**Back Story Essay**

Simple 4 paragraphs

**Clue Cards**

Thomson, young artist and canoeist/fisherman arrives Algonquin Park by train at Canoe Lake.

Mark Robinson thinks he’s a poacher, but strikes up a friendship. He becomes Thomson’s great companion and teaches him about the Park’s ecology and special places to visit / paint.

Robinson keeps a detailed daily journal. Much of what we know about Thomson is from this.

What was Thomson doing in Algonquin?

He is an emerging brilliant but brooding artist, seeking emotion in the north woods via painting. He is an expert fisherman and canoeist already, and is drawn to the northern wilderness.

The former logging village of Mowat is a dying ghost town. Thomson rents a room in a boarding house at Mowat Lodge (Canoe Lake) in what was a Gilmour Lumber Company building. His landlords and hosts are Shannon and Annie Fraser, who are employed by Gilmour’s to sell company assets and host pioneer tourists.

Tom Thomson spends time with the young and lovely Winnie Trainor. She is daughter of a lumber company foreman, and lives in a waterside cottage on Canoe Lake at Mowat. Is there a Thomson – Trainor love affair?! It is not certain, but tongues wag!

Thomson attempts to enlist in the Canadian armed services to join World War I but is denied repeatedly, due to health reasons. He is frustrated by this exclusion, but it also allows him to stay in Canada and continue his art. During this time, his signature style emerges. But he remains super-sensitive to the fact that he’s safe at home while millions die in Europe.

Martin Blecher Jr. is another cottager at Mowat, who constantly needles Thomson over WWI and German prospects. Blecher family are German-Americans. They favor the German side in the world conflict in Europe. Is Blecher also mean to Thomson because he is jealous of his summer neighbor Winnie’s affections for Tom? People think Blecher wants to date Winnie.

Thomson has a dark blue canoe – a unique color he painted using his artists’ oils. Everyone can tell his canoe by the distinctive color. He guides tourists sometimes, but more often he ventures out alone into the Park on solo trips, taking painting and fishing equipment with him for days on end.

Mark Robinson and his boss, Park Superintendent George Bartlett, enforce a no-whisky rule in the Park. However, lumbermen and cottagers sneak lots of booze into Algonquin and drinking is a big social pastime at Canoe Lake in the old days. The Park rangers fear that drunken men will cause problems and get into conflicts.

George Rowe and Lowrie Dickson are professional fishing guides who live together in a small cabin at the top of Canoe Lake across from Mowat. They are hard workers and good friends with Thomson and Robinson.

The guides, Dickson and Rowe, host parties where the men drink rye whisky and play cards. In early July 1917 a party turns dark, when a fight breaks out between Martin Blecher and Tom Thomson. The shocked friends separate these two from punches, but Blecher storms out into the night, yelling “You’ll stay away from me if you know what’s good for you!”

At the guides’ whisky party in early July, a second shoving match erupts between Thomson and his friend Shannon Fraser. Some say Fraser owes Thomson money. Why is Thomson so adamant to get his cash back from Fraser now?

On July 8, 1917 Mark Robinson is on his ranger cabin porch near Joe Lake Dam, and overhears Thomson and Fraser planning a fishing joke. They want to catch a big trout from Gill lake and convince Robinson it is a famously elusive trout caught in the Joe Dam pool. Robinson sees that the two men are returning to Mowat Lodge to get Tom outfitted for a solo fishing trip to Sam, Gill and Drummer Lakes.

As Fraser watches, Thomson sets out on July 8 solo in his canoe, with two paddles, fishing gear including copper wire line, some bread/bacon/tea and a tarp. He plans 1-3 days’ fishing on lakes near Canoe Lake. Fraser sees Thomson paddle past Little Wapomeo Island. No one else sees Tom Thomson alive ever again.

Tom doesn’t return from his trip, and after 2 days, local people on Canoe Lake begin to wonder where he is. No one is too concerned. Thomson ventures out alone all the time.

Tom’s signature colored canoe is found floating swamped in Canoe Lake. Martin Blecher and his sister Bessie Blecher, out on a picnic day trip, find and return the canoe to the shoreline at Mowat. They later insist they did not recognize the canoe as Tom’s. They say they thought the canoe was a rental from the local lodge (Colson’s) which drifted away. People on the lake wonder why the Blechers didn’t recognize Tom’s unique canoe color. WHERE IS TOM?!

The discovery of Tom’s swamped canoe! Inside is the tarp and food, and one of two canoe paddles, not his primary paddle, lashed in for portaging. The guides note that the paddle is tied with a clumsy granny knot. They think there’s no way Thomson would use such a knot. What does it all mean? WHERE IS TOM!? A serious search begins.

Local men search the shorelines and woods, portages and nearby lakes for Thomson for 4 days in July 1917. They whistle and fire shots, the patrol the water’s edge everywhere. Robinson directs the searches. The men come home late, exhausted. No luck. WHERE IS TOM!?

Dr. Howland, a tourist cottager, is up early on a fateful July morning. He watches from his Mowat dock as Dickson and Rowe, the guides, head out again in search of Thomson, their friend. Howland sees what he thinks is a dead loon carcass floating out in the lake. He hollers to the guides to check it out. They paddle up to it and push it with a paddle. It rolls over and IT’S THOMSON’S DEAD BODY!!!! He is bloated and disfigured, deformed from being in the lake for obviously a long time. They are shocked at the sight of their friend dead and mangled in the water.

The shocked guides loop a rope around Thomson’s leg and pull him into shallow water by the campsite on Little Wap Island. Dr. Howland comes over and examines the body. He instructs them to leave Thomson in the water. The guides make a campfire and start a sad vigil. Near then, Thomson bobs in the water, tied to a cedar tree. The weather becomes hot. The world is about to learn of Thomson’s demise.

Howland and the guides look over Thomson. He has a red wound in a straight line along his temple. Howland claims there’s blood coming from his ear and air escaping from his lungs. They notice cooper fishing wire wraps around Tom’s ankle … there are 18 wraps around the ankle. WHY? There is no sign of his missing paddle.

Robinson and his boss Bartlett order the North Bay medical examiner to come by train ASAP. He is the The Coroner – Albert Ranney from North Bay. But he doesn’t show up right away, in fact he hasn’t arrived after two days. The decision is made to bury Thomson’s decaying corpse at the Canoe Lake cemetery.

A Sad Burial   
The local folk all attend a ceremony taking place on the lonesome hill overlooking Canoe Lake. Thomson is in a simple wood coffin. He is buried in a grave dug outside the little picket graveyard fence that encloses James Watson’s and Alexander Hayhurst’s previous graves. Local native people have been known to bury their dead in this same area. Thomson’s coffin joins theirs in unmarked quiet in the woods.

Late the night of July 10, the Coroner (Ranney) finally arrives on a local train. He instructs Robinson to set up an inquiry at a local building. The Blecher family immediately volunteers their cottage and the mom makes a meal while a kitchen meeting takes place in the middle of the night. Not all the lake people are invited. The Coroner interviews Dr. Howland and quickly pronounces the death an accidental drowning. Robinson and the local guides are stunned. NO WAY! Thomson was too expert they claim to have drowned. Too many questions and clues.

Winnie Trainor is seen to be distressed by Tom’s death. When the Thomson family requests that Tom be moved to his family cemetery in Owen Sound, Winnie insists on managing this, and is angry when the local men say they think Thomson would prefer to remain at Canoe Lake.

The night after the Coroner inquest, an undertaker arrives on the train at dusk with his coffin box and formal casket. Shannon Fraser picks him up in horse and wagon for the trip up to the grave site. He is ordered by the Thomson family to exhume the grave and take body by train.

The undertaker acts strangely: he insists on working alone in the dark with a lantern and single shovel. He sends Fraser away for several hours. When Fraser returns, the job is ‘done’. The grave seems little disturbed. The casket alone remains on the ground. When they lift it together, Fraser says the weight is all in one end. The man who did so much digging doesn’t appear muddy in any way. Did he in fact exhume Thomson?!! Why? Why Not?

In 1956, Camp Ahmek alumni sneak to the cemetery and dig holes attempting to find Thomson’s grave. They don’t believe he was ever taken away. After several attempts, they dig up a simple coffin with a skeleton inside. They take the skull and a leg bone and sneak off to have them studied in Toronto. The results? The skull has a hole in the temple, but the lab says the bones can only be from a native man. Is it an indian burial or someone buried later in Thomson’s old grave? The men return the bones to the original grave and the Park says no more digging at Mowat.

Decades after Thomson’s death, comparisons of Thomson face photos and photos of the found skull are used to make a CSI facial reconstruction. The result: a face that looks like Thomson!!??

Just a few years ago, a woman named Daphne Crombie makes a death-bed statement. She knows what happened to Tom Thomson. She was friends with Annie Fraser and spent time at Mowat Lodge with the Frasers and Thomson back in the day. She claims Annie confessed to her that Shannon Fraser saw Thomson come home from fishing at night on July 8. The two argued again about money, and Fraser punched Thomson, who fell into the fireplace and was killed striking his head upon the grate. Shocked, the couple panicked and sunk Thomson in the lake and swamped his canoe, to pretend it was left adrift.

Narrator Sladds

\*Tom Thomson Julian Baker

Martin Blecher Simon McNamee

Bessie Blecher Aidan McPhail

Hugh Trainor Brent Hurley

Winnie Trainor Mimi Deacon

Mark Robinson Pierre Roy

Shannon Fraser Zach Arem

Annie Fraser Steph Arem

Ed Colson Kaleb Chitaphong

Molly Colson Ally Rail

\*Albert Ranney, coroner Samantha Davies

\*Undertaker????? Etienne Demers

\*Charlie Rowe Sam Laemmle

\*Lowrie Dickson Joe Wischerath

\*Dr. Howland Matt Wesorick

\*Daphne Crombie Erica Mason  
friend of Annie Fraser, who reveals a bizarre secret before dying

**Character bio’s.**

**Tom Thomson** (August 5, 1877 – July 8, 1917) was an influential Canadian artist of the early 20th century. He directly influenced a group of Canadian painters that would come to be known as the [Group of Seven](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Group_of_Seven_(artists)), and though he died before they formally formed, he is sometimes incorrectly credited as being a member of the group itself. Thomson died under mysterious circumstances on Canoe Lake in Algonquin Park on July 8, 1917.

Thomson was said to be vibrant and friendly at times, but also brooding and quiet at others. He was intensely devoted to his art, but was also an avid and accomplished canoeist, swimmer and fisherman. He lived spring – fall from 1912 – 1917 at Canoe Lake and traveled extensively in Algonquin Park. He would make small paintings in the field on boards, then choose favorites to render into large canvasses each winter in the city.

**Albert Ranney – Coroner, North Bay –** was summoned by Park Sup’t Geo. Bartlett after Thomson’s body was found July 17 dead in Canoe Lake. Ranney arrived a couple of days late, Thomson’s decomposed body being already buried due to the heat of the season. He came by night train to Canoe Lake Station and was escorted to the cottage of the Blecher family to hold an inquest. Ranney only interviewed Dr. Howland, who discovered the corpse, but quickly pronounced the death due to drowning, despite incomplete and conflicting evidence.

**Charlie Rowe**

**Lowrie Dickson**

**Guides, Canoe Lake –** Rowe and Dickson were fishing guides based out of Canoe Lake. They took sporting tourists on backcountry trips in the fledgling Park. Fond of their rye whiskey they were hosts of regular informal card and drinking parties for the men around Mowat. They befriended Thomson and respected his woods skills, thus they disbelieved that he merely drowned due to accidental fall from his canoe. They recovered his body on July 17 and kept a vigil over it while it floated at their Wap Island campsite until the choice was made to bury him.

**Daphne Crombie – deathbed revelation -** Just a few years ago, a woman named Daphne Crombie makes a death-bed statement. She knows what happened to Tom Thomson. She was friends with Annie Fraser and spent time at Mowat Lodge with the Frasers and Thomson back in the day. She claims Annie confessed to her that Shannon Fraser saw Thomson come home from fishing at night on July 8. The two argued again about money, and Fraser punched Thomson, who fell into the fireplace and was killed striking his head upon the grate. Shocked, the couple panicked and sunk Thomson in the lake and swamped his canoe, to pretend it was left adrift.

**Sketchy Undertaker – exhumed the Thomson grave –** This man, hired by the Thomson family and arranged by grieving Winnie Trainor, arrived at Canoe Lake Station and was met by Shannon Fraser with horse/wagon. The man had a coffin, also a formal casket, and insisted he be left alone at the grave site above Canoe Lake with tools and lantern to perform alone the digging up of the grave and removal of the body over night. Perplexed, Fraser left the man to his work, but on returning later, found the job ‘done’ with only the sealed casket there. The coffin was not visible, nor was the original Thomson coffin, and the grave looked to be only slightly disturbed.

DID THE UNDERTAKER REMOVE OR LEAVE THOMSON’S BODY? WHY? IS IT POSSIBLE THAT THOMSON’S FRIENDS PAID HIM TO LEAVE TOM AT CANOE LAKE?

**Dr. Howland – tourist visitor Canoe Lake –** Howland and his family rented a cottage for the summer that had been one of the Gilmour Lumber Co. buildings at Mowat. He was a physician presumably from Toronto, and joined in the summer activities of the lake, as well as joined in the search for Tom and then was first to spot his body in the lake. He told Rowe and Dickson to tow the body to the island campsite at Little Wap, and there told them to leave it in the water until the Coroner came. He examined Thomson’s remains there, and noted several details: Thomson had a bruise along his temple, blood coming from his ears, and ‘air’ coming from his lungs (?), as well as 18 turns of copper fishing wire lashed around one ankle. Howland was the only witness carefully questioned by the Coroner Albert Ranney, and said he thought Thomson must have struck his head and drowned by accident. Others disagreed with this simple answer.