The Civilizing Machine: Metaphor and precise words in “Iron Routine”

NBE3U, Unit 3: Writing Back, Lesson 8. 75 minutes. Teacher lesson plan.

Lesson at a glance

Zitkála-Šá calls her school an “iron routine” and a “civilizing machine.” The metaphor does an argument's work: a machine has no heart, does not stop for a sick child, and turns out identical products. Analysing her word choices, and choosing our own words precisely, is how we show how style carries meaning.

What students do: Students read “Iron Routine,” sort machine images from nature images, build a vocabulary bank of precise words from the text, revise weak analytical sentences with stronger verbs and vivid, exact language, and write a paragraph on the essay's central metaphor.

Curriculum expectations

Code	Students will…
C2.3	identify a variety of elements of style in texts from First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures, and, as appropriate, in relevant texts from non-Indigenous sources, and explain, with increasing insight, how they help communicate meaning or reflect a world view and enhance the effectiveness of the text
D2.3	use appropriate descriptive and evocative words, phrases, and expressions imaginatively to make their writing clear, vivid, and interesting for their intended audience
C3.3	use a variety of strategies, with increasing regularity, to explore and expand vocabulary, focusing on words and phrases that have particular significance for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities and evaluating the precision with which these words are used in the texts they are reading

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 metaphor and imagery carry an argument. • We are learning to use precise, vivid words in our own analytical writing.	• I can identify the machine metaphor and the nature images. • I can explain how the metaphor makes an argument. • I can add precise words from the text to my vocabulary. • I can revise sentences with strong verbs and exact words.

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Materials and preparation

- **Slides:** The Civilizing Machine deck.
- **Handouts:** Machine and Nature (page 1), Sharpen the Verbs (page 2).
- **Reader:** Zitkála-Šá, “Iron Routine.”

Lesson sequence

Time (min)	Part	Teacher	Students	Look for
0–6	**Hook**	Routines.	Discuss.	
6–20	**Read**	“Iron Routine.”	Read.	
20–38	**Images**	Machine vs nature.	Sort.	Metaphor explained.
38–50	**Vocabulary**	Precise words.	Bank.	
50–75	**Write**	Sharpen the verbs; paragraph.	Revise and write.	Vivid, exact language.

Differentiation

- **Support:** A word bank of strong analytical verbs.
- **ELL:** Pictures for harness, roll call, consumption, seashell.
- **Challenge:** Track the machine metaphor in other industrial-age writing.

Assessment

Type	Tool	Purpose
Assessment for learning	Machine and Nature chart; revised sentences	Style (C2.3), vivid word choice (D2.3) and vocabulary (C3.3)

The civilizing machine: key points

- **Machine words:** “iron routine,” “civilizing machine,” “buzzing,” “day's harness,” “smoothly grinding,” “pencils that moved automatically.”
- **Nature words:** “Western rolling lands,” “the moaning wind,” “a curiously colored seashell.”
- **The argument:** A machine does not notice a sick child; the school's routine mattered more than the children.
- **The classmate:** Her death is met with a Bible and one teaspoon of medicine for everyone: care replaced by procedure.
- **The ending:** Her grief speaks softly, like a seashell, “only for those ears that are bent with compassion.” She tells readers how to listen.
- **Precise verbs:** Not “shows” but “indicts,” “exposes,” “mechanizes,” “reduces.”

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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 essay describes the death of a classmate from illness, likely tuberculosis (“consumption”). Many children died at boarding and residential schools; the TRC's records document thousands of deaths in Canada. Name this before reading.
- “Iron Routine” is a section of “The School Days of an Indian Girl” (Atlantic Monthly, 1900).
- 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 9, Retrospection.

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