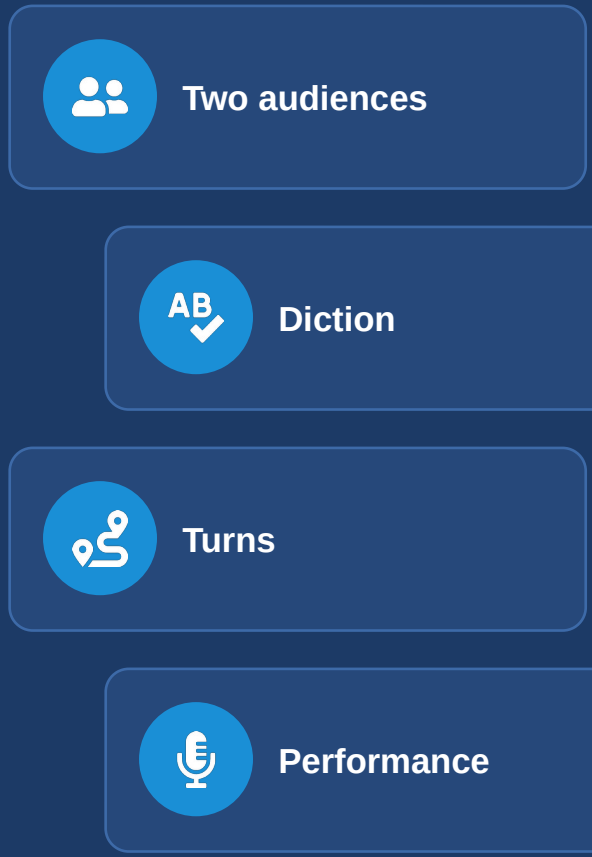
NBE3U Writing Back, Lesson 2

Two Audiences

Word choice in “A Cry from an Indian Wife”



Today's goals

We are learning…

- To analyse how word choice creates meaning for different audiences.
- To explain how a poem's structure develops its ideas.

I can…

- Explain the poem's two audiences.
- Analyse the connotations of key words.
- Explain how the turns build an argument.
- Write an analytical paragraph about diction.

Today's plan

Time	What we're doing	You will…
0–8 min	**Hook**	Discuss
8–20 min	**Read**	Listen
20–40 min	**Two audiences**	Analyse
40–60 min	**Word-choice audit**	Audit
60–75 min	**Paragraph**	Write

Warm-up



Have you ever said something to one person that was really meant for someone else who was listening?

Sentence starters

“I said it to… but I meant it for…”

“The words had to work for both because…”

“The listener I cared about most was…”

How it works

- Pairs: 2 minutes.
- Keep examples light.

Big idea

“A Cry from an Indian Wife” speaks to a Cree warrior in 1885, but it was performed for, and published to, the settlers he was riding against. Every word has two audiences. Johnson chooses words that the husband would hear one way and a Toronto audience another, and that double hearing is where the poem's argument lives.

Toronto, January 1892



At an evening of Canadian literature in Toronto, Johnson recited this poem to a room of the city's literary and political elite. It launched her career as a performer.

The poem is set in 1885, during the North-West Resistance. Imagine the room: who is listening, and how might they feel hearing a Cree wife send her husband to fight Canadian soldiers?

The first audience

My forest brave, my Red-skin love, farewell;
We may not meet to-morrow; who can tell
What mighty ills befall our little band,
Or what you'll suffer from the white man's hand?
Here is your knife! I thought 'twas sheathed for aye.
No roaming bison calls for it to-day;
No hide of prairie cattle will it maim;
The plains are bare, it seeks a nobler game:
'Twill drink the life-blood of a soldier host.
Go; rise and strike, no matter what the cost.

E. Pauline Johnson (Tekahionwake), "A Cry from an Indian Wife" (1885), Flint and Feather (1912). Public domain.

Think about it

Who is "you"?

What does the knife once cut, and what must it cut now?

Which words would a settler listener flinch at?

Praise before the claim

Yet stay. Revolt not at the Union Jack,
Nor raise Thy hand against this stripling pack
Of white-faced warriors, marching West to quell
Our fallen tribe that rises to rebel.
They all are young and beautiful and good;
Curse to the war that drinks their harmless blood.
Curse to the fate that brought them from the East
To be our chiefs—to make our nation least
That breathes the air of this vast continent.
Still their new rule and council is well meant.

E. Pauline Johnson (Tekahionwake), “A Cry from an Indian Wife” (1885), Flint and Feather (1912). Public domain.

Think about it

How does she describe the soldiers?

Why praise them first?

What does “well meant” concede, and what does it not?

The second audience

They but forget we Indians owned the land
From ocean unto ocean; that they stand
Upon a soil that centuries agone
Was our sole kingdom and our right alone.
They never think how they would feel to-day,
If some great nation came from far away,
Wresting their country from their hapless braves,
Giving what they gave us—but wars and graves.

E. Pauline Johnson (Tekahionwake), “A Cry from an Indian Wife” (1885), Flint and Feather (1912). Public domain.

Think about it

Who is this passage really addressed to?

What does “from ocean unto ocean” echo?

Why “imagine” rather than accuse?

Read it twice

On page 1, in pairs:

1. For each line, write what the husband hears.
2. Then write what a settler listener in 1892 hears.
3. Mark where the two meanings pull apart.
4. Decide which audience matters more to Johnson.

Tools for diction

diction	A writer's choice of words. *“stripling pack” rather than “soldiers.”*
connotation	The feelings a word carries beyond its meaning. *“stripling”: young, slender, inexperienced.*
apostrophe	Speaking directly to someone who is absent or silent. *The husband never answers.*
rhetorical question	A question asked for effect. *“Who prays for our poor nation lying low?”*

The other women

Yet stay, my heart is not the only one
That grieves the loss of husband and of son;
Think of the mothers o’er the inland seas;
Think of the pale-faced maiden on her knees;
One pleads her God to guard some sweet-faced child
That marches on toward the North-West wild.
The other prays to shield her love from harm,
To strengthen his young, proud uplifted arm.
Ah, how her white face quivers thus to think,
Your tomahawk his life’s best blood will drink.

E. Pauline Johnson (Tekahionwake), “A Cry from an Indian Wife” (1885), Flint and Feather (1912). Public domain.

Think about it

Who are the “mothers o'er the inland seas”?

What does the speaker share with them?

Why does this make her pause?

Audit the words

On page 2:

1. Choose six words or phrases from anywhere in the poem.
2. Give the dictionary meaning.
3. Rate the connotation: positive, negative or mixed.
4. Explain who each word flatters or accuses.

The last word

O! coward self I hesitate no more;
Go forth, and win the glories of the war.
Go forth, nor bend to greed of white men’s hands,
By right, by birth we Indians own these lands,
Though starved, crushed, plundered, lies our nation low...
Perhaps the white man’s God has willed it so.

E. Pauline Johnson (Tekahionwake), “A Cry from an Indian Wife” (1885), Flint and Feather (1912). Public domain.

Think about it

Which line is a legal claim?

Which line is a question in disguise?

Who decides what the last line means?

Another voice from 1885

He said that if he had to die for what had taken place, it would be a consolation to his wife and to his friends to know that he had not died in vain. In years to come people will look at Manitoba and say that Riel helped the dwellers of those fertile plains to obtain the benefits they now enjoy.

Louis Riel's words at his sentencing (August 1, 1885), as reported in The Story of Louis Riel: The Rebel Chief (1885), attributed to J. E. Collins. Public domain.

Think about it

Whose words are these, really?

Where do you hear the reporter rather than Riel?

How does reported speech change a voice?

Model: a diction paragraph

Task: How does word choice let the poem speak to two audiences?

Johnson's speaker describes the soldiers as a “stripling pack” who are “young and beautiful and good,” words a Toronto audience in 1892 could accept with pride. Yet the same words make the soldiers sound like boys sent to a war they do not understand. Having earned her listeners' sympathy, the speaker asks them to imagine “some great nation” taking their own land. The gentle diction is a strategy: it lowers the audience's guard before the poem's claim that “by right, by birth” the land is hers.

Why it works

- Quotes short phrases.
- Names the audience and the date.
- Explains the strategy, not just the meaning.

Exit ticket

1. The poem's two audiences.

2. One word with a double meaning, and why.

3. Why praise the soldiers first?

Next class: The Ballad Turned.

Teacher reveal

Two audiences: key points

Audience 1: The husband: urged to fight, then held back, then sent.

Audience 2: Settler listeners in Toronto and readers of the collections, who are asked to see the war from the other side.

Diction: “stripling pack,” “young and beautiful and good”: generous to the soldiers, which earns trust before the claim.

Turns: “Yet stay” twice; each turn adds a new argument: empathy, then rights, then shared grief.

Imagine: Lines 24–27 ask settlers to picture a nation “from far away” taking their land.

Ending: “By right, by birth” is a legal claim; “Perhaps the white man's God has willed it so” leaves the audience to judge.