

National Endowment for the Humanities

Living and Writing Deliberately: The Concord Landscapes and Legacy of Henry Thoreau

Three Day Introductory Unit

Living and Writing Deliberately: An Introduction to Henry David Thoreau and Transcendentalism

This three day lesson plan outline can serve as an introduction to Henry David Thoreau and the transcendental philosophy.

Essential Questions:

- What transcendental ideas are still relevant today?
- How did Thoreau suggest ways to live deliberately?
- Is it possible to live “deliberately in today’s society? Is this now seen as a virtue to be nurtured and celebrated?
- How can someone live a life of “quiet desperation?”

Objectives:

Students will be able to:

- develop a working definition of Transcendentalism
- recognize major Transcendental tenets
- use strategies to revise and edit their writing
- create a haiku

Materials needed:

Excerpts from *Walden*

## Lesson 1-

- Begin the class by asking students to provide words and phrases that define success in our society. Write the words prominently on a board, poster paper, etc.
- According to the Oxford University Press, the American Dream is *the ideal by which equality of opportunity is available to any American, allowing the highest aspirations and goals to be achieved*. Ask students if they agree or disagree with this definition. With a partner, describe qualities and goals that are missing from this definition and share what you think those omissions show about this dream.
- Show a clip from *Life off Grid* (@4 minutes)  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GDYr\\_eQIL4o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GDYr_eQIL4o)
- Have students discuss this growing trend. Why are more people adopting this lifestyle? Would they find idea appealing?
- Explain the basic tenets of Transcendentalism (B)
- Working in pairs, have students paraphrase each statement and find examples of people who exemplify the tenant-either real or fictional. Share responses with class.
- Journal: “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.” Henry David Thoreau. Agree? Disagree? Explain.

## Lesson 2

- Provide students with general background information about Thoreau and *Walden*.  
<https://www.thoreausociety.org/life-legacy>
- Introduce and discuss the concept of “living deliberately.”
- Provide students with copies of the excerpt from *Walden*: “Where I Lived and What I lived For” (located at end of lesson plan labeled A). Read this aloud to the class.

- In small groups, have students discuss the content. Ask students when they thought the text was written, noting sentence structure and language to make that determination. Have students record their finding on paper posted on the wall. Student should answer questions in the following categories:  
Main ideas from summary/Time period written and rationale to support the answer/author's inferred definition of the American Dream/ examples of living "deliberately"
- If there is time, show clip from *Tiny House Living* (Luxury edition) and have a discussion as to whether this is in keeping with Thoreau's philosophy of being self-sufficient and communing with nature.  
*Tiny House, Big Living* (@ 1 minute)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0J6gf2OrRGY>

### Lesson 3

- Journal Writing: Is living a deliberate, reflective life beneficial? This is/is not a focus for most people in today's society. Explain.  
  
Show video on Thoreau and Walden Pond (@20 minutes)  
<https://www.walden.org/walden-film>
- Have students free- write for approximately 5-10 minutes about their response to the film and Transcendentalism. Play nature sounds while the students are writing (numerous selections can be found on YouTube Ex. Nature Sounds Forest Sounds Birds Singing Sound of Water-Relaxation-Mindfulness-Meditation  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d0tU18Ybcvk>
- Discuss trends such as down-sizing, urban gardening, and silent retreats and discuss how these modern activities tie into the transcendental philosophy. Why are they growing in popularity?
- Read aloud examples of a haiku and ask students to describe the subjects and format found in the poetry. Provide the definition: A traditional Japanese haiku is a three-line poem with seventeen syllables, written in a 5/7/5 syllable count. Often focusing on images from nature, haiku emphasizes simplicity, intensity, and directness of expression.  
<https://poets.org/text/haiku-poetic-form>
- Discuss the economy of words and the deliberate selection of each word and syllable and its similarities to the transcendental philosophy.

- Assignment/Assessment: Students are to write a haiku based on their free writing. Optional-students may present their poem to the class.

## A.

When first I took up my abode in the woods, that is, began to spend my nights as well as days there, which, by accident, was on Independence day, or the fourth of July, 1845, my house was not finished for winter, but was merely a defense against the rain, without plastering or chimney, the walls being of rough weather-stained boards, with wide chinks, which made it cool at night. The upright white hewn studs and freshly planed door and window casings gave it a clean and airy look, especially in the morning when its timbers were saturated with dew, so that I fancied that by noon some sweet gum would exude from them....

I was seated by the shore of a small pond, about a mile and a half south of the village of Concord and somewhat higher than it, in the midst of an extensive wood between that town and known to fame, Concord Battle Ground; but I was so low in the woods that the opposite shore, half a mile off, like the rest, covered with wood, was my most distant horizon.

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 no life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice 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.

## B.

**Transcendentalism:** An intellectual movement that thought we used something more than our five physical senses to understand life and our place in it.

**Transcend:** to rise above or go beyond the limits of

### Key Beliefs of Transcendentalism

- Individuality: Be true to yourself. Individuals should not conform blindly to beliefs imposed on them by society. Trust your intuition over belief systems built to control you or cause you to conform.
- Natural Interconnectedness: People and nature are connected and reflect each other. "You know your individual nature through communion with nature.
- Spiritual self-reliance: Nothing is more sacred than the integrity of your individual mind.
- Humans were essentially good

\*\*\*I found a site that has good introductory information about Transcendentalism. Some of the links do not work, but it is still worth checking out.

<http://intothewildtranscendentalism.weebly.com/transcendentalism.html>