

Lorine Niedecker:
Wisconsin's Greatest Poet
High School Study Unit



Developed by the Friends of Lorine Niedecker
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Lorine Niedecker Study Unit

Overview:

The intent of this unit is to provide students in a twentieth-century literature class with an awareness of who Lorine Niedecker was as a woman and poet. Students will read about the life of Niedecker, the beliefs of the Objectivist poetry movement, and experience watching a short video of Black Hawk Island with a poem read aloud. After the short unit students should have a written paper applying some of the ideas of the Objectivist poets to poems written by Lorine Niedecker.

The study unit is designed to meet the following criteria:

- It is appropriate for general high school students
- It complies with Wisconsin's Academic Standards for Reading/Literature at the twelfth grade level.
- The unit can be rolled into a larger unit on 20th century poetry, Wisconsin writers, or general poetry. It can encompass at least 2 40-minute teaching periods.

Lesson One: Introduction to Niedecker and the Objectivists

Lesson Two: Biographical Poetry

Lesson Three: Objectivist and Political Poetry

Additional Materials:

A short biography of Lorine Niedecker

Background knowledge on the Objectivist poets

Poems needed for the lessons

A bibliography for further interest

Video/DVD materials

List of speakers available for presentations on Lorine and her poetry

The Objectivists: Background Knowledge

The Objectivist poetry movement officially began in 1931 with the publication of an Objectivist issue of *Poetry* magazine. Louis Zukofsky wrote the first definition of this movement within this issue, and scholars have included William Carlos Williams (his early work), Charles Reznikoff, Carl Rakosi, and George Oppen within the Objectivist camp. As scholars develop an awareness of Lorine Niedecker, she too is placed within the Objectivist movement. As with many poets, not all of Niedecker's poems fit clearly into the Objectivist movement. It is important to note that these men (Zukofsky, Williams, Reznikoff, Rakosi, and Oppen) were influenced by the Imagists, especially the writings of Ezra Pound. Below is a short timeline of influence:

1925 – Ezra Pound & the Imagists

1931 – Louis Zukofsky and the Objectivists

1950s – Black Mountain Poets with Charles Olson and Robert Creeley

1960s – The Beats with Ginsberg

According to Zukofsky the definition of objectivity is the presentation of reality undistorted by the poet's personality. This idea grew out of reading and studying Ezra Pound who stated in his *Literary Essays* that there are three "rules" of writing poetry:

1. Direct treatment of the "thing," whether subjective or objective
2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation
3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of the metronome

Therefore, Objectivist poetry is not adorned with similes and metaphors. It does not use other devices that lead to comparisons or descriptions that do not deal with the object or subject matter of the poem. Niedecker's writing speaks about the work of condensing language, stripping poems of redundancy. Her poems, as well as those of the other Objectivists, often reflect the sounds around them, whether it is the city, nature, or regional American speech.

In the same *Literary Essays* Pound also wrote about three ways poets can charge language with meaning:

1. melopoeia – plain meaning with musical property

2. phanopoeia – casting of images
3. logopoeia – puns, verbal play, language research

The Objectivists used these ideas of Pound and the other Imagists to create poetry, yet they also added their own ideas. Zukofsky wrote that within the Objectivist movement there is the notion of “the craft.” This has two parts, sincerity and history. Sincerity is the presentation of words and phrases that register with exactitude, with details whose specificity and correctness make them unquestionably true. The history of a poem is the political stance of the writer against conditions that hinder creativity and happiness. The definition of sincerity is heavily influenced by Pound’s three “rules”; however, the idea of history as personal and immediate moves beyond Pound and the Imagists. Much of their time was spent looking back in time to learn from the past and to use poetry to convey these ideas to present readers. The Objectivists, Niedecker included, used one’s own present situation and the situation of everyday people around the poet to stand as learning for a larger political message.

Lorine Niedecker: A Short Biography

Lorine Niedecker was born May 12, 1903 and grew up in Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin and nearby Blackhawk Island. She was the only child of Daisy Kunz and Henry Niedecker. They ran the Fountain House Inn, then a place for vacationers, at the end of the island for many years. The family eventually moved to a home on Riverside Drive in Fort Atkinson while Lorine attended the local school. Her mother's hearing failed, and she eventually became deaf. Her father, a fisherman, moved the family from the Riverside Drive home back to Blackhawk Island. Henry and Daisy eventually lived in separate but neighboring homes as their marriage disintegrated and Henry began a relationship with a neighbor. Niedecker later wrote of this separation and her parent's difficult relationship in several poems.

Niedecker finished high school in 1922 and enrolled in Beloit College. She attended the college for two years, showing interest in the debate club and also writing a few pieces for the college literary magazine. At the end of the two years she returned home to care for her mother. She married Frank Hartwig in 1928, and the couple separated in 1930.

At this time there is evidence that Niedecker read Pound, understood Imagism, and wrote poetry within this movement. She read and was struck by Louis Zukofsky's 1931 Objectivist issue of *Poetry* magazine. She immediately wrote to Zukofsky, starting a lifelong friendship and correspondence regarding thoughts on poetry. Zukofsky benefited from this correspondence and was visited by Niedecker in New York during 1933. In 1938 she moved to Madison as part of the Federal Writers' Project, a division of the Work Project Administration (WPA). Although Niedecker did leave Fort Atkinson several times in her life, they were all short visits. When she returned to Fort Atkinson and Blackhawk Island she worked for the publication "Hoard's Dairyman" and eventually as a janitor at Fort Atkinson Hospital. During the many years that she wrote poetry she was influenced by the sounds around her from nature and human speech, reading, and correspondence with peers, nationally and internationally. She wrote through a Surrealist period, one of folk influences, gender differences, and of course secured her place amongst the Objectivist poets.

Lesson One: Introduction to Niedecker and the Objectivists

Objectives:

- Students will develop knowledge of Niedecker's biography.
- Students will develop knowledge of the Objectivist movement.

Assessment: Students will demonstrate understanding during a class discussion of the poem "Poet's Work" using the biographical information and background knowledge of the Objectivists.

Standards: English Language Arts, Standard A.12.2, A.12.3 and Standard B.12.1, B.12.2, B.12.3 and Standard C.12.3

Preparation: The prior evening students should read the biographical information on Lorine Niedecker and the information on the Objectivist movement.

Lesson:

Students read the poem "Poet's Work" independently and write their thinking as marginalia to prepare for a class discussion.

Guiding Questions for Class Discussion:

1. Zukofsky stated that within Objectivist poetry the history of a poem is the political stance of the writer against conditions that hinder creativity. What does he mean? How do the autobiographical elements of this poem embody those beliefs?
2. How does Niedecker's poem strive to comply with Pound's three "rules" of writing poetry from his *Literary Essays*?
3. How does Niedecker charge her language with meaning through melopoeia, phanopoeia, and logopoeia?

Homework:

Read the poem "She grew where every spring" and think about the same guiding questions. Be prepared to incorporate your ideas about this poem into an extended writing assignment.

Poet's Work

Grandfather

advised me:

Learn a trade

I learned

to sit at desk

and condense

No layoff

from this

condensery

- Lorine Niedecker

She grew where every spring
water overflows the land,
married mild Henry
and then her life was sand.

Tall, thin, took cold on her nerves,
chopped wood, kept the fire,
burned the house, helped build it again,
advance, attack, retire.

Gave birth, frail warrior – gave boat
for it was mid-spring—
to Henry’s daughter who stayed
on the stream listening

to Daisy: “Hatch, patch, and scratch,
that’s all a woman’s for
but I don’t sink, I sewed and saved
and now I’m on second floor.”

-Lorine Niedecker

Lesson Two: Biographical Poetry

Objectives:

- Students will read a third poem by Niedecker and write a response to her work.

Assessment: One-page written response to Niedecker's poem

Standards: English Language Arts, Standard A.12.2, A.12.3 and Standard B.12.1, B.12.2, B.12.3 and Standard C.12.3

Lesson:

Watch the video presentation of the poem "My Life by Water" and write some notes about their thinking while hearing the poem.

Allow students to talk in small groups or partnerships about the poem.

When students are finished reading and talking they are to write a one-page response to any of the three Niedecker poems using what they know about the Objectivist movement and Niedecker's life.

Homework: Finish response (if you are using the third lesson then the response may be due after two evenings of work).

My Life by Water

My life
by water—
Hear

spring's
first frog
or board

out on the cold
ground
giving

Muskrats
gnawing
doors

to wild green
arts and letters
Rabbits

raided
my lettuce
One boat

two—
pointed toward
my shore

thru birdstart
wingdrip
weed-drift

of the soft
and serious—
Water

Lesson Three: Objectivist and Political Poetry

Objectives:

- Students will understand the political nature of Niedecker's poetry.

Assessment: Students will demonstrate understanding of the poem through a class discussion.

Standards: English Language Arts, Standard A.12.2, A.12.3 and Standard B.12.1, B.12.2, B.12.3 and Standard C.12.3

Lesson:

Students read two poems, "Black Hawk held" and "In the great snowfall before the bomb" and mark the text with their thinking.

Guiding Questions for Class Discussion:

1. How does Niedecker's work reflect the sound of the speech and the environment around her? How would an Objectivist explain this technique?
2. How do these poems embody the Objectivist ideas about the history of a poem? What do you need to know in order to understand "Black Hawk held?"

Black Hawk held: In reason
land cannot be sold,
only things to be carried away,
and I am old.

Young Lincoln's general moved,
pawpaw in bloom,
and to this day, Black Hawk,
reason has small room.

-Lorine Niedecker

In the great snowfall before the bomb
colored yule tree lights
windows, the only glow for contemplation
along this road

I worked the print shop
right down among em
the folk from whom all poetry flows
and dreadfully much else.

I was Blondie
I carried my bundles of hog feeder price lists
down by Larry the Lug,
I'd never get anywhere
because I'd never had suction,
pull, you know, favor, drag,
well-oiled protection.

I heard their rehashed radio barbs—
more barbarous among hirelings
as higher-ups grow more corrupt.
But what vitality! The women hold jobs—
clean house, cook, raise children, bowl
and go to church.

What would they say if they knew
I sit for two months on six lines
of poetry?

-Lorine Niedecker

Some Additional Readings:

Knox, Jane. Lorine Niedecker: An Original Biography. Ed. By Gail Roub. Fort Atkinson: Dwight Foster Public Library, 1987.

Lehman, John. America's Greatest Unknown Poet. Cambridge, WI: Zelda Wilde Publishing, 2003.

Lorine Niedecker: Collected Works. Ed. By Jenny Penberthy. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.

Lorine Niedecker: Woman and Poet. Ed. By Jenny Penberthy. Orono, MA: University of Maine, 1996.

The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound. Ed. By T.S. Eliot. London: Faber and Faber, 1954.

Zukofsky, Louis. "Program: Objectivists" *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*. 37(1), 1931.

Lorine Niedecker Speakers Bureau

The following individuals or groups are available for class presentations about Lorine Niedecker. Please contact them directly. You may also find more information about poets speak to a class at <http://www.bookthatpoet.com/>.

Paul G. Hayes
N63W5795 Columbia Road
Cedarburg, WI 53012
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pghayes@sbcglobal.net

Area of expertise: Lorine's late-in-life marriage to Al Millen and how it freed her to do her longer and, many say, best poems. Author of the chapter about the marriage in "Lorine Niedecker, Author and Poet."

Tom Montag
P.O.Box 8
Fairwater, WI 53931
(920) 346-5235
tmmontag@dotnet.com

Areas of expertise: Lorine Niedecker: Poet of Place Who Goes Beyond Place; Lorine Niedecker: A Look at Her Poetics from a Poet's Point of View

Pat Moran
510 E. Sherman Ave.
Fort Atkinson, WI 53538
(920) 563-3435
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Areas of expertise: Lorine's poetry

John Lehman
Cup of Poems, Rosebud
WI Academy Review
The Quill Driver
WisconsinPoet.com
WisconsinAuthor.com
WriterGallery.com
315 Water St.
Cambridge, WI 53523
santerra@aol.com
1-800-7-TO-KNOW

Also contact Prairie Fire Poetry Quartet through John Lehman
The quartet has a short program on Lorine and is comprised of Richard Roe, Shoshauna Shy, John Lehman and Robin Chapman

Karl Gartung and Anne Kingsbury
Woodland Pattern Book Center
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Areas of expertise: Lorine's poetry and her literary influence

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