

Irving Layton: An introduction



"If I had to say why I write poetry, I would simply use one word: It makes me rejoice. It enables me to celebrate and to exalt and to express the great delight I find in being alive.... It expresses my delight in being able to take ... chaos and banalities ... and give them a meaningful form so that the banalities slip away and there is only the celebration and the ecstasy of being alive."

A film by Donald Winkler

Filmed in Montreal and Greece, this classroom adaptation of a longer documentary is a candid portrait of Canadian poet Irving Layton: the writer, the teacher, and the private human being. The film affords glimpses of Layton's intense approach to life, including the writing process. The anecdotes Layton tells, the reading of several poems, his metaphysical ruminations, and sequences with the poet in quieter, more private moments, convey the close interweaving of Layton's life and art.

Addressing an audience in Montreal, Layton relates how a visit to a senile sister that began in banality inspired the raging but celebratory poem "Senile, My Sister Sings." At the University of Athens, he lectures on what Canadian poetry is, vigorously attributing to it a metaphysical awareness that renders it unique. In a memorable sequence elsewhere in Greece, the camera first observes Layton captivated by a woman in radiant dance, and, later, as he wrestles with the lines that will shape this experience into art.

Layton comments, "Many people have the romantic idea that a poem just gushes out." Acts of transformation that capture the fervor of life's ephemeral moments are rare and difficult. The continued re-working of his lines about the dancer lays bare a commitment that goes far beyond self-indulgence.

Through fine readings of several major poems, Layton illustrates how he shapes the themes that have compelled him for a lifetime: questions of meaning and purpose; the relationship of the human being to the rest of the universe; creativity; and evolution.

This film of visual grace and power takes us behind the lines of Layton's public mask to reveal the human being who, in his struggle to comprehend a vulnerable human existence, has found a path of creative celebration.

Audiences: Secondary education (10-13); College/university

Subject area: Canadian literature



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Suggestions for use in secondary English classes

Pre-Screening:

Read and briefly discuss one or more of the following poems (the complete poems or portions of them are read by Layton in the film): "There Were No Signs," "Senile, My Sister Sings," "To the Victims of the Holocaust," and "Butterfly on Rock." Students might be asked for their understanding of the theme(s) of each poem, what the inspiration for the poem might have been, and what kind of person the poet might be.

Post-Screening:

1. What impressed you most in the film?
2. Discuss your impressions of Layton. What seem to be his major concerns in life? Why does he write poetry? What are his views on the role of the poet?
3. Discuss Layton's notions of creativity, evolution, and the nature of the human being.
4. In Layton's view, what distinguishes Canadian poetry from American poetry? What does he believe is the reason for this difference?
5. Review the notes you made on the poems you read before seeing the film. In what ways, if any, has your understanding of each poem changed?
6. Choose one of the poems that Layton reads in the film. Write an essay discussing its major theme(s) and analyzing Layton's use of language.
7. Choose two or three of the poems Layton reads in the film. Write an essay discussing how effectively each poem captures Layton's personal life experience, and to what extent the poem transcends a personal situation to embrace universal human experience. Which poem, in your view, is the most universal, and why?
8. Study the poetry of Layton, one other major Canadian poet, and two major American poets. Write an essay discussing the distinguishing features of Canadian and American poetry. Include considerations of both themes and styles.

(This is a classroom adaptation of *Poet: Irving Layton Observed*. Viewers may also wish to screen the related film, *A Tall Man Executes a Jig by Irving Layton*, in which the poet explicates his poem of the same title.)

Biographical Note

Irving Layton, born in Romania in 1912, came to Montreal a year later. He attended Baron Byng High School, Macdonald College, and McGill University, obtaining a master's degree in economics in 1946. His first book of poetry had appeared the previous year, growing out of his association with the magazine *First Statement*. In 1960, Layton won the Governor General's Award. His well-publicized personal life has included several marriages and extensive travel. In 1981 he was nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Selected Readings

Here and Now. Montreal: *First Statement*, 1945.

A Red Carpet for the Sun. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1959.

The Collected Poems of Irving Layton. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1971.

The Darkening Fire: Selected Poems 1945-1968. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1975.

The Unwavering Eye: Selected Poems 1969-1975. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1982.

A Wild Peculiar Joy: Selected Poems 1945-1982. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1982.

Waiting for the Messiah. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1985 (autobiography).



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