant the Tree of the Great Peace. I name the tree the Tree of the Great Long Leaves. Under the shade of this Tree of the Great Peace we spread the soft white feathery down of the globe thistle as seats for you, Adodarhoh, and your cousin lords.

We place you upon those seats, spread soft with the feathery down of the globe thistle, there beneath the shade of the spreading branches of the Tree of Peace. There shall you sit and watch the council fire of the confederacy of the Five Nations, and all the affairs of the Five Nations shall be transacted at this place before you.

Roots have spread out from the Tree of the Great Peace, one to the north, one to the east, one to the south and one to the west. The name of these roots is the Great White Roots and their nature is peace and strength.

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- 21 If any man or any nation outside the Five Nations shall obey the laws of the Great Peace and make known their disposition to the lords of the confederacy, they may trace the roots to the tree and if their minds are clean and they are obedient and promise to obey the wishes of the confederate council, they shall be welcomed to take shelter beneath the Tree of the Long Leaves.

We place at the top of the Tree of the Long Leaves an eagle who is able to see afar. If he sees in the distance any evil approaching or any

1. **Five Nations** the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca tribes. Together, these tribes formed the Iroquois Confederation.

### Vocabulary Builder

**confederate** (kən fed' ə r it)  
adj. united with others for a common purpose

### Literary Analysis

**Origin Myths and the Oral Tradition** How would this visual description facilitate the oral transmission of this constitution?

### Vocabulary Builder

**disposition** (dis' pə zish' ən)  
n. an inclination or tendency

danger threatening he will at once warn the people of the confederacy.

The smoke of the confederate council fire shall ever ascend and pierce the sky so that other nations who may be allies may see the council fire of the Great Peace . . .

Whenever the confederate lords shall assemble for the purpose of holding a council, the Onondaga lords shall open it by expressing their gratitude to their cousin lords and greeting them, and they shall make an address and offer thanks to the earth where men dwell, to the streams of water, the pools, the springs and the lakes, to the maize and the fruits, to the medicinal herbs and trees, to the forest trees for their usefulness, to the animals that serve as food and give their pelts for clothing, to the great winds and the lesser winds, to the thunderers, to the sun, the mighty warrior, to the moon, to the messengers of the Creator who reveal his wishes and to the Great Creator who dwells in the heavens above, who gives all the things useful to men, and who is the source and the ruler of health and life.

Then shall the Onondaga lords declare the council open . . .

All lords of the Five Nations' Confederacy must be honest in all things . . . It shall be a serious wrong for anyone to lead a lord into trivial affairs, for the people must ever hold their lords high in estimation out of respect to their honorable positions.

When a candidate lord is to be installed he shall furnish four strings of shells (or wampum)<sup>2</sup> one span in length bound together at one end. Such will constitute the evidence of his pledge to the confederate lords that he will live according to the constitution of the Great Peace and exercise justice in all affairs.

When the pledge is furnished the speaker of the council must hold the shell strings in his hand and address the opposite side of the council fire and he shall commence his address saying: "Now behold him. He has now become a confederate lord. See how splendid he looks." An address may then follow. At the end of it he shall send the bunch of shell strings to the opposite side and they

2. **wampum** (wăm' pəm) *n.* small beads made of shells.

from *The Iroquois Constitution* ■ 27

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## 22 Humanities

**Red Jacket**, by George Catlin

George Catlin was born in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. To please his father, he practiced law until 1823, at which time he became intrigued by "the dignity and nobility of the Native Americans." It was then that Catlin decided to devote himself to art and to becoming a historian of Native American peoples.

This portrait depicts fiery Seneca orator Sagoyewatha, who reluctantly followed his people into an alliance with the British. He received a red coat from the British as a ritual gift. Although in this portrait he is not wearing the red coat that led to his English nickname, the viewer can see the large medal given to him by George Washington after the American Revolution. Use these questions for discussion:

1. What personality traits has the artist tried to capture in this portrait?  
**Possible answer:** Strength, determination, and pride
2. How are these traits related to the values and ideas set forth in the Iroquois Constitution?

**Answer:** The Constitution says a leader needs wisdom, patience, and a sense of duty—all of which require the inner strength and determination captured in the portrait.


## 23 Critical Viewing


**Answer:** The artist's portrayal of Red Jacket's serious, penetrating stare, defiant stance, face paint, and ceremonial objects—a tomahawk, a peace pipe, and a beaded belt—reflect the dignity and nobility of his subject.

## 24 Reading Check

**Answer:** The speaker says that the nature of the Great White Roots is "peace and strength."

Red Jacket, George Catlin, The Thomas Gilcrease Institute of American History and Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma

23  **Critical Viewing**  
What details or features of this portrait reflect a belief in the dignity and nobility of the Native Americans? [Analyze]

24  **Reading Check**  
What does the speaker say is the nature of the Great White Roots?

## Differentiated Instruction

Solutions for All Learners

### Enrichment for Gifted/Talented Students

Point out that the Iroquois Constitution began as an oral "document," and as such it needed to hold the attention of multiple listeners. Ask students to deliver the speech orally to classmates to demonstrate how this literary work uses imagery and phrasing to create a memorable impression.

### Enrichment for Advanced Readers

Assign students to compare and contrast the Iroquois Constitution and the Constitution of the United States of America. Have students read each text more than once before they begin to analyze the documents' similarities and differences. Encourage them to prepare a short presentation on the topic for the class.

## 25 Reading Strategy Recognizing Cultural Details

- **Ask** students why they think the antlers of a deer are used to crown the lords of the Five Nations Confederacy.

**Answer:** Students may say it is because the deer live in peace, as the Iroquois do.

- **Ask** students the Reading Strategy question: What can you learn about the Iroquois culture from the items mentioned here?

**Answer:** The Iroquois show deep respect for the principles of just leadership.

### ASSESS

#### Answers

1. Students are likely to say yes, that peace and strength in unity under a Constitution is very appealing.
2. (a) They plant the Tree of the Great Peace. (b) The roots symbolize strength and peace.
3. (a) They should thank one another and then “offer thanks to the earth where men dwell.” (b) They respect each other and their environment and are conscious of their dependence on the earth.
4. (a) He uses the image of the Tree of the Long Leaves and its roots, the eagle, and the council fire. (b) They show that the Iroquois are conscious of creating a strongly rooted union that would shelter its members, be vigilant against threats from without, and welcome new members.
5. (a) A lord must be honest in all things, slow to anger, and full of peace, good will, and a desire for the welfare of his people. A lord’s actions should always exhibit farsightedness, deliberation, and compassion. (b) Students’ responses should include examples and supporting details.
6. Students should support their responses with clear reasoning.

shall be received as evidence of the pledge. Then shall the opposite side say:

“We now do crown you with the sacred emblem of the deer’s antlers, the emblem of your lordship. You shall now become a mentor of the people of the Five Nations. The thickness of your skin shall be seven spans—which is to say that you shall be proof against anger, offensive actions and criticism. Your heart shall be filled with peace and good will and your mind filled with a yearning for the welfare of the people of the confederacy. With endless patience you shall carry out your duty and your firmness shall be tempered with tenderness for your people. Neither anger nor fury shall find lodgement in your mind and all your words and actions shall be marked with calm deliberation. In all of your deliberations in the confederate council, in your efforts at law making, in all your official acts, self-interest shall be cast into oblivion. Cast not over your shoulder behind you the warnings of the nephews and nieces should they chide you for any error or wrong you may do, but return to the way of the Great Law which is just and right. Look and listen for the welfare of the whole people and have always in view not only the present but also the coming generations, even those whose faces are yet beneath the surface of the ground—the unborn of the future nation.”

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## Critical Reading

1. **Respond:** If you were the chief of a Native American nation, would this speech persuade you to join the Confederation? Explain.
2. (a) **Recall:** What do the lords plant to commemorate their meeting? (b) **Analyze:** What do the roots of this plant symbolize?
3. (a) **Recall:** According to the Constitution, what must confederate lords do to open a council meeting? (b) **Infer:** What does this decree suggest about the Iroquois?
4. (a) **Analyze:** What three images from nature does Dekanawidah use in the Iroquois Constitution? (b) **Infer:** What do these references tell you about the Iroquois?
5. (a) **Summarize:** Summarize the qualities and conduct required of council lords by the Iroquois Constitution. (b) **Synthesize:** How well do these qualities apply to leaders in the modern world?
6. **Take a Position:** Do you agree with and support the ideas presented in *The Iroquois Constitution*? Why or Why not?

28 ■ Beginnings–1750

**Reading Strategy**  
**Recognizing Cultural Details** What can you learn about the Iroquois culture from the items mentioned here?

**Vocabulary Builder**  
**deliberation** (di lib’ er ā shən) *n.* careful consideration

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