

*Island of the Blue Dolphins*  
**The Vanishing Indian Trope**

**Grade Level**

Middle School: Seventh and Eighth Grade

**Subject**

Literacy and Language Arts

**Common Core Standards**

7–8.RL.1, 7–8.RL.2, 7–8.RI.3, 7–8.RI.4, 7–8.RI.6, 7–8.RI.8, 7–8.RI.9, 7–8.RI.10

**Background Information:**

Scott O’Dell’s *Island of the Blue Dolphins* fictionalizes the story of the Lone Woman of San Nicolas Island, a California Indian who remained on her natal island in relative isolation for eighteen years after the rest of her people were removed to the mainland. O’Dell’s children’s book draws from historical accounts of the Lone Woman and in doing so, perpetuates the myth that many California Indians became extinct during the 1800s (nineteenth century). This concept is known as Indian Vanishing, and it is present in many historical accounts of the Lone Woman that claim she was the “last of her race.” We now know, definitively, that this claim is false; there is evidence that at least one other Nicoleño (a boy baptized as Tomás) outlived the Lone Woman. There are likely others!

The narrative of United States history that is taught in most schools is itself a Vanishing Indian story. History students from elementary to high school generally learn about Native Americans in the fall, in relation to the arrival of the first European settlers (and the Thanksgiving holiday); then Native peoples seem to disappear for most of the rest of the year. Native people are spoken of in the past tense, perpetuating the idea that indigenous peoples vanished in the past.

One of the most prominent examples of the Vanishing Indian trope can be found in the classic American novel *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), written by James Fenimore Cooper. The title itself implies that the Mohicans were vanishing, and that they eventually disappeared. The novel details the demise of a people that certainly did not disappear, and continue to evolve today, culturally, politically, and socially, along with the rest of society.

**Materials**

- “The Wild Woman of San Nicolas” article (provided)
- *Island of the Blue Dolphins* Author’s Note (provided)
- *Indians, Missionaries, and Merchants* excerpt (provided)
- “The Nicoleños in Los Angeles: Documenting the Fate of the Lone Woman’s Community” (provided)
- Copy of Part 1 Documents and Part 1 Questions for each student (provided)
- Copy of Part 2 Document and Part 2 Questions for each student (provided)

- Teacher readings for background information
  - Sara L. Schwebel, "Literary Tropes: Introduction," in *The Lone Woman and Last Indians Digital Archive*:  
<http://calliope.cse.sc.edu/lonewoman/literary>
  - Carole Goldberg, "A Counterstory of Native American Persistence," in *Island of the Blue Dolphins: The Complete Readers Edition* (2016).

### **Procedure**

1. Review teacher background information and materials.
2. Lead a discussion to familiarize students with the idea of the Vanishing Indian trope. Ask students to think about when they may have seen this trope. For example, they may talk about elementary school when they learned about Indians only in relation to the first Thanksgiving.
3. Hand out Part 1 Documents. Ask students to carefully read the documents, discuss, and then complete the Part 1 Questions collaboratively.
4. Hand out Part 2 Document. Ask students to read and discuss in small groups.
5. Hand out Part 2 Questions, and have students complete on their own, in small groups, or as a class discussion.

### **Enrichment Activities**

Native Americans have obviously not disappeared. Ask students to find evidence of this by identifying profiles and professional biographies of contemporary Native peoples, online or in the school library.

- Ask students if any of them have Native American ancestry.
- Send students on scavenger hunt for an example of a Native
  - University professor
  - Doctor
  - Lawyer
  - Astronaut
  - Actor/actress
- Have students write down the Native person's name and tribal/nation affiliation(s), if available.
- The [online list of federally recognized tribes](#) might prove useful for students' keyword searching.

## Part 1 Documents

### Reading 1: *The Wild Woman of San Nicolas* (1853)

Source: "[The Wild Woman of San Nicolas](#)," *San Francisco Daily Herald*, 13 November 1853, 2.

Description: This newspaper account was published in *The San Francisco Daily Herald* on November 13, 1853, shortly after the Lone Woman's death in Santa Barbara, California. The full newspaper article is available at the link provided above.

"In the family of Mr. George Niedever, she lived very contentedly, and apparently gratified with the change; she was evidently much pleased by the novel sights which were presented to her, in horses and other large animals. She ate freely of many things which were given to her, and seemed particularly fond of shell-fish, coffee, liquor, and fruits, but her system was unu[s]ed to such diet, and after too free an indulgence she sickened and died on the 18th of October. She was undoubtedly the last of her race."

### Reading 2: *Island of the Blue Dolphins* Author's Note (1960)

Source: Scott O'Dell, *Island of the Blue Dolphins* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960).

Description: This author's note appears at the end of every edition of Scott O'Dell's novel *Island of the Blue Dolphins*.

"The girl Robinson Crusoe whose story I have attempted to recreate actually lived alone upon this island from 1835 to 1853, and is known to history as The Lost Woman of San Nicolas. The facts known about her are few. From the reports of Captain Hubbard, whose schooner carried away the Indians of Ghalas-at, we know that the girl did jump into sea, despite efforts to restrain her. From records left by Captain Nidever we know that he found her eighteen years later, alone with a dog in a crude house on the headland, dressed in a skirt of cormorant feathers. Father Gonzales of Santa Barbara Mission, who befriended her after her rescue, learned that her brother had been killed by wild dogs. He learned little else, for she spoke to him in only signs; neither he nor many Indians at the mission could understand her strange language. The Indians of Ghalas-at had long since disappeared."

### Reading 3: *Indians, Missionaries, and Merchants* (2005)

Source: Kent G. Lightfoot, *Indians, Missionaries, and Merchants: The Legacy of Colonial Encounters on the California Frontiers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), xiii.

Description: This paragraph is taken from the preface of *Indians, Missionaries, and Merchants*, written by the archeologist Kent G. Lightfoot.

“My findings indicate that many local communities did not become culturally extinct, but maintained a strong sense of their Indian heritage and world views. In the process of reproducing themselves in new social settings they created innovative kinds of Indian identities, social forms, and tribal relationships. As they entered the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, only some of these Native peoples were recognized as ‘real’ Indians by federal Indian agents, by other government officials, and by anthropologists.”

#### **Reading 4: *The Nicoleños in Los Angeles: Documenting the Fate of the Lone Woman’s Community* (2016)**

Source: Susan L. Morris, John R. Johnson, Steven J. Schwartz, Rene L. Vellanoweth, Glenn J. Farris, and Sara L. Schwebel, “The Nicoleños in Los Angeles: Documenting the Fate of the Lone Woman’s Community,” *Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology* 36, no. 1 (2016): 91–118.

Description: This article, published in an academic journal of anthropology, discusses the fate of the people removed from San Nicolas Island in 1835 once they reached the California mainland.

“Numerous secondary sources claimed that the Lone Woman was the last of her people. It is clear that she was not. At least one Nicoleño, who was given the name Tomás, was alive and well when the Lone Woman was taken to Santa Barbara in 1853. According to census and sacramental records, he lived until at least 1860, seven years after the Lone Woman died.

Young Tomás did not just survive in Los Angeles, he thrived. In 1859, he moved from the home of a prominent family, the Johnsons, to live in the household of a very distinguished employer, Antonio Coronel. Coronel held many political posts, serving as the first Latino mayor of Los Angeles (1853–1854), County Assessor, and State Treasurer (1867–1871). Tomás worked in Coronel’s vineyards at Alameda and Seventh streets, close to the former site of the *Rancharía de los Pipimares*. In 1860, Tomás married Refugio López, and they may have had children.

The Nicoleños who lived past their first year in Los Angeles appear to have been resilient. Three of the Nicoleños who were baptized lived with godparents while they adjusted to their new circumstances. The Lone Woman also lived with a family, the Nidevers, when she was brought to Santa Barbara in 1853. Understandably, the Nicoleños more typical relocation from a coastal island to Los Angeles did not receive the level of recognition that the Lone Woman did during her short time on the mainland, and their San Nicolas Island origin was soon forgotten.

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**Part 1 Questions**

1. For each reading, summarize the main ideas. According to the author, what happened to the Native communities discussed?

Reading	What happened to Native community?
"The Wild Woman of San Nicolas" (1853)	
<i>Island of the Blue Dolphins</i> Author's Note (1960)	
<i>Indians, Missionaries, and Merchants</i> (2005)	
"The Nicoleños in Los Angeles: Documenting the Fate of the Lone Woman's Community" (2016)	

2. Look closely at your summaries: Are any of the ideas presented similar? Which authors would agree with one another? Which would disagree?

3. What evidence does the author use, if any, to support his/her claim?

Reading	Evidence to support claim
"The Wild Woman of San Nicolas" (1853)	
<i>Island of the Blue Dolphins</i> Author's Note (1960)	
<i>Indians, Missionaries, and Merchants</i> (2005)	
"The Nicoleños in Los Angeles: Documenting the Fate of the Lone Woman's Community" (2016)	

4. Define the term "Vanishing Indian" in your own words. According to your definition, which of the documents above include the Vanishing Indian trope?

## Part 2 Document

### Excerpt, “Literary Tropes: Introduction” (2016)

Source: Sara L. Schwebel, “[Literary Tropes: Introduction](#),” The Lone Woman and Last Indians Digital Archive, University of Illinois.

Description: This essay discusses the literary tropes that appear consistently in nineteenth and early-twentieth century news account of the Lone Woman of San Nicolas Island, the historical model for Scott O’Dell’s *Karana*. The excerpts below are taken from a section of the essay that discusses the Vanishing Indian trope.

#### *Vanishing Indian*

“As a result of disease, warfare, and the physical removal of Indians from the eastern half of the United States. ... American settlers living in New England, the Southeast, and the Midwest experienced Indian “vanishing” during the nineteenth century. ... But Indian removal involved much more than the physical displacement of indigenous bodies. During the second half of the nineteenth century, Native peoples were also “removed” from the landscape via federal policies rooted in the construction of cultural and legal identities. Forced assimilation (e.g., residential boarding schools that worked to destroy Native languages and kinship ties in youth) was aimed at cultural eradication of the Indian.”

#### *The California Story*

“During both the Mexican and American periods [of colonization], land enclosures by individual settlers displaced California Indians from their homelands, and the violence that resulted led to the outright extermination of many Native peoples. ... Some groups of Native Californians did acquire federally recognized reservations in the early twentieth century but many others did not. ... As a result, they have become “unacknowledged tribes”—tribes that lack federal recognition to this day. Declared “extinct,” these tribes “vanished” in the nineteenth century even as their members remained alive and well aware of their heritage (in fact, today, many unacknowledged tribes are actively seeking federal recognition from the US government).”

#### *Vanishing as Literary Tropes*

“Both in California and throughout the United States, vanishing took one final form—in popular culture. Novels such as James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) provide a clear example of the phenomenon: descendants of the Mohicans fictionalized by Cooper continue to flourish today as the Brothertown Indian Nation. The Lone Woman of San Nicolas Island has similarly been proclaimed the “last” of her tribe, as the documents in this archive attest. Her kin, the people removed from San Nicolas Island on the *Peor es Nada* in 1835, were presumed dead in 1853, when no one could be found who could fluently communicate with the Lone Woman. ... Historical records tell a different story. In 1853, when the Lone Woman arrived in Santa Barbara, at least one man removed from San Nicolas as a child was still living in Los Angeles, married to a California Indian. ... The Lone Woman’s death, therefore, did not mark the “end of a race,” or of a culture, as so many news reports proclaimed.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

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**Part 2 Questions**

1. How would the Vanishing Indian myth be beneficial to settlers during the period of westward expansion in the United States?
2. How might the Vanishing Indian trope continue to affect Native peoples today?
3. Think about your great-great-great grandparents, five generations back in your family (this person probably lived around the time of the Lone Woman). What aspects of your family's culture have survived through all these generations? What has been lost? Think about food, clothing, family traditions, holidays you celebrate, language, family names, heirlooms, etc. How do these things connect



you to your ancestors? In what ways do you live differently from your ancestors? If you cannot trace traditions or family members back five generations, determine what circumstances prevented the passing of heritage knowledge. Finally, consider: how does this exercise connect to the idea of the Vanishing Indian and to the *counter* reality of cultural persistence?

### **Bibliography/Further Reading**

Lightfoot, Kent G. *Indians, Missionaries, and Merchants: The Legacy of Colonial Encounters on the California Frontiers*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

Morris, Susan L., John R. Johnson, Steven J. Schwartz, Rene L. Vellanoweth, Glenn J. Farris, and Sara L. Schwebel. "The Nicoleños in Los Angeles: Documenting the Fate of the Lone Woman's Community." *Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology* 36, no. 1 (2016): 91–118.

O'Dell, Scott. *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960.

"The Wild Woman of San Nicolas," *San Francisco Daily Herald*, 13 November 1853, 2. Lone Woman and Last Indians Digital Archive, University of South Carolina, <https://lonewoman.ischool.illinois.edu/lonewoman/home/SanFranciscoDailyHerald1853>

Goldberg, Carole. "A Counterstory of Native American Persistence". In *Island of the Blue Dolphins: The Complete Readers Edition*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2016.

Schwebel, Sara L. "Literary Tropes." The Lone Woman and Last Indians Digital Archive, University of South Carolina, <https://lonewoman.ischool.illinois.edu/lonewoman/literary>