
A Tall Man Executes a Jig by Irving Layton

Off-camera, a voice asks: "If you were to be remembered for one poem, what poem would that be?" On screen, Canadian poet Irving Layton responds: "A Tall Man Executes a Jig." The off-camera voice: "How did it come about?" Layton: "I saw a grass-snake that had been violated, had been run over, and he had managed to crawl to the wayside ..."

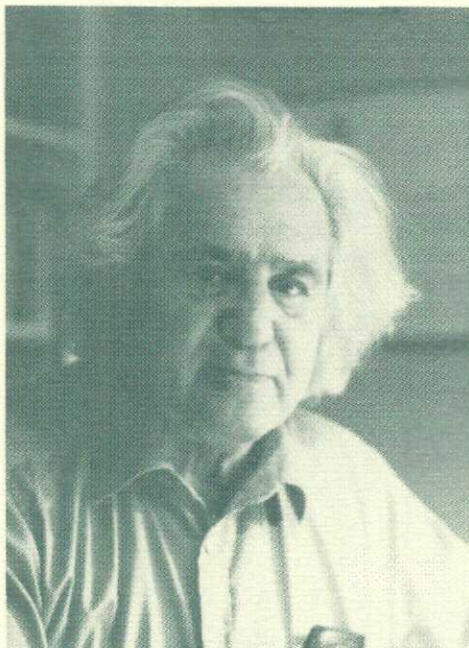
A grass-snake, badly mangled, lying at the roadside. For many, a scene to avoid. For Irving Layton, such a simple episode provides the stuff of artistic inspiration.

Layton watched the snake for hours, identifying with its fate. Out of this intense involvement he later fashioned a metaphysical sonnet-sequence in which are gathered up the major themes of a lifetime of writing. The poem explores questions of purpose, of meaning and meaninglessness, of evil, and pain and suffering. The poet ruminates on different ways to comprehend the human experience, and on the notion that creativity is a kind of redemption.

In this fascinating "conversation," Layton, alone on the screen, talks of how he transforms fleeting experiences into art. He extemporizes a moving analysis of what is perhaps his greatest poem. In so doing, he reveals much about his personality and about the concerns that have shaped his life as well as his art. Above all, **A Tall Man Executes a Jig** provides a rare opportunity to hear an author explicate his own work, making it an extremely valuable film for literature studies.

Audience: Grade 11 through university.

Subject area: Canadian literature



Suggestions for use:

1. Study the poem "A Tall Man Executes a Jig" before viewing the film. Extract the major themes and discuss Layton's perspective on these themes. Analyse, as well, his use of language. Discuss what the inspiration for the poem might have been.
Students might also be asked to write a short analysis of the poem, focussing on major themes.
2. After viewing the film, compare Layton's explanation of the poem with your interpretations. Whose analysis is more satisfactory? Are there insights in your analysis that extend or conflict with Layton's own interpretation?
3. In the film, Layton states that being human makes creative love as well as creative art possible. Study several poems and discuss the various ways in which he handles the theme of love. What sort of definition of *love* emerges?

4. Study several of Layton's poems from different time periods and trace the different ways in which he has handled the question of meaning.
5. "A Tall Man Executes a Jig" is a metaphysical quest, seeking answers to major questions such as the human being's place in the universe, and how to comprehend pain, suffering and evil. Study how another writer has handled similar questions: for example, poets John Donne, Dante or Chaucer, or writer Paul Bunyan. Write an essay comparing Layton's quest with that of the other writer you have chosen.

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