The Fire-Boat: Who studies whom in Eastman's “First Impressions of Civilization”

NBE3U, Unit 3: Writing Back, Lesson 11. 75 minutes. Teacher lesson plan.

Lesson at a glance

Settler writers studied Indigenous peoples as curiosities. In the last chapter of Indian Boyhood, Eastman's uncle studies white Americans: people who measure everything and charge guests for dinner. Then the boy's father arrives in white men's clothes, and his life turns. Readers feel the strangeness from the other side.

What students do: Students read the chapter, infer the boy's feelings about the “fire-boat-walks-on-mountains,” analyse the uncle's observations of the “Big Knives,” compare that perspective with Duncan Campbell Scott's view of an Onondaga woman, and make inferences about how the adult Eastman wants readers to feel about his leaving.

Curriculum expectations

Code	Students will…
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
C1.8	identify and analyse the perspectives and/or biases evident in texts dealing with themes, ideas, and issues related to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures, including increasingly complex or difficult texts, commenting with growing understanding on any questions they may raise about beliefs, values, identity, and power
A1.6	compare multiple perspectives on themes, ideas, and issues related to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit identities, relationships, and self-determination, sovereignty, or self-governance, as reflected in various texts from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous sources

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 to make inferences about a narrator's feelings and a writer's purpose. • We are learning to compare perspectives from Indigenous and non-Indigenous sources.	• I can infer the boy's feelings using details. • I can explain what the uncle's observations reveal about both peoples. • I can compare the uncle's perspective with Scott's. • I can infer the adult writer's purpose.

Materials and preparation

- **Slides:** The Fire-Boat deck.
- **Handouts:** Who Studies Whom? (page 1), Two Gazes (page 2).
- **Reader:** Eastman, “First Impressions of Civilization” (excerpts); Scott, “The Onondaga Madonna.”

Lesson sequence

Time (min)	Part	Teacher	Students	Look for
0–8	**Hook**	A visitor's eyes.	Discuss.	
8–28	**Read**	The chapter.	Read.	
28–45	**The uncle**	Who studies whom?	Analyse.	Perspective explained.
45–60	**Two gazes**	Uncle and Scott.	Compare.	Perspectives compared.
60–75	**The father**	Inference.	Discuss and write.	

Differentiation

- **Support:** Excerpts with paragraph summaries.
- **ELL:** Picture of a 19th-century steamboat and locomotive; glossary for wakan, coup, Big Knives.
- **Challenge:** Read Eastman's later memoir title, From the Deep Woods to Civilization (1916), and predict its argument.

Assessment

Type	Tool	Purpose
Assessment for learning	Who Studies Whom? and Two Gazes	Inferences (C1.4), perspectives and bias (C1.8) and comparing perspectives (A1.6)

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The fire-boat: key points

- **The fire-boat:** A steamboat; the “fire-boat-walks-on-mountains” is a train. The boy is relieved it “cannot chase us into any rough country.”
- **The uncle's study:** White people want “to acquire possessions,” “measure everything,” and make guests pay for food.
- **What it reveals:** Dakota values of sharing and hospitality, seen through what shocks the uncle.
- **Two gazes:** Scott describes a silent woman as “weird and waning”; the uncle analyses a whole society with reasons and examples.
- **The father:** He returns in white clothes, converted, and asks his son to learn “this new way.”
- **Writer's purpose:** “I felt as if I were dead and traveling to the Spirit Land”: Eastman wants readers to feel the cost of the change he chose.

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.
- Eastman calls the conflict of 1862 “the terrible Minnesota massacre.” It is now usually called the U.S.–Dakota War of 1862. His father was imprisoned at Davenport, Iowa, and later released; the family had believed him dead.
- Two paragraphs in which the uncle speaks about slavery are omitted from the Reader and slides; they include a racist idea about Black people that would need its own careful discussion. If students read the full chapter elsewhere, address it directly.
- Duncan Campbell Scott (1862–1947), poet and senior official of Indian Affairs (1913–1932), wrote “The Onondaga Madonna” (1898). Use it only as a contrasting gaze. 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.
- Zitkála-Šá (Yankton Dakota) and Charles Eastman (Santee Dakota) wrote in the United States. Dakota homelands cross today's border, and Eastman spent his boyhood in exile in Manitoba after the U.S.–Dakota War of 1862. Their accounts of U.S. boarding schools are context for, not the same as, Canada's residential school system.
- 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 12, Speaking to Power.

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