

CANADIAN POET A DAY

**6 Lesson Plans
and Student Activity Sheets
for NFB Films about
Prominent Canadian Poets**

**ONF
NFB
JNO**



**NATIONAL FILM BOARD
OF CANADA
OFFICE NATIONAL DU FILM
DU CANADA**

Canadian Poet a Day

A good way to help Canadian students develop a love and passion for Canadian writers and their works is to begin each class with a poetry reading. Also, delving into the family history of the writers, the places that inspired their poetry and the period in which their work is set will help students get to the heart of Canadian poetry and identity.

This guide celebrates the work of six prominent Canadian poets through NFB films and lesson plans.

Share the works of Earle Birney, P.K. Page, Leonard Cohen, Margaret Atwood, Alden Nowlan and Irving Layton with your students by watching NFB films that give insight into their lives and work of our renowned poets.

Over its 70 years, the NFB has made many films that portray Canadian writers and designed several lesson plans to accompany these films in the classroom. You will find more information about these educational films on our website: **<NFB.ca>** or by calling the toll-free customer service line at: **1-800-267-7710**.

Lesson Plan:
Earle Birney: Portrait of a Poet
(1981; 53 min.; directed by Donald Winkler)

Grade Level: Secondary (Grades 9-12)

Time Allowance: 90-120 minutes

Overview and Instructions

This lesson is based on viewing the NFB film, *Earle Birney: Portrait of a Poet* (1981; 53 min). Earle Birney (1904-1995) was born in Calgary. In this film, students will get a glance at the grand old man of Canadian poetry: a writer, scholar, activist, and man of irrepressible zeal and enthusiasm. Students should complete the “Student Activity Sheet” (see the following page) as they watch the film.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think the film opens and closes with Birney reading from a poem that is based more on sounds than words?
2. Earle Birney has been called the “grand old man of Canadian poetry”, a title which suggests literary immortality. Yet Birney argues that the concept of literary immortality does not exist because language changes and poets reflect this in their poetry.
 - a) Do you agree with his assessment?
 - b) Why does he deserve the title?
 - c) Who else might deserve such a title? Is there a grand old woman?

Extension Questions and Activities

1. Examine the poem that established his reputation: “David”. Using sound, music, movement and/or images, prepare a group oral reading of “David”. Write a reflection paper on how this poem contributes to an understanding of Canadian literature.
2. Birney is recognized as one of our country’s first poets to write, and indeed emphasize, the normal, everyday rhythms of speech.
 - a) Examine some of his sound poems.
 - b) How does his expressive use of sound support the ideas that his poems convey?
 - c) Are these poems witty games with words or do they employ sound effects to sound effect?
3. At his memorial, a colleague quoted Birney as saying, “No one wants merely to live but to affirm life. . We all need the therapy of fancy and play, honest emotion, pity, laughter, joy. Especially the joy that comes when the words move someone else from mere living to being Alive, Alive-O!” How does this description compare to his portrayal in the film?
4. A parody is a humorous, mocking imitation of another work. Good parodies catch the special manner and flavour of the originals.
Choose one of Birney’s poems, such as “Canada: Case History”, and write a parody.

Student Activity Sheet:
Earle Birney: Portrait of a Poet
(1981; 53 min.; directed by Donald Winkler)

As you are watching the film, complete the following chart on Birney's life.

Earle Birney	Notes
Process of Writing	
Parents' background	
Schooling	
Experiences in war	
First experiences with writing	
Experiences during the summers of 1922-23	
University experience	
Political affiliations	
Experiences after the war	
Accomplishments as a scholar	
His perfect place to write	
His various projects (at the time of the making of the film)	

Lesson Plan:
Ladies and Gentlemen...Mr. Leonard Cohen
(1965; 44 min.; directed by Donald Brittain and Don Owen)

Grade Level: Secondary (Grades 9-12)

Time Allowance: 90-120 minutes

Overview and Instructions

This lesson is based on viewing the NFB film, *Ladies and Gentlemen...Mr. Leonard Cohen* (1965; 44 min). Leonard Cohen (1934-) was born in Quebec. Students will enjoy this jazzy 1965 black-and-white film portrait of the imaginative energies, lyrical and comic, of the young Leonard Cohen, the quicksilver poet, novelist, and songwriter. Students should complete the "Student Activity Sheet" (see the following page) as they watch the film.

Discussion Questions

1. In 1965, Cohen was said to be the voice of his generation.
 - A) Find evidence to support this opinion.
 - B) Is he the voice of today's generation? Can his poetry transcend the 1960s?
 - C) Who is the voice of this generation? How does today's voice compare to Cohen's?
2. Read some of the poems mentioned in the film: "Prayer for Messiah," "Disguises," "Beneath my hands," "True Love leaves no Traces," "The Music Crept by us," and "The Only Tourist in Havana turns his thoughts Homeward". Which is your favorite?

Extension Questions and Activities

1. Leonard Cohen continues to write songs and poetry today. Research the life of this notable Montrealer since 1965. How has he changed? What has surprised you about his career? Describe the film you would make of him.
2. Listen to one of Leonard Cohen's CDs, perhaps "The Best of Leonard Cohen" (1975) or "More Best of Leonard Cohen" (1997). Choose your favorite poem and put it to music.
3. Cohen said he finds nourishment in a) the crowds; b) solitude; and c) the ancient. Find evidence of these influences in his poetry.
4. His most recent book, *Stranger Music, Selected Poems and Songs*, is published in 1993. Select 10 poems and/or songs from this book and create a book of your favorites. Explain why you chose each poem. Write poems that are inspired by his style or ideas.
5. In one scene of the movie, Cohen describes being inspired by his careful examination of the Classified Section of several newspapers and he wrote his comedy act about the hair asylum. Examine the Classifieds of several newspapers and/or magazines. Write a poem, speech, or song based on your findings.

Student Activity Sheet:
Ladies and Gentlemen...Mr. Leonard Cohen
(1965; 44 min.; directed by Donald Brittain and Don Owen)

As you watch the film, make notes on the following aspects of this “stand-up comic, novelist, poet and very confident young man.” Use the following categories as general guidelines:

- ☐ Family background
- ☐ Influences of his grandfather
- ☐ What he cares about
- ☐ Successes
- ☐ Friends
- ☐ Attitudes towards poetry
- ☐ How he rebels
- ☐ His writing habits
- ☐ His attraction to violence

Lesson Plan:
Still Waters: The Poetry of P.K. Page
(1983; 38 min.; directed by Donald Winkler)

Grade Level: Secondary (Grades 9-12)

Time Allowance: 90-120 minutes

Overview and Instructions

This lesson is based on viewing the NFB film, *Still Waters: The Poetry of P.K. Page* (1983; 38 min). Patricia Kathleen Page (1916-) was born in England, raised on the Prairies, has lived in the Maritimes and Montreal, and is now living in Victoria, B.C.. She is a poet and painter who has won international recognition. In this film, students enter into her childhood world on the prairies and her ambassador years in Brazil. Students should complete the "Student Activity Sheet" (see the following page) as they watch the film.

Discussion Questions

1. Why did the filmmaker begin with close-ups of dolls' faces and eyes?
2. She describes Melanie as being her underside yet in her poem, she says, "I am not Melanie". How do you account for this difference?
3. Consider the effect of the repeated final line in the poem, "Hold me. Hold me." How does it contribute to the poem's tone and feeling?

Extension Questions and Activities

1. As P.K. Irwin, she has had one-woman shows in Mexico and Canada and is represented in the permanent collections of the National Gallery of Canada and the Art Gallery of Ontario. Check out her work at these galleries. How does her poetry compare to her painting? Can you make some conclusions about her as an artist?
2. Towards the end of the film she describes the environment as being her biggest concern. Read and reflect on her most recent book of poems, *Planet Earth: Poems selected and new* that was shortlisted for the Griffin Prize for Poetry in 2003.
3. In her poem, "Inebriate", she takes the final four lines of Cohen's poem, "I have not lingered in European monasteries".
 - A) Study and compare these two poems.
 - B) Select any four last lines of a Canadian poem and follow Page's format of working the final four lines of the poem into her own poem.
4. In the film we gain insight into P.K. Page through a series of family photos: of her mother, father, and Sarcee Indians. Select five photos of your family and/or friends and use them as inspirations for writing. Create a Personal Poetry and Photo Portfolio.

Student Activity Sheet:
Still Waters: The Poetry of P.K. Page
(1983; 38 min.; directed by Donald Winkler)

As you are watching the film, describe her responses to the following:

- ☐ Her interest in labyrinths and mazes
- ☐ Her two earliest memories
- ☐ Her parents
- ☐ Her experience in Sarcee Camp
- ☐ Her life in Montreal in the 1940s
- ☐ Her first meeting of Arthur Irwin, her husband
- ☐ Her reasons for taking a break from writing while in Brazil
- ☐ Her attitudes toward religion
- ☐ The most serious thing she has had to confront

Lesson Plan:
Alden Nowlan: An Introduction
(1984; 28 min.; directed by Jon Pedersen)

Grade Level: Secondary (Grades 9-12)

Time Allowance: 90-120 minutes

Overview and Instructions

This lesson is based on viewing the film *Alden Nowlan: An Introduction* (1984; 28 min), which captures Nowlan reminiscing and reading from his work. Alden Nowlan was born in Nova Scotia in 1933 and died in Fredericton, N.B. in 1983. Students will see that his empathy with ordinary people ran throughout his work as poet, journalist, short-story writer, novelist and playwright. Students should complete the "Student Activity Sheet" (see the following page) as they watch the film.

Discussion Questions

1. Before viewing this film, prepare some interview questions (see following page). After viewing the film, review the interview techniques used in the film. How did your prepared questions compare to what was asked? Which was the best question? Which question demonstrated preparation and prior knowledge of the interviewee since it was specific to Alden Nowlan? What makes a good interview?
2. Nowlan said there are two subjects that anyone can write about: love and death. Do you agree with him? What other subjects could anyone write about? Rank this list.
3. Nowlan said that, "if people expect you to be wise, you become wiser." Do you agree?

Extension Questions and Activities

1. Nowlan said he uses the bull moose as a symbol. Reexamine "The Bull Moose" and identify the images of royalty. Explain what they contribute to the idea and feeling of the poem. Is this an especially Canadian symbol?
2. Study "Warren Pryor" by Alden Nowlan and "The Average" and "The Unknown Citizen" by W.H. Auden. How do they compare? Which poet best conveys your beliefs? Do these poems reflect adolescence today? Write a poem that examines a similar idea found in these poems.
3. Select a writer in your community to interview. Using your prepared questions and those questions from the film, prepare your interview. What research should you do before your interview? Videotape your interview.
4. Nowlan was asked if he could do it all over again, what would he be. He told the story of wanting to be the king of Nicaragua. How would you respond to that question? Turn your childhood dream into a poem.
5. Choose a word or line from one of his poems and use it as a springboard for your own poem.

Student Activity Sheet:
Alden Nowlan: An Introduction
(1984; 28 min.; directed by Jon Pedersen)

Part One: Before viewing this film, do some research on Alden Nowlan. www.library.utoronto.ca/canpoetry is a good place to start. Prepare three questions that you would have asked Alden Nowlan in 1984.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Part Two: This film is a combination of Alden Nowlan reading from his poems and Nowlan being interviewed. As you are watching the film, record some of the questions posed by the interviewer.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Part Three: This film includes many wonderful readings of his poems. Record some of the words and lines that stand out for you. If possible, note the titles of the poems.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Lesson Plan:
Atwood and Family
(1985; 29 min.; directed by Michael Rubbo)

Grade Level: Secondary (Grades 9-12)

Time Allowance: 90-120 minutes

Overview and Instructions

This lesson is based on viewing the NFB film, *Atwood and Family* (1985; 29 min). Margaret Atwood was born in Ottawa in 1939. In this film, students will get a glimpse of the internationally acclaimed poet and novelist in a rare encounter with Atwood on her family's island retreat. Students should complete the "Student Activity Sheet" (see the following page) as they watch the film.

Discussion Questions

1. This film is a series of conversations located in various places. Comment on the effectiveness of some of the location choices and how they contributed to the portrayal of Atwood's character.
2. Why did Rubbo include the short clips of barometer rising and falling?
3. Comment on the inclusion of the conversation between family members on the evening when Rubbo was not around. Would you have included this clip?
4. Comment on the final image of the islands in the film. What other images might Rubbo have chosen?
5. Michael Rubbo sets out to discover what shapes this celebrated Canadian writer's work and what motivates her characters. Is his film a success?

Extension Questions and Activities

1. This film begins with a list of her accomplishments. Research Atwood's accomplishments since the making of this film in 1985. As a filmmaker, decide on the location of a new Atwood film. What will she do in this film? What five questions will you ask her?
2. Research 2-3 interviews with Atwood since 1985. How do they compare to her portrayal in this film? How has she changed in the past 20 years?
3. Atwood is acclaimed for her talent of portraying both personal and wordly problems of universal concern. Find poems that support this statement and explain your choices.
4. Focus on a place that is important to you and/or your family. In a poem, describe this place from two peoples' perspectives.

Student Activity Sheet:
Atwood and Family
(1985; 29 min.; directed by Michael Rubbo)

Michael Rubbo sets out to discover what shapes this celebrated Canadian writer's work and what motivates her characters. As you are watching the film, make note of what we learn of Atwood in the various locations:

- ☐ In the kitchen, as her Mother makes a pie
- ☐ Under the canoe, between Atwood and Mary-Lou
- ☐ Under the tarp, between Rubbo and Atwood
- ☐ On the rocks while painting, between Rubbo and Atwood
- ☐ At the table in the evening, between Atwood, Gibson, and her parents
- ☐ The shadow conversation

Lesson Plan:
Irving Layton: An Introduction
(1986; 27 min.; directed by Donald Winkler)

Grade Level: Secondary (Grades 9-12)

Time Allowance: 90-120 minutes

Overview and Instructions

This lesson is based on viewing the NFB film, *Irving Layton: An Introduction* (1986; 27 min). Irving Layton was born in 1912 in the Romanian town of Tirlu and immigrated to Montreal in 1913. Filmed in Montreal and Greece, this beautifully crafted documentary is a warm portrait of a 1981 Nobel prize nominee. Students will see Layton's passionate approach to life as a writer, teacher, and private human being. Students should complete the "Student Activity Sheet" (see the following page) as they watch the film.

Discussion Questions

1. The first words of the film are, "I want to make it clear, quite clear, that a poet is a different kind of animal...there's something abnormal about the poet".
 - A) How would you describe Irving Layton?
 - B) Does his definition of a poet describe him?
 - C) Do you think this is an effective way for Winkler to begin his film?
2. Do you agree that there is a distinctive Canadian poetry?
3. Layton says that one role of the poet and artist is to expose the demons in society. Do you agree? Identify authors who have fulfilled this role.

Extension Questions and Activities

1. It has been said that Layton's "tell it like it is" style won him enemies and worshippers. Find evidence of his conflicting audiences. Where do you stand in the debate?
2. Where is Irving Layton today? Research his life and recent publications.
3. Layton said that poetry has to dance. It has to get off the page and do a dance. Examine "A Spider Danced a Cosy Jig" and "A Tall Man Executes a Jig". How do these poems dance? How does the style of the poem support the ideas?
4. Louis Dudek of McGill University wrote that Layton is more widely read and discussed than any other Canadian poet as "he has belaboured conformity, Calvinism, prudery, and plain dullness with a direct fury and passion unequalled by any Canadian past or present". Find ten poems that demonstrate the protesting nature of Layton.
5. Choose one of the titles from one of his poems. Write your own poem using the same title. Try to make your poem dance!

Student Activity Sheet:
Irving Layton: An Introduction
(1986; 27 min.; directed by Donald Winkler)

As you watch the film, answer the following questions.

1. Describe Layton's background.
2. Why does he write poetry?
3. What does he think Canadian poetry is all about?
4. Describe his process of writing.
5. What is the role of the poet and artist, according to Layton?
6. What are the three things he loves and why does he love them?
 - ☐
 - ☐
 - ☐

English/History Project

It is fascinating to look at an event in the past and how a poet has responded to this experience. We have to remind ourselves that poetry can often be a metaphorical response to one person's interpretations of events as s/he experienced them.

Assignment:

1. Choose a poem that is about an event in the past.
2. Research the historical significance of the event. You may include web research, but some research should also be from book and/or newspaper sources. Provide your summary notes, as well as photocopied information.
3. Analyze the poem using your research of the event. You should make notes on the text.
4. Write a response about the poet's interpretations of the event.
5. Extension: Find another poem about the same event and compare the two versions of the event.
6. Extension: Create a website for your poem. The links should go from lines in the poem to annotation, analysis, images, and/or historical significance. If each member of the class uses a different poem, one major *Canadian Poetry Timeline* website can be created. If the technology is unavailable, create a bulletin board display of the links.

Sample:

Joy Kogawa's "What do I Remember of the Evacuation" would work well as a poem that is a response to a historical event. Kogawa uses a child narrator to express her point of view about the evacuation and the ensuing racism:

And I remember the puzzle of Lorraine Life
Who said "Don't insult me" when I
Proudly wrote my name in Japanese
And Tim flew the Union Jack
When the war was over but Lorraine
And her friends spat on us anyway
and I prayed to the God who loves
All the children in his sight
That I might be white.

Historical significance:

In December, 1941, Japanese forces attacked the American naval base at Pearl Harbour sparking the entry of the U.S. into World War II. Many Canadians and Americans were suspicious that the people of Japanese descent might spy and accused them of preparing the way for a Japanese invasion of North America. In the months that followed, the governments of both Canada and United States moved people of Japanese descent from their homes and into internment camps. In 1988, federal governments of both Canada and United States issued a formal apology and made financial reparations for the losses that Japanese-Canadians and Americans suffered during the war years.

English/Geography Project

It is fascinating to look at places in Canada and how a poet has responded to certain locations. We have to remind ourselves that poetry can often be a metaphorical response to one person's interpretations of a place.

Assignment:

1. Choose a poem that describes a place. It may be focused on anything, but the place should be somehow significant to the poem.
2. Research that place. Find as many pictures of that place as possible. Try to find old photos, depending on when the poem was written. Also research the significance of that place. You may include web research, but some research should also be from book and/or newspaper sources
3. Analyze the poem using your research of the place. You should make notes on the text.
4. Write a response about the poet's interpretations of the place.
5. Extension: Find another poem about the same place and compare the two versions. Or, find poems about places across the country.
6. Extension: Create a website for your poem. The links should go from lines in the poem to annotation, analysis, images, and/or historical significance. If each member of the class uses a different poem, one major *Canadian Poetry Across the Country* website can be created. If the technology is unavailable, create a bulletin board display of the links.

Sample:

F.R. Scott's "Laurentian Shield" provides a perfect example of a poem about a Canadian place:

Hidden in wonder and snow, or sudden with summer,
This land stares at the sun in a huge silence
Endlessly repeating something we cannot hear.
Inarticulate, arctic,
Not written on by history, empty as paper,
It leans away from the world with songs in its lakes
Older than love, and lost in the miles...

Imagine the time and place of this poem, taken from "Five Poems for Grandmothers" and what attitude Atwood is portraying about Canadian city life:

How little I know
about you finally:
The time you stood
In the nineteenth century
On Younge Street, a thousand
Miles from home, with a brown purse
And a man stole it...

English/History Project

Both historians and poets have written about the theme of what it means to be Canadian. To compliment a study of Canadian History, explore what various Canadian poets have contributed to this concept.

Assignment:

1. Choose a poem that explores the theme of Canadian Identity.
2. Analyze the poet's attitude towards what it means to be Canadian.
3. Compare various versions. Create a display of *Canadians about Canadians*.
4. Compare poets' attitudes with various historians' views.

Sample:

Earle Birney's "Canada: Case History" is one example of a national identity poem.

This is the case of a highschool land
Deadset in adolescence
Loud treble laughs and sudden fists
Bright cheeks the gangling presence...

Miriam Waddington provides another glimpse of our identity in "Canadians":

Here are
Our signatures:
Geese, fish, eskimo
Faces, girl-guide
Cookies, ink-drawings
Tree-plantings, summer
Storms and winter
Emanations.
We look like a geography but
Just scratch us
And we bleed history...

Yet another from John Robert Colombo in "Oh Canada":

Canada could have enjoyed
English government,
French culture,
And American know-how.
Instead it ended up with
English know-how,
French government,
And American culture.