

Into the Wild and Transcendentalism

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AP English Language & Composition



Unit Overview

This lesson sequence is designed for Advanced Placement English Language & Composition students; however, it can be easily modified for any 11th or 12th grade English class. While students will gain significant knowledge of Transcendental ideas and thorough knowledge of the myriad literary works that inspired Chris McCandless, the protagonist in Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*, a major focus in this lesson sequence is for students to hone comprehension skills through intense and repeated close readings of challenging texts (the types of texts that can be found on the AP exam).

There are 10 lessons included here, attached to 10 (out of 18) various chapters in *Into the Wild*. This particular lesson plan begins after a thorough introduction to *Into the Wild* and a classroom reading of Chapter 1. Each lesson will run for at least one 48-minute period, but flexibility is important because some of these lessons can go two or even three days depending on the discussion that is generated by the students.

The unit will focus on the following threads:

- "Living in Nature"
- "Examining Desperate and Deliberate Lives"
- "Practicing Simplicity"
- "Choosing Life *with* Principle"
- "Relationships"

It's important for students to pay attention and track these threads because their final assessment requires them to write about one of them. Most of these threads will be introduced with a reading from Henry David Thoreau. However, an introduction to Ralph Waldo Emerson and Transcendentalism will be presented with the third lesson.

Essential/Framing Questions

1. Was Chris McCandless a Transcendentalist?
2. What textual evidence suggests that Chris McCandless lived "deliberately"?
3. Where do both H.D.T and Chris McCandless practice simplicity?

4. What are the principles that H.D.T. and Chris McCandless espouse?
 5. How do McCandless and Thoreau provide (sometimes contradictory) commentary on relationships?
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Lesson 1 (Two periods):

Thread(s)

- Living in nature

Objectives

- Define epigraph and infer why Jon Krakauer used these to introduce each chapter.
- Describe diction after closely reading two passages. [Note: Students have already been taught about diction and have practiced describing and categorizing diction.]
- Identify the theme of two passages.
- Explain how a writer's attitude toward nature is reflected in description.

Materials

- *Into the Wild* book
- Handouts of passages
- Two different colored highlighters

Activities

1. Define *epigraph* for students: "a short quotation or saying at the beginning of a book or chapter, intended to suggest its theme."
2. Class begins with a close reading of the following epigraph found at the beginning of Chapter 2. Students will receive this in a handout and they will be asked to highlight "negative" diction in yellow. This is independent work. Using cellphones or Chromebooks, students will look up any words they do not know, i.e. "mirth" or "futility." (Sample highlights included below; students will receive a clean copy)

Dark spruce forest **frowned** on either side the frozen waterway. The trees had been stripped by a recent wind of their white covering of frost, and they seemed to lean toward each other, **black and ominous**, in the fading light. A vast silence reigned over the land. The land itself was a **desolation, lifeless**, without movement, so **lone** and cold that the spirit of it was not even that of **sadness**. There was a hint in it of laughter, but of a laughter more terrible than any sadness—a laughter that was **mirthless** as the smile of the Sphinx, a laughter **cold** as the frost and partaking of the **grimness** of infallibility. It was the masterful and incommunicable wisdom of eternity laughing at the **futility** of life and the effort of life. It was the Wild, the **savage**, frozen-hearted Northland Wild.

JACK LONDON, WHITE FANG

3. Class discussion of passage. Negative diction will be easy to interpret. Look at "laughter." Why is nature laughing at man?
4. Move on to the next passage. The passage will be paired with the first two paragraphs of "The Pond in Winter" from *Walden* (after placing it in context). Student will complete the same highlighting activity. They should be asked to pay attention to diction and be able to describe diction.

After a still winter night I awoke with the impression that some question had been put to me, which I had been endeavoring in vain to answer in my sleep, as what—how—when—where? But there was dawning Nature, in whom all creatures live, looking in at my broad windows with serene and satisfied face, and no question on her lips. I awoke to an answered question, to Nature and daylight. The snow lying deep on the earth dotted with young pines, and the very slope of the hill on which my house is placed, seemed to say, Forward! Nature puts no question and answers none which we mortals ask. She has long ago taken her resolution. "O Prince, our eyes contemplate with admiration and transmit to the soul the wonderful and varied spectacle of this universe. The night veils without doubt a part of this glorious creation; but day comes to reveal to us this great work, which extends from earth even into the plains of the ether."

Then to my morning work. First I take an axe and pail and go in search of water, if that be not a dream. After a cold and snowy night it needed a divining-rod to find it. Every winter the liquid and trembling surface of the pond, which was so sensitive to every breath, and reflected every light and shadow, becomes solid to the depth of a foot or a foot and a half, so that it will support the heaviest teams, and perchance the snow covers it to an equal depth, and it is not to be distinguished from any level field. Like the marmots in the surrounding hills, it closes its eyelids and becomes dormant for three months or more. Standing on the snow-covered plain, as if in a pasture amid the hills, I cut my way first through a foot of snow, and then a foot of ice, and open a window under my feet, where, kneeling to drink, I look down into the quiet parlor of the fishes, pervaded by a softened light as through a window of ground glass, with its bright sanded floor the same as in summer; there a perennial waveless serenity reigns as in the amber twilight sky, corresponding to the cool and even temperament of the inhabitants. Heaven is under our feet is well as over our heads.

Class Discussion - Compare and contrast the attitudes of Jack London and H.D.T toward nature based on these passages. Note the personification of nature.

Homework - Students will read Chapter 2. What is the "theme" of Chapter 2?

Lesson Two (two periods)

Thread(s):

- Examining desperate and deliberate lives

Objectives:

- Demonstrate comprehension of a chapter and two passages
- Annotate a text
- Identify the theme of "living deliberately" in a passage
- Compare Chris McCandless with H.D.T. and other writers

Materials:

- *Into the Wild* book
- Handouts of passages
- Two different colored highlighters

Activities:

1. Start-up activity: Short quiz on Chapter 2. Then, short discussion that reviews why Krakauer chose to use the Jack London excerpt to introduce this chapter.
2. Like yesterday, class begins with a close reading of the following epigraphs found at the beginning of Chapter 3. Students will receive this in a handout and they will be asked to annotate in the margins. [Annotation has previously been taught]

I wanted movement and not a calm course of existence. I wanted excitement and danger and the chance to sacrifice myself for my love. I felt in myself a superabundance of energy which found no outlet in our quiet life.

LEO TOLSTOY, "FAMILY HAPPINESS"
PASSAGE HIGHLIGHTED IN ONE OF THE BOOKS
FOUND WITH CHRIS MCCANDLESS'S REMAINS

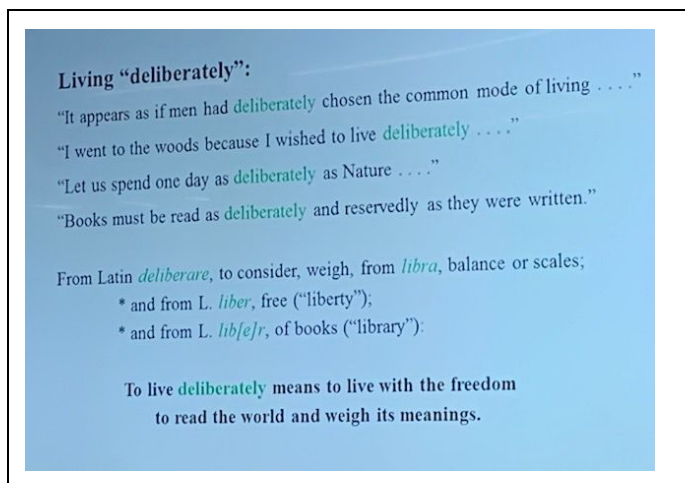
It should not be denied... that being footloose has always exhilarated us. It is associated in our minds with escape from history and oppression and law and irksome obligations, with absolute freedom, and the road has always led west.

WALLACE STEGNER, THE AMERICAN WEST AS LIVING SPACE

These short passages will be paired with the following famous passage from *Walden*:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. For most men, it appears to me, are in a strange uncertainty about it, whether it is of the devil or of God, and have somewhat hastily concluded that it is the chief end of man here to "glorify God and enjoy him forever."

3. Define "deliberately"



Living "deliberately":

"It appears as if men had **deliberately** chosen the common mode of living"

"I went to the woods because I wished to live **deliberately**"

"Let us spend one day as **deliberately** as Nature"

"Books must be read as **deliberately** and reservedly as they were written."

From Latin *deliberare*, to consider, weigh, from *libra*, balance or scales;
* and from L. *liber*, free ("liberty");
* and from L. *lib[er]*, of books ("library");

To live **deliberately** means to live with the freedom to read the world and weigh its meanings.

4. Small Group Work: Based on these passages, define what it means to “live deliberately.” Come up with a definition and be prepared to share with the class.
 5. Assessment: Pick one of the excerpts above and write a one-paragraph response that explains how Chris McCandless and the author you chose exemplify the idea of “living deliberately.”
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Lesson Three (two periods)

At this point, it becomes necessary to define Transcendentalism for the students. (This in itself can be as long and as many “lessons” as necessary.) All of the “threads” will be covered.

Objectives:

- Define and describe Transcendentalism
- Explain Emerson’s influence on H.D.T
- Read and analyze passages that reflect the ideas of transcendentalism

Materials:

- [Transcendentalism powerpoint](#)
- *Into the Wild* book
- Handouts of passages
- Highlighters

Activities

1. Lecture/note-taking on Transcendentalism using a Powerpoint. After which students should have a clear idea who the Transcendentalists were and what they were about.
2. Close reading of the following passages, the first one found at the beginning of Chapter 4, *Into the Wild*.

The desert is the environment of revelation, genetically and physiologically alien, sensorily austere, esthetically abstract, historically inimical.... Its forms are bold and suggestive. The mind is beset by light and space, the kinesthetic novelty of aridity, high temperature, and wind. The desert sky is encircling, majestic, terrible. In other habitats, the rim of sky above the horizontal is broken or obscured; here, together with the overhead portion, it is infinitely vaster than that of rolling countryside and forest lands... In an unobstructed sky the clouds seem more massive, sometimes grandly reflecting the earth’s curvature on their concave undersides. The angularity of desert landforms imparts a monumental architecture to the clouds as well as to the land....

To the desert go prophets and hermits; through deserts go pilgrims and exiles. Here the leaders of the great religions have sought the therapeutic and spiritual values of retreat, not to escape but to find reality.

PAUL SHEPARD, MAN IN THE LANDSCAPE:
A HISTORIC VIEW OF THE ESTHETICS OF NATURE

This will be paired with Emerson's "Nature." Here is an excerpt:

"But if a man be alone, let him look at the stars. The rays that come from those heavenly worlds, will separate between him and vulgar things. One might think the atmosphere was made transparent with this design, to give man, in the heavenly bodies, the perpetual presence of the sublime. Seen in the streets of cities, how great they are! If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore; and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God which had been shown! But every night come out these envoys of beauty, and light the universe with their admonishing smile."

— Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nature

3. Class Discussion of the excerpts will follow the reading.

4. Final activity - The following quotes comes from Chapter 4:

"Then, in a gesture that would have done both Thoreau and Tolstoy proud, he arranged all his paper currency in a pile on the sand—a pathetic little stack of ones and fives and twenties—and put a match to it. One hundred twenty-three dollars in legal tender was promptly reduced to ash and smoke."

In a two to three paragraph response, explain whether or not you believe Thoreau would have been proud. Then, explain how you interpret Chris McCandless's actions. Was it noble and heroic, or senseless and ill-advised?

Homework: Finish written responses

[NOTE: THE NEXT LESSON JUMPS TO CHAPTER 6; STUDENTS WILL HAVE TO HAVE READ CHAPTER 5 BEFOREHAND]

Lesson Four (two periods)

The epigraph at the start of Chapter 6 is from "Higher Laws" in Walden.

Thread(s):

- Living with Principle

Objectives:

- Review Emerson influence on American society
- Define and describe what Thoreau means by "higher laws"
- Explain Thoreau's influence on Chris McCandless based on the passage that C.M. highlighted
- Identify the theme of "living in nature" in an epigraph

Materials:

- TED video (online)
- *Into the Wild* book
- Handouts of passages

- Highlighters

Activities:

1. [Video - TEDed Talk](#) - Students will listen and take notes.
2. Read and annotate the following epigraph that can be found at the beginning of Chapter 6

No man ever followed his genius till it misled him. Though the result were bodily weakness, yet perhaps no one can say that the consequences were to be regretted, for these were a life in conformity to higher principles. If the day and the night are such that you greet them with joy, and life emits a fragrance like flowers and sweet-scented herbs, is more elastic, more starry, more immortal,—that is your success. All nature is your congratulation, and you have cause momentarily to bless yourself. The greatest gains and values are farthest from being appreciated. We easily come to doubt if they exist. We soon forget them. They are the highest reality... The true harvest of my daily life is somewhat as intangible and indescribable as the tints of morning or evening. It is a little star-dust caught, a segment of the rainbow which I have clutched.

HENRY DAVID THOREAU,
WALDEN, OR LIFE IN THE WOODS
PASSAGE HIGHLIGHTED IN ONE OF THE BOOKS FOUND
WITH CHRIS MCCANDLESS'S REMAINS

2. Small Group Work: After students grapple independently with the passage, they will form in groups of three to identify the theme, discuss the language, and find evidence that suggests C.M. took Thoreau to heart.

Lesson 5 - (One period)

Thread(s)

- "Practicing Simplicity"
- "Choosing Life *with* Principle"
- Relationships

Objectives:

- Interpret and explain C.M.'s message to Ron
- Identify rhetorical techniques that C.M. uses to be persuasive.
- Discuss Ron's response to the letter

Materials:

- Photocopied letter
- Highlighters
- *Into the Wild* Book
- Harkness worksheet

Activities

1. Read letter found in Chapter 6 aloud to class.
2. Students will highlight and annotate as the passage is being read.
3. [Harkness Model of discussion](#)

Homework: Write a letter to Chris from the point of view of Ron.

Lesson 6 - (one or two periods)

Threads

- Relationships

Objectives

- Analyze the importance of relationships in a person's life.
- Compare and contrast attitudes on relationships.
- Describe Thoreau's attitude toward love.
- Explain Chris McCandless's attitude toward family and interpersonal relationships.

Materials

- Photocopied excerpt
- Highlighters
- *Into the Wild* Book

Activities

1. Freewrite: Explain how important relationships are in your life.
2. Read the following epigraph

It is true that many creative people fail to make mature personal relationships, and some are extremely isolated. It is also true that, in some instances, trauma, in the shape of early separation or bereavement, has steered the potentially creative person toward developing aspects of his personality which can find fulfillment in comparative isolation. But this does not mean that solitary, creative pursuits are themselves pathological... [A]voidance behavior is a response designed to protect the infant from behavioural disorganization. If we transfer this concept to adult life, we can see that an avoidant infant might very well develop into a person whose principal need was to find some kind of meaning and order in life which was not entirely, or even chiefly, dependent upon interpersonal relationships.

ANTHONY STORR, SOLITUDE: A RETURN TO THE SELF

3. Read excerpt from Walden "Visitors"
 4. HOMEWORK: [Read Thoreau's essay on "Love."](#)
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Lesson 7 (One or Two Periods)

Threads

- Living in nature
- Practicing simplicity

Objectives

- Explain how Everett Ruess embodied the characteristics of a Transcendentalist
- Compare Everett Ruess to H.D. Thoreau
- Compare Chris McCandless to Everett Ruess

Materials

- Handout with the following epigraph
- Highlighters
- *Into the Wild* text

Activities

1. Follow up discussion on Thoreau's essay on love.
2. Read the following epigraph from the beginning of Chapter 9. Highlight any details that reflect Transcendental thought (or thoughts of H.D.T)

As to when I shall visit civilization, it will not be soon, I think. I have not tired of the wilderness; rather I enjoy its beauty and the vagrant life I lead, more keenly all the time. I prefer the saddle to the streetcar and star-sprinkled sky to a roof, the obscure and difficult trail, leading into the unknown, to any paved highway, and the deep peace of the wild to the discontent bred by cities. Do you blame me then for staying here, where I feel that I belong and am one with the world around me? It is true that I miss intelligent companionship, but there are so few with whom I can share the things that mean so much to me that I have learned to contain myself. It is enough that I am surrounded with beauty.... Even from your scant description, I know that I could not bear the routine and humdrum of the life that you are forced to lead. I don't think I could ever settle down. I have known too much of the depths of life already, and I would prefer anything to an anticlimax.

THE LAST LETTER EVER RECEIVED FROM EVERETT RUESS, TO HIS BROTHER, WALDO, DATED NOVEMBER 11, 1934

What Everett Ruess was after was beauty, and he conceived beauty in pretty romantic terms. We might be inclined to laugh at the extravagance of his beauty-worship if there were not something almost magnificent in his single-minded dedication to it. Esthetics as a parlor affectation is ludicrous and sometimes a little obscene; as a way of life it sometimes attains dignity. If we laugh at Everett Ruess we shall have to laugh at John Muir, because there was little difference between them except age.

WALLACE STEGNER, MORMON COUNTRY

2. Small Group work

- Compare highlighted passages
- List five details that represent Transcendentalism

3. HOMEWORK: Write a one-paragraph summary that explains how this epigraph represents the attitude of Chris McCandless.

[NOTE: THE SUBSEQUENT THREE LESSONS INVOLVE EPIGRAPHS FROM *INTO THE WILD* FROM HENRY DAVID THOREAU. THERE WILL BE NO MORE PAIRED READINGS. WHILE THESE LESSONS ARE SEQUENTIAL, YOU WILL SEE THAT SEVERAL CHAPTERS ARE READ IN BETWEEN THEM.]

Lesson 8 - Chapter 12

Threads

- Practicing life with principle
- Examining desperate and deliberate lives

Objectives

- Ascertain what “truth” Chris McCandless may have found in a Thoreau quote.
- Based on any of the prior passages, identify where Chris McCandless may have found “truth.”

Materials

- *Into the Wild* book
- Chromebook/White-lined paper

Activities:

1. Read and discuss the following excerpt:

Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth. I sat at a table where were rich food and wine in abundance, an obsequious attendance, but sincerity and truth were not; and I went away hungry from the inhospitable board. The hospitality was as cold as the ices.

Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

PASSAGE HIGHLIGHTED IN ONE OF THE BOOKS FOUND WITH CHRIS MCCANDLESS'S REMAINS. AT THE TOP OF THE PAGE, THE WORD “TRUTH” HAD BEEN WRITTEN IN LARGE BLOCK LETTERS IN MCCANDLESS'S HAND.

2. Write a definition of “truth” as understood by H.D.T and Chris McCandless.
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Lesson 9 - FIELD TRIP

Objectives

- Go on a “field trip” in nature to make a connection
- Write descriptively and creatively about your experience

Materials

- Walking shoes
- Journal/Notebook and a pen or a pencil

Activites

1. Read aloud the following passage (from Chapter 14 in *Into the Wild*):

I cannot now tell exactly, it was so long ago, under what circumstances I first ascended, only that I shuddered as I went along (I have an indistinct remembrance of having been out overnight alone),—and then I steadily ascended along a rocky ridge half clad with stunted trees, where wild beasts haunted, till I lost myself quite in the upper air and clouds, seeming to pass an imaginary line which separates a hill, mere earth heaped up, from a mountain, into a superterranean grandeur and sublimity. What distinguishes that summit above the earthly line, is that it is unhand-selled, awful, grand. It can never become familiar; you are lost the moment you set foot there. You know the path, but wander, thrilled, over the bare and pathless rock, as if it were solidified air and cloud. That rocky, misty summit, secreted in the clouds, was far more thrillingly awful and sublime than the crater of a volcano spouting fire.

HENRY DAVID THOREAU, JOURNAL

2. Walk out the Haviland Pond (near the school) to reflect and journal. Students will be asked to write down what they observe (using all of their senses) and then try to jot down feelings they may have that are associated with their observations.

3. HOMEWORK: Edit their journal response into a rough draft of a reflection of the experience.
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Lesson 10

Objectives

- Identify a “theme” found in student writing.
- Read, annotate, and respond to questions in a text.

Activities

1. [Pass out sheet of “theme” words](#). Students will highlight three or four words that relate to their journal reflection. They will then write one sentence that shows the relationship between at least two of these theme words. (Example: “Nature’s beauty inspires imagination and self-discovery that oftentimes is neglected in modern society.”)
2. Read the following epigraph found in Chapter 17 and answer the questions on the right:

<p>HENRY DAVID THOREAU, from “KTAADN”</p>	<p>Questions: (Use back of sheet if necessary.)</p>
<p>Nature was here something savage and awful, though beautiful. I looked with awe at the ground I trod on, to see what the Powers had made there, the form and fashion and material of their work. This was that Earth of which we have heard, made out of Chaos and Old Night. Here was no man’s garden, but the unhand-selled globe. It was not</p>	<p>How can Nature be both “awful” and “beautiful”?</p> <p>Do a Google search of “Chaos” and “Old Night”. Jot down what you learned here:</p> <p>Define “unhand-selled”:</p>

<p>lawn, nor pasture, nor mead, nor woodland, nor lea, nor arable, nor waste land. It was the fresh and natural surface of the planet Earth, as it was made forever and ever,— to be the dwelling of man, we say,—so Nature made it, and man may use it if he can. Man was not to be associated with it. It was Matter, vast, terrific,—not his Mother Earth that we have heard of, not for him to tread on, or to be buried in,— no, it were being too familiar even to let his bones lie there,— the home, this, of Necessity and Fate. There was clearly felt the presence of a force not bound to be kind to man. It was a place of heathenism and superstitious rites,—to be inhabited by men nearer of kin to the rocks and to wild animals than we... What is it to be admitted to a museum, to see a myriad of particular things, compared with being shown some star's surface, some hard matter in its home! I stand in awe of my body, this matter to which I am bound has become so strange to me. I fear not spirits, ghosts, of which I am one,—that my body might,—but I fear bodies, I tremble to meet them. What is this Titan that has possession of me? Talk of mysteries! Think of our life in nature,—daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it,—rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! the solid earth! the actual world! the common sense! Contact! Contact! Who are we? where are we?</p>	<p>What do you think Thoreau meant when he says “Man was not to be associated with it” [Nature]?</p> <p>Define “heathenism”:</p> <p>Why might the speaker “fear bodies”?</p> <p>Define “Titan”:</p> <p>What is the speaker in search of?</p>
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2. Small group work: Share journal responses with your group.

Final Assessment: Essay

In a well developed essay, explain how Chris McCandless embodied the idea(s) of Transcendentalism. To focus your essay, you should identify one of the following threads:

- "Living in Nature"
- "Examining Desperate and Deliberate Lives"
- "Practicing Simplicity"
- "Choosing Life *with* Principle"
- "Relationships"

Your essay should be grounded in a clear, strong thesis statement. Support your reasoning with evidence from *Into the Wild* and any Henry David Thoreau or Ralph Waldo Emerson writings that support your argument. Your essay must be a minimum of _____ pages and MLA formatted.