

Once In A Lifetime



Teacher Resource Package Prepared By:

Susan Starkman, B.A., M. ED.

***Once in A Lifetime* (original title: Les Héritiers)**

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Synopsis

Country of Origin: France

Release Year: 2014

Director: Marie-Castille Mention-Schaar

Runtime: 105 minutes

Language: French

Themes: Diversity, Holocaust, French Society, Inspirational Teachers

Based on a true story, ***Once in a Lifetime*** is a film about a group of students whose lives are changed forever when their teacher enters them in a high school competition on the theme of children in Nazi concentration camps.

History teacher Anne Gueguen is determined to motivate her troubled inner city students and to engage them in a project that will instil in them a sense of purpose and ambition. Despite their unlikelihood of winning, Anne challenges them to take part in a national high school competition on the lives of teens in Nazi concentration camps. Though the project is met with resistance at first, the students begin to open up to each other as they delve into the subject and ultimately learn to believe in themselves and their ability to achieve.

Curriculum Links

Once in a Lifetime can be used to meet the English and Media Studies component of the English curriculum from Grades 10-12. It can also be applied to Grade 11 World Religions and Beliefs, Grade 11 World History Since 1900, Grade 12 World History: The West and the World and Grade 12 Canadian and World Politics.

Ways into the Text: Balancing Secular Laws and Religious Values

On January 7, 2015, Said and Cherif Kouachi stormed the offices of the satirical French magazine, Charlie Hebdo and killed 11 staff members and a French National Police officer outside the building. The magazine is known for its irreverent humour and non-conformist tone, describing itself as secular, atheist, far-left-wing and anti-racist. Religion is a favourite target of ridicule for the magazine and its crude cartoons of the prophet Mohammed are considered by some to be blasphemous because it violates the tradition against depicting his image. The attack was met with horror and outrage, not just because of the loss of innocent lives, but because it was seen to be an attack of French values in general, particularly the right to free speech, a value central to France, birthplace of the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man. Four days after the attack, two million people and 40 world leaders gathered in Paris for a rally of national unity and a further 3.7 French people gathered in similar rallies across the entire country. A nationwide minute of silence in memory of the victims laid bare the deep divisions in French society when several students refused to participate.

Recognising that it needed to build bridges to the millions of French Muslims who felt alienated from mainstream French society, the French government announced a 250 million euro (\$285 million) plan to train educators in anti-racism education and help them to transmit the value of "vivre ensemble" (living together). It is in this context that *Once in a Lifetime* provides teachers with a springboard to explore the issues of integration, religious freedoms and the role that schools play in instilling civic values that can sometimes be at odd with personal beliefs.

Banning of Religious Symbols

Once in a Lifetime begins with a student being refused a copy her high school diploma because she enters the school wearing a hijab (Muslim headscarf). Though she is no longer a student at the school, the administration refuses her request, citing a strict prohibition of religious symbols within the corridors of a public school. Students could explore both the background to this ban and its implications by answering the questions below:

1. What is a veil? What is a hijab?
2. What is a burqa? How is a burqa different from other veils?
3. Why do women wear veils/burqas?
4. Who wears veils in France?
5. What does laïcité mean? How does it relate to the ban on headscarves?
6. When did the law against students wearing conspicuous religious and or political symbols in schools come into effect? What other religious symbols

besides headscarves are banned? Students could research France's 2004 Bernard Stasi Commission that led to this law.

7. Do you think that the teachers in the film were right to deny the student her diploma because she won't take off her hijab in school? Why/why not?

Related Activity

Early in the film, Madame Gueguen angers her Muslim students when she points to a depiction of the prophet Mohammed on an Italian mosaic. Respecting the religious and cultural sensitivities of a diverse group of students while delivering a curriculum that can be at odds with them is a very real challenge facing teachers in a multicultural setting. This discrepancy was thrown into sharp relief after the Charlie Hebdo attacks in France when teachers were suddenly made responsible not only for reading, writing and math, but also for instilling the values of citizenship and the concept of the rule of law. Students should read the New York Times article [French Teachers on the Front Lines](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/11/world/europe/charlie-hebdo-attack-puts-schools-under-scrutiny.html? r=0) (<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/11/world/europe/charlie-hebdo-attack-puts-schools-under-scrutiny.html? r=0>) and answer the questions listed below.

1. According to Michel Lussault, president of an advisory group of teachers that helps the Education Ministry develop curricula, French schools "have historically had a decisive role in the fabric of the republic and the fabric of citizenship... That's the great thing about the schools of France, but also a burden." What does he mean by this? Do you think that schools should play this role? Why/why not?
2. The new French civics program proposed in the wake of the Charlie Hebdo massacres would allow schools to take disciplinary measures against students who were seen to be disrespecting French values. Do you agree with this measure or do you believe like some teachers that the government is confusing citizenship with obedience?
3. Many students of Muslim background complained that they were "already the forgotten of the socio-political system" and the new curriculum emphasizing free speech over cultural sensitivity added insult to injury by "tramp(ling) on [their] values. Do you agree? Why/why not?"
4. Some students wonder why the law continues to allow magazines to print cartoons satirizing the prophet Mohammed but prosecuted the comedian Dieudonné M'bala M'bala for hate speech in 2013 after he said that he wished that a prominent Jewish journalist "did not die in the gas chambers?" Do you think that this reflects a double standard? Why/why not? Where does one

draw the line between free speech and hate speech designed to incite racism?
Explain your reasoning.

Extension Activities

1. Compare the French education system with the Canadian system in terms of civics education. What do you think the public reaction would be if the government tried to ban religious symbols in schools? What happened when the Parti Québécois tried to introduce a charter of values that would ban Muslim headscarves, Sikh turbans, Jewish skullcaps and other "overt" religious symbols from the public service? Divide students into groups to debate the issue.
2. The school that the students attend in the film (and the real school on which this story is based) is called Lycée Léon Blum. Who was Leon Blum? Students should research the former prime minister of France and discuss his significance in relation to the issues raised in the film. Prominent in the film is the following quote from Bloom that appears outside the school:

J'ai souvent pensé que la moralité consiste essentiellement en le courage de faire un choix."

Translate the quote. How does it relate to the themes explored in the film?

Focus Questions

1. Liberté, égalité, fraternité (liberty, equality and fraternity) is the national motto of France and the values that teachers are meant to impart to their students. Compare the students' behaviour from the beginning of working on the competition to the point where they reached the finals. How did the competition instil the value of fraternité into the class as a whole? Provide specific examples from the film.
2. The dress code plays an important role in the daily life of the school. Though the school is strict to enforce the ban against hijabs, the principal refuses to bow to parental complaints about girls wearing long skirts. Why are the parents against girls wearing these skirts? Why does the principal refuse to ban them? How do some of the students try to enforce a dress code of their own? Do you think that a public school has the right to implement a dress code? Why/why not?
3. Why do you think that Mme Gueguen decided to enter her students into the National Resistance and Deportation competition instead of any other competition?

Context: Holocaust Studies

Once in a Lifetime lends itself to further exploration about the Holocaust and can be used by History teachers as an entry point into a unit of work on this topic. There are numerous online resources relating to Holocaust education that students can access to learn more. Listed below are a few websites that can provide students with an introduction to learning about the Holocaust:

Yad Vashem

http://www1.yadvashem.org/yv/en/holocaust/index.asp?WT.mc_id=ggcamp&WT.srch=1

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

<http://www.ushmm.org/education/>

Washington State Holocaust Education Resource Centre

<http://www.wsherc.org/>

USC Shoah Foundation Institute

<http://college.usc.edu/vhi/about/segmentsfortheclassroom/index.php?gclid=CiiCttuyzqcCFcW8KgodfBMmFA>

The Holocaust and the United Nations Outreach Programme

<http://www.un.org/en/holocaustremembrance/emainpage.shtml>

Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behaviour

<http://www.facinghistory.org/resources/hhb>

Extension Activity

Once in the Lifetime includes the testimony of real-life concentration camp survivor Leon Zyguel who ends his talk by quoting the Buchenwald Oath. Students should research the history of the oath and the resistance movement that was formed in Buchenwald. Below are some helpful websites:

Yad Vashem

http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/righteous/stories/historical_background/buchenwald.asp

Scrapbook Pages

<http://www.scrapbookpages.com/Buchenwald/Resistance.html>

Buchenwald Resistance

<http://buchenwaldresistance.weebly.com/>

Jewish Virtual Library

<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/buchenwald.html>

Context: Genre Study

Once in a Lifetime focuses on one individual teacher who made a meaningful impact in the lives of her students. There are many other examples of films, both fictional and documentary, that deal with inspirational teachers. Listed below are some examples:

Blackboard Jungle (1955)

To Sir with Love (1967)

Stand and Deliver (1988)

Lean on Me (1989)

Dead Poet's Society (1989)

Dangerous Minds (1995)

Music of the Heart (1999)

Freedom Writers (2007)

The Great Debaters (2007)

Students should choose one other film about an inspirational teacher and compare it with *Once in a Lifetime*, considering the following questions:

1. What do the films have in common? How are they different?
2. What are some of the personality traits that make a teacher inspirational?
3. How realistic are the films? Would those based on true stories be better if they were done as documentaries? Why/why not?
4. What tactics do the teachers use to persuade disinterested students to become involved in their studies?
5. How are these dedicated teachers regarded by their co-workers?
6. How do the students affect the lives of the teachers portrayed in these films?
7. Why do you think that the topic of inspirational teachers continues to be a popular subject for filmmakers today?

Once in a Lifetime: Characters

Describe the part each of these individuals takes in the film and make an assessment of how convincing and believable you found each one. In the final column, rate the

performance of each actor taking the part from one star * (not convincing) to five stars *****. See table below.

Character	Role in the Film	Personal Characteristics	Your Opinion of the Character	Actor Playing the Part	Assessment of Performance
Madame Gueguen					
Malik					
Lea					
Max					
Olivier/Brahim					
Camelia					
Theo					
Principal					

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Once in a Lifetime: General Discussion Questions

1. Madame Gueguen insists that no image or no joke can be seen to be innocent. Do you agree? Why/why not? How are images and jokes used as propaganda or to perpetuate stereotypes? Provide specific examples.
2. How are Madame Gueguen's colleagues at the school presented and contrasted with her approach to teaching? Provide specific examples. Are any of these depictions stereotypes or do you think that they are realistic?
3. Make a list of some of the texts and approaches Madame Gueguen uses to engage her class (e.g. the visit to the Holocaust Memorial, visiting speakers, etc.) What teaching technique proves to be most effective? Why?
4. Madame Gueguen warns her students that some of their racist jokes and remarks are, in fact, punishable by law. Increasingly, governments around the world are making "hate speech" or "incitement to racial hatred" subject to legal charges and sanctions. Do you believe such legislation needs to be strengthened? Why/why not?
5. What function does the character of Olivier/Brahim serve in the film? What is Malik's attitude towards Olivier's conversion to Islam? Why does Brahim drop out of the competition and how does the director indicate that he has made a terrible mistake?
6. What is the principal's attitude towards Madame Gueguen entering her students in the competition? What does he mean when he says "29 groups live in harmony here. I want things to stay that way"? How might the competition destabilize the class?
7. What are some of the challenges that the students face in their home lives? How might this affect their attitude towards school?
8. Chart the progress that the students make from the beginning of the competition to the end. At what point do they start to become personally engaged with the material? At what point do they start work as a team? Make a list of the pivotal moments in their journey. How much of their progress was due to Madame Gueguen and how much of it was self-motivation?
9. Lea is one of the last to embrace the competition. It is a book about Simone Weil that influences her. Why did the librarian choose the book about Weil to give to Lea specifically? Who was Simone Weil and why would her life speak to Lea?
10. How does the director indicate that the lessons that the students learn in the competition translate into their behavior in daily life?

11. How do you think students like those in Gueguen's class will develop their opportunities without her presence to guide and encourage them?
12. Compare Madame Gueguen's diverse class in France with Canadian schools. How successful is the integration of diverse racial and ethnic groups in many Canadian schools?
13. How can pride and loyalty to your birthplace and racial origins turn into extreme nationalism, dangerous fanaticism and racial intolerance?

References

(All websites cited are from April, 2015)

New York Times

http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/11/world/europe/charlie-hebdo-attack-puts-schools-under-scrutiny.html?_r=0

Yad Vashem

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United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

<http://www.ushmm.org/education/>

Washington State Holocaust Education Resource Centre

<http://www.wsherc.org/>

USC Shoah Foundation Institute

<http://college.usc.edu/vhi/about/segmentsfortheclassroom/index.php?gclid=CiiCttuyzqcCFcW8KgodfBMmFA>

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<http://www.un.org/en/holocaustremembrance/emainpage.shtml>

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