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AP English Language and Composition (11th grade), New York City

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

Project Director: Jayne Gordon

Focus: Being Awake, Aware and Alive

Overview: These two lessons are part of a larger Transcendentalism/Nature unit that includes poems by Mary Oliver and the book *Into the Wild* by Jon Krakauer. This past year I also incorporated The Green New Deal. The lessons scaffold the assignment, which is a creative nonfiction essay (see below for assignment description).



Objectives: (for these lessons)

Reading Common Core Standards:

- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.4](#)

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful.

- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.9](#)

Demonstrate knowledge of eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century foundational works of American literature, including how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics.

Writing Common Core Standards:

- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.3.a](#)

Engage and orient the reader by setting out a problem, situation, or observation and its significance, establishing one or multiple point(s) of view, and introducing a narrator and/or characters; create a smooth progression of experiences or events.

- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.5](#)

Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience.

- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.3.d](#)

Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.

- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.3.e](#)

Provide a conclusion that follows from and reflects on what is experienced, observed, or resolved over the course of the narrative.

Essential Questions (for these lessons):

- How can we be present?
- How can we access the natural world in our urban environment?
- Where can we find “wildness” in New York?
- How can we thoroughly observe our surroundings?
- How do our surroundings impact us?
- How can we turn journal entries into a polished, contemplative piece?
- How can we use our observations to better understand our own minds?

Materials (for entire unit):

→ Excerpts from *Walden* (“Where I Lived, and What I Lived For,” “Spring”), Excerpts from “Walking,” Excerpts from “Civil Disobedience,” “Slavery in Massachusetts,” “A Plea for John Brown”

→ Excerpts from “Nature” by Ralph Waldo Emerson

→ *Into the Wild* by Jon Krakauer

→ Poems by Mary Oliver: “Wild Geese,” “When Death Comes,” “The Summer Day”

→ “The Green New Deal”

→ Natural objects (flowers, grass, rocks, etc)

→ Ideally a projector/white board/smart board for annotating quotes, showing photos, etc.

Assessment: Creative essay (provided w/ lesson #1)

Procedure:

Lesson #1: (41 minutes)

HW due: bring a natural object with you (a rock, a leaf, a blade of grass, some dirt or sand, a pinecone, etc)

Aim: (How) can we follow Thoreau’s advice?

1. Do Now: Ask for three student volunteers to read aloud the following excerpts from *Walden*. Then, instruct them: Choose the one that most speaks to you--because you’re intrigued, confused, in agreement, etc--and copy it into your notebook:

A. “We can never have enough of nature...We need to witness our own limits transgressed, and some life pasturing freely where we never wander.” OR

B. “Life consists with wildness. The most alive is the wildest.” OR

C. “We need the tonic of wildness,--to wade sometimes in marshes where the bittern and the meadow-hen lurk, and hear the booming of the snipe...”

→ Once you’ve copied your quotation, write in your own words what you think it means. Which words are standing out to you in the quotation? Why? Use your phone to look these words up, if you like. What do you notice about their **etymology?** (5 minutes)

2. Turn and talk: phones away! share your thoughts with someone sitting near you (teacher circulates)

3. Full class share out: Take turns with each quote--project them onto the board and take notes on student responses below each quote.

*For (A) make sure to get to the significance of “transgress” (see [transgression etymology](#)) and “pasturing” ([pasture etymology](#)) What contradictions or complications is Thoreau introducing by including these two words?

* For (B) and © Really dig deep into **WILD** ([etymology](#)): students could list out synonyms they associate with wild. Why would Thoreau say the most alive is the wildest? What is a tonic? How could wildness be a tonic?

4. Quick jot: So (how) can we access the wildness he is describing? (save your thoughts!)

5. Transition→ Introduce assignment:

The Tonic of Wildness

“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...” – Henry David Thoreau

“You are wrong if you think Joy emanates only or principally from human relationships. God has placed it all around us...it is simply waiting out there for you to grasp it, and all you have to do is reach for it.” - Christopher McCandless

“Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” – Mary Oliver

Thoreau used the relative solitude of Walden as a place to realize truths revealed to him through experience; as a result, *Walden* is a triumph of self-expression. Thoreau looks inward and outward at the same time, so that Walden (the place) becomes a mirror of his own thought, and he captures that mirroring in his writing. In Jon Krakauer’s *Into the Wild*, we learn that Christopher McCandless was a great admirer (if a misguided one) of Transcendentalist philosophy, and that he believed in the healing power of nature, minimalism, and solitude.

Now it’s time for you to conduct your own experiment; this is your chance to get a small taste of the world that Thoreau inhabited in the woods at Walden in 1845, and to consider what forces pulled McCandless out of society and into the wild.

Here is what you will do:

1. Choose a place to go where you can be alone in a natural environment. Don’t choose your backyard or a busy playground. This spot should be quiet – **away from traffic, away from people, away from distractions**. This may be close to home, or you may have to venture a bit further, but you will have to visit here more than once, so choose appropriately. Most importantly, **make sure you feel safe**. Don’t choose a place that makes you feel nervous, uneasy or uncomfortable; go **on a temperate day during daylight hours**. A few suggestions:

- Botanical Gardens –the Bronx or Brooklyn
- A spot in a park – Central Park, Prospect Park, Riverside Park, Battery Park, Socrates Sculpture Garden, Fort Tryon Park, Wave Hill Park...
- A pier on the Hudson River; if you walk North or South from school along the West Side Highway, there are lots of quiet piers, with places to sit and think
- Out of town (only if you can do it easily and cheaply!)
- Other thoughts? Be creative. Think outside the box.

2. Over the next few weeks, go to your place **at least twice**, if not more. Be prepared to spend some time there—at least 30 minutes, but an hour is really ideal. **Bring a pen and a notebook.**

3. Pay attention to your surroundings; revel in your solitude; observe; notice; think; meditate. Learn what this place has to teach you and what you have to teach yourself. Begin by describing your surroundings in extensive detail using your five senses. Describe what you see, hear, smell and feel. Really look at and take in the nature around you. Write down all of it. Most importantly, **DO NOT LOOK AT YOUR PHONE** or listen to music. Be present in your spot. If you want to walk around and write, go for it! Thoreau would approve.

4. After your final excursion, develop your journal writings into an account of your experience. Your job is to learn from your surroundings. Open yourself to nature, internalize it, make it your own and transform it into something personal and true. Use your concrete observations to ground abstract thought, realizations or questions. We will begin this work together in class.

6. Students will inevitably have questions / need clarification. Allow time for this. (A few common answers: They can take pictures, but only after they've done some writing first. They'll get help (in lesson #2) turning the journal into something more polished.)

7. "So what do I write when I'm there?" will probably come up--> tell them to start with observations about their surroundings.

8. End with a little practice w/ the natural object they brought to class: (free writing questions, 1 min each, tell students to write **AS MUCH AS THEY CAN**)

- a. Describe what your object looks like: consider color(s), shape, size, density, etc. What special features does it have?
- b. Describe what your object feels like: is it smooth or rough, brittle or strong, made of many parts or uniform?
- c. Where did you find your object? Describe that setting.
- d. What questions do you have about your object? (what it's made of, why you found it in the place you did, what role it plays in the ecosystem, etc?)
- e. What is "wild" about your object?

9. Pair/share/whole class: what was it like to really **LOOK** at your object? What did you notice/think about that you normally wouldn't have? Why do you think that is? Bring this awareness and level of observation to your journaling!

CLOSING: Does anyone know where they're going to go for this assignment? Share ideas!

Lesson #2 (41 minutes): may take more than one class period

HW due: Students need to have visited their place **AT LEAST ONCE**, and should have their handwritten notes in class.

Aim: How can we turn our journal entries into something more polished?

1. **Do Now:** (solo) Read through your notes and mark a few moments that have promise, that you want to turn into something more. Are there any themes emerging? What questions came up? What might you choose as a central idea for your essay?

→ Jot down what you notice.

MODELING THIS FOR STUDENTS: (you may want to project this)

- a. Here's an excerpt from my journal entry, on Friday 7/26/19, written in the morning at the Concord confluence of rivers: "The tree has partially fallen over. I'm sitting on the exposed roots and embankment, which is dry. The tree is bowing into the river. I wonder what kind of tree this is. Quite a few have been pulled down into the river so their tops, which should be reaching to the sky, are resting on the surface of the water. Find out what these trees are. Definitely still alive. Green w/ new growth)"
- b. Why did I choose this? The tree defies my expectations and provided an excellent spot to journal, a beautiful green canopy shade on a sunny summer morning. Also the bark was peeling off and looked cool!
- c. What did I do? I asked Rich Higgins: they're river birch.
- d. Next step: the internet! A couple of interesting details: % wikipedia: "In states in which mining is prevalent, the river birch is often used for reclamation and erosion control, as it is well suited for soils that are too acidic for other species of hardwoods. In West Virginia, they have been found to establish within mine refuge sites after being blown from neighboring areas." !!! Also not the first to notice this quality of the birches: [birches by Robert Frost](#)
- e. So what do I want to write about? Maybe perseverance, hope, being open to acknowledging my expectations and initial perceptions might be wrong. These trees really "pasture freely where [I] never wander"

2. Turn to someone next to you and share your thoughts. Ask each other questions and offer suggestions.

3. Beginning to polish: choose a sentence that has potential that you want to edit. Write it down again, so it's separated from the rest of the journal. Choose one of Thoreau's writing/ observational techniques to edit your sentence from the following options: (also project this!):

COMPLEX SYNTAX: "I learned this, at least, by my experiment: that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours."	SYMBOLISM: "It reminds me that Nature has been partner to no Missouri Compromise. I scent no compromise in the fragrance of the water-lily. It is not a Nymphaea Douglasii. In it, the sweet, and pure, and innocent are wholly sundered from the obscene and baleful."
SPECIFIC NOUNS: "We need the tonic of wildness,--to wade sometimes in marshes where the bittern and the meadow-hen lurk, and hear the booming of the snipe..."	SUCCINCT REALIZATION: "It is never too late to give up your prejudices."

→ Ask students to write about how the technique is enhancing the content of the excerpt. Share out ideas (briefly).

4. Self-editing: incorporate that technique into your sentence. Give them time to do this, and circulate.

(MODEL, **COMPLEX SYNTAX:** Robert Frost wrote that he'd prefer a boy swinging to have bent the birches, rather than the ice storm of Truth. I don't think a boy has bent the river birch that provides my canopy; instead, the graceful arc does not look like an injury, the tree reaching for another sky that is reflected on the surface of the river.)

5. Full class read around: each student should read their BEFORE sentence & AFTER sentence (alternate: two large groups, if need for time).

CLOSING: Reminder: your whole paper does not have to be a metaphor! Use concrete examples from your life to ground your bigger ideas.

Focusing Quotes:

Henry David Thoreau:

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."

"when we are unhurried and wise, we perceive that only great and worthy things have any permanent and absolute existence, that petty fears and petty pleasures are but the shadow of reality. This is always exhilarating and sublime."

"We need the tonic of wildness,--to wade sometimes in marshes where the bittern and the meadow-hen lurk, and hear the booming of the snipe..."

"We can never have enough of nature...We need to witness our own limits transgressed, and some life pasturing freely where we never wander."

"If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them."

"It is never too late to give up your prejudices."

"I learned this, at least, by my experiment: that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. He will put some things behind, will pass an invisible boundary; new, universal, and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him; or the old laws be expanded, and interpreted in his favor in a more liberal sense, and he will live with the license of a higher order of beings. In proportion as he simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex, and solitude will not be solitude, nor poverty poverty, nor weakness weakness."

"Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star."

From "Slavery in Massachusetts": "It reminds me that Nature has been partner to no Missouri Compromise. I scent no compromise in the fragrance of the water-lily. It is not a *Nymphaea Douglasii*. In it, the sweet, and pure, and innocent are wholly sundered from the obscene and baleful."

From "Life Without Principle": "The aim of the laborer should be, not to get his living, to get "a good job," but to perform well a certain work; and, even in a pecuniary sense, it would be economy for a town to pay its laborers so well that they would not feel that they were working for low ends, as for a livelihood merely, but for scientific, or even moral ends. Do not hire a man who does your work for money, but him who does it for love of it."

From "Walking":

"Life consists with wildness. The most alive is the wildest."

"A truly good book is something as natural, and as unexpectedly and unaccountably fair and perfect, as a wild-flower discovered on the prairies of the West or in the jungles of the East. Genius is a light which makes the

darkness visible, like the lightning's flash, which perchance shatters the temple of knowledge itself—and not a taper lighted at the hearthstone of the race, which pales before the light of common day.”

“The West is preparing to add its fables to those of the East. The valleys of the Ganges, the Nile, and the Shine having yielded their crop, it remains to be seen what the valleys of the Amazon, the Plate, the Orinoco, the St. Lawrence, and the Mississippi will produce. Perchance, when, in the course of ages, American liberty has become a fiction of the past—as it is to some extent a fiction of the present—the poets of the world will be inspired by American mythology.”

“Above all, we cannot afford not to live in the present.”

From poet Mary Oliver:

“I am not very hopeful about the Earth remaining as it was when I was a child. It’s already greatly changed. But I think when we lose the connection with the natural world, we tend to forget that we’re animals, that we need the Earth.”

In her poem “When Death Comes,” she wrote, “When it’s over, I want to say all my life / I was a bride married to amazement. / I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.”

From Laura Dassow Walls, *Henry David Thoreau: A Life*

“‘Keep a journal. Pay so much honor to the visits of Truth to your mind as to record those thoughts.’ Emerson’s point was that solitude and journal-keeping work together: solitude is not for empty reverie but for the productive habit of exploring, pen in hand, “what facts of moment lie in the memory,” facts that would illuminate the gross and heedless world into meaning and life...Thoreau’s response to that call inaugurated a monumental life’s work, an epic journey of over two million words, sustained as long as he could hold a pen.”

“‘I cannot fish without falling a little in my own respect,’ he fretted in his Journal; “always I feel that it would have been better if I had not fished.’ Over the years his worries evolved into the conflicted defense of vegetarianism in *Walden’s* ‘Higher Laws.’”

“...On November 8, 1850, he wrote up everything he noticed and thought during his daily walk as one long entry...Thoreau’s new experiment made the very act of writing visible on the page--as if I were to tell you about the warmth of a May afternoon seeping through my open window as I type these words...from this point, Thoreau did not stop doing this, ever--not until, dying and almost too weak to hold a pen, he crafted one final entry...in short, without announcing it, Thoreau simply stopped using his Journal as the means to the “real” work of art, somewhere else, and started treating the Journal itself as the work of art, with all the integrity that art demands...Thoreau developed the practice of walking with pencil and paper and scribbling notes on the spot, brief name and phrases that he wrote up the following morning in long, often lyrical Journal entries...”