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NEH Curriculum Unit:

Living and Writing Deliberately: The Concord Landscapes and Legend of Henry David Thoreau

Course Background

English 3 is a year-long, 11th-grade course. The first semester focuses on nonfiction texts including *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* by Frederick Douglass, selections from essays by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, excerpts from *Walden* by Thoreau, selected poetry by Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman, and *Into the Wild* by Jon Krakauer. Students will be introduced to writing in a personal journal from the beginning of the school year.

Essential Questions for the semester include: How is identity created and formed? What provokes self awareness? What role does place play in creating identity? What rhetorical and literary devices do writers use to enhance their communication? A final semester assessment includes a personal essay addressing one or more of these questions.

Class periods range from 45-90 minutes, but the lessons as presented, reflect 45-50 minute segments. Students in this course can range a great deal in their reading and writing abilities; consequently, materials, procedures, and assessments may need to be differentiated.

Unit Overview

This 2-3-week unit follows a 3-week unit on *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. In addition to the essential questions, tying the units together are an analysis of daguerreotype images of the writers, discussion of the self “renaming” of the writers and its relationship to identity, and an analysis of metaphor. These threads will continue throughout the semester. While students are completing the [Transcendental Notebook](#) (summative assessment) for this unit, students will be reading and discussing poetry by Whitman and Dickinson.

Lesson Context

This **four lesson sequence**, which focuses on the study of Thoreau and *Walden*, follows a two-day introduction to Transcendentalism, which includes reading and discussing excerpts from Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “Self Reliance” and “Nature.” This sequence will be followed by reading and discussing “Civil Disobedience” and supplemental activities and contemporary connections. The metaphor focus of Lesson 4 will help bridge the *Walden* and “Civil Disobedience” discussions.

Invention of the Self: Living and Writing in Society and Nature

Essential Questions for this unit and four-day sequence:

- How is identity invented or formed?
- What is the difference between writing for yourself and for an audience?
- What rhetorical tools do writers effectively use to examine the self in writing?
- How can we, as writers and thinkers, use nature as an instrument for reflection and insight?
- Where is your “Walden”?

Objectives

At the end of this sequence, and after completing the final assessment, students will be able to

- Observe the natural world and societal world in detail.
- Write about these observations and reflect on them, using imagery and metaphor in particular.
- Discuss impressions, interpretations, and connections related to Thoreau’s writing, both in writing for the self and for others to respond to.
- Ultimately see how writing and reflection can help us better understand our world and the choices we make in it.

Assessment

The journal entries and discussions will provide formative opportunities for the summative assessment of a Transcendental Notebook. Students will choose entries to include in the notebook, many of which will be drafted informally during the course of the unit and revised for an audience in the notebook.

Lesson 1: Introduction to Thoreau and *Walden*

Procedures

- 1) On the daily slide, students will have the following topic to respond to in their journals: “Describe a place where you can go to just think and get away from it all.”
- 2) After 5 minutes or so, display the two daguerreotype images of Thoreau. Students view the images for two minutes without speaking and complete “Analyzing a Work of Art as a Source” created by the Art Institute of Chicago. They could be broken into two groups, each focusing on one image, or they can compare and contrast them both.
- 3) Discuss their observations, having students explain their thinking if they start to make inferences. After this discussion, provide students information about these [images and their sources](#). Have students consider what they can infer about Thoreau based on these images. How do they account for the differences between the two images?
- 4) Show the 20 minute *Walden Film* produced by Ken Burns and available through the Walden Woods Project’s website.

- 5) After the video, briefly discuss some of the questions it raises and questions they have about Thoreau and *Walden*.
- 6) Distribute teacher-selected excerpts from *Walden*. Consider selections from “Economy,” “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For,” “Sounds,” and “Spring.” Students will need to read them by Lesson 3. As they read, they should identify three quotes or passages that they would like to discuss.

Materials

- Student journals
- Thoreau Images (available online: the National Portrait Gallery image, and the Thoreau Society Collection image)
- [“Analyzing a Work of Art as a Source”](#)
- [Walden Film](#)
- Excerpts from *Walden*, such as “Economy,” “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For,” “Sounds,” and “Spring.”

Lesson 2: Writing in Nature

Procedures

- 1) As a class, take a mini “field trip” on or off campus to a natural setting where students can observe, write, and read, for the class period. In this setting, students should be encouraged to find their own space to eventually sit.
- 2) In their journals, they should write as long as they can. They may simply describe what they hear, see, smell, and feel. They can write in any format they wish. They can draw if they are so moved. Speaking to others should be at a minimum and they should be considerate and not distract others.
- 3) When they have written all they can, they may continue with their reading of *Walden*.

Materials

- Student journals
- Excerpts from *Walden*, such as “Economy,” “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For,” “Sounds,” and “Spring.”
- Optional--jacket or something else to sit on

Lesson 3: A “Silent Discussion” of *Walden*

Procedures

- 1) Prior to class the teacher should devise a strategy for pairing students randomly.
- 2) Students will meet with their partner (a group of three may be needed; solos won’t work). Each group should have a large piece of paper (such as butcher-block paper) and some markers.

- 3) Briefly discuss with students what makes a good discussion (such as listening to each other, using examples for support, asking questions, making personal connections, risk taking with ideas). Tell students they will engage in a discussion, but instead of speaking to each other, they will discuss in writing.
- 4) Upon meeting, the two students should share the quotes they selected from their reading of *Walden*. They should decide on one of the quotes for the discussion. They may speak for this part, but after this point. there should be no talking out loud.
- 5) The selected quote should be written largely on the paper by one of the students.
- 6) One student should start the discussion in writing just as they would in a conventional discussion. The topic is the selected quote. Students will go back and forth in the discussion.

Tips: Students should spread out around the room. Many like to sprawl out on the floor. Students may write anywhere, anyway they like on the paper. Playing nature sounds (there are many YouTube videos that provide this) helps create a relaxed atmosphere.

- 7) Push students beyond their comfort level and tell them you will tell them when the discussion is over. Often after 10 minutes students get a “second wind” and start writing again.
- 8) After students have wound their discussions down (20 minutes or so) have them move around and read other “discussions.”
- 9) If time allows, have students share their impressions of these kinds of discussions.
- 10) Collect the papers for the next day’s lesson.

Materials

- Butcher-block or other large pieces of paper
- Markers
- Student-annotated copies of *Walden*

Lesson 4: Analyzing Metaphors

Procedures

- 1) On the daily slide, students will have the following topic choices to respond to in their journals: “Where is your Walden? Explain.” Or “What was something you read from someone else yesterday that interested you? Why?” Try to limit students to five minutes or so.
- 2) Many students struggle with Thoreau’s use of metaphors and can have different interpretations of what they mean. A followup discussion using the quotes from the previous day’s discussion provides a springboard for more analysis.

- 3) Select the quotes from the previous day's discussion that contain a metaphor. They will be there, but if you need to supplement, "Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads" and "Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in. . . ." are a good start.
- 4) Holding up the "discussions" discuss with the class what Thoreau is trying to say with each metaphor. What do they reveal about his values, identity, or worldview? Why would he choose to communicate each of these ideas in a metaphor?
- 5) After discussing metaphor (and having previously read their discussions), you may review the larger context of the text of *Walden* and fill in any gaps in their understanding. Additionally, you may prepare students for their reading of "Civil Disobedience," asking them to identify and analyze the metaphors in this particular essay.

Materials

- Discussion pages from previous lesson's discussion.
- Student-annotated excerpts from *Walden*, such as "Economy," "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For," "Sounds," and "Spring."