

Activity Questions

History, Biography, Epic

for use with the epic poem
touring Canada, April-May 2005
www.plainsofabraham.ca



AN INITIATIVE OF THE DOMINION INSTITUTE

General Notes

The following questions and activities were created with a range of grade levels in mind. Some questions may be more appropriate for secondary school students. Teachers may create their own activity list by selecting appropriate questions for their class.

This Activity Questions Guide includes suggestions for both **Pre-Visit Activities** and **Post-Visit Activities**. In the Post-Visit Activities section you will find ideas for *Recalling History*, *Discussing the Poem*, *Critical Thinking Questions*, and *Critical Thinking Activities*.

Pre-Visit Activities

Assign one of the following topics to groups or individual students. Ask each student to research the topic and to make a presentation to the class.

1. Explain the origins of the Seven Years' War.
2. Research the importance of the Seven Years' War to American history. Is there any significance in the fact that Americans give the war another name?
3. Detail the events leading up to the Battle of the Plains of Abraham.
4. Write a biography of James Wolfe, the English general.
5. Write a biography of the Marquis of Montcalm, the French general.
6. Describe the role played by First Nations groups in this period of Canadian history.
7. Consider the results of the Battle of the Plains of Abraham and explain why it was important to Canadian and world history.
8. Explain why it was significant that both Wolfe and Montcalm died in the battle. Is there any significance in the fact that one died on the battlefield while the other died later that day in the Ursuline hospital?

Or

Students should read the History Lessons in the Teaching Guide on the Plains of Abraham and Epic Poetry before the Plains of Abraham performance. They could then discuss the following questions:

1. Why would Jack Mitchell choose to perform the poem in the style of Homeric Epic Poetry? Who was Homer, what sort of poems did he compose, and how does his way of telling a story differ from that of other poets?
2. What is the significance of the battle in Canadian history? What world events or tensions led to the war?

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Post-Visit Activities

Students can review the *Recalling History* questions before the performance, and then discuss them as a class. With the help of questions and activities for *Discussing the Poem* and *Critical Thinking*, students can explore their feelings about epic poetry and the greater significance of the Battle of the Plains of Abraham in Canadian history.

Recalling History

1. Who were the first people to visit General Wolfe on the 12th of September, as he lay sick during the first scene of the poem?
2. Why did the British have to attack Quebec so quickly? What was the urgency?
3. What sort of destruction did Wolfe and his troops bring to New France? From the poem, list specific ways that Wolfe pursued "scorched earth" tactics.
4. How did the British army manage to reach the Plains of Abraham before the battle? Explain the importance of L'Anse-au-Foulon.
5. How many French regiments did Montcalm lead to battle? What other groups fought on the French side?
6. Identify four First Nations groups that fought on the French side in the battle.
7. Why does Montcalm's heart misgive him before the battle?
8. According to the poem, who was the first man on the French side to fall in the battle? Who was the second?
9. What image does the poet use to describe the French charge? What image does he use to describe the British regiments firing their muskets at the charging French?
10. How many wounds did Wolfe receive before he fell? How many wounds did Montcalm receive?
11. What was the name of the last French regiment to retreat, towards the end of the battle?
12. What were Wolfe's feelings as he lay dying? What were Montcalm's feelings as he lay dying?
13. What was the name of the female religious order that tended to Montcalm as he lay dying? Why are they called "the brides of Christ" in the poem? In what sort of building was Montcalm buried?

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Discussing the Poem

1. Why do you think that the performer carries and uses a “rhabdos” (stick)? What did you notice about the way he holds the rhabdos at different points in the poem? How did it help to communicate the story?
2. Does the use of rhythm in telling the story help the listener follow along? How would you tell the story if you had to communicate it to younger students?
3. Why does the performer address an “immortal angel” at different points in the poem? What do you notice about the points where he does address the angel? Do they have something in common?
4. Is the story an emotional one? How did you feel when the generals died, for example?
5. Discuss the use of weather and the natural world in the poem.
6. Is poetry an effective vehicle for conveying and explaining history? Why or why not? What are its strengths and limitations?
7. Does the poet use “poetic licence”? What about the way he seems to quote the actual words of historical characters? Is the poem a blend of fact and fiction? Does this help the story, or detract from it? Explain.
8. In what sort of voice is the poem performed? Why does the performer do this?
9. What poetic devices are used? What effect do these devices have?
10. Is there a difference between reading and hearing the poem? If so, what are the differences? Which is more effective? Why?
11. How does the poet humanise death in the poem?
12. The phrase “impregnable Quebec” is repeated several times in the course of the poem. Why does the poet repeat phrases like this? Is it effective?
13. Wolfe is referred to as “the redhaired Wolfe” many times in the poem, and likewise Montcalm is called “the dark Montcalm” or “the dark-haired Marquis of Montcalm.” Can you suggest why the poet calls them this, and why he calls them this so consistently?
14. In what way is the structure of the poem circular? How does it begin? How does it end?

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Critical Thinking Questions

1. What were the significant outcomes of the Seven Years' War? Was this, as some have argued, the first truly world war? If so, why was it the first such war?
2. How does the poem treat the opposing sides in the Seven Years' War? Are they presented differently? Is there a bias for one side or the other in the poem?
3. What is the lesson and legacy of the Battle of the Plains of Abraham in Canada today? Is it an appropriate subject for an epic poem? Why would the subject potentially be considered controversial?
4. In your opinion, who died a nobler death, Wolfe or Montcalm?
5. In the poem, both Wolfe and Montcalm talk about remembrance. How would judge that history remembers them today?
6. Is the poet appealing more to the heart or the head?
7. Does the poem consciously convey a message? Is there an unconscious message?
8. An epic poem is essentially a long story, told in rhythmical verse. History also is a story. How would you compare or contrast the kind of story that books of history tell with the history told in an epic poem? Are the same elements important in both? What are they?

Critical Thinking Activities

1. Select another major event in Canadian history. Independently or in pairs, think of how you would treat the event if you were writing an epic poem about it. Try composing a short segment of such a poem.
2. Write a eulogy for either Wolfe or Montcalm.
3. If you could have dinner with General Wolfe, what three questions would you ask him? What questions would you ask the Marquis of Montcalm at dinner? Write out a dialogue you might have with either one of the generals killed in the battle.
4. Write a contemporary newspaper story that might have appeared in an English newspaper reporting on the Battle of the Plains of Abraham. Do the same for a French newspaper. How would the story have been reported among First Nations, for example in the Iroquois Confederacy or among the Ottawa?
5. Imagine that you were living in Quebec City during the Siege. What would you have seen during the Siege, or during the Battle? What would you have felt? Write a biography of yourself living in Quebec in 1759.