

# When All the Leaves Are Gone

A poetic fable about the power of dreams in overcoming adversity.

A film by ALANIS OBOMSAWIN With ROSALIE DUMAS

## TEACHING GUIDE



## GENERAL OBJECTIVE

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To help students gain a deeper understanding of both themselves and the current culture and foster a tolerant, open-minded attitude that respects differences in others.

## TARGET AUDIENCE

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Students from 9 to 12 years old.

## DISCIPLINES

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- Arts
- Ethics and religious culture
- Personal development
- Languages and literature
- Social sciences

## THE FILM

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The NFB documentary *When All the Leaves Are Gone* (Alanis Obomsawin, 17 min 20 s).

## SUMMARY

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This guide is geared towards teaching students to acquire self-knowledge by taking part in activities that focus on self-realization and on their relationships to their ethnic backgrounds and cultures, and particularly their language. The students will be exposed to the traditional culture and way of life of the Abenaki people and will learn about the importance of dreams and storytelling to First Nations people. Other activities will lead students to reflect on the phenomena of bullying and discrimination so that they are able to challenge them and build a culture of peace. In watching *When All the Leaves Are Gone* and putting themselves in the shoes of Wato, a young Abenaki girl who describes the difficulties she faced as a child because of her ethnicity, the students will better understand bullying and discrimination. Inspired by director Alanis Obomsawin's own experience as a child, the film combines autobiography, fiction and fable to create a moving tale about the power of dreams. Students will observe how Wato's dreams comfort her and give her renewed hope for the future. They will be asked to keep a journal in which they will record their observations, ideas and reflections.

We suggest one primary and four secondary activities. Each activity will encourage students to develop respectful and open-minded attitudes towards cultural differences. In addition, these activities are designed to get students to reflect on the ways that Alanis Obomsawin has dealt with the issues in her film, in order to grasp what it was like to be a young Abenaki girl growing up in the 1940s.

## APPROACH AND PRIMARY ACTIVITY: I PROMOTE PEACE

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Approximate duration: 60 to 75 minutes

This activity will afford students an opportunity to reflect on bullying and to realize that it can lead to discrimination if it isn't stopped. They will be encouraged to look for ways to counter bullying and to strive to create a culture of peace.

To begin, briefly familiarize your students with Alanis Obomsawin. Tell them that they are about to watch a film that is largely inspired by the filmmaker's experiences as a child. Wato, the film's protagonist, is a young Abenaki girl who leaves her reserve at Odanak to attend primary school, where she is the only "Indian." In the film, Wato talks about her attachment to Odanak and about the difficulties of being the only First Nations person in her new home. She feels isolated and is bullied. She frequently thinks about her dead father and she sees again the black crepe hung on the door as a sign of mourning. The child finds comfort in a dream in which horses come to console her as though they were her friends. The young girl also describes various aspects of how she and others lived in 1940.

Explain to the students that they will be expected to keep a journal recording their ideas, observations and reflections as they take part in this activity. Tell them that they will be able to continue working on the journal in class during subsequent activities.

## PREPARATORY ACTIVITY

A few days before the activity, place an empty box in the classroom. Ask students to write a note describing a situation they witnessed in which a young person was subjected to hurtful actions or words by either a single individual or a group of students. They could also describe a situation in which a student was ostracized by a group, or something they experienced themselves. Explain that it is important to avoid naming the students involved and have students deposit their notes in the box.

## STEP 1

Pick one of these notes at random and get your students to write about the ways in which the incident described in the note constitutes an example of bullying. The following questions will help stimulate the discussion:

- What did the young people do to this student? Was the student the victim of physical, psychological or social abuse by one or more of their peers? Explain.
- How did the student react to the abuse? How did the witnesses react? How would you have reacted if it had been you in their place?
- What means could the student have used to counter the bullying? Why do you think that fighting against bullying is a way of promoting a culture of peace?

Then ask students to take a few minutes to note their reflections on this issue in their journals.

## STEP 2

Present Christine Sioui Wawanoloath's story to the class (account no. 1 in Annex I). Get your students' impressions of this story by asking them to consider what kind of impact these words might have had on a young Abenaki child.

## STEP 3

Screen *When All the Leaves Are Gone* for the class.

## STEP 4

Ask the students to break out into small groups and use the following questions to stimulate and guide their discussions:

- Why do the two girls in the film attack Wato? How does the passerby in the film react to the physical attacks to which Wato is subjected?
- Why do you think the young girls behaved in this way towards Wato?
- How does Alanis Obomsawin show that Wato is being bullied? What do the images and the words tell you about this bullying?
- How does Wato react? Why do you think she reacted like this? What would you have done in her place?

## STEP 5

Have the students return to the full group and review some of the discussions that have taken place. Use the following questions to explore the subject more thoroughly:

- How does the filmmaker depict the bullying that Wato suffers? What images does she use?
- How are the examples of bullying you discussed earlier similar to or different from Wato's experiences in the film?
- How do you think the perception and treatment of First Nations people have or haven't changed since the period depicted in the film? Would it be possible for a young Abenaki person today to suffer from the same kind of discrimination and bullying as in 1940?
- Explain how, in your opinion, challenging bullying fosters a culture of peace.

To conclude, suggest that students make posters illustrating ways of opposing the various types of bullying and intimidation.

## SECONDARY ACTIVITIES

This film can also lead to discussions about several other subjects. An activity has been developed for each of the following subjects:

- From the distant to the recent past: *From One Era to the Next*
- The link between language and culture: *I Embrace My Language and My Culture*
- The power of dreams and stories: *I Dream and I Imagine*
- Self-realization: *I Live Fully*

These subjects are explored through the experiences of young Wato, helping students better understand various facets of Abenaki life during Alanis Obomsawin's childhood.

## ACTIVITY: FROM ONE ERA TO THE NEXT

Approximate duration: 30 minutes

### BEFORE THE SCREENING

Ask your students what they know about the Abenaki people and about life in Quebec in the 1940s.

### DURING THE SCREENING

Ask your students to pay particular attention to the selected sequences of images listed in Annex II. Explain to the students that this exercise will reveal various aspects of Wato's life as well as teach them about life in 1940s Quebec. These sequences will also lead them to better understand what Wato experienced as a young Abenaki forced to leave her reserve at Odanak and move to a large city.

### AFTER THE SCREENING

Use the following questions to stimulate further discussions:

- What do these images tell you about life in Quebec? About the different kinds of work shown in the film (e.g. delivering bread or ice)? How do these methods of making a living differ from those of today?
- How and why are the pulp and paper mills depicted in this film? How important do you think the pulp and paper mills were to the economy of the region?
- According to the film, what was the role of religion in individuals' lives?
- How were "Indians" (today referred to as Indigenous, Aboriginal, Native or First Nations people) depicted in schoolbooks then? What kind of impact might these stereotypes have had at the time on First Nations schoolchildren and on other schoolchildren as well?
- Why did the filmmaker choose to use colour for some sequences and black and white for others? How did it affect you?
- Having watched the film, how would you interpret its title?

## ACTIVITY: I EMBRACE MY LANGUAGE AND MY CULTURE

Approximate duration: 60 to 75 minutes

In exploring this subject—language and its link to culture—students will have the opportunity to consider their own relationship to the language(s) they speak, and the window this offers them onto their culture. They will learn that culture is at the heart of human experience and that language is its most essential component. They will also learn about how the Abenaki people were prevented from speaking their own language, and grasp the importance of preserving one's language and culture.

### PREPARATORY ACTIVITY

A few days before starting this activity, ask your students to note in their journal the language or languages they speak fluently at home, with their families, at school among themselves (e.g. in class or during recreation) or during their activities with their friends.

### STEP 1

Ask your students to break out into small groups and use the following questions to stimulate and guide discussion about what they've written in their journals:

- What is your first language?
- What languages did your grandparents speak? On what occasions did you hear them speak these languages?
- What languages do you and your fellow group members speak at home, at school (in the classroom and during recreation) and with your friends? How are these languages similar to or different from each other?
- Describe activities in which you use a language other than your own. Explain why you use this language.

Then ask the students to take a few minutes to write down any other thoughts they may have on this issue in their journals.

### STEP 2

Have the students return to the full group and present to them the accounts of people of Abenaki origin, in which they tell anecdotes related to their language (see nos. 2 and 3 in Annex I). Ask your students to discuss these accounts and what they have learned about the Abenaki language.

### STEP 3

Screen *When All the Leaves Are Gone* for the class.

### STEP 4

Ask your students to return to their small groups and use the following questions to stimulate further discussion:

- Why is Wato not allowed to speak her own language at school?
- How does she seem to react to this? If you'd been in her place, how would you have reacted?
- How have the accounts by people of Abenaki origin helped you to better understand Wato?

### STEP 5

Have the students return to the full group and review what they've discussed with the whole class. Use the following questions to explore the subject more fully:

- Why do you think that some people choose not to speak their language? In what kinds of settings does this occur? What might explain their choice?
- What does Wato mean when she says: "He [her father] says someday our people will have a voice again, and no one can take away what is in our hearts, our spirit and our dreams."
- Why is it so important to retain one's language? What can language tell us about a people's culture?

To conclude, ask your students to make a list of all the languages that are spoken in their classroom. Ask them for suggestions on ways of highlighting the importance of the various individual languages while at the same time preserving the use of the common language.



## ACTIVITY: I DREAM AND I IMAGINE

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Approximate duration: 60 to 75 minutes

This activity will help students understand the importance of legends, myths and dreams in Abenaki culture. They will learn that dreams had the power to comfort and restore Wato, and could perhaps have a similar effect on them as well.

### PREPARATORY ACTIVITY

A few days before the activity, ask your students to write about a positive dream in their journals. Get them to explain why and in what way the dream made them feel uplifted or empowered. Ask your students to read the legend *The Strange Origin of Corn*.

### STEP 1

Ask your students to form small groups and use the following to stimulate and guide discussion about what they have written in their journals:

- Describe the positive dreams that you have written about.
- What did you learn from *The Strange Origin of Corn*? What did you like about it?
- What else did this tale teach you about the Abenaki people or culture?

Then ask each student to take a few minutes to record in their journals any further reflections they may have on this subject.

### STEP 2

Present the stories that Alanis Obomsawin gathered for her film *Waban-Aki: People from Where the Sun Rises* to the whole group (see account no. 4 in Annex1). Ask your students to discuss what these accounts have taught them about the power of dreams.

### STEP 3

Screen *When All the Leaves Are Gone* with your students.

### STEP 4

Ask the students to remain in small groups and draw on the following questions to stimulate further discussion:

- What role do dreams play in *When All the Leaves Are Gone*? How are dreams evoked in the film?
- How can dreams be powerful enough to comfort us?
- What do horses seem to represent to Wato? What sequences in the film best show this?

### STEP 5

Back in the full group, review points and ideas that emerged in the small group discussions. Use the following questions to explore the subject more fully:

- What fundamental aspects of a people's culture do legends reveal?
- Why are dreams so important in this film? Explain.
- What has watching this film taught you about Abenaki culture?
- What is the role of dreams in this film? Why do you think the filmmaker chose this role?
- How does the filmmaker depict the importance of dreams to Wato?
- Why does Wato speak to her dead father? What does she say to him? How does his response affect her? How do you react to his words?

To conclude, ask your students to share any myths and legends they may know with the whole class.

## ACTIVITY: I LIVE FULLY

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Approximate duration: 60 to 75 minutes

This activity focuses on self-realization and aims to help students understand that a sense of self-fulfillment can empower them to contribute to their community in some way. Students will also come to understand that a connection to their cultural, family or other kinds of roots can lead them to self-realization.

### PREPARATORY ACTIVITY

After giving your students some examples to guide them, ask them to describe in their journals an activity that they enjoy doing either on their own or with others. Ask them why this activity makes them feel good.

### STEP 1

Ask your students to break out into small groups and use the following questions to stimulate discussion about what they've written in their journals:

- What activity do you enjoy? Why? With whom?
- How are the activities of other group members different from your own?
- What do these differences tell you about each other? About your culture?

## STEP 2

Ask each student to answer the following questions in their journal:

- How does the activity you enjoy instill a sense of pride in you? Choose one word to describe this sensation.
- Who encourages you to do this activity? How do they do so? Are these individuals family members?
- What do your elders teach you? Why is this important to you?

## STEP 3

Have the students return to the full group and present to them accounts 5 and 6 from Annex I. The first is by an Abenaki person who finds fulfillment building canoes; and the other is by a Mi'kmaq who discusses the importance of self-knowledge for young people interacting with horses. Ask your students to explain how these accounts have helped them understand their own reasons for wishing to achieve a sense of self-fulfilment.

## STEP 4

Screen *When All the Leaves Are Gone* for the class.

## STEP 5

Ask your students to return to their small groups and to use the following questions to stimulate discussion:

- At what moments in the film do you think Wato finds a degree of self-fulfillment? Explain.
- How does Alanis Obomsawin show us the importance of self-fulfillment in the film? Using what kinds of images? Give some examples.

## STEP 6

Ask the students to return to the large group and review their discussions with the entire class. Use the following questions to explore the subject more fully:

- What prevents Wato from finding self-fulfillment in the 1940s? Give some examples taken from the film.
- What do you think makes Wato feel good? Which images in the film reflect this?
- What can every young person do to help someone else feel good and achieve self-fulfillment?

To conclude the exercise, ask the students to share with their classmates the passages in their journals that express their feelings of self-fulfillment and self-realization.

## REINVESTMENT OF LEARNING

Ask your students to use whatever means (drawing, other artwork, prose, poetry, dance, etc.) they prefer to recount important moments in their lives. Suggest that they create an exhibition of these different art works in the classroom.

## OBJECTIVIZATION

After having completed the activities included in this teacher's guide, the students should be able to:

- Discuss what they've learnt about Abenaki people and culture through watching Wato's account of her life.
- Explain in their own words how dreams and stories can (for some) act as ways of representing a people's culture.
- Give examples of how this film fosters a greater openness towards others.

## WEB RESOURCES

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Profile of Alanis Obomsawin, NFB website  
[onf-nfb.gc.ca/eng/portraits/alanis\\_obomsawin/](http://onf-nfb.gc.ca/eng/portraits/alanis_obomsawin/)

“Les Amérindiens aujourd’hui” (in French only), Allô prof website  
[biblio.alloprof.qc.ca/PagesAnonymes/DisplayFiches.aspx?ID=9002](http://biblio.alloprof.qc.ca/PagesAnonymes/DisplayFiches.aspx?ID=9002)

Quebec First Nations website  
[indianamarketing.com/anglais/nations/nations.html](http://indianamarketing.com/anglais/nations/nations.html)

*L’histoire du maïs* legend, Amérindiens website (in French only)  
[culture-amerindiens.com/article-402548.html](http://culture-amerindiens.com/article-402548.html)

Odanak, Les nations autochtones du Québec website  
[indianamarketing.com/nations/%21odana-f.htm](http://indianamarketing.com/nations/%21odana-f.htm)

Musée des Abénakis website  
[museedesabenakis.ca/en](http://museedesabenakis.ca/en)

Sites containing information on bullying:

Government of Canada’s Healthy Canadians website  
[healthycanadians.gc.ca/kids/bullying/](http://healthycanadians.gc.ca/kids/bullying/)

Bullying (ages 4–11), Government of Canada’s Healthy Canadians website  
[healthycanadians.gc.ca/kids/bullying-ages-4-11/](http://healthycanadians.gc.ca/kids/bullying-ages-4-11/)

Aboriginal Perspectives, NFB website  
<http://www3.nfb.ca/enclasse/doclens/visau/index.php?language=english>

This site, designed for high school and upper elementary students and teachers, features National Film Board of Canada documentaries by and about Canada’s Aboriginal peoples.



## ANNEX I: ABENAKI WITNESSING

These accounts are taken from the film *Waban-Aki: People from Where the Sun Rises*, written and directed in 2006 by Alanis Obomsawin. The Abenakis describe their experiences as children or young people before the turn of the century. At this period, the Abenakis, like many First Nations peoples, were discriminated against. Length of the video: 104 min 2 s

### BULLYING AND DISCRIMINATION

1 “I went to school in what is now the museum [Odanak]. When I was seven years old, the school closed and we were sent to board at St-François-du-Lac, on the other side of the river. In fact, my strongest memories are about the nuns who didn’t like Indians. We were Indians. We’d always known it. When I was little I even thought that the whole world was Indian, just because we were Indian. The first day of school, for example, a nun made us stand up and then she said to us, ‘You’re all the same. You’re lazy, you’re like this, you’re like that. It wasn’t a very good start to the year; I can tell you... in fact I think it undermined our spirits right from the very start. It didn’t start well for us at all, not at all.’ – Christine Siou Wawanoloath’s account.

### LANGUAGE

2 “I remember hearing Abenaki. There were several people who spoke Abenaki. You would hear it when you went to the local store. The storekeeper spoke Abenaki and often people who went to the store spoke it with her. It was so soft and so musical that one got the impression that it was impossible to argue. In any case, they were laughing all the time. Everything they said was funnier in Abenaki.” – Account of an Abenaki woman remembering her childhood.

3 “I went to school here at Odanak, in what is now the museum. The school was all right, but we couldn’t speak Indian. It was completely forbidden. The nuns wouldn’t allow us to speak Indian. Nor would the priests. Our priest was called Joe de Gonzague. He was very hard on young people.” – Account by Joseph Benedict, an Abenaki elder.

## STORIES AND DREAMS

4 “A healer would choose a seven-year-old child. Most of the time it was a boy, but sometimes it was a girl. They would take them to an island and make them go without food for several days and nights. While the child was fasting, the healer told them stories about the magical powers of plants and animal spirits. A child from the bear clan might be visited by a bear, the guardian of the clan medicine. Depending on the animals or birds that came to visit the child in their dreams, the healer would decide whether the child would make a good pupil. Once chosen, the child had to give over their entire lives to learning to become a healer. It’s said that when the healer was a woman, her powers could be even stronger than those of a man, since she already had the strongest power of all, the power to give life and love.” – Account recorded by the narrator, Alanis Obomsawin.

### SELF-REALIZATION

5 “It was a difficult period in my life, maybe because of my youth. I was looking for myself. It was the kind of identity crisis that most Abenakis living in the US and maybe people everywhere, go through. I had no work. And I wanted to find work that would make me truly happy. My stepfather asked me what I really enjoyed and wanted to do. In my heart, I saw a canoe, and so I said ‘I want to make a birch bark canoe.’ He asked me why. ‘I have to. I absolutely need to do this.’ I realised then that it was more than a job, that it was a way of life, or as we say, *Alnôbaiwi*, the way of things, the Abenaki way. That’s why I do it. I’m proud to bring my canoes back to the house because I have the feeling that I am acting in accordance with traditional values. It feels really good. It’s very tiring work, but it’s a good tired.” – Account of an American Abenaki.

6 “We work with young people because they are the heart of our community. They are the leaders of tomorrow, and together we are the ‘Waban-Akis’ who will know how to continue with the work of our ancestors. I can testify to the magic that happens when young people learn to communicate with horses. To communicate with a horse you have to be comfortable with yourself, because horses are very sensitive, intuitive animals, and ones that never judge. That makes them powerful teachers, showing you how important it is to be true to oneself... when you are at ease with yourself, the horse comes to you.” – Miigam’agan, a Mi’Kmac woman’s account.

## ANNEX II: DESCRIPTIONS OF FILM SEQUENCES IN *WHEN ALL THE LEAVES ARE GONE*.

Here are some examples of film sequences that reveal something about the year 1940 and about Wato's life:



Wato's ties with her family: Wato walking beside the river with her elderly aunt H  l  ne or falling into her arms laughing; the photograph of her uncle Th  ophile Panaqui, looking into the distance; Wato's conversation with her father.



Health: a photo of Wato's father in the sanatorium; nurses walking softly down hospital hallways.



The businesses: the man delivering bread in a horse-drawn carriage; the man delivering ice; the storekeeper coming out of the general store; the bilingual hotel sign from 1940.



Legends and dreams: An elder watching a crackling fire; Wato dreaming that she rests her head against a horse, that she dances with them, and is comforted by them.



The factories: the view of the paper factory with its mountains of logs; smoke escaping from the factory; men pushing logs down the river.



Nature: a snake sliding through the grass; a horse running free in fields; a rolling river, a moon appearing on a dark night; leaves moving in the wind; ducks flying overhead.



School: stereotyped images of First Nations people from the schoolbooks of the period; the statue of a teaching nun showing that she was the teacher of the period.



Bullying: Wato walking down a street in Trois-Rivi  res; girls attacking her; a passerby intervening between Wato and the girls to protect her.



The Church: the faithful climbing the stairs to attend church; Wato addressing herself to St. Joseph in the hopes of finding help.