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The Johnston Sisters: A Primary Source-Based Lesson on Intersections Between Indigeneity, Femininity, and Imperialism in Early Nineteenth-Century North America

In this lesson students learn about the complex intersections between race, gender and imperialism in early nineteenth-century North America by analyzing the following primary sources: two poems by Jane Johnston Schoolcraft entitled "Pensive Hours" and "From an *Ojibwa Female* Pen" (both circa 1820, published in *The Sound the Stars Make Rushing Through the Sky,* edit by Robert Dale Parker) and an excerpt from Thomas McKenney's *Lakes Sketches of a Tour to the Lakes, of the Character and Customs of the Chippeway Indians, and of Incidents Connected with The Treaty of Fond du Lac* (1827). The lesson would be appropriate for the Indian Removal portion of a US History survey course or for courses on Native American, U.S. foreign policy/imperialism, and the histories of women and gender. Jane Johnston Schoolcraft was a pioneering Indigenous literary writer little known in her own time but recently rightfully resurrected by literary scholars. She was born on what is now the Upper peninsula of Michigan to a high-born Ojibwe mother skilled in diplomacy and a British fur trader father. Her husband was Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, the U.S. ambassador ("Indian agent") to the Ojibwes of the Michigan Territory. McKenney was the Superintendent of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the office within the Department of War responsible for the diplomacy with and "management" of American Indians' non-state polities (variously known as tribes, nations, and bands). Despite serving in the Bureau for several years, in 1826 McKenney had not actually traveled deep into Indian Country. That summer he finally did so, serving as one of the commissioners at a major treaty council in what is now Wisconsin. Upon returning to Wisconsin McKenney published his travel journal. This excerpt documents his meeting with Jane Johnston Schoolcraft and her sisters at their home in Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan.

Discussion Questions

1. Jane Johnston Schoolcraft was the age of a college student when she wrote these poems. How can you tell that the texts reflect the experience and concerns of someone at your own stage of life? What are "pensive hours"?
2. How does Schoolcraft depict family life in these poems?
3. How do you think Schoolcraft conceived of her female gender identity? How did this relate to her identity as an Ojibwe woman?
4. How does Schoolcraft portray relationships between human beings and the natural world in these poems, for example in her depiction of the St. Mary's Rapids?
5. Some Native Americans argued that Native people could not adopt White cultural forms such as Christianity without surrendering their Indigenous identities. Do you think Schoolcraft agreed or disagreed with this position? How can you tell?
6. How would you describe the impression McKenney wants to give his White, East Coast readers of Jane Johnston Schoolcraft and her sisters?
7. How does McKenney view the sisters' femininity and its relation to their indigeneity? How does it compare to the impression you get about these matters from the Schoolcraft poems?
8. What do you think McKenney means with his final statement about the potential significance of the Johnston sisters for future federal policies toward Native Americans?

9. McKenney stayed on in his role at the Bureau of Indian Affairs under President Andrew Jackson and became a public supporter of Jackson's controversial Indian Removal policy. Do you find this surprising? Why or why not?

Pensive Hours

The sun had sunk like a glowing ball,
As lonely I sat in my father's hall;
I walk'd to the window, and musing awhile,
The still, pensive moments I sought to beguile;
Just by me, ran smoothly the dark deep stream,
And bright silver rays on its breast did beam;--
And as with mild luster the vestal orb rose,
All nature betokened a holy repose,
Save the Sound of St. Mary's—that softly and clear
Still fell in sweet murmurs upon my pleas'd ear
Like the murmur of voices we know to be kind,
Or war's silken banners unfurled to the wind,
Now rising, like shouts of the proud daring foe,
Now falling, like whispers congenial and low.
Amidst such a scene, thoughts arose in my mind;
Of my father, far distant—of life, and mankind;
But slowing, receding—with awe most profound
They rested on God, and his works spread around,
Divine meditation!—and tear drops like dew—
Now moisten'd my hand,--for His mercy I knew:
Since even a leaf cannot wither and die,
Unknown to his care, or unseen by his eye;
Oh how much more then, will he hear when we mourn,
And heal the pierced heart that by anguish is torn,
When he sees that the soul to His will loves to bend,
And patiently suffers and waits to the end.
Such thoughts—the lone moments serenely employed,
Creating contentment and peace unalloyed— Till
roused by my harp—which so tremblingly true,
The soft balmy night breeze enchantingly blew,
The sounds to my heart as they vibrated clear,
Thrill'd sweetly and carried the melody tried,
Softer and sweeter the harmony rings,
I fanceyed some spirit was touching the strings,
And answered, or seemed to my hopes, thus to say,
Let thy Soul live in hope, mortal:--watch still and pray.
A holy tranquility spread o'er my mind.

By an *Ojibwa Female* Pen

Invitation to sisters to walk in the Garden, after a shower

Come, sisters come! the shower's past,
The garden walks are drying fast, The
Sun's bright beams are seen again,
And nought within, can now detail.
The rain drops tremble on the leaves,
Or drip expiring, from the eaves;
But soon the cool and balmy air,
Shall dry the gems and sparkle there,
With whisp'ring breath shake ev'ry spray,
And scatter every cloud away.

Thus sisters! shall the breeze of hope,
Through sorrow's clouds a vista ope;
Thus, shall affliction's surly blast,
By faith's bright calm be still'd at last;
Thus, pain and care,--the tear and sigh,
Be chased from every dewy eye;
And life's mix'd scene itself, but cease
To show us realms of light and peace.

Excerpt from *Sketches of a Tour to the Lakes*

Of Mrs. Schoolcraft you have heard. She is wife, you know, to H.R. Schoolcraft, Esq., author of travels and other works of great merit, and Indian agent at this place…Her voice is feeble, and tremulous. Her utterance is slow and distinct. There is something silvery in it. Mildness of expression, and softness, and delicacy of manners, as well as of voice, characterize her. She dresses with great taste, and in all respects in the costume of our fashionables, but wears leggins [sic] of black silk, drawn and ruffled around the ankles, resembling those worn by our little girls. You would never judge, either from her expression, or language, or from any other circumstance, that her mother was a Chippeway, except that her moderately high cheek bones, her dark and fine eye, and breadth of the jaw, slightly indicate it – and you would never believe it, except on her own confession, or upon some equally responsible testimony, were you to hear her converse, or see her beautiful, and some of them highly finished compositions, in both prose and poetry. You would not believe it, not because such attainments might not be universal, but because, from lack of the means necessary for their accomplishment, such cases are so rare….Mrs. Schoolcraft is, I should judge, about twenty-two years of age,--she would be an ornament to any society; and with better health, for at present she enjoys this great blessing but partially, would take a first rank among the best improved, whether in acquirements, in taste, or in the graces.

Charlotte comes next in order, being younger than Mrs. S. by some two or three years. Here again…you have a beautiful specimen of a female of mixed blood. This interesting young lady has but little of the mother's complexion. She possesses charms which are only now and then seen in our more populous and polished circles. These are in the form and expression of a beautiful face,

where the best and most amiable and cheerful of tempers—the loveliest and most captivating ornament of the sex—sits always with the sweetness of spring, and from whence the graces seem never to have departed even for a moment—and all this has imparted to it an additional interest in her own total unconsciousness of their presence, and of her powers to please. Her eyes are black, but soft in their expression, and between her lips, which I have never seen otherwise than half parted with a smile, is a beautiful set of ivory. Her style of dress is neat, and in all respects such as we see in our cities. She would be said to be *rather* tall. Yet her person is good. She sings most sweetly; but seems unconscious of it—and least I should forget it, I will copy in this letter a beautiful song, which she sings with the most enchanting effect, called the "*O-jib-way Maid*.

My opinion of Charlotte is, she would be a belle in Washington, were she there, as I find she is here. No one speaks of her but in terms of admiration of her amiable disposition, and in praise of her beauty; and according to my own observation and taste, she merits richly all the praise that is bestowed.

When I look upon this group of interesting children, and reflect that their mother is a native of our wilds, I wish, for the sake of the Indians, that every representative of the people, and all who might have an influence to bring about a complete system for the preservation and improvement, of at least the rising generation.