

Historica Canada Education Portal

Pauline Johnson

Overview

This lesson is based on viewing the Pauline Johnson biography from [The Canadians](#) series. Pauline Johnson astounded audiences all over the world with her performances of poetry, comedy, and plays. The daughter of an Indigenous-Canadian father and an American mother, Johnson did not embody the stereotype of a Mohawk woman in the early nineteenth century.

Aims

In the following activities, students will learn about Pauline Johnson by researching the connections between her life and written work. Students are also encouraged to relate Pauline Johnson's experiences to the lives of other women in her time and to other historical Aboriginal individuals.

Background

Emily Pauline Johnson, the second daughter of a Mohawk chief and his American wife, expressed herself in a society where women did not speak out. She was an Indigenous rights activist at a time when most people believed Indigenous Canadians and Americans were a dying

race.

Charming, headstrong, witty – her exuberant, extroverted personality was the foundation, which supported her vaulting ambition to become a celebrated poet. She began writing poetry at a very young age. Using the Mohawk name "Tekahionwage," Pauline published six original collections of her works. She was not, however, representative of the average female writer of the time. Pauline travelled as a single woman and made a living as an independent person. Ignoring the Victorian attitudes in the still-young country, she became a mesmerizing performer with an international audience. From the stage at Steinway Hall in London, England to the top of a billiards table in a room full of British Columbia miners, her words and images captivated listeners.

Many famous people enjoyed her theatrics and valued her friendship, including Sir Wilfrid Laurier and Nellie McClung. Pauline Johnson was a socially aware woman who dared to speak her opinions in any company and was clearly proud of her heritage. The *New York Sun* called her "perhaps the most unique figure in the literary world on this continent." To *Canadian Magazine* she was "the most popular figure in Canadian literature." Her career was one of the most remarkable in the history of North American theatre, but it represents only part of her story. Pauline Johnson's life consistently defies our expectations.

Her personal life was a journey filled with incredible highs and lows, and contemporary audiences will be astonished by the events of her life and the challenges she faced. Pauline spoke out passionately on behalf of Canada, and became famous as "The Mohawk Princess." She was uncomfortable with the stereotypes but drew enormous strength from her Indigenous ancestry. Hers is a story of two worlds embodied in one extraordinary individual.

Activities

Time Allowance: 1 - 4 hours

Procedures:

1. Organize your students into small groups to research and create a timeline of the events occurring in the world at the time of Pauline Johnson's life. Students can report to the rest of the class the types of events that would have influenced peoples' perceptions of Pauline as a Canadian Indigenous woman.
2. Use the [Historica Canada Heritage Minutes](#) as a contrasting portfolio of images and depiction of First Nations people by consulting the "Peacemaker," "Louis Riel" and "Sitting Bull" Minutes. Students could write a storyboard or videotape a Minute about Pauline Johnson. Direct your students to identify other Indigenous people who could be depicted in a Heritage Minute.
3. Map her travels! Pauline Johnson travelled extensively performing for many people in many countries. Students can produce a map that documents her travels from her home in Brantford and later from her home in Vancouver. Encourage students to draw symbols to represent what would have been happening in the various places Pauline visited. Direct your students to research the famous people she may have met on her travels.
4. After reviewing the techniques involved in interviewing and reporting for the media, call on your students to produce a news article or modern

television interview featuring Pauline Johnson. Tape a television interview show with one of your students role-playing Pauline Johnson. You will also need a host, a panel of questioners, and audience members who have questions to ask.

5. There is evidence of posters and tickets which promote Pauline's appearance at various venues. Students can produce posters from the time that advertise Pauline's appearance at a particular performance. For more types of posters and various other visuals from the time period please view the [Pauline Johnson Archive](#).

6. One of the most engaging ways of learning history is to connect students with primary sources by making them feel a part of the material. Students could memorize and recite one of Pauline's works in a dramatic fashion. Discussion could follow indicating the student's analysis of the work in terms of the issues, themes, or symbols present in the poetry or story. Students can also construct their own story or poetry that they feel depicts Canada, Canadian themes, or symbols after the class brainstorms a list of ideas on the chalkboard.

7. Students can also connect with the material present in the video through writing a diary entry as if they are Pauline Johnson. Encourage students to identify thoughts and feelings that Pauline may have written about during a certain stage in her life. Try to be specific about the time, place, and circumstances.

8. Research skills are very important for students and after viewing a video can assist students in identifying the difference between factual information and fiction. Students can also gain a deeper insight into the works of authors during various time periods. By researching the background of one of Pauline's pieces of literature, students could

produce a visual, which would illustrate the various influences on her including the actual places and people. An example is "The Caribou Trail" poem, which Pauline wrote after travelling the Caribou Trail in British Columbia. Visit [CanLit Guides](#) to read some of her work.

9. Pauline did not meet the typical expectations for a woman of her time. Make a chart comparing her choices and actions to the choices other women made in terms of appearance, career, hobbies/leisure activities, and lifestyle. Students may want to do additional research into other women of Pauline's time.

Resources

[Pauline Johnson Worksheet](#)

[Pauline Johnson - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

Brant, Beth. *Writing as Witness, Essay and Talk*. Toronto: Women's

Press, 1994.

Keller, Betty. *Pauline, a Biography of Pauline Johnson*. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1981.

Lyon, George W. *Pauline Johnson: a Reconsideration*. *Studies in Literature*, vol 66, no. 2, 1992.

McRae, Walter. *Pauline Johnson and Her Friends*. Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1947.

Johnson, Pauline E. *The White Wampum*. London: John Lane, 1895.

Johnson, Pauline E. *Canadian Born*. Toronto: Musson, 1903.

Johnson, Pauline E. *Flint and Feather: the Complete Poems of E. Pauline Johnson (Tekahionwage)*. Toronto: Musson, 1912.

Johnson, Pauline E. *Legends of Vancouver*. Vancouver: Thompson Stationary Co., 1911.

Johnson, Pauline E. *Shagwanapi*. Toronto: Briggs, 1913.

Johnson, Pauline E. *The Moccasin Maker*. Toronto: Briggs, 1913.

[The Pauline Johnson Archive](#)