

ELA Lesson Plan: Stillness in War – Interpreting Nonprint Texts

Overview

Inspired by Alfred Munnings' painting *Halt on the March by a Stream at Nesle* (1918), this Grade 10–12 English Language Arts lesson plan encourages students to analyze visual texts through historical and emotional context.

Curriculum Connections

Aligned with Alberta ELA 10–12 outcomes:

Outcome Area	Grade	Description	Application to Assignment
2.1 Construct Meaning from Text and Context	10-1 20-1 30-1	Analyze the relationship between text and historical context. Describe the creator's purpose and how societal forces shape meaning.	Understand Munnings' choice to depict calm in war. Examine how WWI context influences the image's meaning.
2.1 Construct Meaning from Text and Context	10-2 20-2 30-2	Identify audience and purpose. Use background knowledge to support interpretation.	Use WWI history and visual cues to determine what message the image communicates.
2.2 Understand and Appreciate Textual Forms and Techniques	10-1 20-1 30-1	Recognize the use of motif, symbol, colour, and composition to evoke meaning or mood.	Analyze the symbolism of horses, use of light, and spatial arrangement in the painting.
2.2 Understand and Appreciate Textual Forms and Techniques	10-2 20-2 30-2	Describe visual elements and their effect on mood, theme, or tone.	Identify how line, texture, and light support a reflective or peaceful wartime theme.
2.3 Respond to a Variety of Texts	10-1 20-1 30-1	Defend interpretations with evidence. Describe image construction and impact on audience.	Use composition, symbolism, and context to support personal or critical interpretations.
2.3 Respond to a Variety of Texts	10-2 20-2 30-2	Evaluate effectiveness and realism of visual text. Explore emotional or symbolic depth.	Assess how Munnings' image communicates war experiences through artistic means.

Learning Intentions

- Analyze non-print text, such as a painting, using descriptive and interpretive language. Examine the historical and artistic context to support your interpretation. Articulate and defend your interpretation in both oral and written formats.

Lesson Outline

1. Visual Engagement (Hook)



FIGURE 1. ALFRED MUNNINGS, *HALT ON THE MARCH BY A STREAM AT NESLE*, 1918, OIL ON CANVAS, BEAVERBROOK COLLECTION OF WAR ART, CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM, OTTAWA.

Students should spend two minutes looking at the painting *Halt on the March by a Stream at Nesle* (1918). After looking at the painting, students should answer the following questions:

- What's happening in this image?
- What mood does it evoke?
- What stands out to you most and why?

2. Guided Group Analysis – Feldman's Model

Group students and provide them with the following analysis framework:

Step	Prompt Example
Describe	List objects, figures, settings, and colours. No interpretation.
Analyze	How are line, light, space, texture, and movement used?
Interpret	What story/emotion is this communicating?
Evaluate	Is the image powerful/persuasive? Why or why not?

3. Contextual Background

Provide historical information on:

- Alfred Munnings (Exhibition) and information from:
 - [The Munnings Museum](#)
- WWI:
 - [Britannica](#)
- The Canadian Cavalry Brigade:
 - [Military History Books](#)
- A Letter from a WWI soldier to provide emotional context:
 - [Letter from Corp. A.E. Duggan \(The Canadian Letters and Images Project\)](#)

4. Class Discussion

Discuss varying interpretations. Ask:

- How do our perspectives shift with context?
- Why might Munnings depict calm rather than violence?

5. Creative Writing

After researching and analyzing the painting *Halt on the March by a Stream at Nesle* (1918) by Alfred Munnings, students should choose one of the following options. The painting provides a thoughtful perspective on war, highlighting stillness, routine, and the experiences of both humans and animals amid conflict. Students are encouraged to explore the emotional and narrative potential within the image by writing an original piece.

Poem	Write a poem capturing the emotions of soldiers in the scene. Focus on themes of camaraderie, longing, or the toll of war.
Diary Entry	Create a diary entry from the perspective of one soldier reflecting on their day by the river, their thoughts about home, and their experiences in battle.
Dialogue	Write a conversation between two soldiers discussing their memories, hopes for the future, or fears about what lies ahead.
Short Story	Craft a short story that tells the backstory of how these soldiers arrived at this moment, incorporating flashbacks to illustrate their personalities and relationships.
Visual Art Interpretation:	Have students create their own artwork inspired by the painting, then write a brief artist statement explaining their choices and emotional responses.
Character Sketch	Develop a character profile for one of the soldiers, detailing their background, motivations, and feelings regarding their situation.
Narrative Exposition	Write a narrative that explains the historical context of the scene depicted in the painting, focusing on the time period and its significance.
Imaginary Letter Home	Compose a letter from one soldier to a loved one, describing their experiences and the sights and sounds of their surroundings.
Soundtrack	Curate a list of songs that resonate with the mood of the painting and write a short piece explaining how each song connects to the soldiers' experience.
Future Reflection	Write about the future, imagining what these soldiers might become after the war. Explore themes of survival, trauma, and healing.

Assessment Options

- Formative: Participation in discussion, group chart, reflections
- Summative: Creative writing or critical analysis evaluated for voice, clarity, and use of context

Cross-Curricular Links

Social Studies 20-1/20-2:

- Analyze expressions of nationalism during wartime
- Evaluate legacy and visual representation of war

Visual Arts:

- Analyze historical and emotional purpose of war art
- Compare historical images to modern conflict representations