



# Who Shares Responsibility for Aurore's Death?

*This MysteryQuest examines factors leading to the abuse and death in 1920 of Aurore Gagnon, a ten-year-old girl living in a small community in Quebec. Students learn that many individuals, including those who were not actively or directly involved, may share responsibility for historical events.*

*A critical thinking challenge to accompany*

***Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History***

***Aurore! The Mystery of the Martyred Child***

**<http://www.mysteryquests.ca/quests/20/indexen.html>**

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*based on an approach developed by The Critical Thinking Consortium (TC<sup>2</sup>)*

**[www.tc2.ca](http://www.tc2.ca)**

## **Ages**

14-16

## **Courses**

Canadian history, social studies, civics, law

## **Key Topics**

- responsibility (culpability)
- family and community life in rural Quebec during the early 20th century

## Critical Challenges

- Identify those who played a significant role in the death of Aurore Gagnon.
- Assign a degree of responsibility to those associated with Aurore Gagnon and deemed to have played a significant role in the events leading up to her death.

## Broad Understanding

- Students will learn to find evidence in textual sources to support a causal explanation of an historical mystery.
- Students will learn that events often have multiple causes and these causes can be both direct and indirect. Students also learn that culpability can result from action or inaction.

## Requisite Tools



### *Background knowledge*

- knowledge of the social and economic conditions in rural Quebec in the early 20th century
- knowledge of the degree to which children were protected in Quebec society in the early 20th century



### *Criteria for judgment*

- criteria for responsibility (e.g., depth of knowledge of harmful actions, opportunity or ability to intervene, social expectations of people in the situation)
- criteria for use of historical evidence (e.g., relevant to the topic, plausible conclusions drawn)
- criteria for sound conclusion (e.g., plausible, supported with accurate evidence)



### *Critical thinking vocabulary*

- historical causation
- culpability



### *Thinking strategies*

- data charts



### *Habits of mind*

- attention to detail
- full-mindedness

## Independent Study

This lesson can be used as a self-directed activity by having students individually or in pairs work their way through the guided instructions and support material found on <http://www.mysteryquests.ca/quests/20/indexen.html>.

## Whole Class Activities

On the following pages are suggested modifications of the self-guided procedures found on the MysteryQuest website for use with a class of students. For convenience, each support material and set of directions found on the website is reproduced next to the relevant suggestions for whole class instruction.

## Suggested Activities

### Set the context

- Invite students to reflect on how events may have multiple causes and how these causes may be both direct and indirect by asking them to brainstorm a list of reasons why a student may do poorly on a test. Once the class has generated several reasons, invite students to work with a partner to sort the reasons into direct causes (did not understand the material, ran out of time, was distracted by noise in the hall) and indirect causes (argued with parents, worked late the night before).

### Discuss the challenge

- Using *Introduction* as a guide, explain to students the challenge of their investigation.

#### INTRODUCTION

Aurore Gagnon was a ten-year-old girl who died of abuse on February 12, 1920. Her story shocked her community and “Aurore, the Child Martyr” has become a famous figure in Québec popular culture. She lived and died in the small community of Sainte-Philomène de Fortierville. Much of what we know of her life is based on the testimony of those who witnessed her abuse and did nothing to save her. How did this small community become so dangerous for this young girl? Why did no one intervene?

The lingering mystery is how such a tragedy could have been allowed to happen. Does the blame for her brutal death lie solely at the feet of her father and stepmother, whose abuse led to Aurore’s death? Or, do others (including neighbours, family members, local authorities, the local priest, and the family doctor) share in the responsibility for allowing the abuse to continue? Is the safeguarding of children the sole responsibility of the parents or do others in society have an obligation to ensure the safety of all children?

- Using *The Task* as a guide, explain to students that their challenge, working collaboratively in small groups, is to determine the degree of responsibility, if any, of certain family and community members in the death of Aurore Gagnon.

#### THE TASK

In this MysteryQuest you are invited to determine what responsibility, if any, various family and community members might share in the tragic death of Aurore Gagnon. Although Aurore’s father and stepmother were held criminally responsible for her death, many other people in the community knew or suspected what was being done to Aurore and yet the abuse continued. Do any of these people deserve to be held at least partially responsible for Aurore’s death?

First, you will need to learn more about the details surrounding Aurore’s death. After considering the kinds of factors that might influence whether someone is indirectly responsible for an event, you will examine documents describing the actions of ten people in Aurore’s life. You will use the evidence collected to assign degrees of responsibility for Aurore’s death to each of these people.

## Learn about the incident

- Using *Step 1: Learn about the incident* as a guide, describe the events leading up to Aurore's death.

### STEP 1: LEARN ABOUT THE INCIDENT

Aurore Gagnon was a young girl who died February 12, 1920, under suspicious circumstances. She was born on May 31, 1909, in Sainte-Philomène de Fortierville, in the county of Lotbinière, Québec. When she was eight years old her mother died. Her father, Téléphore Gagnon, a farmer and logger from Fortierville, immediately married Marie-Anne Houde, a widow with four children from a previous marriage. Aurore died two years later at the age of ten. The coroner's inquest revealed that she had died of blood poisoning and general exhaustion, the result of a great number of untreated wounds covering her body.

With the death of Aurore Gagnon, the community was in crisis. Fingers quickly pointed to the stepmother, who had made no secret of the violence she and her husband inflicted on the child. Both were quickly brought to trial. Her stepmother was convicted of first-degree murder after her defence of insanity was rejected. She was sentenced to death by hanging, but the sentence was commuted to life imprisonment because she was pregnant with twins. She died in prison a few years later. Although Téléphore Gagnon was clearly involved in the violence against his daughter, he was convicted of the lesser crime of manslaughter. After serving a short sentence, he returned to Sainte-Philomène where he spent the rest of his life.

Learn more about the case by reading three documents in the "Background to the case" section of *Evidence in the Case*. These documents include Aurore's father's testimony and two newspaper articles published just before Marie-Anne Houde (Aurore's stepmother) was sentenced for killing Aurore.

- To learn more about Aurore's death, direct students to the three documents in the Background section of *Evidence in the Case*.

### EVIDENCE IN THE CASE

#### Background to the case – Newspaper Articles

"The Gagnon Case at the Quebec Assizes: A Neighbour Testifies that the Accused Allegedly told her 'I Wish Little Aurore Would Die Without Anyone Knowing About it'", *La Presse*, April 15, 1920

"Why did the Authorities Not Intervene Until After the Little Girl Died?", *La Presse*, April 17, 1920

## Introduce the concept of individual responsibility

- Ask students to imagine that they are at a party where a lot of alcohol has been consumed. As the party is breaking up, one of the people who is very drunk gets behind the wheel of the car filled with other party goers. On the way home, there is a terrible accident. Two of the passengers are killed instantly, two others die later in hospital. The driver is badly hurt but lives. Obviously, the driver is at fault and therefore responsible. Ask students if anyone else carries any responsibility in the deaths of the four people?
- Using *Step 2: Consider individual responsibility* as a guide, share with students the factors that affect justification for holding a person responsible in an event, even if they didn't actually cause the event.
- You may choose to revisit the discussion about the party, asking students to use the criteria for assigning responsibility when giving their responses.

### STEP 2: CONSIDER INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY

Your task is to assess whether various family and community members, other than Aurore's father and stepmother, may share some responsibility because of their failure to act to prevent her death. Various factors affect our justification for holding a person responsible for an event, even if they didn't actually cause the event. Three important factors in assigning indirect responsibility are:

- *Depth of knowledge of the harmful actions:* The more people know about a situation, the more inclined we are to attribute responsibility. For example, we would have reduced expectations for action if someone had merely heard vague second-hand rumours of some abuse than we would if the person had witnessed repeated instances of it.
- *Opportunity and ability to make a difference:* Even though people may not actually have caused the harmful action, they may still be accountable if they failed to do anything to prevent it when they had an opportunity and the ability to do so — especially if acting to prevent harm would have been easy for the person to do and involved little or no effort or personal risk. For example, someone who knew about a crime long before it happened and could have made an anonymous telephone call bears more responsibility for a failure to act than someone who learned about a crime at the last minute and would put themselves in great personal danger if they tried to prevent it.
- *Social expectations of people in the situation:* Some people, by virtue of their role in society, have greater responsibility to act than others. For example, suppose you reported a crime being committed to two people — a police officer and a tourist. We would have greater expectations about the police officer's responsibility to do something than we would with the tourist.

## Look for evidence

- Using *Step 3: Look for evidence* as a guide, instruct students to work individually or in pairs to examine several primary documents to find evidence of how Aurore’s death came about and why action was not taken to prevent her death.
- Some of the documents the students will examine are news reports, while others are court testimony – two very different text forms. You may need to discuss the structure of these text forms and how to read each for deep meaning. For example, in the news report use the headings and subheadings to determine point of view and the flow of the story. In the court testimony be sure to consider who was speaking, their relationship to the accused, and how reliable their testimony is in uncovering the truth.
- Distribute copies of *Looking for Evidence of Responsibility* to each pair of students.
- You may want to direct students to other links on the Aurore! website to learn more about the context of this murder.

### STEP 3: LOOK FOR EVIDENCE

Your next task is to examine documents describing the actions of ten people who may have contributed indirectly to Aurore’s death. Work on your own or with a partner to read the ten documents in “Testimony of Family and Community Members” found in *Evidence in the Case*. Although there are many documents, most of these are short and consist largely of questions and answers presented to the witness at one of the hearings into Aurore’s death.

As you read the documents, consider the evidence in light of the three factors discussed above. Record information on each factor in determining responsibility on the chart *Looking for Evidence of Responsibility*.



MysteryQuest 20

Support Materials 1 (Activity Sheet)

Looking for Evidence of Responsibility

Person and relationship to Aurore	Depth of knowledge of the harmful events	Opportunity and ability to make a difference	Social expectations to act
Willie Hault (Aurore’s uncle)			
Vladimir Lehouf (neighbour)			
Adeline Gagnon (neighbour)			
George Gagnon (Aurore’s brother)			
Emeline Hault (Aurore’s cousin)			

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## Prepare for assessment of responsibility

- Using *Step 4: Prepare your assessment of responsibility* as a guide, explain to students that they are now ready to determine the degree of responsibility, if any, each person bears in Aurore’s death.

### STEP 4: PREPARE YOUR ASSESSMENT OF RESPONSIBILITY

When you have examined the documents and recorded evidence for each of the ten people, you are now ready to determine what degree of responsibility, if any, each person bears for Aurore’s death. Sort the people into the following categories or levels of responsibility:

- 0 These persons should not be held responsible in any way for Aurore’s death.
- 1 These persons are only slightly responsible for Aurore’s death.
- 2 These persons are responsible for Aurore’s death but do not deserve to be punished.
- 3 These persons bear considerable responsibility for Aurore’s death and deserve some form of punishment.
- 4 These persons are as responsible for Aurore’s death as the people who actually killed her.

Using the chart *Assigning Levels of Responsibility*, record the names of the people who belong at each level of responsibility and explain your reasons for assigning the people to this level.

- Duplicate and distribute to students copies of *Assigning Levels of Responsibility*.
- You may choose to hold a class debate or to assign students individually to prepare a 250-word report. The report should present and defend their conclusions in light of the evidence from the primary and secondary documents examined.

MysteryQuest 20 Support Materials 2 (Activity Sheet)

**Assigning Levels of Responsibility**

Degree of responsibility	Names of people	Explanation for assessment of responsibility
0 <i>These persons should not be held responsible in any way for Aurore's death.</i>		
1 <i>These persons are only slightly responsible for Aurore's death.</i>		
2 <i>These persons are responsible for Aurore's death but do not deserve to be punished.</i>		
3 <i>These persons bear considerable responsibility for Aurore's death and deserve some form of punishment.</i>		
4 <i>These persons are as responsible for Aurore's death as the people who actually killed her.</i>		

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## Evaluation

- Use the rubric *Assessing the Evidence and Conclusions* to evaluate students' completion of the charts.

MysteryQuest 20 Evaluation Materials 1 (Rubric)

**Assessing the Evidence and Conclusions**

	Outstanding	Very good	Competent	Satisfactory	In-progress
<b>Identifies relevant and important evidence</b>	Identifies the most important and relevant statements in the documents.	Identifies the required number of relevant statements including most of the important ones in the documents.	Identifies some relevant statements in the documents but important ones are omitted.	Identifies some relevant statements in the documents but none of the important ones are included.	Identifies no relevant statements in the documents.
<b>Offers plausible conclusions</b>	The conclusions are highly plausible and highly justifiable in light of the evidence.	The conclusions are clearly plausible and justifiable in light of the evidence.	The conclusions are plausible and somewhat justifiable in light of the evidence.	The conclusions are plausible but are barely justifiable given the evidence.	The conclusions are implausible and not justifiable given the evidence.

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## Extension

- Invite students to work individually or as a class to pursue the suggested activities listed in *Extension*.

### EXTENSION

*What additional evidence would you need?*

Describe the amount and kind of additional evidence you would need if you were to write a coroner's report outlining the most important steps to be taken to ensure another tragic death like Aurore's would not happen again.

*Examine additional documents*

Locate other historical documents in Aurore! The Mystery of the Martyred Child that provide more complete evidence as to the role that various people played in the life and death of Aurore Gagnon.

*Put yourself in the place of these community members*

Apply your detective skills to a related mystery associated with Aurore's death. MysteryQuest 1 invites you to put yourself in the situation of someone living in the community and to try to understand why people failed to protect this desperate child.