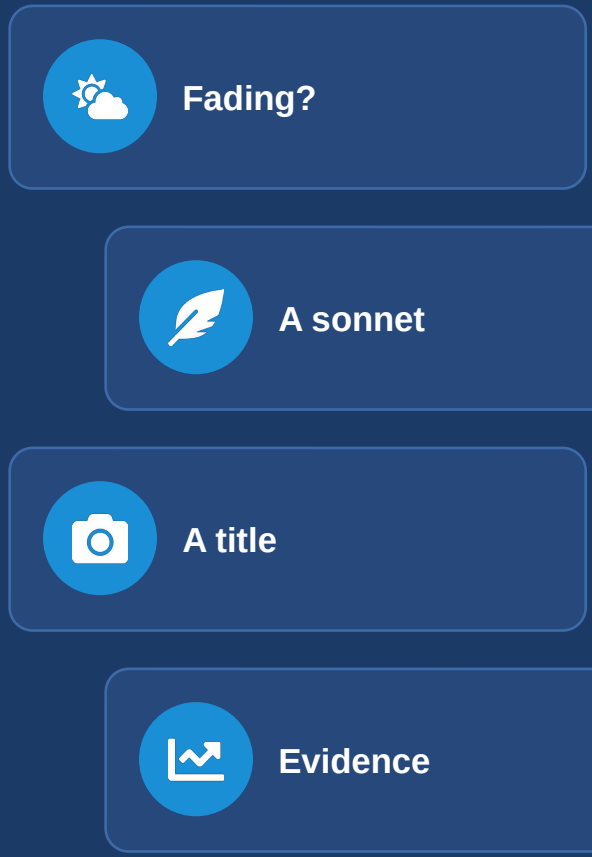
NBE3U Behind the Image, Lesson 3

The Vanishing Myth

A sonnet, a photograph and a policy



Today's goals

We are learning…

- How a literary form can carry a myth.
- To test a representation against evidence.

I can…

- Explain how the sonnet's form and turn build its message.
- Infer the attitude behind the “vanishing race” idea.
- Identify a contradiction between the myth and the evidence.
- Explain who benefited from the myth.

Today's plan

Time	What we're doing	You will…
0–8 min	**Hook**	Discuss
8–30 min	**The sonnet**	Annotate
30–45 min	**The policy**	Note
45–65 min	**Evidence**	Analyse
65–75 min	**Reflect**	Write

Warm-up

A poem calls a people a “vanishing race.” A government passes laws to absorb them. Is the poem just a poem?

Sentence starters

“A poem is just art because…”

“Words can shape laws when…”

“It depends who wrote it…”

How it works

- Pairs: 3 minutes.

Big idea

Around 1900, poets, painters and photographers agreed on one story: Indigenous peoples were a “vanishing race.” The story was false, and it was useful. If a people is fading by nature, no one has to answer for laws designed to make them disappear.

The Onondaga Madonna

She stands full-throated and with careless pose,
This woman of a weird and waning race,
The tragic savage lurking in her face,
Where all her pagan passion burns and glows;
Her blood is mingled with her ancient foes,
And thrills with war and wildness in her veins;
Her rebel lips are dabbled with the stains
Of feuds and forays and her father's woes.

And closer in the shawl about her breast,
The latest promise of her nation's doom,
Paler than she her baby clings and lies,
The primal warrior gleaming from his eyes;
He sulks, and burdened with his infant gloom,
He draws his heavy brows and will not rest.

Duncan Campbell Scott, "The Onondaga Madonna," Labor and the Angel (1898). Public domain.

The sonnet's form

sonnet	Fourteen lines, usually with a turn. *Here: eight lines on the mother, six on the baby.*
octave	The first eight lines. *The mother: “tragic,” “savage,” “waning.”*
volta (turn)	Where the poem shifts. *Line 9: from mother to baby.*
sestet	The last six lines. *The baby as “her nation's doom.”*

Read the sonnet

On page 1, in pairs:

1. Quote the key images in each part.
2. Explain what each image suggests.
3. Find the turn and explain it.
4. What future does the form allow?

The poet in power



From 1913 to 1932, Scott ran the federal Department of Indian Affairs. In 1920 he supported making residential school attendance compulsory.

He said the aim was to continue “until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic.”

The same story, everywhere

Year	Text	The message
1898	Scott, “The Onondaga Madonna” (sonnet)	A “waning race” facing “doom”
1904	Curtis, “The Vanishing Race – Navaho” (photograph)	The title itself announces an ending
1920	Scott in Parliament (policy)	Absorption until no “Indian question” remains

Show Curtis's photograph from a museum website if you can.

Test the myth

2021 Census	Count
Indigenous people in Canada	1,807,250 (5.0%)
First Nations	1,048,405
Métis	624,220
Inuit	70,545
Growth since 2016	9.4% (non-Indigenous: 5.3%)

Source: Statistics Canada, released September 21, 2022. Check for updates before teaching.

Myth vs evidence

On page 2:

1. For each claim of the myth, write the evidence.
2. Explain who benefited from the myth.
3. Answer the question about Scott.
4. Use one quotation from the sonnet.

Myth vs reality

The myth

- A people fading by nature.
- No one is responsible.
- Only the past is “authentic.”

The reality

- Peoples survived deliberate policy.
- Governments made choices.
- Nations living, growing and changing.

A myth can hide a policy.

Exit ticket

1. How the sonnet's turn carries the myth.

2. Who benefited from the “vanishing race” idea?

3. One piece of evidence against it.

Next class: Posed and Retouched.

Teacher reveal

The vanishing myth: key points

The sonnet: Fourteen lines; the octave describes the mother as “tragic,” “savage” and “waning”; the sestet turns to her baby as “the latest promise of her nation's doom.”

The form's message: Even the baby, the future, is described as an ending. The poem cannot imagine an Onondaga future.

Who benefits: If a people is vanishing naturally, no one has to answer for the policies, including Scott's own, that tried to make them disappear.

Scott's 1920 words: His department's aim was absorption “until there is not a single Indian in Canada” left as a distinct people.

The evidence: The 2021 Census counted over 1.8 million Indigenous people, growing almost twice as fast as the rest of the population.