The Indian Girl in Fiction: Johnson's 1892 critique and her own answer

NBE3U, Unit 2: Behind the Image, Lesson 2. 75 minutes. Teacher lesson plan.

Lesson at a glance

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.

What students do: Students learn Johnson's argument in “A Strong Race Opinion” (summarized), build a checklist of the “Indian girl” formula, test “A Red Girl's Reasoning” against it, analyse how Christine refuses the script, and consider how a male, settler or female Indigenous perspective changes the story's message.

Curriculum expectations

Code	Students will…
A2.1	determine how the messages relating to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures conveyed in various contemporary and historical Indigenous text forms, and, as appropriate, in non-Indigenous texts, might change if they were presented from a range of different perspectives, and make appropriate inferences about how the viewpoint of the creator/author is shaped by factors related to historical period, gender, culture, sexual orientation, ability, and/or politics
A2.2	identify contradictions in how First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures have been depicted in various contemporary and historical Indigenous text forms, and non-Indigenous texts, and analyse the reasons for the divergence of views
C1.4	make and explain inferences of increasing subtlety about texts from First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures, and, as appropriate, relevant texts from non-Indigenous sources, including increasingly complex or difficult texts, supporting their explanations with well-chosen stated and implied ideas from the texts
C1.8	identify and analyse the perspectives and/or biases evident in texts dealing with themes, ideas, and issues related to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures, including increasingly complex or difficult texts, commenting with growing understanding on any questions they may raise about beliefs, values, identity, and power

From The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 9 to 12: First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies (2019), English: Understanding Contemporary First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Voices, Grade 11, University Preparation (NBE3U). A = First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Perspectives and Text Forms in Canada, B = Oral Communication, C = Reading and Literature Studies, D = Writing, E = Media Studies.

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Learning goals and success criteria

Learning goals	Success criteria
• We are learning how gender shaped representations of Indigenous women. • We are learning how a writer can answer a stereotype with a story.	• I can summarize Johnson's argument about the “Indian girl” of fiction. • I can identify parts of the formula in a text. • I can explain how Christine breaks the formula, with evidence. • I can explain how the story would change from another perspective.

Materials and preparation

- **Slides:** The Indian Girl in Fiction deck.
- **Handouts:** The Formula (page 1), Christine's Answer (page 2).
- **Text:** “A Red Girl's Reasoning” (1893), from the Writing Back Reader in Unit 3 or the excerpts on the slides.

Lesson sequence

Time (min)	Part	Teacher	Students	Look for
0–10	**Hook**	Spot the formula.	Discuss.	
10–25	**Johnson, 1892**	Her argument.	Note.	Accurate summary.
25–50	**The story**	Read key scenes.	Read and test.	Evidence.
50–65	**Perspective**	Retell it from another seat.	Discuss.	
65–75	**Reflect**	Write.	Write.	

Differentiation

- **Support:** Plot summary of the story before reading the excerpts.
- **ELL:** Vocabulary list: magistrate, rites, legality, scornfully.
- **Challenge:** Read the full story and find two more breaks from the formula.

Assessment

Type	Tool	Purpose
Assessment for learning	The Formula and Christine's Answer	Changing perspectives (A2.1), contradictions (A2.2), inferences (C1.4) and bias (C1.8)

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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.

Teacher notes

- Johnson's essay “A Strong Race Opinion: On the Indian Girl in Modern Fiction” appeared in the Toronto Sunday Globe on May 22, 1892. It mocks the single stereotyped “Indian girl” of settler fiction: always a chief's daughter with a “Winona”-sounding name and no surname, always in love with a white hero, and almost always doomed. Johnson, “A Strong Race Opinion: On the Indian Girl in Modern Fiction,” Toronto Sunday Globe, May 22, 1892 (paraphrased; the short phrase is from the excerpt published by Broadview Press).
- Johnson's essay names settler novels of her time; you do not need to read them. Students can find the essay through CanLit Guides (UBC) if they want to read it in full.
- “A Red Girl's Reasoning” first appeared in Dominion Illustrated (February 1893) and was collected in The Moccasin Maker (1913). Christine's mother is Indigenous and her father an English Hudson's Bay trader; the story does not name her mother's Nation, so don't assign one.
- Gender and the law: under the Indian Act until 1985, a First Nations 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 1981, and Bill C-31 (1985) restored status to many women (The Canadian Encyclopedia).
- Historical texts use the words of their time, including terms now considered offensive (for example, “Red-skin,” “savage,” “squaw,” “half-breed,” “Eskimo”). We quote accurately when analysing, explain why these terms are harmful, and use today's terms (First Nations, Métis, Inuit, Indigenous, or the specific Nation) in our own words. Readers may say “[skip]” instead of reading a slur aloud.
- We strongly recommend reviewing this unit with your board's Indigenous education lead and, where possible, inviting a First Nations, Métis or Inuit Elder, Knowledge Keeper or guest speaker following your board's protocols (including offerings and honoraria). Local Nations' own sources come first.

Coming up

Lesson 3, The Vanishing Myth.

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