

Activities for University Students: The Humanities

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 to 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 the Humanities (Culture and Community) curricula.

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 examine what makes up a culture, with a specific focus on Acadians.
- Students examine how beliefs and traditions can continue unchanged, be adapted or change completely throughout time.
- Students compare the traditions and customs in the novel to present-day.

C. Culture and Community

Fête of the *Mi-Carême*

In *Laura's Story*, we read about the mini carnival-like celebration during mid-Lent, called the *Mi-Carême*, a tradition that is still practised in the Acadian region of Chéticamp and Saint-Joseph-du-Moine, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. People don costumes and masks. Then, alone or in small groups, they go from house to house to visit family and friends. The *Mi-Carêmes* change their voices and mannerisms. In turn, the householders or “watchers”, as they are called, try to guess the identity of the people behind the masks and costumes. The fête is light-hearted with music, song, dance, food and fun. The following quote from the book refers to the *Mi-Carême*:

“Our gift to you, Mother, on your homecoming, from the whole family!”

“Where did you get the outfits?”

“Ben brought them up from Chéticamp. They have an annual tradition in the middle of Lent where people disguise themselves and go from house to house hoping they won't be recognized. He says it's a lot of fun.”

“I'd bet it is. We should go next year!”

“Will do, Mother.” p. 350



Logo: Le Centre de la *Mi-Carême*, Grand-Étang,
Cape Breton, Nova Scotia

C. Culture and Community (continued)

Fête of the *Mi-Carême*

Activities

- 1) Visit (if possible) the museum *Le Centre de la Mi-Carême*, located in Grand-Étang, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia.
- 2) Visit the Website of *Le Centre de la Mi-Carême*
<http://www.micareme.ca/en/>
- 3) Participate in the activity *The Battle Between Lent and Carnival* which shows the extreme behaviours of the joys of Carnival (as well as *Mi-Carême*) and the austerity of Lent, portrayed in the painting by Pieter Bruegel, the elder (1525-1569). The activity is at the following link:
<http://www.acadian-explorations.ca/the-battle-between-carnival-and-lent/the-battle-of-carnival-and-lent-painting/#prettyPhoto>
- 4) Participate in the activity *Fêtes and Celebrations, Event Planning: The Fête of the Mi-Carême*. By doing this activity, you become an event planner of the *Mi-Carême* fête, giving the opportunity to celebrate this festivity in your school or other venue. The activity is at the following link:
http://www.acadian-explorations.ca/wp-content/uploads/UNIT_Event_Plan1.pdf

References

- Arsenault, Georges (2009). Translated from French into English by Sally Ross, *Acadian Mi-Carême: Mask and Merrymaking*, Charlottetown, Acorn Press.
- Le Blanc, Barbara and Mireille Baulu-Willie (2014). "Long Live *Mi-Carême*", Section "In My Classroom", *AVISO*, Halifax, The Magazine for the Nova Scotia Teaching Profession, pp. 3-7.

C. Culture and Community (continued)

Acadian Traditional Dishes

Peggy prides herself on her cooking and is reputed to have the best biscuits in the region. When she and Laura think about happy memories of their childhood, it's their mother's traditional Acadian cooking that first comes to mind.

Here is a quote that refers to traditional Acadian food in the book:

Laura's stomach rumbled. She suddenly craved her mother's Acadian dishes of *fricot* and meat pie. Their whole lives were gone now, their quiet childhood afternoons skating on the pond or fishing in Chéticamp, the tang of the sea air. Nights knitting by the fire in Inverness singing Acadian songs and lullabies, all gone. p. 4

Activities

- 1) Why is the preparation of food important for Peggy?
- 2) What dishes do Peggy and Laura remember fondly?
- 3) Research a few Acadian recipes and create a menu with pictures for a meal (or have a class potluck!).

Many sites offer examples of traditional Acadian recipes. Here is one link:
<http://www.acadian-explorations.ca/home/traditional-recipes/>

C. Culture and Community (continued)

Hooked Rugs and Rag Rugs

Laura is quite taken with the famous Chéticamp area hooked rugs and rag rugs. In *Laura's Story* we discover some information about these rugs. Here is an example:

“Oh my, Laura, how beautiful,” she murmured.

Peggy pulled out a hooked rug, displaying intricate colourful details of a rough sea where the high waves lashed against imposingly large rocks and in the corner, a lighthouse meant to guide any lost ship. The tears in her sister's eyes told Laura that this gift was anything but inconsequential; she'd clearly derived a very personal meaning from the scene given what was happening to her.

Laura breathed out. “I bought it in Chéticamp. They have the most marvellous rugs and what's most intriguing is each stitch is made by hand. Sam and I talked to a few ‘hookers’,” Laura giggled into her hand, “but really we were quite overwhelmed at how genuinely enthused they are about their work. A real labour of love.” p. 228

Activities

- 1) Visit *Les Trois Pignons* Website www.lestroispignons.com/
- 2) Invite (if possible) a person who makes hooked rugs or rag rugs to visit your class and demonstrate how to make them.
- 3) Visit (if possible) the museum located at *Les Trois Pignons* in the village of Chéticamp, Nova Scotia that highlights aspects of the history of hooked rugs and showcases such artisans as Elisabeth Le Fort.
- 4) Create your own design for a hooked rug.
- 5) Do you have a passion for an activity? If yes, what is it? If not, chose a potential one. Some examples are writing, dancing, biking, cooking, sewing, knitting, playing a musical instrument, wood-working, metal-working or computer programing. Share your choices in a small group discussion.

If you wish to learn more about hooked rugs of Chéticamp, see the following book:

Chiasson, Anselme and Annie Rose Deveau (1985). *History of Chéticamp Hooked Rugs and their Artisans*, Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, Lescarbot Publications.

C. Culture and Community (continued)

Acadian Songs

In *Laura's Story* we see the importance of singing. Here is an example:

The night soon grew cool, a sure sign fall was upon them. When Laura tucked the boys in, she started to sing, *C'est la poulette grise*. The boys did not understand a word. "You hardly sing anymore, Mother. Where did you learn these songs?"

"My mother used to sing them. Both my parents were Acadians, you know. My mother's last name was Chiasson and my father was a Boudreau." p. 43

Activities

- 1) See the following page of this guide for the traditional song *C'est la poulette grise*. Ask someone to play/sing the melody or find a version online. Then, search online to find information about other Acadian traditional songs. Share the information you find.
- 2) Find a traditional song from another ethnic group. Present your findings. If possible play, sing or demonstrate the song.
- 3) Either alone or with a classmate, write a song or a poem. Share your creation with others.
- 4) In small groups, prepare a concert for an audience with some of the songs and/or poems you found and/or wrote.
- 5) Invite (if possible) an Acadian songwriter, composer and/or musician to visit and perform.

References:

Boudreau, Daniel (1996). 2e édition, *Chansons d'Acadie*, série 11, Moncton, Centre d'études acadiennes, Université de Moncton.

Chiasson, Anselme & Daniel Boudreau (different dates). *Chansons d'Acadie*, séries 1-11 (variety of publishers).

Savard, Louis-Martin (2014). « Acadian Folklore Studies », <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/acadian-folklore-studies/>, consulted February 21, 2015.

C'EST LA POULETTE ¹⁵



M.S.H.
Présentation de Marie

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C'est la pou-let-te gri-se Qui pond dans l'é - gli - se, Ell' va pondre
un beau p'tit co-co Pour son p'tit qui va fair' do-di-che, Ell' va pondre
un beau p'tit co-co Pour son p'tit qui va fair' do-do. Do-di-che, do- do.

2
C'est la poulette blanche
Qui pond dans les branches,
Ell' va pondreetc.

4
C'est la poulette jaune
Qui pond dans les aulnes
Ell' va pondre etc.

3
C'est la poulette noire
Qui pond dans l'armoire
Ell' va pondreetc.

5
C'est la poulette brune
Qui pond dans la lune
Ell' va pondre etc.

C'EST LA CLOCHE DU VIEUX MANOIR

A (Canon) p (écho) B
C'est la clo- che du vieux ma - noir, du vieux ma- noir Qui nous
dit le re - tour du soir, le re - tour du soir. C'est la...etc.

C. Culture and Community (continued)

Superstitions

Laura sees signs of good and bad luck in everyday life. Spiders, a clear blue sky, a flock of crows, and a lone fawn all take on meaning.

Many people cross their fingers for good luck or believe a black cat is a sign of bad luck. What superstitions do you know?

Here is a definition of the word “superstition”:

“A belief or way of behaving that is based on fear of the unknown and faith in magic or luck: a belief that certain events or things will bring good or bad luck.”

“Superstition”, <http://www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/superstition> consulted February 20, 2015.

Here is an example in the book:

Laura felt this was a wonderful sign; spiders were good luck. And at long last, they were free. She smiled and hugged Ben tightly. p. 59

Activities

- 1) Find another example of a superstition that existed and/or still exists in the Acadian community. Find a similar superstition in another ethnic group and compare it with the Acadian superstition.
- 2) Research some superstitions to find out their origins, if possible. What did people who believed in the superstition(s) think would happen to bring them good or bad luck?

C. Culture and Community (continued)

Landscape

The land influences its people and their outlook, behaviour, personality and even physical body.

Activity

Discuss how the weather and the landscape of east coast Canada has affected the characters in the novel?

D. Change and Continuity: Then and Now

Identifying Shifts over Time in *Laura's Story*

Over the nearly 100 years of the novel, the characters see numerous changes introduced: modes of transportation; construction of the Canso Causeway and the Trans-Canada Highway; adult education; advancements in medical research; creation of the Canadian flag; implementation of government programs such as the Employment Insurance System, Family Allowance, and Medicare; arrival of the telephone, radio and television in homes; and the invention of certain household appliances. Because of these changes, attitudes and thinking shifted.

1) Discuss the following questions:

- a) When Laura is widowed, how does she provide for her family? What might she do today?
- b) How did the war affect George? What might a veteran do today in George's situation?
- c) Sam's wife makes a decision that affects her forever. What is it and why does she do it? What are its impacts? Would this happen today? Elaborate.
- d) Certain fêtes, holidays or other festivities in the book might be celebrated differently today. Choose a contemporary example. Compare it with an example from the book. What needs are being met at these types of gatherings?
- e) 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. Discuss what other factors contribute to the assimilation process?
- f) What other communities face similar assimilation challenges? Compare.