

Activities for University Students: Language Arts

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for the novel

Laura's Story

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A. Introduction

Laura's Story weaves together the themes linked to finding meaning in one's life with the challenge of holding a family together, often under the most trying circumstances. As the characters age and their personalities evolve, many are tested through addiction, poverty, and the restraints of the period (1938-1987). If compared to our contemporary era, these challenges and their potential solutions, illustrate how far we have progressed, or perhaps, how much we have not advanced, as a people, a community, and a society.

The work is literary historical fiction with a clear, clean writing style. It has a strong female protagonist. Set in the Canadian Maritimes, it focuses on Acadian culture.

Because of its applicability to young people and its accessibility in theme, character, and tone, the novel is a valuable educational resource and would lend itself well to a Language Arts (Literature & Writing) curriculum.

Synopsis

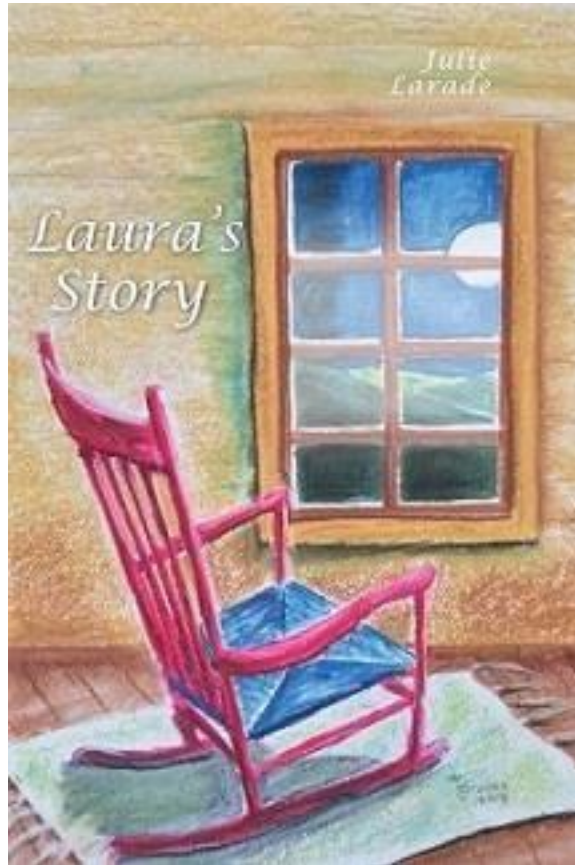
Laura's Story is a novel about the life, struggles and triumphs of an Acadian woman born in Chéticamp, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia in 1920. When she is widowed, penniless and alone with three small children, she takes a job at a convent in Montreal, Québec. She returns with a beleaguered body and spirit but with a firmer resolve than ever to keep her family together. When she develops tuberculosis, she is taken away again, this time for two and a half years to the sanitorium in Kentville, Nova Scotia. While Laura struggles to hold on to her boys and find her place in the world, the family members' stories develop, weave and unfold. Over the years of their lives, we see courage and perseverance firsthand, and we are moved by the true meaning of family and love.

B. Learning Outcomes

- Students explore and interpret the themes and sub-themes of the book.
- Students examine the plot and characters.
- Students examine the literary devices used by the author.
- Students practise creative writing.

C. Literature Aspects

Interpretations of Themes and Sub-Themes: Interpretation of the Cover Art



Activities

1) Before reading the book, discuss the following question:

Based on the cover, what do you think the story will explore?

2) After reading the book, create your own book cover that you think would represent the story.

Interpretation of the Opening Sentence

The opening chapter of *Laura's Story* establishes a geographical setting, a time frame and introduces several of the main characters. The first sentence of the chapter might be understood simply as Laura's mother falling off a ladder. However, it could also be interpreted in a symbolic manner.

The opening sentence is: It could have been fate, or an accident, but while climbing a ladder to wash her English employer's second story windows during the summer of 1938, Laura's mother, Joséphine Boudreau, slipped and fell hard onto the ground, slipping quickly into delirium, then coma, and finally death.

Here is one way of interpreting the symbolic nature of the sentence:

Laura Boudreau, a young Acadian woman, was the descendant of Acadians, who had been deported from the colony of *Acadie* between 1755-1763. In the book, which begins in the year 1938, Laura's mother is working for an English master, a descendant of the group who had deported the Acadians from their original homeland in the 18th century.

After the 1763 Peace Treaty of Paris, Acadians were permitted to settle in what is today called the Maritime Provinces. However, they were not allowed to return to their original villages. One of the communities which these exiled wandering Acadians established was the Chéticamp region located on Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia. What symbolic irony that Laura's mother, descendant of the Acadian deportees, was working for a descendant of the group who had sent her ancestors into such a tormented exile.

Laura's mother falling from a ladder doing work for her English master, going from delirium to coma and finally to death could be interpreted as a symbol of what her ancestors had lived. Their Deportation and exile might be considered as falling into a surreal delirium, a coma and a death of their life as they had known it. Fate? Accident?

Activities

- 1) Write down some of your favourite lines from *Laura's Story*. Why do you like them?
- 2) Write one first line that could be the start of a new story and share with the class.

Crafting Characters

Activities

- 1) Who is your favourite character? Why?
- 2) Who is your least favourite character? Why?
- 3) Place your favourite character in a present-day situation. Describe the situation. Write a dialogue involving another character.
- 4) Choose one of the following scenes. Write alternative choices that the character(s) could have made in the situation.
 - a) Johnny's decision to hide his infirmity from Laura.
 - b) Sam's wife gives up her child for adoption.
 - c) Laura goes to Montreal to work in a convent. She brings her youngest child with her and leaves her two older sons with her sister, Peggy.
 - d) Tom drowns his sorrows in alcohol. Then, without any warning, runs away from his family.
 - e) George suffers trauma from fighting in the war. He suffers alone and in silence.
 - f) Sam's wife is cold and unfriendly to Laura, even belittling her in front of her friends.

The Novel Structure: Its Arc

One definition of “a narrative arc” is as follows:

“A narrative arc provides a visual map of a story showing how writers typically build up tension to a climactic moment and then allow the tension to decrease to the story’s resolution.” Susan Blau

Source: “Arc”, “What are story arcs in fiction writing?” www.freelancewriting.com
consulted February March 6, 2015

Activities

- 1) Discuss one or more events in the story that move from a problem (tension) to a resolution (a release of the tension).
- 2) Create a new scenario and put one of the characters from *Laura’s Story* in it. Write a minimum one-page story that follows the “arc” model: beginning, challenge (problem), tension building, climactic moment and resolution.
- 3) Analyse the changes that occurred in Laura’s character.

Literary Devices

Simile, Metaphor, Alliteration, Foreshadowing

Simile

Examples:

“fit as a fiddle” (p. 117)

“like a shock of cold water” (p. 126)

Activity

Discuss the use of similes in the book. Find a few examples in the novel and/or create your own. Share with others.

Metaphor

Example:

Laura opened her mouth to protest, not wanting to be mothered, but she realized resting was for the greater good and more productive than arguing with her bull in a china shop sister. p.129

Activity

Discuss the use of metaphors in the book and create a few examples. Share with others.

Alliteration

Examples:

“fall’s first frost” (p. 352)

“perfect parallel parking” (p. 339)

Activity

Discuss the use of alliteration in the book. Find a few examples in the novel and/or create your own. Share with others.

Foreshadowing

Example:

Peg’s face was awash in heat spots beneath her blazing freckles. “He’s probably out in the barn, smoking. I give him hell for it, but it goes in one ear, out the other. Tom smokes with him, you know!” she looked accusatorily at Laura. p. 228

Activity

Find other examples of foreshadowing throughout the novel, moments that indicate something is about to happen.