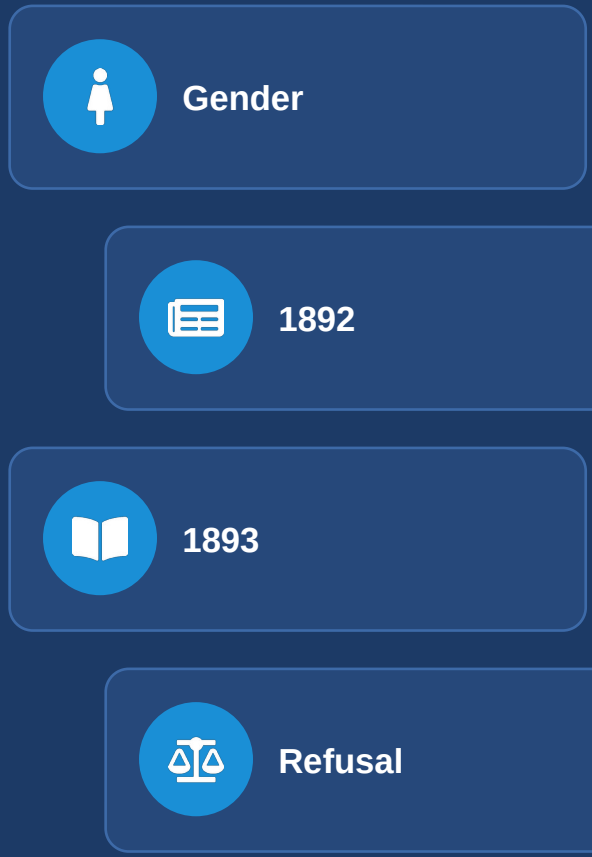
NBE3U Behind the Image, Lesson 2

The Indian Girl in Fiction

Johnson's 1892 critique and her own answer



Today's goals

We are learning…

- How gender shaped representations of Indigenous women.
- How a writer can answer a stereotype with a story.

I can…

- Summarize Johnson's argument about the “Indian girl” of fiction.
- Identify parts of the formula in a text.
- Explain how Christine breaks the formula, with evidence.
- Explain how the story would change from another perspective.

Today's plan

Time	What we're doing	You will…
0–10 min	**Hook**	Discuss
10–25 min	**Johnson, 1892**	Note
25–50 min	**The story**	Read and test
50–65 min	**Perspective**	Discuss
65–75 min	**Reflect**	Write

Spot the formula

Think of a film where an Indigenous woman falls for an outsider. What happens to her by the end?

Sentence starters

“In the film I'm thinking of…”

“She ends up…”

“The story is really about…”

How it works

- Pairs: 3 minutes.

Big idea

In 1892, E. Pauline Johnson complained that Canadian novels had only one Indigenous heroine: a chief's daughter with no surname who loves a white hero and dies. A year later she published a story whose heroine refuses that script. Gender shaped how Indigenous women were imagined, and Johnson fought back.

A Strong Race Opinion

On May 22, 1892, the Toronto Sunday Globe published Johnson's essay on “the Indian girl in modern fiction.” She argued that Canadian writers had invented one heroine and copied her endlessly.

Her complaint: the heroine is never allowed to be an individual. She must not be “one of womankind at large.”

The formula

A chief's daughter

Always royalty, never ordinary.

One name

A “Winona” sound, no surname.

The white hero

She exists to love him.

Doomed

She dies or is left behind.

Build the checklist

On page 1, in pairs:

1. For each part of the formula, explain why it's a stereotype.
2. Who benefits from each part?
3. Name a modern example of one part.
4. Be ready to share one.

Her husband's hobby

As a boy he had had the Indian relic-hunting craze, as a youth he had studied Indian archaeology and folk-lore, as a man he consummated his predilections for Indianology, by loving, winning and marrying the quiet little daughter of the English trader, who himself had married a native […]

E. Pauline Johnson (Tekahionwake), “A Red Girl's Reasoning” (1893), The Moccasin Maker (1913). Public domain.

Think about it

What did Charlie collect before he married?

What does “Indianology” suggest?

What might he expect from his wife?

Her argument

“Do you mean to tell me, Charlie—you who have studied my race and their laws for years—do you mean to tell me that, because there was no priest and no magistrate, my mother was not married? Do you mean to say that all my forefathers, for hundreds of years back, have been illegally born? If so, you blacken my ancestry beyond—beyond—beyond all reason.”

E. Pauline Johnson (Tekahionwake), “A Red Girl's Reasoning” (1893), The Moccasin Maker (1913). Public domain.

Think about it

What does Christine accuse Charlie of?

What does she defend?

Is this the silent heroine of the formula?

Her ending

“You cannot make me come,” said the icy voice, “neither church, nor law, nor even”—and the vice softened—“nor even love can make a slave of a red girl.”

E. Pauline Johnson (Tekahionwake), “A Red Girl's Reasoning” (1893), The Moccasin Maker (1913). Public domain.

Think about it

What does she refuse?

How is this ending different from the formula?

Why does Johnson use the period term “red girl” here?

Christine's answer

On page 2:

1. For each part of the formula, show what Christine does instead.
2. Find a quotation for each.
3. Which break is the strongest?
4. Why might Johnson write this story a year after her essay?

Who tells the story?



Mrs. Stuart's version

- A scandal at the ball.
- A “wildflower” who embarrassed her husband.
- Sympathy for poor Charlie.



Johnson's version

- A defence of her mother's people's laws.
- A woman who knows her worth.
- Charlie is the one who fails.

Gender and culture both shape who gets believed.

Law and gender

Johnson's story is about whose marriage law counts. For nearly a century, the Indian Act also treated First Nations women differently: a woman who married a man without status lost her own status. Men did not.

Sandra Lovelace (Wolastoqiyik, Tobique) took her case to the UN Human Rights Committee in 1977; it ruled in her favour in 1981. Bill C-31 (1985) restored status to many women.

Exit ticket

1. Johnson's 1892 argument in one sentence.

2. One way Christine breaks the formula.

3. How would the story change if Charlie told it?

Next class: The Vanishing Myth.

Teacher reveal

The Indian girl in fiction: key points

Johnson's formula: A chief's daughter, a “Winona”-sounding first name and no surname, in love with a white hero, and usually doomed: she dies or is abandoned.

Her complaint: Authors would not let her be an individual: she must not be “one of womankind at large.”

Christine breaks it: She has a full name, a family and a voice; she argues law and honour, and she leaves her husband rather than accept his shame.

Her ending: Not death but refusal: “nor even love can make a slave of a red girl.”

Perspective: Told by Charlie or the society ladies, the story would be a scandal; told by Johnson, it is a defence of her mother's people's laws.