

5.1 Native Poetry: An Introduction

Until very recently, Emily Pauline Johnson was one of only a few Native poets included in the mainstream Canadian curriculum. During the late nineteenth century, Pauline Johnson made her living by giving live performances of her work. She was well-known on the vaudeville circuit, and while she tried to maintain her artistic integrity, she begrudgingly admitted to writing for and playing to her audiences (Petronne 82). For performance purposes, she often wore a buckskin outfit and a beaded necklace, and preferred to be billed as Tekahionwake (Smoky Haze of an Indian Summer), the Mohawk Princess.

Because of the performance aspect of her poetry, much of Pauline Johnson's poetry is narrative. She also adopted the Western structure of Victorian prose. Her audiences were primarily non-Native. She was one of the most popular performing artists of her time and travelled extensively throughout the United States, Canada, and Europe. Johnson died in 1913, and in 1961, a commemorative stamp was issued in honour of her accomplishments as a Canadian writer. Despite the British style and structure of her work, the content of Johnson's literature was primarily concerned with Native people and the Native causes of her time. She wrote about the injustices imposed upon Native people as a result of colonization, and she often performed these emotional narratives in front of politicians and British royalty. Emily Pauline Johnson was an important figure in the development of Native literature in Canada.

Modern Native poetry began to emerge in the early 1970s as a direct result of the political action taking place in the United States and Canada. *The White Paper*, which was proposed by the Liberal government in 1969, threatened to eliminate the status of First Nations people in Canada. This proposed change to the *Indian Act* united Native people across the country. Robbie Robertson, Mary Carpeñter, Harold Cardinal, and Buffy Sainte-Marie began producing poetry, music, and essays that created an awareness of racist government policies. Well-known poets such as Duke Redbird penned strong, positive affirmations concerning Native identity. At the same time, other poets such as Rita Joe and Chief Dan George used a more gentle voice to express ideas related to cultural alienation, traditional knowledge, and Native issues. Since then, a whole new generation of Native poets has emerged.

By the 1980s, political themes began giving way to more personal themes, which have been carried through to the present. In addition, notable ties to the oral tradition were strengthened and both tribal and individual voices have emerged. The poems selected for this unit reflect the diversity of the Native writers in terms of culture, use of language, and overall creative style. It includes works by Pauline Johnson as well as newer pieces by Daniel David Moses and Marilyn Dumont.

Any analysis of poetry begins with one's personal emotional response to the poem and a grasp of the poet's primary message. Many poets still perform their work through oral readings and are able to convey additional meaning through their expression of emotion in the oral delivery. When reading a poem, it is a good idea to start your analysis by jotting down your personal responses to the following key questions:

Poetry
Themes/Issues

- injustices imposed on F.O.P. as a result of colonization
- performance as emotional narratives
- racist government policies
- affirmations about Native identity, cultural alienation, traditional knowledge

Ties to oral tradition:

- poetry strengthens these
- emergence of tribal + individual voices.