

Chapter 2 — Coyote Visits the Land of the Dead

Coyote and his wife were staying in a nice village. One winter his wife became ill and died. He did nothing but weep for his wife.

The death spirit came to him and asked if he was crying for his wife.

“Yes, my friend,” answered Coyote. “I long for her. There is great pain in my heart.”

After a while the death spirit said, “I can take you to the place where your wife has gone, but if I do, you must do exactly what I say. You can’t disregard a single word.”

“What would you expect me to do? I will do whatever you say, my friend.”

“Well then, let’s go.”

After they had gone a ways, the death spirit again cautioned Coyote to do exactly as he was told. Coyote said he would.

By this time Coyote was having trouble seeing the death spirit. He was like a shadow on an overcast day. They were going across the prairie to the east, and the ghost said, “Oh, look at all those horses over there. It must be a roundup.” Coyote could not see any horses, but he said, “Yes, yes!”

They were getting nearer the place of the dead.

“Oh, look at all these serviceberries! Let’s pick some to eat.” Coyote could not see the berries, so the ghost said, “When you see me reach up and pull down the limb, you do the same.”

The ghost pulled down one of the limbs and Coyote did the same thing. Although he could not see anything, he imitated the ghost, putting his hand to his mouth as though he were eating. He watched how the ghost did everything and imitated him.

“These are good serviceberries,” said the ghost.

“Yes, it’s good we found them.”

“Well, let’s get going now.”

They went on. “We are about to arrive,” said the ghost.

“Your wife is in a lonely lodge, that one over there. Wait here. I will ask someone exactly where.”

In a little while the ghost returned and said, “They have told me where your wife is.” They walked a short distance. “We are coming to a door here. Do everything exactly the way I do. I will take hold of the door flap, raise it up, and, bending low, I will enter. Then you will take hold of the door flap and do the same.”

In this way they went in the lodge. Coyote’s wife was right near the entrance. The ghost said, “Sit down right here by your wife.” They both sat down. “Your wife is now going to prepare some food for us.”

Coyote could see nothing. He was sitting in an open prairie where nothing was in sight. He could barely sense the presence of a shadow.





“Now she has prepared our food. Let’s eat.”

The ghost reached down and brought his hand to his mouth. Coyote could see only grass and dust in front of him. Coyote imitated all the actions of his companion. When they had finished and the woman had apparently put the food away, the ghost said to Coyote, “You stay here. I must go around and see some people. Here we have conditions different from those you have in the land of the living. When it gets dark here, it is dawn where you live. When it is dawn for us, it is growing dark for you.”

Now it was getting dark, and Coyote thought he could hear voices faintly talking all around him. Then darkness set in, and Coyote could begin to see a little. There were many small fires in the long house. He began to see the people waking up. They had a vague form, like shadows, but he recognized some of them. He saw his wife sitting by his side, and he was overjoyed. Coyote went around and greeted all his old friends who had died long ago. This made him happy. He went among them visiting and talking with everyone. All night he did this. Toward morning he saw a little light around the place where he had entered the long house. The death spirit said to him, “Coyote, our night is falling, and in a little while you will not see us. But you must stay here. Do not move. In the evening you will see all these people again.”

“Where would I go, my friend? I will stay right here.”

When dawn came, Coyote found himself sitting alone in the middle of the prairie. He sat there all day in the heat. He could hear meadowlarks somewhere. It got hotter, and he became thirsty. Finally, evening came and he saw the lodge again. For a couple of days he went on like this, suffering through the daytime but visiting with his friends every night in the lodge.

One night the death spirit came to him and said, “Coyote, tomorrow you will go home. You will take your wife with you.”

“But I like it here, my friend,” Coyote protested. “I am having a good time and we should like to remain.”

“Yes, but you will go tomorrow. I will advise you about what you are to do. Listen. There are five mountains to the west. You will travel for five days. Your wife will be with you, but you must not touch her. When you have crossed over and descended the fifth mountain, you can do whatever you want.”

“It will be this way, then,” said Coyote.

When dawn came, Coyote and his wife set out. At first it seemed to Coyote as though he were alone, but he was aware of his wife’s dim presence as she walked along behind. The first day, they crossed the first mountain and camped. The next day they crossed the second mountain. They went on like this, camping each night. When they sat across from each other at the fire, Coyote could see his wife a little more clearly.

The death spirit had begun to count the days and to figure the distance Coyote had traveled. “I hope he does everything right,” he thought, “and takes his wife on to the other world.”

The fourth camping was their last camp. On the next day, Coyote's wife would become entirely like a living person again. Coyote could see her clearly across the fire now. He could see the light on her face, but he did not dare touch her. Suddenly a joyous impulse overtook him. He was so glad to have his wife back! He jumped up and ran around the fire to embrace her.

"Stop! Stop!" screamed his wife. "Coyote, do not touch me!"

But her warning had no effect. Coyote rushed to her, and just as he touched her, she vanished. She disappeared and returned to the shadowland.

When the death spirit learned what Coyote had done, he became furious.

"You are always doing things like this, Coyote," he yelled. "I told you not to do anything foolish. You were about to establish the practice of returning from death. Now it won't happen. You have made it this way."

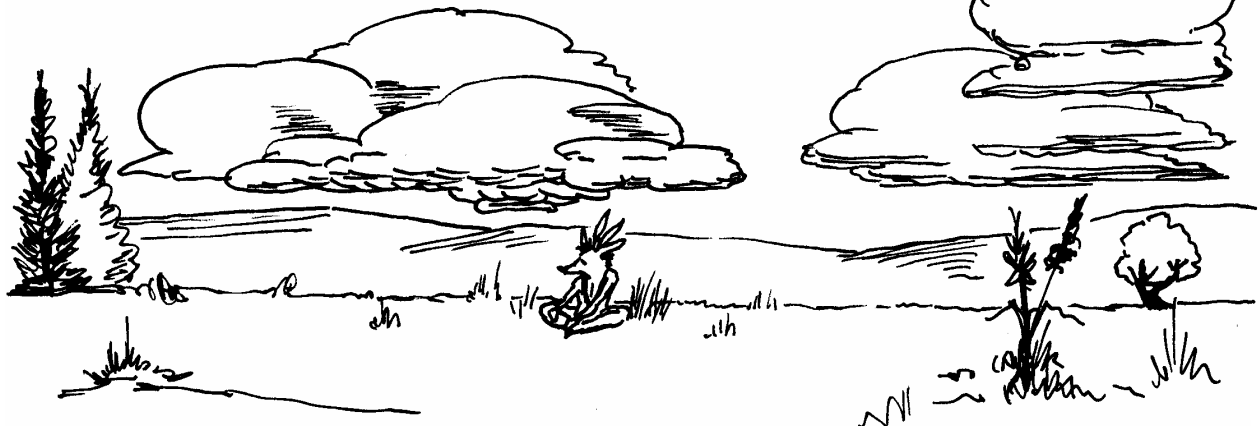
Coyote wept and wept. His sorrow was deep. He decided that he would go back, he would find the death lodge and find his wife again. He crossed the five mountains. He went out on the prairie and found the place where the ghost had seen the horses, and then he began to do the same things they had done when were on their way to the shadowland the other time.

"Oh, look at all the horses. It must be a roundup!"

He went on to the place where the ghost had picked the serviceberries. "Oh, such choice berries. Let's pick some and eat." He went through the motions of picking and eating the berries.

He finally came to the place where the death lodge stood. He said to himself, "Now when I take hold of the door flap and raise it up. You must do the same." Coyote remembered all the things his friend had done and he did them. He saw the spot where he had sat before. He went to it and sat down. "Now your wife has brought us some food. Let's eat." He went through the motions of eating again.

Darkness fell and Coyote listened for the voices. He looked all around, but nothing happened. Coyote sat there in the middle of the prairie. He sat there all night, but the lodge did not appear. In the morning he heard meadowlarks.



How Well Did You Read and Understand the Story?

Hint: *The first time through a story the reader is reading to find out how the story ends. The second time through, the reader can begin to close-read or analyze the text and its meaning. Knowing this, you may decide to read the story more than one time before you answer the questions.*

1. Find and copy the line in the story where Coyote sees his wife clearly for the first time after her death.
2. How many days did Coyote wait before disobeying the death spirit?
3. Find two similes in the story.
4. Identify the theme as best you can with one word.
5. Discuss how both Coyote and his wife feel during the story. Prove your answer by quoting text.
6. To what from your personal experience can you relate this story? (This could be a book, a movie, an incident from your own life, or something you've heard or read about.)
7. Identify what you think is the author's purpose in telling this story. What specific events or ideas helped you discover this purpose?
8. Imagine what may have been going on inside the head of the author. Make a list of events and emotions that may have played a role in the creation of this legend.
9. The meadowlarks are mentioned twice in this story. What do you think they could symbolize? Has there been a time in your life when you have "heard meadowlarks?" Explain.

The author is coming to our school soon. What suggestions would you make to improve the story? What was your favorite part?