

## TOPIC 7. WATER, ART, AND THE CANADIAN IDENTITY

### Chapter 7: At the Water's Edge

#### Purpose

To help students gain a keen appreciation for water's role in shaping the identity of Canadian society. This will be accomplished through the study of Canadian art and tradition using a historical perspective.

#### Subject areas

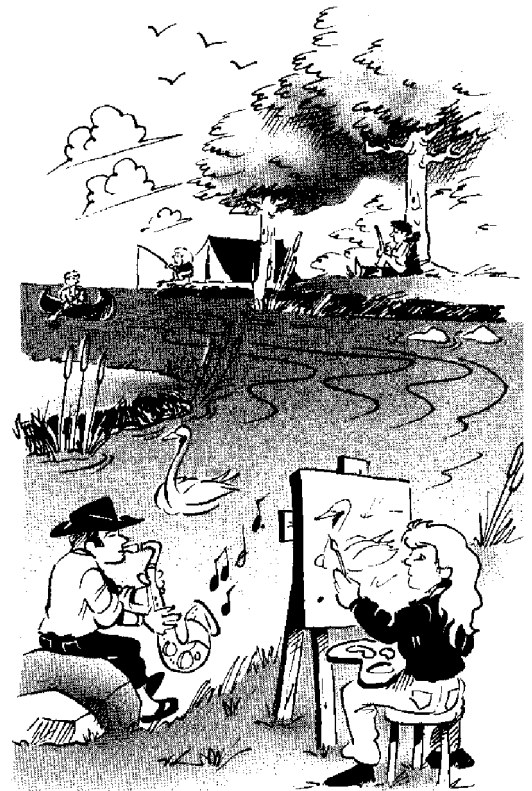
Art, Language Arts, Environmental Studies, History, Geography, Music

#### Procedure

**Note:** Because art and tradition span all facets of our system of learning, this is an appropriate section to link as many subject areas as possible while encouraging students' own creativity and independent study.

1. Generate class participation with the following ideas:

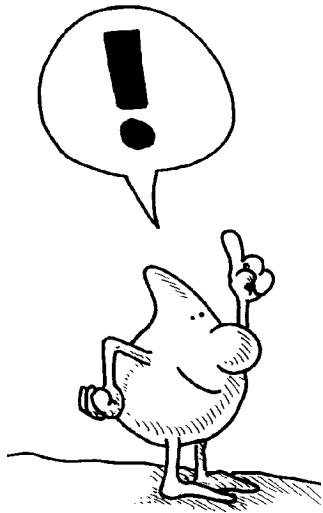
- Discuss what art means to different individuals in the class. This discussion will establish the diversity of meaning and feeling that art has for a large group of people.
- Display a particular piece of art and generate discussion. Or, ask students about a specific piece of art that may be hanging in their homes or one they might have seen. Or, ask students about a poem or story that depicts feelings about water.
- Ask students why so many artists, poets, writers, and musicians focus on water and its “meaning.” Beside water's many uses, what does water mean to them?



2. Concentrate on activity, creativity, and independent study throughout this section. A focus on each student's initiative is important from the beginning. This can be done in a number of ways:
  - For example, in the first class have the students choose a medium such as drawing a picture, making a collage, writing a poem or a story. Using their chosen medium, they are to describe a personal experience that they relate to water. This could include everything from a rainstorm to tears running down a cheek.
3. Music provides a good opportunity for group activity and learning. Bring music into the classroom for the students to listen to; for example, Gordon Lightfoot's "The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald." Use a wide variety of songs to gain a representative cross section of Canadian society.

## **References**

- Freshwater Series A-7: "Water, Art, and the Canadian Identity: At the Water's Edge"



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### Chapter 7: At the Water's Edge

How do you feel about being by the water? If you had a choice of taking your vacation near a river or lake, or in a setting where no water was present, which would you choose?

The majority of Canadians would take the waterfront, hands down. We have so many beautiful lakes and rivers to choose from in all provinces and territories that we are the envy of many other countries.

#### Could you imagine your life without water?

Picture your daily routines without taps and a shower, without water in the summer, ice in the winter, puddles in the spring. Water is one of the most precious riches that the earth provides. But water gives us more than life; it also gives meaning to our lives, and this meaning cannot always be measured in scientific terms or in numerical data.

However, this meaning can be expressed in art. Writers, artists, musicians, dancers, and actors have all been inspired by water, and these artists express things we all feel about water but may not be able to communicate as well. This celebration of the Canadian

landscape and water through art began with the first Canadians.

#### Water Canada's Aboriginal peoples

For thousands of years the Aboriginal peoples of Canada selected sites for villages because they were close to water.

Before Europeans crisscrossed North America, Canada's Aboriginal population had depended on water for their physical and spiritual health. From the magnificent totems and legends of the West coast to the stone cuts and stencils of the Inuit in Canada's North, Aboriginal art records how much they depended upon water and all it provided, and it also shows how Aboriginal history is tied to these waters.

## Art and Canada's history

When English and French explorers and settlers first came to Canada, rivers were the main transportation system.

Follow the path of streams and rivers flowing into Hudson Bay, and the Mackenzie and the St. Lawrence rivers. You can see how these waterways, which had long been the Aboriginal peoples' route of travel, now became

the guide to European exploration, trade, and settlement.

Some of the first European explorers, such as Alexander Mackenzie, Simon Fraser, and David Thompson, recorded their trips in journals — writings which were rich in accounts of the waters they saw, as well as in their respect for the force of the mighty rivers.

## Water in words

We can feel the danger of the waters and the respect early writers felt for them by reading David Thompson's account of travelling the Black River:

*The dashing of the water against the rocks, the deep roar of the torrent, the hollow sound of the fall, with the surrounding high dark frowning hills. . . .*

or by reading the lines of Simon Fraser about the river that bears his name:

*The struggle which the men on this trial experienced between the whirlpools and rocks almost exhausted their strength; the canoes were in perpetual danger of sinking or being broken to pieces.*

But other writers and poets saw Canada's waters as romantic, and their writings were filled with the grandness and majesty of the lakes and rivers. Poets like Charles Sangster and the four “Confederation poets,” Charles G.D. Roberts, Bliss Carman, Archibald Lampman, and Duncan C. Scott found inspiration in the lakes and streams they came to know.

One of Canada's most popular poets, Pauline Johnson, also captures the force of nature and energy in her poetry. Born of an English mother and a Mohawk father, her poetry celebrated her Aboriginal heritage and the Canadian landscape, especially its lakes and rivers. Lines from her poem “The Song My Paddle Sings” are familiar to most Canadian students:

*And up on the hills against the sky,  
A fir tree rocking its lullaby,  
Swings, swings,  
Its emerald wings,  
Swelling the song that my paddle sings.*

Other writers and poets were inspired by Canadian waters and landscape. For example:

- Frances Brooke, who wrote *The History of Emily Montague*, one of Canada’s first novels
- Thomas Cary, poet
- Adam Allan and J. Mackay, two poets who focused on eastern Canada
- William Francis Butler, whose novel, *The Great Lone Land*, tells of his journey from Fort Gary to the Rocky Mountains

### **The artist's view of water**

When you visit any of Canada’s art galleries, you will see paintings of Canada’s beautiful scenery from coast to coast — scenery that includes all kinds of landscapes, especially our rivers, lakes, and streams. Paintings you will find include the following:

- Canadian landscape paintings from the late 1700s, which began with the works of such artists as Thomas Davies, whose watercolours sparkled with brilliant colour
- Artists such as Joseph Légaré in Quebec and William Armstrong in Ontario and western Canada, whose paintings featured rivers and streams
- Paul Kane, one of the most celebrated painters of the Canadian West, who recorded the lives of Aboriginal peoples
- through his sketches of rivers, waterfalls, portages and life along the waterways, as he travelled along the routes of the fur traders of the Hudson’s Bay Company in the mid-1800s
- Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven, artists whose works celebrated Canada’s wilderness
- Robert Bateman, whose paintings highlight natural settings and the wildlife that inhabit them

### **Water and music**

The gurgling of a stream, the thunderous crashing of waterfalls, and the quick dripping of a spring thaw — these are all sounds of nature’s music. All sounds that are reflected in the music and songs of Canada’s history. From the ballads of the voyageurs to the modern songs of musicians such as Gordon Lightfoot and Stan Rogers, water has inspired artists.

Indeed, it is often through stories told in music that we learn about our past.

R. Murray Schafer, one of Canada’s foremost composers, returns often to the lakes and streams of his native land. He writes, “A mountain stream is a chord of many notes strung out stereophonically across the path of the attentive listener.”

## **How things change**

The rivers, lakes, and streams celebrated by early artists were from a clean and pure environment, one which knew little about pollution and water diversion. What happened?

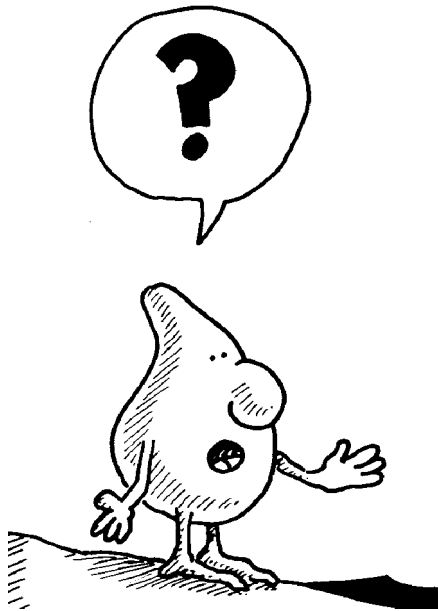
After World War II, Canada began to develop as an industrialized society. And this industrialization began to reduce the quality of our natural environment, especially our rivers, lakes, and streams. In *Rivers of Canada*, published in 1974, Hugh MacLennan identifies the modern uses of Canada's water systems with a sense of loss:

*...the rivers of Canada are still there, and their appearance and character have changed little or not at all in the last century and a half. It is only our use of them that has altered. Now we fly over them, build dams on them, fish in them for sport, use them for municipal water supplies, and some of them we have poisoned with sewage and industrial effluents. . . . But the rivers are as worth knowing as they ever were, though none of us will know them as the voyageurs did.*

In recent years, Canada's Aboriginal peoples have seen the quality of their lives changed and lowered by development, pressures from oil exploration, large hydroelectric developments, and other sources.

Many natives feel that when their land deteriorates, so too does their health and way of life. As Grand Chief B.G. Cheechoo of the Nishnawbe-Aski Nation explains:

*Our history is tied to these waters. Our continued reliance on fishing, trapping and hunting and our desire to do so is dependent on these waters. Our future is based on these waters. . . . Any threat to such waters poses a direct threat to our survival.*



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#### Activity 1 — Language Arts, Poetic Expression

Make your writing come alive!

Canadian Roderick Haig-Brown writes, “rivers are **veins of the earth** through which the lifeblood returns to the heart.”

Another Canadian writer, Hugh MacLennan, in *The Watch That Ends the Night*, writes:

*In the early October of that year, in the cathedral hush of a Quebec Indian summer with the lake drawing into its mirror the fire of the maples, it came to me that to be able to love the mystery surrounding us is the final and only sanction of human existence.*

Both Haig-Brown and MacLennan are using metaphors to compare rivers and lakes to veins and mirrors. Figures of speech, such as metaphors and similes, are used by writers to add description to their writings. (A simile resembles a metaphor except that it uses *like* or *as* to make a comparison, for example, “rivers are like veins of the earth.”)

We all know that rivers are not really veins, nor are lakes mirrors. But we also see the connections and comparisons when someone makes them.

- Try to make your own comparisons. Think of an original way to describe some part of water and write your own metaphors and similes. Think about how water tastes, looks, feels, smells, etc. Write your comparison so that you can make people look at water in a new way.
- Describe what water means to you, and/or what it means to people all around the world. Be creative. Paint a picture, make a model, write a poem or a song.

## **Activity 2 — History**

Although early writers recognized the beauty and value of our waterways, they were also very aware of the dangers involved in navigating lakes and rivers. Those who were not careful often paid for their mistakes with their lives, and even those who were careful often were caught in nature’s fury.

- Find out about disasters in Canadian history where people and water came into conflict — maybe a water-related disaster occurred in your region, or affected someone close to you. Describe this disaster in a poem, a story, a picture, or a song.

## **Activity 3 — Art, Writing**

In Freshwater Series A-7, “Water, Art, and the Canadian Identity: At the Water’s Edge,” you will find pictures of famous Canadian paintings. Pretend you can afford to buy one of these works of art to hang in your home. But in order to buy it, you must explain in writing why you have chosen a particular painting.

- Tell why you made your choice
- Explain what mood or feeling you think the painter was trying to express

## **Activity 4 — Art and Writing, Research**

In your reading, you saw a reference to Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven. These painters all painted the wilderness of Canada, especially scenes in Ontario’s Algonquin Park. Research one of these painters and prepare a short report about his work.

The Group of Seven included:

- Lawren Harris
- A.Y. Jackson
- J.E.H. MacDonald
- Frederick Varley
- Arthur Lismer
- Frank Johnson
- Franklin Carmichael



### Activity 5 — History, Environmental Studies

Canada's Aboriginal peoples, rely on water for physical and spiritual health. But in recent years they have seen the quality of their lives degraded by pressures of human development, pressures from oil exploration, large hydroelectric developments, and other sources.

- Compare past and present lifestyles of Canada's Aboriginal peoples.
- Research a large hydroelectric development, such as James Bay. Show what effect this development has had on Canada's Aboriginal peoples.

### Activity 6 — Literature, Research, Writing

Research one of the Confederation poets. Find examples of poetry using water themes. Prepare your analysis of these works.

**Note:** It can be difficult to read, look at, or listen to a piece of artistic expression and decide for yourself what the artist is trying to say. What you need to look at is how you feel about the piece.

Here are some questions to ask yourself when analysing art:

- How does this piece make me feel? For example, does it make me sad, excited, happy, or otherwise?
- Does it remind me of anything in my own life? For example, something else I may have seen or heard.
- How much importance does the artist seem to place on water in the piece?
- Do I feel that this piece shows respect for the water which it depicts?

## **Activity 7 — Research, Writing**

Pauline Johnson toured throughout Canada, England, and the United States, giving recitals of her poetry. She became very popular and led a very interesting life — so much so that books have been written about her. Research and prepare a report about a part of Pauline Johnson’s life and her poetry.

## **Activity 8 — Art**

### **Create your own rain pictures**

You know how water can land on your homework project or favourite water colour and smudge the ink or paint. Why not use the rain to help you create your own watercolour?

- Use water based paints or poster paint to make some shapes on a sheet of drawing paper.
- Place the paper outdoors for a short while in the rain.
- Bring it in and let it dry.
- Frame it.

## **Activity 9 — Language Arts, History**

### **Research a Aboriginal legend**

Check with your librarian and learn about some of our communities and water systems that were named by Canada’s Aboriginal peoples. Find out if there are legends or stories that go with the names. One example is found in the following lines:

On a height of land in northern Manitoba is a pond from which water flows east into the Hayes River, and west into the Nelson. This is the Echimamish, “the-river-that-flows-both-ways.” Each time they crossed the divide, Native Canadians left offerings in tribute to the mystical reversal of flow that made portaging between the rivers so easy.

A few other examples of place names are:

- *Yukon* comes from the Athapascan language and means “clear water.”
- The Restigouche River, which flows through New Brunswick, was called “good river” by the Micmacs.
- The Hurons called Niagara Falls the “thunder of waters.”
- Winnipeg is named after its river, which the Cree knew as “muddy water.”

See how many others you can find.

**Note:** One of many books to help you in your research is *Indian Giver: A Legacy of North American Native Peoples*, by Warren Lowes. Canadian Association in Support of the Native Peoples, 1986.

## Activity 10 — Language Arts, Creative Writing

Using water as the central theme, write a short story or poem. Be creative. You are not allowed to use topics such as lakes or rivers; you have to use less obvious subjects such as tears, perspiration, fog, or puddles.

Ask your teacher and classmates for examples of poems or suggestions you may gain ideas from. And remember, poems do not necessarily have to rhyme. You may use a specific type of poetry such as haiku or diamante (your teacher will explain what these types of poetry are).

## Activity 11 — Music

### Make your own kind of music!

- Music can be made using water. Fill a set of glasses with different levels of water. When the rim of the glass is rubbed with a wet finger the different levels of water will produce different sounds. See if you can find the levels of water that will produce a recognizable tune.
- Or, in a similar activity, fill bottles with different levels of water and blow into the mouths of these bottles to produce different sounds and pitches.

- Work with your teacher and class to make a symphony of water sounds by recording audio images of water such as waterfalls, a tap, a shower, rivers, rain, a bubbling brook. Play these tapes together or in series to make different compositions. You can also test the hearing of your classmates by having them listen to the tapes to try to identify the sounds properly.
- Study modern poetry or song lyrics that deal with water. Choose material that will be fun for you. Write your own poem and put it to music.

### **Activity 12 — Art, History**

Canada's history has been well documented through Canadian art. The original waterways are pictured by artists such as Cornelius Krieghoff, Paul Kane, Joseph Légaré, and Thomas Davies.

Study and prepare a report on a work of art that directly relates to a topic in Canadian history.

Some examples are:

- Aboriginal use of waterways
- arrival of the first European immigrants
- use of Canadian rivers in the Fur Trade
- present use of water in transportation, for example, the Great Lakes

### **Activity 13 — Aboriginal Art, Research**

Examples of Aboriginal art can be found that show the respect and closeness Canada's Aboriginal peoples feel with nature. Modern Aboriginal artists continue this tradition, for example, Morriseau, Chee Chee, and countless others.

Take an example of Aboriginal art, such as a drawing, painting, or carving, and tell the class about the artist and the art.

## **Activity 14 — Geography, Research**

### **Water and architecture**

Many of our cities and towns were located next to waterways because they provided food, a water supply, and a “road” for transportation. Often our architecture is also influenced by location and closeness to water.

Study an example of architecture from a particular Canadian city that has been influenced by water and prepare a report about it. Some examples to get you thinking are:

- the Expo 1986 site constructed in Vancouver, British Columbia. Buildings were designed to resemble ships in the Vancouver harbour.
- Toronto’s Ontario Place, focused on the Toronto harbour shoreline. If you have visited the site you may be familiar with its setup.
- the Parliament Buildings, designed and built to present an attractive view from the Quebec side of the Ottawa river, as well as the Ontario side. This is a good example of the influence that rivers have.
- you may have a local mill in your area which is located on a river. Mills have historic importance in the development of original Canadian settlements.
- you may also wish to include bridges in this study of Canadian architecture.