The Ballad Turned: Form and point of view in “The Cattle Thief”

NBE3U, Unit 3: Writing Back, Lesson 3. 75 minutes. Teacher lesson plan.

Lesson at a glance

Frontier ballads made settlers the heroes and Indigenous people the villains. In “The Cattle Thief,” Johnson borrows that galloping form and its point of view, then turns both inside out. The form is the trap: by the time readers notice whose side the poem is on, they have already been carried along.

What students do: Students identify the features of the frontier ballad, read the poem aloud, track the shift in point of view, write two opposing newspaper headlines for the same event, and evaluate how effectively the poem's ending makes its argument.

Curriculum expectations

Code	Students will…
C2.2	identify a variety of features of texts from First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures, and, as appropriate, relevant texts from non-Indigenous sources, and explain, with increasing insight, how they help communicate meaning or reflect a world view
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
C1.7	evaluate the effectiveness of texts from First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures, and, as appropriate, relevant texts from non-Indigenous sources, including increasingly complex or difficult texts, using evidence from the text to support their opinions

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.

Learning goals and success criteria

Learning goals	Success criteria
• We are learning to analyse how a writer uses and changes a familiar form. • We are learning to evaluate the effectiveness of a text with evidence.	• I can identify features of a ballad and their effects. • I can make inferences about the shift in point of view. • I can explain how two headlines frame one event. • I can evaluate the ending with evidence.

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Materials and preparation

- **Slides:** The Ballad Turned deck.
- **Handouts:** Ballad Features and Headlines (page 1), Evaluate the Ending (page 2).
- **Reader:** “The Cattle Thief.”

Lesson sequence

Time (min)	Part	Teacher	Students	Look for
0–8	**Hook**	Heroes and outlaws.	Discuss.	
8–22	**Read**	Aloud, with rhythm.	Listen.	
22–40	**Form**	Ballad features.	Chart.	Features linked to effects.
40–55	**Headlines**	One event, two papers.	Write.	Framing explained.
55–75	**Evaluate**	The ending.	Argue.	Evidence-based judgment.

Differentiation

- **Support:** Feature chart partly filled with line numbers.
- **ELL:** Headline frames: “___ Shot / ___ Starved.”
- **Challenge:** Compare with a popular frontier ballad or Western film scene.

Assessment

Type	Tool	Purpose
Assessment for learning	Headlines and evaluation	Text features (C2.2), inferences (C1.4) and evaluation (C1.7)

The ballad turned: key points

- **Ballad features:** Long galloping lines, a chase, a named hero or outlaw, repetition (“hard and fast,” “sighted their man at last”).
- **Borrowed point of view:** The first stanza sounds like the settlers' own ballad: “That terror to all the settlers.”
- **The turn:** The feared raider steps out unarmed: “starved to the bone and old.”
- **Second voice:** His daughter speaks “in the language of the Cree” and takes over the poem.
- **Headlines:** “Notorious Cattle Thief Shot” vs “Starving Elder Killed on Open Plain”: framing chooses the hero.
- **Evaluation:** The ending works because it turns the settlers' language of theft back on them: “When you pay for the land you live in, we'll pay for the meat we eat.”

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Teacher notes

- Before reading, name the content (boarding and residential schools, separation from family, loss) and remind students they may step out, pass, or talk privately. 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.
- “The Cattle Thief” was collected in The White Wampum (1895) and Flint and Feather (1912). It is set on the prairies after the buffalo herds were destroyed and many Cree families faced starvation.
- The poem includes violent images (the settlers' threat to mutilate the body) and period slurs. Read lines 30–35 with a content note, or summarize them. 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 4, Christie's Argument.

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