Nicolas Perrot was a French fur trader who traveled extensively in the area around the Great Lakes, especially in modern-day Wisconsin and Montreal, in the latter half of the 17th century. His skills as an interpreter, trader, and diplomat led him to take part in many negotiations between the French and various Native American peoples. Among these peoples were the Ottawa, whose origins story he retold as part of his memoirs, which were unavailable in English until the early 20th century. Because the Ottawa, like other Native American peoples, had no written language, accounts such as Perrot’s were often the only versions Europeans ever read. The prejudices of the authors were often obvious in their accounts, though it should be noted that Perrot was greatly respected and honored by the tribes with whom he interacted.

After the creation of the earth, all the other animals withdrew into the places which each kind found most suitable for obtaining therein their pasture or their prey. When the first ones died, the Great Hare caused the birth of man from their corpses, as also from those of the fishes which were found along the shores of the rivers which he had formed in creating the land. Accordingly, some of the savages derive their origin from a bear, others from a moose, and others similarly from various kinds of animals; and before they had intercourse with the Europeans they firmly believed this, persuaded that they had their being from those kinds of creatures whose origin was as above explained. Even today [ca. 1720] that notion passes among them for undoubted truth, and if there are any of them at this time who are weaned from believing this dream, it has been only by dint of laughing at them for so ridiculous a belief. You will hear them say that their villages each bear the name of the animal which has given its people their being— as that of the crane, or the bear, or of other animals. They imagine that they were created by other divinities than those which we recognize, because we have many inventions which they do not possess, as the art of writing, shooting with a gun, making gunpowder, muskets, and other things which are used by [civilized] mankind.

Those first men who formed the human race, being scattered in different parts of the land, found out that they had minds. They beheld here and there buffaloes, elks, and deer, all kinds of birds and animals, and many rivers abounding in fish. These first men, I say, whom hunger had weakened, inspired by the Great Hare with an intuitive idea, broke off a branch from a small tree, made a cord with the fibers of the nettle, scraped the bark from a piece of a bough with a sharp stone, and armed its end with another sharp stone, to serve them as an arrow; and thus they formed a bow [and arrows] with which they killed small birds. After that, they made viretons [crossbow arrows], in order to attack the large beasts; they skinned these, and tried to eat the flesh. But as they found only the fat savory, they tried to make fire, in order to cook their meat; and, trying to get it, they took for that purpose hard wood, but without success; and [finally] they used softer wood, which yielded them fire. The skins of the animals served for their covering. As hunting is not practicable in the winter on account of the deep snows, they invented a sort of racket [snowshoe], in order to walk on this with more ease; and they constructed canoes, in
order to enable them to cross the rivers.

They relate also that these men, formed as I have told, while hunting found the footprints of an enormously tall man, followed by another that was smaller. They went on into his territory, following up this trail very heedfully, and saw in the distance a large cabin; when they reached it, they were astonished at seeing there the feet and legs of a man so tall that they could not descry his head; that inspired terror in them, and constrained them to retreat. This great colossus, having wakened, cast his eyes on a freshly-made track, and this induced him to step toward it; he immediately saw the man who had discovered him, whom fear had driven to hide himself in a thicket, where he was trembling with dread. The giant said to him, "My son, why art thou afraid? Reassure thyself; I am the Great Hare, he who has caused thee and many others to be born from the dead bodies of various animals. Now I will give thee a companion." Here are the words that he used in giving the man a wife: "Thou, man," said he, "shalt hunt, and make canoes, and do all things that a man must do; and thou, woman, shalt do the cooking for thy husband, make his shoes, dress the skins of animals, sew, and perform all the tasks that are proper for a woman." Such is the belief of these peoples in regard to the creation of man; it is based only upon the most ridiculous and extravagant notions--to which, however, they give credence as if they were incontestable truths, although shame hinders them from making these stories known.

Document Analysis

What is the tone of Perrot’s retelling of the creation story? Does he respect or ridicule the Ottawa people? Do you find his tone surprising? Why or why not?

How do you think the Ottawa might have characterized Perrot’s Christian creation story? Might they have found elements of it “ridiculous” and “extravagant”?

Though this is a second-hand account of the Ottawa creation story, which of its elements are comparable to the creation stories of other societies with which you are familiar?