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Main Idea and Summaries

Everything you read has a main idea or a **theme**—something that answers the basic question “What is it about?” Identifying that main idea, and the most important ideas that support it, is one of the most important reading skills. Once you know what you’re reading about, the details all seem to fall into place. If you’ve understood what you’ve read, you should be able to write a summary that briefly answers that key question, “What’s it about?”

VOCABULARY

arduous
darkrooms
harbor
luminous
vain

Guided Practice

Read the passage. Then answer the questions.

White Buffalo Woman

a myth of the Plains Indians

Many American Indian peoples of the Great Plains relate different versions of this myth. This one comes from the Lakota, or Sioux.

- 1 In the days before the People had horses, it was an arduous task to find game. One summer when the seven bands were camped together, there was little food.
- 2 Two young braves of the Without-Bows band rose early one morning to hunt. They left camp before dawn, when only the yellow meadowlark was awake. As the day warmed, the insects stirred and chirruped, and the prairie dogs sought their burrows at the approach of Man, but the hunters found no real game. Then they climbed a small hill, from which they would be able to see across the prairie in all directions.
- 3 As they scanned the distance toward the horizon, they saw something luminous rise out of the shimmering heat and come toward them. It seemed to walk on two legs, not four. As it came near, they saw that it was a beautiful woman in shining white buckskin, wonderfully decorated with sacred designs in porcupine quills of all colors. She carried a medicine bundle on her back and a fan of fragrant sage leaves in her hand, and it seemed that her eyes were full of light and power.
- 4 Now, one of the young men was inflamed with desire for this woman. “I don’t know what her nation is, but I’m going to make her mine,” he said to his friend.
- 5 “You fool!” said the other. “Can’t you see she’s a spirit?”
- 6 The fool thought he had seen the woman beckon to him, however, and he walked toward her. As he reached out to embrace her, a white cloud enshrouded them both. When it lifted, the woman stood there

arduous
difficult

luminous
shining



alone. At her feet was a pile of bones with snakes twisting horribly among them.

7 “See,” the woman said to the other young man, “I bear a message to your people from Tatanka, Oyate, the buffalo nation. Return to your chief, Standing Hollow Horn, and tell him what you have seen. Tell him to prepare a large tipi, big enough for all his people, and presently I will come to him.”

8 The young man raced back to his camp and told the chief what he had seen and what the woman had said. The chief ordered several tipis to be combined together into one large enough for the entire band. The people waited eagerly for the sacred woman to arrive. Scouts were posted to watch for her approach in each of the four directions.

9 After four days, one of the scouts saw something coming in a beautiful manner across the prairie. Then suddenly she was in the great tipi, walking around it from east to west in the manner of the sun. She paused before the chief and held out her medicine bundle to him with both hands.

10 “Behold this,” she said, “and always love and respect it. Only the spiritually pure may touch this bundle, for in it is the sacred pipe.”

11 She unrolled the bundle and took out the pipe and a small stone carved with seven circles and placed them on the ground.

12 “With this pipe you will walk on the earth, which is your mother and your grandmother. Every step you take upon the earth is sacred. The bowl of the pipe is of red stone; it is the earth. Carved on it is the buffalo calf; it is all that goes on four legs. The stem is of wood; it is all that grows on the earth. The twelve hanging feathers are from the eagle; it is all the flying creatures. All these are children of Mother Earth, as you are. This you will remember when you smoke this pipe. Treat the pipe and the earth in a sacred manner, and all will increase and prosper. The seven circles carved on the stone are the Seven Rituals in which you will learn to use the sacred pipe. These I will teach you when the time comes.”

A pipe said to be the one given by White Buffalo Woman is kept by a Lakota Sioux family in Looking Horse, South Dakota.

13 The woman then turned to the chief and said, “In me there are four ages. This pipe will carry you to the end. I am going now, but I will look on your people in every age, and at the end I will return.”

14 The people were silent and filled with awe as the woman walked slowly around the lodge again from east to west. Then, silently, she left the lodge. However, after she had gone a short distance, she turned and faced the people and sat down on the prairie. When she rose again, she had become a red and brown buffalo calf. The people watched, amazed, as the calf receded from them and then, looking at them, lay down and rolled over. When she rose a second time, she was a white buffalo. She walked on until she was only a bright speck against the earth and sky. Then she rolled over again, and when she rose she was a black buffalo.

15 The buffalo bowed to each of the four directions and walked away, disappearing over the hill.

Which sentence best states the theme of the myth?

- A** The buffalo is the source of food and sustenance.
- B** Listen well to teachers who bring new ways of living.
- C** Observe your people’s customs even if they don’t make sense.
- D** Treat sacred things with respect, and the earth will sustain you.

This is probably the most important myth of the Lakota people: a goddess-figure represented by a buffalo, the main source of food, shelter, and clothing on the Great Plains, brings the people a ritual object representing the earth, and a promise to sustain them if they keep its rites in a sacred manner. Many religious traditions have such “covenant stories” and sacred objects, like the pipe, that stand for the connection between humans and the spirit world.

Analyze how the first two paragraphs establish the theme.

The people have no sacred pipe or rituals. They are hungry. The spirit-woman promises them prosperity if they live in a sacred manner. Here is a sample answer:

The first two paragraphs show how poorly and desperately the people lived before White Buffalo Woman came to them.

How is the theme developed by the two braves' encounter with White Buffalo Woman?

One man sees her as an ordinary woman; the other recognizes her as a messenger from the world of the spirit.

Determine which of these sentences expresses the main idea of paragraph 3.

- A** As they scanned the distance toward the horizon, they saw something luminous rise out of the shimmering heat and come toward them.
- B** It seemed to walk on two legs, not four.
- C** As it came near, they saw that it was a beautiful woman in shining white buckskin, wonderfully decorated with sacred designs in porcupine quills of all colors.
- D** She carried a medicine bundle on her back and a fan of fragrant sage leaves in her hand, and it seemed that her eyes were full of light and power.

In many paragraphs, there's a single sentence that expresses the main idea of the paragraph. It's called the topic sentence. This paragraph is about the approach of White Buffalo Woman and how the two young men perceive her. The important thing that happens in the paragraph is that you recognize that the woman is a spirit.

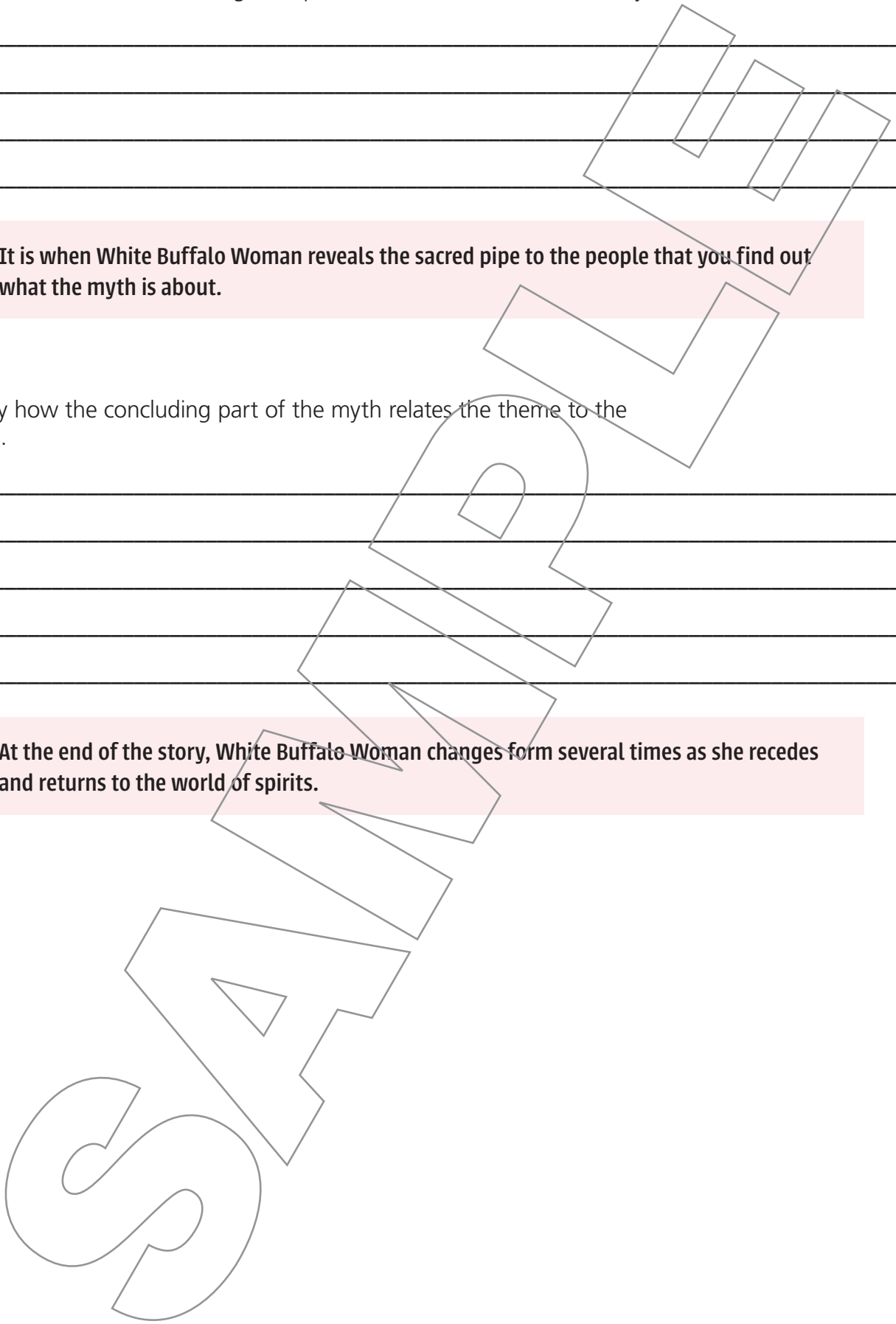


Analyze how the scene in the great tipi clarifies the main idea of the myth.

It is when White Buffalo Woman reveals the sacred pipe to the people that you find out what the myth is about.

Identify how the concluding part of the myth relates the theme to the setting.


At the end of the story, White Buffalo Woman changes form several times as she recedes and returns to the world of spirits.



base 60 was used, while among the Maya people of Central America, it was 20. However, since humans everywhere count on their fingers, base 10 was the rule in most places.

4 Finally, people began to use symbols to stand for numbers. In the system used by the ancient Egyptians and later the Greeks, symbols represented the powers of 10. People wrote numerals by repeating symbols for different values and adding them together. For example, to write the number 347, the Egyptians would repeat the symbol for 100 three times, the symbol for 10 four times, and the symbol for one seven times. In the Roman numeral system, which we still use today to indicate Olympiads and Super Bowls, a smaller numeral placed to the right of a larger one meant “more than,” while a smaller numeral placed to the left of a larger one meant “less than.” The Egyptian and Roman systems worked well for simple counting, but they were not so useful for computation.

5 The numeration systems used in India and in Central America were different. They used the concept of *place value*. The Hindus used symbols to stand for the digits 1 through 9 and words to represent tens, hundreds, and so on. They would write a number like 625 as “6 hundred 2 ten 5. For a number like 306, where there were no tens, they would write “3 hundred 6.”

COMPARING NUMERATION SYSTEMS		
Egyptian	Roman	Hindu-Arabic
	CCCXLVII DCIII	347 603
1 /	1 I 500 D	
10 ∩	5 V 1,000 M	
100 ∅	10 X 5,000 V̄	
1,000 ⚡	50 L 10,000 X̄	
10,000 /	100 C 100,000 C̄	
100,000 ∪		

6 Around AD 600, a Hindu mathematician had a breakthrough idea. He or she invented a symbol to stand for the empty place. It was a simple dot that the Hindus called *sunya*, meaning “empty.” (The Maya people, who may have come up with the idea earlier, used a symbol that looked like an empty bowl.) Now, there was no need to write the names of the places. The position of each figure was all that was needed to show place value. Suddenly adding, subtracting, multiplying, and dividing became much easier. Calculation with decimals replaced the cumbersome and less precise use of fractions.

7 The *sunya*, which became our zero, gave a huge advantage to anyone who knew how to use it. It made possible calculations so rapid and accurate that it must have seemed like magic to people who were still using Roman-type numerals. In the 700s, the Arabs were the world's leading traders. They began using the Hindu numerals, including the zero, in business and science. They carried the system to other parts of the world with which they traded. That's why Europeans (and we) usually refer to them as "Arabic numerals."

8 As for the lowly zero, can you understand its power and importance? If not, think about this: Would you rather receive a check for \$1, or for \$1,000,000? Still think all those zeroes mean nothing?

Identify the central idea of this passage.

What is the passage mainly about? The title focuses the theme of the passage before you even begin to read.

Analyze how the author develops this theme in paragraphs 2–4.

Klamst introduces the theme in his first paragraph in a conversational way, and then takes awhile to get to his point about zero.



How does paragraph 5 suggest why the Hindus and Maya people were the first to come up with the zero?

This question asks you to distinguish what made the Hindu and Maya numeration systems different from the Egyptian or Roman.

Which of these is the least essential statement to include in a summary of the passage?

- A** The Mayas' numeration system used 20 as a base.
- B** Roman numerals were adequate for counting but not easy to calculate with.
- C** The Arabs discovered how useful the Hindu numeration system was for trade.
- D** Using symbols to represent numbers was an important step in human thought.

A summary should include only the main ideas and the most important details that support them. The passage is about the zero and why mathematics is more powerful with it than without it.



Test Yourself

Read the poem. Then answer the questions.

the flattered lightning bug

by Don Marquis

Don Marquis, a New York newspaper columnist, created the characters of Archy the cockroach and Mehitabel the cat in 1916 and included them in more than 500 sketches. Archy has the soul of a poet (literally) and observes the world from an insect's point of view. He slips into Marquis's office at night to type his verse on the typewriter by jumping on the keys. Because he is not strong enough to press the shift key in those precomputer days, his poems are all in lowercase letters and have no apostrophes.

- 1 a lightning bug got
- 2 in here the other night a
- 3 regular hick from
- 4 the real country he was
- 5 awful proud of himself you
- 6 city insects may think
- 7 you are some punkins
- 8 but i don t see any
- 9 of you flashing in the dark
- 10 like we do in
- 11 the country all right go
- 12 to it says i mehitabel the
- 13 cat and that green
- 14 spider who lives in your locker
- 15 and two or three cockroach
- 16 friends of mine and a
- 17 friendly rat all gathered
- 18 around him and urged him on
- 19 and he lightened and
- 20 lightened and lightened you
- 21 don t see anything like this
- 22 in town often he says go to it
- 23 we told him it s a
- 24 real treat to us and
- 25 we nicknamed him broadway
- 26 which pleased him
- 27 this is the life
- 28 he said all i
- 29 need is a harbor¹
- 30 under me to be a



¹harbor: body of water deep enough that a boat or ship can anchor there

31 statue of liberty and
32 he got so vain² of
33 himself i had to take
34 him down a peg you ve
35 made lightning for two hours
36 little bug I told him
37 but I don t hear
38 any claps of thunder
39 yet there are some men
40 like that when he wore
41 himself out mehitabel
42 the cat ate him

archy

1 Identify the lines in the poem that best express Marquis's theme.

- A i don t see any
of you flashing in the dark
like we do in
the country
- B we nicknamed him broadway
which pleased him
- C i don t hear
any claps of thunder
- D yet there are some men
like that

2 Explain your answer to question 1.

²vain: excessively proud



- 3 Analyze how “archy” introduces and develops the theme through the character of the lightning bug and the way the other characters respond to him.

- 4 Explain what the lightning bug is saying in lines 27–31 and analyze how it supports the theme of the poem.

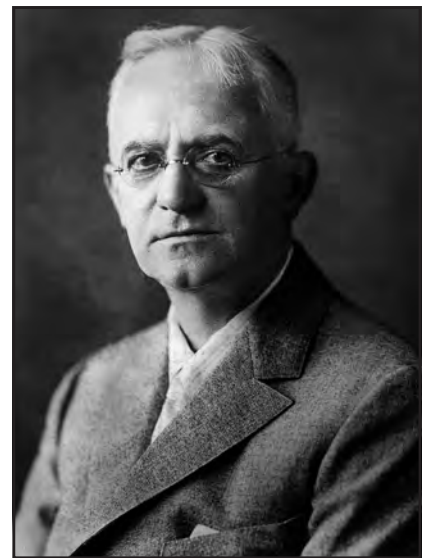
Read the passage. Then answer the questions.

George Eastman’s Camera

by Luke Ruiz

1 The city of Rochester, New York, boasts a world-class museum. It’s the George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film. It was the first museum in the world to honor picture taking as an art and a science. No person did more to advance the science of photography than the man who once called the museum home.

2 George Eastman was born in Waterville, New York, in 1854. His father died when George was still a boy, so he had to leave school to go to work at age 14. He worked for an insurance company but never made more than five dollars per week. He studied accounting at home in the evening so he could get a job as a bank clerk. This job, too, paid little money. But by the time he was 24, Eastman had saved enough to plan a vacation in Santo Domingo. A friend suggested he bring a camera along to record the trip, so George bought one.



3 In those days, photographic images were made on large glass plates. Each one had to be coated with wet, light-sensitive chemicals just before the picture was taken. The camera Eastman bought was as big as a microwave oven. It had to be supported on a heavy tripod. It came with chemicals, a developing tent, and other heavy equipment.

4 Eastman never made the trip. Instead, he became obsessed with photography. Surely, he thought, there had to be a better way to take pictures. He read about a new British process for coating plates with chemicals that remained light sensitive for days after they dried. George took it a step further. He invented a better dry-plate formula and a machine for mass-producing the plates. In 1880, he opened a factory and sold the plates he made to other photographers.

5 But Eastman was already experimenting with even simpler ways of making photographic images. He wanted, as he put it, “to make the camera as convenient as the pencil.” The problem was the heavy glass plates. His solution was to coat a roll of paper film with photographic chemicals. The film moved through the camera on rollers.

6 Eastman thought that professional photographers would rush to buy his new film process. They didn’t. They were comfortable with the old method. As Eastman continued to experiment with better and better ways to make film and film rollers, he realized he needed to do something new and different. He would sell the idea to the public. He would make a camera so simple that anyone could use it.

7 Eastman introduced his first Kodak camera in 1888. The name “Kodak” didn’t mean anything. (Eastman later explained that he had always liked the letter K.) His advertising slogan was “You push the button—we do the rest.” The Kodak sold and sold. Photography became a popular hobby. With the Kodak, anyone could take “snapshot” photographs. Some people developed and printed them in their own darkrooms. But most chose to have the Eastman Kodak Company “do the rest.”

8 George Eastman became a very rich man. He built the Rochester mansion that now houses the museum. But he gave most of his money away. He gave a third of his company’s stock holdings to his workers. He donated \$30 million to colleges and universities. He started a dental clinic for Rochester’s children. He also established a theater, a symphony orchestra, and the Eastman School of Music.

9 George Eastman died in 1932. His home became a museum 17 years later. The Eastman House museum displays rare old photographs and cameras. It is a center for restoring and preserving old movies. Younger visitors, however, regard film photography much as the first Kodak owners regarded glass-plate photography. With the modern digital camera and smartphone, the memory card has replaced the roll of film, and the “darkroom” is a computer and social media.

darkrooms
*special rooms
for developing
photographs*

- 5 What is this passage mainly about?
- A how photography has changed over the years
 - B the Eastman House Museum of Photography
 - C the life and work of George Eastman
 - D how digital photography works

6 How does the author develop the central idea of this passage?

7 Write a summary of the passage.

