

Historica Canada Education Portal

Anna Leonowens

Overview

This lesson is based on viewing the Anna Leonowens biography from [The Canadians](#) series. It focuses on the facts behind the mystique of Leonowens, whose adventures in Siam (now Thailand) in the late nineteenth century have inspired several films and musicals.

Aims

Students will study the remarkable life of Anna Leonowens within the larger context of women's history, and "East-West" relations, while also considering the reliability of biographies as sources of historical record.

Background

Anna Leonowens was born in India in 1831. To escape the limited lifestyle available to women of the day, she became a teacher and a writer. She wrote four books, in which she outlined a fictional life she touted as her own. In her novels, she chose a remote corner of Wales as her birthplace. She spent the last forty years of her life in Canada, twenty of those years she spent in Halifax, which she called home. In Halifax, she founded the Victoria School of Design, which changed its name in

1925 to the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. She was an active suffragette, founding the Halifax Local Council of Women. The Anna Leonowens Gallery in Halifax remains to this day a venue in which students, professors, and visiting artists display their work. She died in Montreal in 1915.

"Getting to Know You" is a co-production for History TV in Canada and the BBC in the U.K. Welsh Director/Writer Karen Whiteside, filmed around the world. Locations included: New York, Los Angeles, Halifax, Montreal, Wales, Thailand, and India. An interview with Jodie Foster, which is featured in the documentary, provides the production with an entertaining perspective on this captivating story.

Activities

Time Allowance: 1 - 4 hours

Procedures:

The life of Anna Leonowens inspired numerous biographies, a Broadway Musical, and Hollywood feature films. Although her life story is often infused more with fiction than with fact, she was an extraordinary woman who accomplished extraordinary things. Anna's story can be studied as the biography of a remarkable individual, as one aspect within the larger context of women's history, or in terms of Western-Eastern relations. This video can also be used in the study of historiography. Here are some strategies to use after viewing the video.

1. Prepare a poster, brochure, or bulletin board advertising the occupational options available for women in the western world during the

nineteenth century.

2. Write a journal entry, in Anna's voice or in the voice of a Siamese woman, focussing on the life of women in nineteenth Century Siam versus the life of women in nineteenth Century Canada or Britain. Another way to make this comparison would be to write a dialogue between Anna and different actresses who have portrayed her, such as Deborah Kerr and Jodie Foster. This activity would provoke some interesting discussions, since views on women's roles would differ depending on who Anna was "talking" to: a woman from the 1940s (Kerr) or a woman from the 1990s (Foster).

3. On a map of the world, trace the travels and significant events in the life of Anna Leonowens. Choose one significant event/location and write an entry in Anna's diary, describing her surroundings and her reactions. You could also create Anna's 'Travel Log,' with entries detailing Anna's surroundings and impressions for each location.

4. Anna kept journals from her time in Siam. Assume the role of the King of Siam and create a journal of the same time period from his perspective. What do you feel are your rights and responsibilities? What do you think of Anna?

5. Watch and compare scenes from the different versions of Anna's story (Deborah Kerr version, the Jodie Foster version, and the animated film.) How are these stories different from the Biographies documentary? How are they different from the "real" story? Why are there so many variations?

6. Explore the process of creating a [Heritage Minute](#). Show examples of other Heritage Minutes and discuss the techniques used to make them

interesting and informative. Students will then create a story board for a one-minute video about Anna, and produce (or role play, should equipment not be available) their concept.

7. Create an artistic impression (picture, collage, poem) that reflects what you believe Anna would have seen when she first arrived in Siam. Try to infuse your work with the feelings Anna may have been experiencing. Create a second piece of work (picture, journal entry, 'photograph,' poem) portraying Anna's last night in Siam.

8. Re-create Anna's classroom using materials available in your own classroom. Create mock lessons that reflect the material Anna would have taught to the King's children, and role play a "typical" class. From this experience, brainstorm: What are some challenges and obstacles Anna would have faced in such a setting? Would Anna have found any rewards in her situation?

9. Write two obituaries for Anna Leonowens. The first should be based only on the known facts of her life, and the second may be as romantic and exaggerated as you wish. Brainstorm: Does the fact that Anna may have fictionalized parts of her life render her accomplishments less impressive? Why has her story captured such attention as to have been retold and exaggerated and enhanced so many times?

10. In an activity similar to #9, try to write the story of Anna's life in the form of a legend, complete with illustrations, poetry, and dialogue. Try to then write the story in the form of a newspaper article, based only on fact. Consider the same brainstorming question as above.

11. Although she died in Halifax, Anna Leonowens did not spend a significant amount of time in Canada. Can she be considered a

"Canadian"? An informal debate might take place on what defines Canadian identity and what makes a Canadian Hero. You might include the Great Farini and famous Canadian entertainers, such as Mike Myers, Alanis Morissette and others, in your discussion - all Canadian born, but Canadians who have chosen to spend little time in Canada.

12. Have your students attempt to research and write a biography of a relative. Students should be encouraged to use diaries, interviews, and oral histories as sources. Have your students include a reflective paragraph about the process of writing biographies. Consider such issues as bias, reliability in biographies, and fact versus opinion and memory. Brainstorm: Can biographies be used as reliable sources of historical information?

13. Pretend you are a clothing historian in twenty-second century. What conclusions could you make about Canadian society according to our clothing? Compare contemporary women's clothing in Canada to women's clothing in the Victorian age and brainstorm the symbolic aspects found in each. How does clothing reflect the values and beliefs of a culture?

14. Have your students create a mock lesson plan with the aim of describing "snow" to those who have neither seen nor heard of it. Role play the lesson and brainstorm: what other similarly unfamiliar concepts might Anna have had to teach to the King's children?

15. "Interview" Anna. If you were interviewing Anna Leonowens, what would you ask her about her life? Her decisions? Her books? Her "legendary" place in history?

Resources

[The Canadians: Anne Leonowens](#)

[Anne Harriette Leonowens - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

Blofeld, John. *King Maha Mongkut of Siam*. The Siam Society of Bangkok, 1987.

Bristow, W.S. *Louis and The King of Siam*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1976.

Landon, Margaret. *Anna and The King of Siam*. New York: The John Day Company, 1944.

[Herstory and Exhibition](#)