

Lorine Niedecker
Wisconsin's Nature Poet
Middle School Study Unit



Photo by Gail Roub

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Lorine Niedecker Study Unit

Overview:

The objective of this unit is to introduce the poetry of Lorine Niedecker to middle school classes and middle grade educational groups. Students will read three Lorine Niedecker poems that focus the attention on the natural world. Students will be expected to discuss all of the three poems and are encouraged to explore further the flora and fauna that Lorine exhibited in her poetry. Finally, the students will be given the opportunity for a nature walk in their local community. Fort Atkinson students can walk down from the middle school to Haumerson's Pond or explore the Bark River Nature Park, both nearby. Students outside of Fort Atkinson can pick a nature preserve or nature park in their community. During the nature walk students will bring a camera or a pad of paper and a pencil. Their objective during the walk is for each student to observe the natural world, research the natural world, and write a short poem similar in style to the works of Lorine Niedecker.

This study unit is designed to meet the following criteria:

1. It is appropriate for middle school students, grades 6 to 8.
2. The activities of this unit will encompass at least one classroom session of 48 minutes each followed by a creative writing assignment whose session length will be determined by each teacher and class.

Lesson One:	Introduction of Lorine Niedecker as a Naturalist Poet
Lesson Two:	Examination of <i>July, waxwings</i>
Lesson Three:	Examination of <i>Linnaeus in Lapland</i>
Lesson Four:	Examination of <i>Get a load</i>
Lesson Five:	Creative Writing Assignment

Lesson One: Overview of Niedecker as a Naturalist

Lorine Niedecker, an objectivist poet who was born and raised in Fort Atkinson, having spent most of her life here, is known for a deep appreciation of the natural world. Her attention to nature is found throughout her poetry. She often recognizes the scientific classification of a species, often referring to Carl Linnaeus, founder of the scientific classification system, and often tries to relate her own life to the natural wonders occurring around her.

Guiding Questions for Class Discussion

1. What does it mean to be a naturalist?
2. What does a naturalist do?
3. Why is it important today to have individuals who still study nature?
4. Why do you think Niedecker refers to the scientific classification system in her language as a poet?

Lesson Two: Examination of *July, waxwings*

Objectives: Students will develop a deeper appreciation of this untitled poem. Students will look at images of cedar waxwings, a bird common to Wisconsin.

Hand out a copy of *July, waxwings*. Students read *July, waxwings* independently and write their thinking in the margins of the handout or on post-it notes. Allow students to then share their thoughts as a literary discussion group (LDG). Some responses to the guiding questions are given for use by the presenter.

Guiding Questions for Class Discussion

1. What is a waxwing?

Niedecker's untitled poem, *July waxwings*, is a poem resulting from the observation of cedar waxwings in Wisconsin. Show the students images of waxwings on berry bushes. (Image 1).

2. Why was it important for Niedecker to point out the month of July or berries?

Niedecker's emphasis gives the reader a time and a place. It places the image of the bird into a context, that of eating berries on a branch. This attention to the natural habits and habitat of a common bird of Wisconsin shows the reader a deep respect for the environment or natural world.

3. How could Niedecker have conveyed context differently in this poem?

Niedecker could have written about the songs of the waxwings. She could have observed the nesting habits or mating rituals of the males and females.

4. Notice how Niedecker builds or constructs the shape of the poem: the first line is broken by a comma and another is indented. Why do you think Niedecker constructed the poem in this fashion?

Lesson Three: Examination of *Linnaeus in Lapland*

Objectives: Students will develop a deeper appreciation of this poem. Students will understand the importance Niedecker placed on Linnaeus and on the study of the natural world using the classification system.

Handout a copy of *Linnaeus in Lapland*. Students read *Linnaeus in Lapland* independently and write their thinking in the margins of the handout or on post-it notes. Allow students to then share their thoughts as a literary discussion group.

Guiding Questions for Class Discussion

1. Who was Linnaeus and how does he relate to Lapland?

Carl Linnaeus, was the founder of the scientific classification system. On expedition to Lapland (northern Finland) in 1732 he compared a plant that he observed to Andromeda, a princess in Greek history who was daughter to the King and Queen of Ethiopia. Niedecker's use of the word taxed may also draw reference to the taxonomy of the classification system.

2. What is Niedecker referring to when she uses the word Andromeda?

Niedecker is referring to *andromeda polifolia* or *andromeda glaucophylla*, also known as bog rosemary. *Andromeda glaucophylla* grows in woody areas in North America and can be found in Wisconsin. (Image 2)

3. What does the word quadrangular mean and why did she use it?

Bog rosemary is a member of the mint family. All mints have square stems. The use of the word quadrangular was meant to suggest that it had four sides. If possible, handout a sample of a mint stem and have the students smell, look at, and touch the stem. If not possible, handout the picture of a mint stem provided in this lesson. (Image 3)

4. What do you think of Niedecker's use of rhyme in this poem?

Niedecker does not always use rhyme in her poems. Her quick repetition of pairs of rhyming words is quite evident in this poem but not set in any meter or rhythm.

5. Why do you think the classification system is important to an observer such as Niedecker?

Lesson Four: Examination of *Get a load*

Objectives Students will develop a deeper appreciation of this poem.
 Students will recognize how concise this poem is.

Handout a copy of the untitled poem whose first line begins with *Get a load*. Students will read this poem and write their thinking in the margins of the handout or on post-it notes. Allow students to share their thoughts as a literary discussion group.

Guiding Questions for Class Discussion

1. Is this poem short and concise? What does it mean to write concisely?

Niedecker often wrote short and concise poems. Niedecker wrote concisely by putting a significant amount of meaning into a poem with just a few words.

2. What are your thoughts on this poem?
3. Why does Niedecker compare frogs to freight cars?

Instead of focusing on the visual elements of imagery Niedecker is comparing the audible sounds of both frogs and freight cars.

4. Notice how Niedecker builds or constructs the shape of the poem. The first line is broken by a comma and another is indented. Why do you think Niedecker constructed the poem in this fashion?
5. Could you create a short poem of some aspect of nature by comparing it to another thought or idea or thing or experience in your life?

(Use this last question as a sounding board for lesson five)

Lesson Five: Creative Writing Assignment

Objectives: Students will create at least one short poem that examines nature and is similar to Niedecker's work.

Handout a rubric describing the creative writing assignment that the students can refer to during the writing process. A rubric has been created for Fort Atkinson Middle School students and a separate rubric has been provided for students outside of Fort Atkinson. Students will take a nature walk at a nearby park, school forest, or nature area in order to make naturalist observations. Fort Atkinson middle school students are encouraged to take a walk down at Haumerson's Pond and the Bark River Nature Trail, just two blocks away from the school. Tell the students to bring a camera (any electronic device with a camera will work as well) or sketch pad to record images that they see. Encourage the students to make observations of plants and animals in order to do research about a plant or an animal. Remind them that they can use the scientific name and draw reference to Linnaeus' classification system just as Niedecker did. Guide them by reinforcing the last question in Lesson Four, "Could you create a short poem of some aspect of nature by comparing it to another thought or idea or thing?" Give the students a week to do research on any of their photos or subjects and complete their poem(s). Remind them that students are not limited to submitting only one poem and that the Friends of Lorine Niedecker will collect the completed poems and publish them for the students to keep or place in their student portfolio. Quality work will be recommended for publication in the Solitary Plover.

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Creative Writing Assignment – Fort Atkinson Middle School

1. Next week we will be taking a hike at Haumerson's Pond and the Bark River Nature Park in Fort Atkinson or at a nature area in your community. Please bring a camera (any electronic device with a camera will work) and/or a sketch pad to record your observations.
2. A diverse variety of species, both flora and fauna, exist in the pond and along the trail. Find a species you would like to learn more about, study it through observation, photograph it, or even sketch it. Sometimes sketching a plant or animal will help us form a closer mental image of it.
3. Take your observations home or to the local library and do research about the plant or animal. Online encyclopedias or wildlife databases will help you learn more about it. For instance, Wild Chicory grows along the roadsides in Wisconsin some even near the Pond and Park. You can find information on Wild Chicory on a variety of reliable websites or science databases. Ask your teacher to help you find a source.
4. Search for the scientific name of the specie(s) that you are studying. Consider using it in your poem.
5. Try to relate the plant or animal that you studied to a thought, experience, and/or moment in your life.
6. Try to construct your poem or shape your poem with indentations, unusual commas, or ending line with a series of hyphens just as Niedecker did.
7. Submit your poem(s) for inclusion in a publication produced by the Friends of Lorine Niedecker (each of you will receive a copy) and for consideration in the Friends of Lorine Niedecker online publication of *The Solitary Plover*, a publication by the Friends of Lorine Niedecker. Poems can be emailed at contact@lorineniedecker.org. Put STUDENT POEM in subject line and include your school name and your grade level after your poem. Put STUDENT POEM in the subject line and include your school name and your grade level after your poem.

Lorine Niedecker Middle School Study Unit

Creative Writing Assignment

1. Next week we will be taking a hike at a nature area in your community. Please bring a camera (any electronic device with a camera will work) and/or a sketch pad to record your observations.
2. A diverse variety of species, both flora and fauna, exist in nature. Find a species you would like to learn more about, study it through observation, photograph it, or even sketch it. Sometimes sketching a plant or animal will help us form a closer mental image of it.
3. Take your observations home or to the local library and do research about the plant or animal. Online encyclopedias and any online information will help you learn more about it. For instance, Wild Chicory grows along the roadsides in Wisconsin some even near the Pond and Park. You can find information on Wild Chicory on a variety of reliable websites or science databases.
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Image 1



Photo Credit: <https://sites.psu.edu/birdsofpa/files/2016/12/cedar-waxwing-double-berry-14wxmaa.jpg>

(cedar waxwing)

Lorine Niedecker Middle School Study Unit

Image 2



Photo Credit: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/59003943@N00/5738701936>

(Bog Rosemary or *Andromeda glaucophylla*)

Lorine Niedecker Middle School Study Unit

Image 3



Photo Credit: <https://tinyurl.com/ydzd5rg3>

(square stem of a mint)

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Poem # 1

July, waxwings
on the berries
have dyed red
 the dead
branch

Lorine Niedecker Middle Grade Study Unit

Poem # 2

Linnaeus in Lapland

Nothing worth noting
except an Andromeda
with quadrangular shoots—
 the boots
of the people

wet inside: they must swim
to church thru the flood
or be taxed—the blossoms
 from the bosoms
of the leaves

Lorine Niedecker Middle Grade Study Unit

Poem # 3

Get a load
of April's
fabulous

frog rattle—
lowland freight cars
in the night