

## Documentary Lens Lesson Plan for “*Just One Big Mess*”: *The Halifax Explosion, 1917*

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### Curriculum Connections

“*Just One Big Mess*” is an 18-minute documentary about an event that occurred at the height of the First World War: the crash of a Belgian freighter with a French munitions ship carrying explosives. The explosion and the resulting tidal wave took the lives of 1600 people. A fifth of the population of Halifax was injured. Several hundred victims were left blind. The story is told through archival material and the voices of the survivors and their descendants. Images of that December 6 day, created by photographers and three artists, add another layer of dramatic detail.

### Lesson Objectives

“*Just One Big Mess*” can develop core concepts in Social Studies. The theme also cuts across the Health curriculum and may be used to discuss safety measures to confront extreme weather and other emergencies. It may also be used in Media Studies, in Art or in Language Arts.

The activities may be used from Grades 4 through high school. Students begin the lesson by brainstorming how today’s media documents disasters and by considering ways that their own community meets sudden challenges. Then students analyze how the filmmaker conveys multiple perspectives in terms of story and film techniques and how those techniques inform the total effect the film makes on its audience. Finally, students apply what they have learned by detailing examples of good citizenship in the film and by writing a movie review of “*Just One Big Mess*.”

**Note to Teachers** : Death and loss are part of this Canadian tragedy. Use your discretion when showing this film with younger viewers.

### Canadian Social Studies Themes in “*Just One Big Mess*”: *The Halifax Explosion, 1917*

Theme/Strand/ Key Concept	Connection to “ <i>Just One Big Mess</i> ” –Applications and Discussion Points
Citizenship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How did the community of Halifax show citizenship in “<i>Just One Big Mess</i>”?</li><li>• What agencies helped them after the 1917 explosion? What agencies might help Halifax if a disaster happened today?</li><li>• How do media connect us in a global network to help others?</li></ul>
Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How do you think the explosion changed the way of life of the people of Halifax?</li><li>• How do the survivors in this film serve as role models for others who are experiencing crisis? What did you learn about dealing with a crisis and about survival from this film?</li><li>• How do you think the explosion and its aftermath might have shaped the identity of the people of Halifax? What changes and challenges have shaped your identity?</li></ul>

<b>Theme/Strand/ Key Concept</b>	<b>Connection to “<i>Just One Big Mess</i>” –Applications and Discussion Points</b>
Multiple Perspectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why is a documentary such a powerful form of media for showing many points of view? How has Cheryl Lean used this genre effectively to tell the story of the Halifax explosion from multiple perspectives?</li> <li>• How can films and other art forms help us understand the life experience of other people?</li> </ul>
Time, Continuity and Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do Canadian history and the stories of the people of Canada contribute to our sense of identity?</li> <li>• Why do you think people decided to build Halifax on the coast rather than inland?</li> <li>• What was the historical context of this event? Why was a boat from France carrying explosives in the Halifax harbour?</li> </ul>
The Land: Places and People	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the major geographic regions, landforms and bodies of water in Nova Scotia?</li> <li>• How do landforms, bodies of water and natural resources affect people’s quality of life?</li> <li>• Why do people live close to the ocean? How does living along a coast shape people's identity?</li> <li>• How does the Atlantic coast shape people's lives? In what ways did natural resources and the physical geography of the region determine the establishment of the community of Halifax?</li> <li>• What are differences and similarities between the location for this film and the location where you live?</li> </ul>
Power, Authority and Decision-Making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How did the municipal government of Halifax show support for the survivors of the explosion?</li> <li>• How did decisions made by governments contribute to the Halifax explosion?</li> </ul>
Deliberative Inquiry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do you think the children in this film would have dealt with their shock during and after the Halifax explosion? What questions do you have about the people and their responses?</li> <li>• What challenges have you or people in your community experienced?</li> <li>• How can we deal effectively with shocks and post-traumatic shock? Who can help us deal with a crisis and the aftermath?</li> <li>• How does Lean's movie help you to understand challenge in your own community or in the global community?</li> </ul>

## Assessment Strategies

You could use students' movie reviews and their worksheet checklists (Activity 6, Writing a Movie Review) to assess the following:

- Choosing content to support a point of view: Did students cite relevant images, words, or film techniques in the film? Did they give supporting details and examples for their judgements?
- Critical thinking: Did students summarize the film and its main theme? Did they evaluate the film and make relevant comments?
- Inquiry and research skills: Did students gather facts and evidence from the film and from other valid sources?
- Communication: Did students organize and present their ideas clearly and thoughtfully?

## Materials and Resources

- “Behind the Camera” and “Teacher's Guide: How to Use Documentary Lens” are two articles on the National Film Board's Documentary Lens Web site.

## Background

A French munitions ship carrying tonnes of explosives collided with a Belgian relief vessel in the Halifax harbour on December 6, 1917. The blast and its impact caused fires and a tidal wave that devastated homes and businesses and contributed to the death or injury of nearly a quarter of the population of the city.

The director offers a glimpse into the traumatic repercussions of the event through layers of imagery and a variety of voices. Documentary and experiential evidence are intertwined in a multi-layered text. Paintings and photographs of devastation are intensified by the narration and by the voices of survivors and their descendants. Another layer of text calls out to the viewer in sounds, for example, children's voices in a schoolyard before the explosion. The viewer feels how the devastation shocks their innocence and natural sense of invulnerability.

The camera focuses in and out of powerful paintings that depict the total destruction. The artists' works also capture the horror and shock in the eyes of the people.

## Activities for “*Just One Big Mess*”

### Introduction

#### ACTIVITY 1: Brainstorming Media Stories of Disasters

Tell the class that they are going to watch a documentary about a historic Canadian disaster. You may want to give some background on the event (see Background notes above).

Then, using their own experience of media coverage of disasters, students brainstorm some of the ways that such stories are told today.

- How are disaster stories usually handled by the media?
- Whose point of view do they represent?
- Which disaster stories are told?

- Which stories are not told? What is the effect of including some stories and leaving out others?
- What techniques are used to tell the story? How are those techniques designed to create a particular effect in the audience?

Record students' ideas from the brainstorming session so that they can refer to them later in the lesson.

### **ACTIVITY 2: Challenges in Our Community**

"*Just One Big Mess*" tells the story of a catastrophic event from 1917. To get students thinking about such events, ask:

- Has our community ever faced a disastrous event?
- How do people in our community react when something bad happens?
- How do they help each other?
- How does helping each other show good citizenship?

### **Developing Concepts**

#### **ACTIVITY 3: Multiple Perspectives in Film**

As students view "*Just One Big Mess*," ask them to take notes on personal stories of the people who survived the explosion.

- How does the film help you understand the experience of the people who were in Halifax on that day?
- What are some of the different points of view shown in the film?
- How are the personal stories different from the news reports? What did you learn when people shared their own stories?
- Which parts of the film did you feel were most powerful in relating the aftermath of the disaster? (The photographs? The artists' images? The narration? The stories? Sound effects?)

Students may need to view this documentary more than once to answer these questions.

#### **ACTIVITY 4: Exploring Filmmaking Techniques**

In preparation for this activity, you can summarize for your students, or have them read, the following sections of the "Behind the Camera" guide at the Documentary Lens Web site: "What is a Documentary?", "Preparing to Film" and "The Art of the Interview" (in the "Shooting the Documentary" section).

Ask students to form small groups to discuss how the filmmaker, Cheryl Lean, helps them understand the impact of the Halifax explosion on the people who experienced it.

- What techniques does the filmmaker use to create an impact on her audience?
- What are the different ways that Cheryl Lean "tells" the story of the Halifax explosion?
- How effective were the personal stories, the sounds, the artwork and other elements in the film in creating an impression on the audience?
- What symbolism does she include? What effect does this have on the telling of the story?

After the group discussions, ask students to prepare a brief written or oral presentation on how one of the filmmaker's chosen techniques contributed to the overall effect.

## Application Activities

### ACTIVITY 5: Representing Good Citizenship

Have students think of how they can show what they have learned about good citizenship from the film. For example, they can create a poster, a collage, a comic strip, or a computer generated slide show.

Have students take notes on all of the examples of good citizenship shown in the film. Caution them that some evidence will be obvious and some may require careful thought. These questions may help:

- What would be evidence of good citizenship? What does good citizenship look like? What does it sound like?
- How did people cooperate with one another in “*Just One Big Mess*”?
- How did they work together towards a common goal?
- What decisions did they have to make?
- How did they solve problems arising from the disaster?
- How did they work together to rebuild their city and their lives?
- How did they take responsibility for each other?

### ACTIVITY 6: Writing a Movie Review

Students may need to watch “*Just One Big Mess*” again for this activity. You may want to collect samples of movie reviews from the newspaper or from online sources to show to the class as preparation.

- Distribute copies of the worksheet appended to this lesson: **Movie Review Checklist**. This sheet should help them write their review of “*Just One Big Mess*”: *The Halifax Explosion, 1917*.

## Additional Activities

### Oral, Written and Visual Literacy

You could use the following for small group or class activities.

- Choose a scene in the film and write a script to represent more than one point of view, for example, a news reporter’s point of view and the personal story of a survivor.
- Create a series of tableaux or vignettes to act out.
- Sketch scenes of Halifax on overhead transparencies and present their work to classmates: for a discussion on the effects of geographic factors on the lifestyle of people in the community.

## Worksheet for “*Just One Big Mess*”

### Movie Review Checklist

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Have I included all the factual information I need for my review?

- Title of the movie
- Type of movie
- Producer’s and director’s names

\_\_\_\_\_ Did I consider the main ideas and the main stories in the film as I wrote my summary of the story?

\_\_\_\_\_ In my summary of the film, have I answered Who? What? Where? When? Why? How?

\_\_\_\_\_ Have I included my opinion about what is the main theme or lesson in the film?

\_\_\_\_\_ Have I used evidence from the film to support my opinion about the main theme or lesson?

\_\_\_\_\_ Did I include examples from the film to support my evaluation?

\_\_\_\_\_ Does my evaluation of the film focus on the techniques that the filmmaker used to make her story memorable?

\_\_\_\_\_ Did I make sure that my facts come from reliable sources?

\_\_\_\_\_ Have I organized my ideas so that readers will be able to follow them?

\_\_\_\_\_ Have I clearly communicated what I wanted to say?

**Additional Notes:**