

Activities for University Students: Women's Studies

prepared by
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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 Women's Studies curricula.

B. Learning Outcomes

- Students identify the cultural attitudes toward women during the various eras of the novel.
- Students compare attitudes toward women in the 1900s and present-day.
- Students consider how the various roles women hold affect how they think about themselves.

C. Shifting Cultural Attitudes

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 some of the women in the book achieved equality in work, in social roles, and general life.
- 2) Make a list of attitudes, general perceptions, accepted behaviour and stereotypes that have shifted over the last fifty years regarding the treatment of women. What behaviour and thinking used to be acceptable? What is no longer acceptable?

D. Change and Continuity: Then and Now

Activities

- 1) Laura goes to a convent in Montreal, Quebec, with her toddler so she can earn enough money to keep her home and family together. The nuns at the convent are educated and have power. Most of them treat Laura cruelly. Why do they do this? What would be Laura's options today?

- 2) 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. How have things changed? If yes, elaborate.

- 3) Laura and members of her family faced assimilation during their lifetime. The minority French-speaking Acadians living in Nova Scotia were mostly surrounded by villages populated by English speakers. 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. What other communities face similar assimilation challenges?

E. Roles of Women

Activities

- 1) Discuss the work of a prominent woman in history:

Why do you consider her prominent?

Why was she effective?

Why and how does her work have a lasting impact?

Why do we continue to admire her today?

- 2) Discuss the work and efforts of a woman you know personally, for example, your mother, grandmother, or a friend.

How has she been influential?

What is her legacy?