

ASSIGNMENT 60/0

RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS

Read the section and
complete Q # 6

* NOTE Q# 7 IS AT LEAST
1/2 PAGE



Lesson 6

In this lesson you will be focusing on relationships as expressed in literature between a speaker or a narrator and a listener/reader. Think about texts you have read that sound as though the narrator is *actually* speaking to you. These are the types of texts you will be studying.

Before you begin Assignment 6.1 you will need some background information on residential schools. Although you may be aware of some of the issues surrounding residential schools, this article will help to provide you with a summary of the concerns raised with regards to residential schools.

Residential Schools

Long before Europeans came to North America, aboriginal people had a highly developed system of education. If you think of how difficult it must have been for aboriginal people to survive by earning a living from the land, you may realize that there was a great deal for aboriginal children to learn before they could survive on their own. Aboriginal elders and parents passed on not only survival skills to their children, but their history, artistic ability, music, language, moral and religious values.

When European missionaries began to live amongst aboriginal people, they concluded that the sooner they could separate children from their parents, the sooner they could prepare aboriginal people to live in a civilized (i.e. European) lifestyle. Residential schools were established for two reasons: separation of the children from the family and the belief that aboriginal culture was not worth preserving. Most people concluded that aboriginal culture was useless and dying and all human beings would eventually develop and change to be like the 'advanced' European civilization.

Early residential schools were similar to religious missions. Later, the mission-run schools were administered jointly by Canadian churches and the federal government, and for a number of years, residential schools became official Canadian policy for the education of Indian children. Speaking no English, having never ridden in a car or truck, having never eaten anything other than meat, fish, bannock and perhaps the occasional sweet treat, aboriginal children as young as six left the world of their families and were sent into the unfamiliar world of the white man.

Children were usually rounded up in August and transported by train, plane or bus to the residential schools. They were separated from their brothers, sisters and friends and herded together according to age level. They were issued clothes and assigned a bed number. Even though many of the children could not speak English, the supervisors spoke only English to them. The children were, in fact, punished for speaking their native languages. For as long as a year, and occasionally for several years, children were unable to express to anyone in authority what their basic needs were. Loneliness, sickness, confusions and abuse all had to be borne in lonely silence.

Many things combined to make the experience difficult for young aboriginal children. They included the suffocating heat of the buildings; the painful need for someone to talk to; the pain of separation from their families; the bad tasting, indigestible food; the size and unfamiliarity of the buildings; the frightening crowds of people; the

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concentration-camp style discipline; mental and physical abuse; and the continual loss of personal freedoms and individual control. All of this must have been a staggering shock to the new “student”.

The white man’s school contradicted everything these aboriginal children had learned at home. Aboriginal society placed a large measure of responsibility on children’s shoulders. They were expected to help with jobs such as tending the nets, feeding the dogs, cutting and hauling wood, cutting up meat and fish for drying. The school demanded very little in comparison. A child had no responsibility for the well-being of others. At residential school, the aboriginal child became no one’s keeper, not even his own.

Some children were able to return home for two short summer months. Parents found that they had changed. Children were no longer interested in helping the family with tasks such as carrying water and other chores. They had to be told everything, and they often refused to “listen.” Instead they “talked back” and in general tended to spend time with children their own age who also attended residential school. Parents noted that frequent, violent arguments (very foreign to most aboriginal cultures) arose and that children seemed as unconcerned about hurting others as they were unwilling to obey elders.

Even more difficult for parents was the children’s loss of ability to speak their own language. After several years away at school, children often found it difficult to speak their mother tongue. Parents felt left out when the children spoke English and wondered if their sons and daughters were talking about things they didn’t want their parents to understand. Children used English when they were angry and so English became associated with bad feelings and strong language.

The most damaging part of residential schools, from an aboriginal perspective, was that children were taught that their culture was not worth preserving. Students learned that aboriginal traditional values were wrong and primitive, and that white Canadians came from a more “advanced” form of social organization. Students came to see their homes as “dirty” and “cold,” their parents as dressing “funny” and as smelling “bad.” Students began to believe that the ceremonies and rituals, which harmonized the spiritual and social life of the community and gave its members a sense of personal significance and group identity, were “heathen” and “the work of the Devil.” The organization of the schools and the content of the curriculum conveyed to aboriginal children that the human values, the political institutions, the spiritual practices and the economic strategies of other Canadians were infinitely superior to the “primitive” ways of their traditional lifestyles.

It was disorienting for aboriginal children to spend the first (formative) years of life living in a traditional aboriginal way, and then to be thrust into a foreign, concentration-camp style school. Residential school disrupted the smooth transmission of beliefs, skills, and knowledge from one generation to the next, and deliberately divorced the aboriginal child from her background by discrediting her culture, punishing her for speaking her language and preaching the superiority of European attitudes. The experience often caused severe, and in many cases, unalterable damage to the child, to the family and to the community to which she would eventually return

There were some positive aspects to residential schools. Without them, most of the students would never have learned to read and write, or learn about other ways of life

than their own. It was not education itself that was bad. It was that the manner in which the residential schools were organized were simply not sensitive to the needs or lifestyle of the aboriginal students.

By the 1950s, the Canadian government began to realize the residential school policy was a failure. The last residential school in Canada was closed some 30 years later.

Today, aboriginal people want recognition of what was done to their communities as a result of the residential schools. Aboriginal people have demanded, and received, official apologies from the Anglican, United and Roman Catholic churches which operated residential schools. As more and more former students of residential schools come forth with stories about the sexual and physical abuse they experienced, several religious authorities who administered the schools are being charged criminally.

The residential school experience continues to plague First Nations education. Many people who attended residential schools, now parents and grandparents, have biases against education for their children because of what they experienced. Furthermore, while the closure of residential schools meant that more and more aboriginal children began to attend regular schools, provincial education curriculums did not change to reflect the educational needs of aboriginal children. Today, the cross-Canada average of the percentage of aboriginal children that complete Grade 12 is about 20%, and even lower in northern regions. Aboriginal children continue to have difficulties fitting in to the existing schools, which are still designed around a culture alien to their own.

Many First Nations are taking over the running of their schools from the government. By designing their own curriculums and running their own schools, aboriginal people intend to reclaim the education of their children and put the residential school experience in the past.

Assignment 6.1

Read the following poem by Micmac poet, Rita Joe.

“I Lost My Talk”
by Rita Joe

I lost my talk
The talk you took away
When I was a little girl
At Shubenacadie school

You snatched it away:
I speak like you
I think like you
I create like you
The scrambled ballad, about my word

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Two ways I talk
Both ways I say,
Your way is more powerful.

So gently I offer my hand and ask,
Let me find my talk
So I can teach you about me.

2. Pretend you are an aboriginal student at a residential school. Write a letter (minimum of 150 words) to your family at home. Describe to them what the school is like, what type of daily tasks you have been asked to perform, what your opinion is of the administrators (mainly clergy), and what (if anything) you miss about home. (10 marks)
3. What is the poet's opinion of the residential school? What type of emotions is she expressing when she remembers the school? What does she feel she has lost? How does she hope to change the future? (7 marks)
4. Look carefully at the conversational style of the poem. What is the relationship between "you" and "I" in the poem? In other words, who is the "you" and "I" that the poet is referring to? (2 marks)
5. Compare the importance of orally passed on stories versus written stories. How does this affect Aboriginal people? (3 marks)
6. In your opinion, what is the role of Aboriginal languages? Should Aboriginal literature be written in an Indigenous language rather than in English? Why or why not? (5 marks)

It wasn't long after European settlement in Canada that some unscrupulous people felt they could make money exploiting Aboriginals. Some Natives were kidnapped and taken to Europe where they were put on display as oddities for the paying public to see. Read Harry Robinson's poem "Captive in an English Circus". You will need to obtain a copy of An Anthology of Canadian Native Literature in English. You will find Robinson's poem on page 54. While you are reading consider the writing style used by the poet.

Assignment 6.2

Examine Harry Robinson's writing style in "Captive in an English Circus". How does the oral voice come through in the writing of this particular narrative? What techniques and devices does Robinson use to illustrate the oral voice? Be sure to cite examples from the poem. (3 marks)