

# Traveling Back in Time with "The Last Neanderthal"

**GRADE LEVEL**

Grades 9-12

**SUBJECTS**

English, Language Arts

**ESTIMATED TIME**

Four 50-minute sessions

*"That girl coming reluctantly down the pathway to the fire was removed from us in time, and subconsciously she knew it as I did. ... No, we are out of time, I thought quickly. We are each and every one displaced. She is the last Neanderthal, and she does not know what to do."*

**OVERVIEW**

As a fossil hunter at a rhino dig near the Wildcat Hills in western Nebraska, Loren Eiseley encountered what he imagined to be a haunting throwback to Neanderthal man during the Ice Age. In this unit, students will travel back in time to learn about the physical features and lives of the Neanderthals and speculate why they went extinct. They will craft their own story or multi-media presentation as they imagine they are living with the Neanderthals. Students will also learn about recent scientific findings on Neanderthal DNA, and discuss similarities and differences between the Neanderthals and modern man (*homo sapiens*).

**MATERIALS AND TECHNOLOGY**

- Copies of *The Loren Eiseley Reader* for all students in the class
- Computer access to the Internet, Microsoft Word, multi-media software (Prezi, PowerPoint, Audacity, etc.), and access to a printer for all students
- Desktop or laptop computer for the instructor plus a large screen for viewing downloaded videos
- Blank postcards for everyone in the class (available from office supply stores or online)

## **PREPARATION**

1. Read Part II of Eiseley's essay "The Last Neanderthal" and make sure there are enough copies of *The Loren Eiseley Reader* for each student (available for loan from your ESU).
2. Prepare for this unit by looking at two or three websites on Neanderthal man, such as:

<http://www.livescience.com/28036-neanderthals-facts-about-our-extinct-human-relatives.html>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neanderthal>

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/407406/Neanderthal>

3. Download and watch the Discovery Channel video titled "Time Travellers: The Search for Neanderthal," available on YouTube at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oJjtflpIruA>
4. Arrange for students to have access to personal computers (with Internet) during most of the sessions of this lesson.

## **INSTRUCTIONAL PLAN**

### **STUDENT OBJECTIVES**

In this series of lessons, students will

- work in small groups to research and learn about the physical features and lives of the Neanderthals;
- practice oral and presentation skills by presenting their research to the class;
- craft a story in which they imagine they have traveled back in time to live with the Neanderthals; and
- make connections between their stories and Eiseley's essay, "The Last Neanderthal."

### **SESSION ONE**

1. Begin by asking students what they know about Neanderthals: when they lived, what they looked like, and how they lived. Write their thoughts on the white board.
2. Explain that as a student at the University of Nebraska, Loren Eiseley went on three bone hunting expeditions in western Nebraska with the University of Nebraska State Museum's South Party, from 1931 to 1933. In his essay, "The Last Neanderthal," Eiseley writes about one of these trips in which he encountered a girl who he imagined to resemble a

Neanderthal. The place where Eiseley encountered this girl is believed to be the Brubaker Farm (which is private property) near Bridgeport, Nebraska.

Pass out copies of The Loren Eiseley Reader. Have the class take turns reading the essay out loud, beginning on page 122 with the paragraph "It happened in the West...," and ending at the bottom of page 125.

3. Tell the class that Neanderthals are believed to have lived in Europe and central Asia between 230,000 and 30,000 years ago—longer than *Homo sapiens*, or modern humans, have lived on Earth. They lived during the most recent Ice Age, when vast sheets of ice covered many northern parts of the world. The term “Neanderthal” (also spelled Neandertal) comes from the Neander Valley near Dusseldorf, Germany. This is where scientists found the first Neanderthal fossils in 1856.

"Ideas about the nature of Neanderthals have often been at extremes, either that they were of limited intelligence, and not in any way related to contemporary humans, or that they were smart, and very much like contemporary humans. One of the challenges for anthropologists today is to try to understand the Neanderthals as they truly were." (Source: [http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/education/activities/2902\\_neandert.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/education/activities/2902_neandert.html))

4. Watch the Discovery Channel history documentary titled "Time Travellers: The Search for Neanderthal." (Note: download the video from YouTube prior to the class session and have it set up on a computer with a large screen for viewing. The running time is 21:25.)

## SESSION TWO

1. Begin this session by asking five students to perform a short dramatic reading and role play in class of the scene in Part II of "The Last Neanderthal" (pages 123-125) where the girl brings the food packages to the South Party in camp. Choose one person to play each of the following parts: narrator, Eiseley, the cook stoking the fire, the girl, and the girl's father.

Allow these five students to gather for about 5 minutes to decide how they are going to act out these passages. As a suggestion, the narrator could begin reading the second paragraph on page 123, and continue to a chosen stopping point, e.g., the dialogue on page 125.

While the five students are gathering, suggest that the rest of the class review the text on pages 123 to 125.

2. After the dramatic reading is performed, ask students for their reaction. Questions for discussion could include:
  - What themes or messages is Eiseley trying to convey in this part of the essay?
  - What kinds of images do the passages suggest?

- What features or characteristics of the young woman Eiseley encountered reminded him of a Neanderthal?
  - What kinds of feelings or thoughts does the Last Neanderthal convey?
  - What does the young woman (the "last Neanderthal") symbolize in this essay?
3. Divide the class into small groups and have each group research different aspects of the Neanderthals using Internet resources (including YouTube):
    - Physical features/cranial capacity
    - Hunting and diet
    - Tools and weapons
    - Shelter and Clothing
    - Communication/language
    - Burial ceremonies and religious/spiritual beliefs

Each group should prepare a one-page summary of their findings using Microsoft Word or presentation software. Ask each group to appoint a spokesperson to present the information to the rest of the class.

### **SESSION THREE**

1. Ask any groups that have not presented their research in Session Two to do so.
2. Tell the students to imagine that they are a Neanderthal girl or boy in the ice age. How would they live, and what would they do to survive? In class, ask each student to write a two-page (double-spaced) story that tells what their life is like, as if they were describing it to someone in the future.
3. Ask students to volunteer to read their stories out loud to the class. (If no volunteers, call on a minimum of three students.)
4. Collect everyone's stories for grading, if desired.

### **SESSION FOUR**

1. Ask students to imagine that they are Eiseley on the South Party expedition in Bridgeport. Distribute blank postcards to everyone in the class, and ask students to write a postcard back home describing their encounter with the Last Neanderthal girl and other news. Allow 5-10 minutes for this activity. Collect the postcards for grading, if desired.
2. Considering the origins and extinction of the Neanderthals, discuss the possible meanings of these passages from "The Last Neanderthal":

- "*Homo sapiens*, the energy devourer, was on his way once more."
  - "Upon a surging tide of power first conceived in the hearth fires of dead caverns, mankind was plunging into an uncontrolled future beyond anything the people of the Ice had known."
3. The disappearance of the Neanderthals is still an unsolved mystery. Ask students to speculate on what happened to them.
  4. Recent scientific findings have revealed that Neanderthals and early humans inter-bred, and that 1.5 to 2.1 percent of the DNA of anyone living outside Africa today is Neanderthal in origin (source: <http://www.livescience.com/48399-when-neanderthals-humans-first-interbred.html>).

Ask students for their reactions to this scientific finding. Questions for discussion could include:

- What do you think about the fact that you may be related to Neanderthal man?
- What characteristics, traits, and behaviors do you think you (and modern man) have in common with Neanderthals?

## **ENRICHMENT**

1. Ask students who have written stories to animate or illustrate their story using graphics or animation software. Share their projects with the entire class.
2. Create a class mural of a Neanderthal cave, with images representing aspects of Neanderthal life such as hunting and food, tools and weapons, culture (art, music and language), and shelter.
3. Interested students can explore the following website on Neanderthals:  
<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/08/15/sleeping-with-the-enemy>



Mark Hertig from the National Park Service at Agate Fossil Beds National Monument holds a life-size picture of a Menoceras, a small rhinoceros whose fossils were found by the South Party near Bridgeport, Nebraska.