

Women's Studies Guide for Adult Education or University Students

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for the novel

Laura's Story
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A) Introduction

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. On her own at age eighteen after both her parents have died, Laura must make her way in the world. When she is widowed, penniless and alone with three small children, she takes a job at a convent in Montreal. She returns with a beleaguered body and spirit but with a firmer resolve than ever to keep her family together. Yet, when she develops tuberculosis, she is taken away again, this time for two and a half years to the sanatorium in Kentville, NS.

Over the course of her nearly 80 years, she struggles to find herself, seeking wholeness through God, through her children, through her two marriages, and through nature. Laura and her sister Peggy fight to find their love beneath all their jealousies and differences. In the end, we see a woman who has held so many titles, who has been so many things to so many people, but who finds her peace because of and in spite of them all.

The time in which *Laura's Story* takes place was a difficult one for women, who would not see increased equality in many areas until decades later. Many, like Laura, were illiterate as they had to leave school to help raise their siblings and assist in running the family home. Birth control was largely unheard of in those days. Large families, poverty as well as infant and maternal death were commonplace. Women often laboured physically, morning to night, first as children in their own homes and later as adults with their husbands.

A) Introduction (continued)

***Laura's Story* as an educational tool**

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 evolve and age, many are tested through addiction, poverty, and the restraints of the historical period. If held against 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, is set in the Canadian Maritimes with a focus on Acadian culture and showcases a pivotal time in Canada's recent history.

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 Women's Studies curricula.

B) Learning Outcomes

- Students identify the cultural attitudes toward women during the various eras of the novel and note how as time moves forward, attitudes change and women's ability to be more fully realized does as well.
- Students compare attitudes toward women between 1920 and 1980 against contemporary attitudes: what has changed and how? What trends are rising for women to find continual progress in their quest for equality?
- Students consider how the various roles women hold affect how they think about themselves and whether the similar roles men hold have the same effect.

C) Shifting cultural attitudes

Suggested activities:

- 1) Discuss the following:
 - a) Nowadays in North America, marriage is culturally acknowledged to be a joining of two people who are in love. In the book, when Laura is first widowed in rural 1950s Nova Scotia, a neighbouring farmer comes to offer his hand in marriage. How does our modern view of marriage differ from how marriage was viewed in Nova Scotia in the 1950s?
 - b) If Laura had discovered she loved to write earlier in her life, would she have been able to or encouraged to pursue her love of writing? Why or why not?
 - c) Discuss a few of the ways in which the women in the book achieve a form of progress in finding equality in work, social roles, and life in general.
- 2) Make a list of attitudes, general perceptions, accepted behaviour, and stereotypes that have shifted over the last fifty years regarding the treatment of and behaviour of women. What behaviour and thinking used to be standard and what is no longer acceptable? You could use popular culture as examples (TV shows and movies, old advertisements, and magazines and/or the internet).

D) Then & Now

Suggested activities:

1) Discuss the following:

- a) Laura journeys to a convent in Montreal with her toddler so she can earn enough money to keep her home and family together. Like their male priest counterparts, the nuns are educated and have power, and some treat her cruelly.
 - Why do you think they do this?
 - What is the cultural attitude toward women such as Laura being perceived as a single mother? Is it right or fair?
 - What would be Laura's options today?
- b) In Laura's day, if someone, particularly a woman, did something atypical or out of what was considered the "norm", she was instantly not only gossiped about but could have even been ostracized from her community. Women tended not to speak their minds, act in any "unseemly" manner, and tried very hard to maintain community norms to ensure they'd be accepted.
 - How have things changed regarding people's self-expression?
 - Do we have similar concerns today or have our concerns shifted to other things? Give examples.
- c) Laura and members of her family faced assimilation during their lifetime. The minority French-speaking Acadians living in Nova Scotia were surrounded by villages populated by English speaking individuals. In addition, radio, TV and newspapers were generally only in English. As a result, Acadians often felt a pressure to speak in the language of the majority, often forgetting their mother tongue, French. However, when in crisis situations or near end of life, their mother tongue was the language that came to their mind.
 - What is the symbolic nature of Peggy and Laura speaking to one another in French after Laura's stroke?
 - What other communities face similar assimilation challenges?

D)Then & Now (continued)

- 2) Imagine a “modern day” Laura being alive now.
 - a) Make a chart of significant events that occurred in Laura’s life. (ex. struggles)
 - b) Compare and contrast what kind of struggles a “modern day” Laura might experience versus Laura in the novel.
 - c) What additional similarities and differences might the “modern day” Laura have with Laura in the novel.
 - Provide three examples of each.
 - Explain and justify your answer.

E) Roles of Women:

mother, wife, sister, grandmother, girlfriend, widow, single woman, career woman, friend, daughter, niece, aunt, etc.

Suggested activities:

- 1) a) First, highlight the work of a prominent woman in history:
 - Why do you consider her prominent?
 - Who was she?
 - Why was she effective?
 - Did her work have a lasting impact? How?
 - Why do we continue to admire her today?
- 2) Then, highlight the work and efforts of a woman you know personally or have known (deceased). Examples: see the list above.
 - How has she been influential?
 - What is her legacy?
- 3) Choose an inspiring female leader in each of the following domains: (sports, politics, community, and another domain of your choosing.) Has their leadership as women affected how you see yourself? Explain why.
 - Choose one of the four women to research. Present your findings in the format of your choice.
- 4) a) How have gender roles in society changed over the years?
 - b) Draw a list of opportunities that have opened to women today that were only once available to men.
 - c) Are there still jobs today that are not inclusive to women?