

Historica Canada Education Portal

Northrop Frye

Overview

This lesson is based on viewing the Northrop Frye biography from [The Canadians](#) series. It explores the life and writings of Frye, who was one of Canada's greatest thinkers. He struggled with questions about Canadian identity and the nature of Canada with depth and humour. His ideas and passion have influenced many of today's writers and thinkers.

Aims

These activities challenge students to explore the issues and ideas that Frye wrote about and taught. Students will explore these ideas in relation to film, literature, or art.

Background

Northrop Frye was one of the greatest thinkers Canada has ever produced. He struggled with questions about the nature of Canada and Canadian Identity both deeply and humourously. He was a scholar, a teacher, a United Church minister and Professor of Literature at Victoria College, University of Toronto for almost half a century. He managed to infect his pupils (among them the young writers who are today the

doyens of Canadian literature) with the passion of his ideas.

Northrop Frye was born in Sherbrooke, Quebec in the summer of 1912 to a family of Methodist fundamentalists. Though religion was a touchstone to Frye's ideas he certainly was anything but a fundamentalist.

Enrolling in the University of Toronto's Victoria College at the age of 17, he stayed there first as a student, later as a teacher, principal, and finally as Chancellor. After his initial studies he studied theology and then as a student minister he spent five months in Saskatchewan travelling by horse between small towns. His understanding of religion was not conventional and there were many who were offended by his views. But the Bible was central to his thinking and he saw it as the source of myth and imagery, the crucible of western literature.

He saw the arts as a creative power that can be possessed by their audience. He was an intellectual giant whose influence reached to the US and Britain and whom many feel can rightly be compared to Freud and Darwin. His 1957 book *The Anatomy of Criticism* transformed the study of literature but he was also a profoundly human man.

Not only an academic, Frye wrote for the CBC and served for nine years on the CRTC. As in his classroom, his comments and questions during CRTC hearings were ironic, witty, and tough, often garnering laughs as he skewered pretentious license applicants.

The aim of this documentary is to make this humorous witty man accessible to the audience. Interviews with his students and colleagues (e.g. Margaret Atwood, Robert Fulford), and excerpts from his letters and diaries reveal a man who was brilliant and funny, wise and poignant. The documentary is a visual journey that explores a life rich with ideas that

sparked a passion for living in others.

Activities

Time Allowance: 1 - 4 hours

Procedures:

The video lends itself to responses in three major areas including film, literature, and art.

Film

Before watching the video, direct the students to pay attention to camera angles, music, editing, cross-cutting, the treatment of the experts, and the pace of the video. Divide your students into small groups to evaluate filming techniques used in the video. The following questions can be used as a guide:

- Did you enjoy watching the video? Why or why not?
- What camera angles were used (low, medium, high)?
- How was music interwoven with images and words to create meaning?
- Did the video take an objective or subjective stance?
- How did the filmmakers incorporate Frye's notion of an underlying myth in every text?
- How did the filmmakers balance music, literature, and art? Give an example of each of these from the video.

While the video documents the life of Northrop Frye, he never appears in it. With your students, discuss what sort of person Northrop Frye appears

to be. How was he as a religious man, a thinker, an academic, a humourist, a critic, and a husband? Pair off the students and direct them to focus on one part of his life that interests them. Based on this aspect of his life, the students will prepare and present a 1 minute clip that they would include in the video as if they were Frye himself.

If the students have access to a video camera and editing equipment, they could film the segment using techniques that are used in *The Canadians* series. These could include camera angles, fading and crosscutting between images, and adding music and text on the screen. If not, they can create a storyboard for how they would film the video and what they would say. You may want to give students time to research Frye in more detail, emphasizing the importance of consulting multiple sources as opposed to relying solely on the video.

Questions they should answer:

- What would Frye want to say in a biography on his life?
- What parts of his life did this video not discuss that he would have wanted to include?
- What parts of the video should have been given more or less emphasis and why?
- How would Frye present himself?

Follow up the presentations by analyzing what students chose to focus on. What limited their ability to represent Frye? Given a time limit, did students have difficulty condensing the information? Did they have to cut anything from the presentation that they wanted to include? Use these questions to explore what interpretive strategies the pairs used when creating the video.

Literature

Use William Blake's writing to illustrate the role of History in poetry.

Provide the students with copies of the poems "The Chimney Sweeper" (one version from *The Songs of Innocence*, one version from *The Songs of Experience*), and the poem "London." In the former, discuss the tone of the dream state in which the boy finds himself. Relate this to the poet's units of thought (mythology and metaphor according to Frye). What circumstances have led to the boy's position in society? Place the poem in its historical context, emphasizing the problem of child labour.

Compare the poem written in *Songs of Innocence* (1789) with the one written in *Songs of Experience* (1794); how do the poems bring new meaning to each other?

Discuss the tone of the poem "London." How does it reflect the period in which it was written? Blake, like Frye who threw off his fundamentalist education, wanted to rid himself of the materialist philosophy of the Enlightenment and a repressive interpretation of Christianity. Explore how this sentiment comes through the negative view of Blake's London. Develop the social framework within which the poem was written by discussing conditions in London in the late eighteenth century.

Just as Blake believed that he must create a system or be enslaved by another man's, Frye developed his own system of criticism to father the notion of a total vision in literature. Look at Blake's *Songs of Innocence* and *Experience* to look for one vision. Do the students notice a pattern in Blake's treatment of his subject? What underlying myths are present in Blake's writing? Do we find desire or scapegoats in Blake's writing? If so, who or what are they? To focus students, using the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, compare the early version of the poem "The Tyger" with the finished version. What words have been changed? Why?

Do a lesson on Greek mythology. Explore some of the major patterns in Greek myth such as the role of the hero and the ability to perform superhuman feats. Have the students bring in a current newspaper. Instruct them to read the paper, looking for desires (including power and unobtainable dreams), and any form of myth that underlies the articles. Is today's mythology limited to popular culture or is it also found in sport, business, national, and international issues in everyday events? Who do we use as the scapegoats in the papers today? Make a collage of the pictures of people that the students believe are used as scapegoats from the newspapers.

Art

Plan a field trip to an art gallery. Prior to the trip, tell students that they are going to become experts on one painting in the gallery. You may either limit them to one artist who has multiple pieces in the gallery, or to a particular period of painting. Students will need to know who the painter was and when it was painted. They will need to know specifically what the painting contained, what colours were used, and painting style. Ask them to record how the painting makes them feel, and what they think it means. Students may collect information about the painting from gallery audio tapes, the gallery library and information pamphlets. If information is available to the students in your school library, have them continue to research the artist and the period in which he/she painted.

When all relevant information has been collected, select a painting that you will discuss with the whole class. Rembrandt Van Rijn and Salvador Dali would be good painters to use. In Frye's lectures, he wanted to confront visual works with verbal works. The main questions that the students will be considering are: 1) what are the painter's intention and

meaning, and 2) what was achieved and how do I understand the painting? Since most historical interpretation aims at restoring the author's intentions, have them consider how they responded to the painting as opposed to what their research tells them. Discuss the painting as a class to help students learn to interpret art.

Their assignment will be to create a gallery tour handout. Have them imagine that as a class, they will be putting together a guidebook for the gallery. They will each be given two pages (one page, two sides), to tell the history of the painting, the painter, and to give their interpretation of it. When they have all completed the assignment, put the booklet together in an anthology format for the students to enjoy.

Address the problems with canonical works. Were there examples of racism, classicism, or sexism in these works? Break students into groups of five to discuss these issues with regard to their paintings. What changes would need to be made to eliminate the problems they find in the works? Have your students draft fictional letters to the painter whose work they have selected.

Other questions you may want to have the students consider are:

- Why are some paintings worth so much?
- Is High Art part of popular culture, or separate from it?
- Should we consider a painter's works together or individually?
- Frye believes that a holistic reading of a painter's work is most profitable, do students agree?
- Texts and images do nothing on their own. How much does the interpreter bring to a work?
- Why do we look at paintings?
- Why bother trying to interpret a painting if it's subjective anyway?

Additional Activities

Find a chronology of Frye's life (i.e., in *Northrop Frye: A Visionary Life*). Classify and categorize the events in his life. In a chart, list events in his personal life, his education, his employment, his publications, and his achievements. How is his life represented?

Have your students create chronologies of their own lives using the above as a model. What do they include? What do they leave out? Is the chronology an accurate representation of their lives, and of them as people? Use their own chronology to teach them the concept of a time line that extends from the past to the future.

Required Materials:

The second activity requires the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Blake's *The Songs of Innocence*, and *The Songs of Experience*.

The third activity would be enhanced by a trip to a local art gallery.

Resources

[Northrop Frye Worksheet](#)

[Northrop Frye - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[Northrop Frye, Simulation, And the Creation of a Human World](#)

[The Northrop Frye Centre](#)

Adamson, Joseph, *Northrop Frye: A Visionary Life*. Toronto: ECW Press, 1993.

Bates, Ronald, *Northrop Frye*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1971.

Bal, Mieke, *Reading Rembrandt: Beyond the Word-Image Opposition The Northrop Frye Lectures in Literary Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

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World Perspectives, 1985.

Frye, Northrop. *A Study of English Romanticism*. New York: Random House, 1968.