The Vanishing Myth: A sonnet, a photograph and a policy

NBE3U, Unit 2: Behind the Image, Lesson 3. 75 minutes. Teacher lesson plan.

Lesson at a glance

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.

What students do: Students read Duncan Campbell Scott's sonnet “The Onondaga Madonna” (1898) as a fourteen-line form built around a “doomed” future, connect it to Edward Curtis's photograph title “The Vanishing Race” (1904) and to Scott's own 1920 words as head of Indian Affairs, then test the myth against census evidence.

Curriculum expectations

Code	Students will…
A2.3	make inferences of increasing subtlety about attitudes towards First Nations, Métis, and Inuit content in various contemporary and historical text forms, providing explanations that draw on a range of appropriate evidence to support their opinions
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
C2.1	identify a variety of characteristics of literary, informational, and graphic text forms, and explain, with increasing insight, how they help communicate meaning or reflect a world view
C1.6	analyse texts, including increasingly complex or difficult texts, in terms of the information, themes, ideas, and issues they explore in relation to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures, explaining with increasing insight how various aspects of the texts contribute to the presentation or development of these elements

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 a literary form can carry a myth. • We are learning to test a representation against evidence.	• I can explain how the sonnet's form and turn build its message. • I can infer the attitude behind the “vanishing race” idea. • I can identify a contradiction between the myth and the evidence. • I can explain who benefited from the myth.

Materials and preparation

- **Slides:** The Vanishing Myth deck.
- **Handouts:** Reading the Sonnet (page 1), Myth vs Evidence (page 2).
- **Optional:** Curtis's “The Vanishing Race – Navaho” (1904), viewable on museum websites (for example, the Denver Art Museum). Show it from the museum site; it is not reproduced here.

Lesson sequence

Time (min)	Part	Teacher	Students	Look for
0–8	**Hook**	Fading away?	Discuss.	
8–30	**The sonnet**	Form and images.	Annotate.	Form explained.
30–45	**The policy**	Scott, 1920.	Note.	
45–65	**Evidence**	Test the myth.	Analyse.	Contradiction identified.
65–75	**Reflect**	Write.	Write.	

Differentiation

- **Support:** Glossary: full-throated, waning, mingled, forays, primal.
- **ELL:** Focus on five images from the sonnet.
- **Challenge:** Compare Scott's sonnet with Johnson's “The Cattle Thief” (Unit 3).

Assessment

Type	Tool	Purpose
Assessment for learning	Reading the Sonnet and Myth vs Evidence	Inferring attitudes (A2.3), contradictions (A2.2), form (C2.1) and analysis (C1.6)

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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.

Teacher notes

- Duncan Campbell Scott (1862–1947) was a Confederation poet and Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs (1913–1932). In 1920, speaking in support of an Indian Act amendment that made 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” (quoted in The Canadian Encyclopedia, “Duncan Campbell Scott”).
- Edward S. Curtis (1868–1952) published The North American Indian in twenty volumes (1907–1930). His 1904 photograph is titled “The Vanishing Race – Navaho” (Denver Art Museum catalogue). He photographed Nations in the United States and parts of Canada.
- Census facts: Statistics Canada (2021 Census, released September 21, 2022) counted 1,807,250 Indigenous people, 5.0% of the population, growing 9.4% since 2016 compared with 5.3% for the non-Indigenous population. First Nations 1,048,405; Métis 624,220; Inuit 70,545. Check for updates before teaching.
- The sonnet contains stereotypes (“savage,” “pagan,” “weird and waning race”). 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.
- This course discusses colonization, residential schools and their effects. Some students and families carry this history personally. Support: Hope for Wellness Help Line (for Indigenous people across Canada, 24/7, by phone or online chat at hopeforwellness.ca; English and French, with Cree, Ojibway and Inuktut on request at certain times), 1-855-242-3310; Kids Help Phone, 1-800-668-6868 or text 686868; 9-8-8 Suicide Crisis Helpline (call or text 988); National Indian Residential School Crisis Line, 1-866-925-4419.
- 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 4, Posed and Retouched.

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