

Four Middle Grade (4th-6th) Units based on Thoreau and His Work

Greek Mythology Allusions and Metaphors in Thoreau's Walden

Journaling: Noticing, Reflecting, and Planting Seeds

Solitude and Self-Discovery in Middle Grade Literature

Math Applications based on Thoreau's Walden House

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Greek Mythology Allusions and Metaphors in Thoreau's Walden

Unit summary and rationale: This unit introduces students to the concept of allusions and metaphors, using common Greek allusions that most kids are familiar with. Allusions and metaphors are introduced as a key element of Thoreau's author's craft.

Unit Essential Questions:

- Why do authors use allusions and metaphors and how do they help readers?
- Why is a basic knowledge of Greek Mythology important to understanding Walden?

Lesson 1: Common Greek Allusions

Lesson summary and rationale: Students will understand what an allusion is and be able to identify some common Greek mythological allusions that are already familiar (but most likely did not realize were Greek allusions.)

Essential questions:

- How do companies use Greek allusions to send a message to consumers?
- What does each name or logo want people to think about?

Familiar Examples

Names:

- Midas Mufflers
- Ajax cleaner
- Olympus Camera
- Phoenix, Arizona
- Nike Athletic Wear
- Pandora Music and Jewelry
- Tennessee Titans (football team)

Logos:

- Nike Swoosh (The Goddess of Victory's wing)
- Versace (Medusa's head)
- Starbucks (Siren)
- Maserati (Greek trident)
- Exxon Mobil (Pegasus)

Anticipated outcomes: Students will understand how Greek allusions are used to entice consumers and/or to create a metaphor.

Lesson 2: References to Greek Mythology in Walden

Summary and rationale: Students will look at examples of the Greek Mythological allusions in Walden and other works by Thoreau. They will define features of the Greek myth/God/creature and what allusion they think Thoreau intended by using it.

Essential questions:

- Why does Thoreau use Greek mythology to create allusions and metaphors?
- What does he assume of the reader in doing so?
- How is the text interpreted differently if the reader is not familiar with Greek Mythology?

Thoreau quotes:

“They [the beans] attached me to the earth, and so I got strength like **Antaeus**.”

“.....He was there to represent spectatordom, and help make this seemingly insignificant event one with the removal of the **gods of Troy**.”

“The **twelve labors of Hercules** were trifling in comparison with those which my neighbors have undertaken; for they were only twelve, and had an end; but I could never see that these men slew or captured any monster or finished any labor. They have no friend Iolas to burn with a hot iron the root of the **Hydra’s head**, but as soon as one head is crushed, two spring up... “

“In the meanwhile there came along a single red ant on the hillside of this valley, evidently full of excitement, who either had despatched his foe, or had not yet taken part in the battle; probably the latter, for he had lost none of his limbs; whose mother had charged him to return with his shield or upon it. Or perchance he was some **Achilles**, who had nourished his wrath apart, and had now come to avenge or rescue his **Patroclus** ...”

“Every morning was a cheerful invitation to make my life of equal simplicity, and I may say innocence, with Nature herself. I have been as sincere a worshipper of **Aurora** as the Greeks.”

“To enjoy these advantages I was ready to carry it on; like **Atlas**, to take the world on my shoulders...”

“The morning wind forever blows, the poem of creation is uninterrupted; but few are the ears that hear it. **Olympus** is but the outside of the earth everywhere.”

Anticipated outcomes: Students will recognize Greek allusions as a common way to make a subtle point. They will know that Greek allusions and metaphors were an important part of Thoreau’s author’s craft.

Lesson Three: Allusions and Metaphors as an Element of Author’s Craft

Summary and rationale: Students will use what they have learned about Greek allusions and metaphors in Thoreau’s work to incorporate it into their own writing.

Essential questions:

- How can using an allusion or metaphor improve your writing?
- Why is it important that both the writer and the reader have a basic knowledge of Greek mythology for allusions to be effective?

Directions to students: *(Note this lesson would be done late in the year when the Writer’s Notebooks have many types of drafts and genres)*

- 1) Look through the drafts of your writing in your Writer’s Notebooks.
- 2) Think about a place that a Greek allusion or metaphor will improve your craft.
- 3) Experiment with it. Try to use it in poetry, fiction and nonfiction.
- 4) Don’t be afraid to try it. If it doesn’t work, look for another piece or place.

Anticipated outcomes:

- Students will be able to incorporate a Greek allusion or metaphor into their writing.

Journaling: Noticing, Reflecting, and Planting Seeds

Unit summary and rationale: Following in the way that Thoreau used his journal, this unit will look at journals as a way to record daily events, reflect on ideas and experiences as well as create 'seeds' for longer written pieces. Various ways that journals can be used will be introduced and practiced.

Unit essential questions:

Why do people keep journals?

How can a journal help a person become a better writer?

How can a journal help a person become a better person?

Lesson 1: Noticing

Summary and rationale: Students will practice noticing details in a variety of familiar and unfamiliar settings and documenting them in their journal. They will also visit several of the settings multiple times to see if are able to notice new details each time.

Essential questions:

How do you decide what details are important (in a setting, text, illustration, etc)?

What makes people notice certain details and ignore others?

Thoreau quotes that show detailed descriptions of a small setting:

"...anchored in forty feet of water, and twenty or thirty rods from the shore, surrounded sometimes by thousands of small perch and shiners, dimpling the surface with their tails in the moonlight, and communicating by a long flaxen line with mysterious nocturnal fishes which had their dwelling forty feet below, or sometimes dragging sixty feet of line about the pond as I drifted in the gentle night breeze, now and then feeling a slight vibration along it, indicative of some life prowling about its extremity, of dull uncertain blundering purpose there, and slow to make up its mind. "

"The shore is composed of a belt of smooth rounded white stones like paving-stones, excepting one or two short sand beaches, and is so steep that in many places a single leap will carry you into water over your head; and were it not for its remarkable transparency, that would be the last to be seen of its bottom till it rose on the opposite side. Some think it is bottomless. It is nowhere muddy, and a casual observer would say that there were no weeds at all in it; and of noticeable plants, except in the little meadows recently overflowed, which do not properly belong to it, a closer scrutiny does not detect a flag nor a bulrush, nor even a lily, yellow or white, but only a few small

heart-leaves and potamogeton, and perhaps a water-target or two; all which however a bather might not perceive; and these plants are clean and bright like the element they grow in. The stones extend a rod or two into the water, and then the bottom is pure sand, except in the deepest parts, where there is usually a little sediment, probably from the decay of the leaves which have been wafted on to it so many successive falls, and a bright green weed is brought up on anchors even in midwinter.”

Anticipated outcomes:

Students will understand that Thoreau was known for noticing and recording details of nature and other settings. They will be able to notice and record details in the journal and draw conclusions about how this deliberate investigation and journaling lead to understanding. They will also contemplate on why and how people choose and ignore details and the larger repercussions of this aspect of human nature.

Lesson 2: Reflecting

Summary and rationale: Students will use the journal to reflect on their ‘inner world’--their own personal thoughts and feelings. Quotes by Thoreau (see below) and others will be offered as starting points. Students will be able to share their journals, but also have the opportunity to keep them private if it will increase their level of self-reflection.

Essential questions:

How does writing about your thoughts and feelings feel?

How does rereading old entries feel? Does it make you think differently about any situations?

Thoreau quotes (to be used as a starting point for a reflection)

“I would rather sit on a pumpkin, and have it all to myself, than be crowded on a velvet cushion.”

“Things do not change; we change.”

“The question is not what you look at, but what you see.”

“Be not simply good – be good for something.”

“Be yourself- not your idea of what you think somebody else’s idea of yourself should be.”

Anticipated outcomes: Students will experience journaling as a method of self-reflection. They will see the possible benefits of the act of writing down their thoughts and feelings as well as the rereading at a later date. They will understand that Thoreau (and many others) have used journals as a part of individual self-improvement.

Lesson 3 Planting Seeds (for longer written work)

Summary and rationale: Students will use their journal as a place to collect story seeds; small ideas or parts of a writing that can be stretched into a longer piece.

Essential questions:

How can a journal help an author collect ideas for longer pieces?

How do authors choose which pieces to turn into longer pieces?

Directions for students:

1) Spend at least 10 minutes each day writing about “something”

2) Ideas:

- A quick story
- A moment in time
- A thought or feeling you have
- A person that is special
- An incident you still think about
- A song that means a lot to you
- A time you felt proud
- A time you didn’t
- A happy memory (or a sad one)
- Something you know a lot about
- A poem or lyrics
- Anything else you can think of...just keep writing

After students have collected a good number of short pieces, they will choose one or two to expand upon. They can extend a story by giving more details, rework a poem or elaborate on ideas that they have. The goal is to use the short-write seeds to generate

a longer piece. ...and to understand that each short piece does not need to be used. Part of being a writer is deciding which seeds to plant and tend and which to leave.

Anticipated outcomes: Students will understand that journals can be a valuable tool for authors. They will begin to collect ideas for written pieces and learn how to choose ones that can be turned into longer pieces.

Solitude and Self-Discovery in Middle Grade Literature

Summary and rationale: Although Thoreau's works are not accessible to younger students (except in excerpts), many of the themes can be found in middle grade literature. This unit will focus on how characters in books (both fiction and non-fiction) have used experiences of solitude as the impetus for self-discovery. The following is a list of middle grade (4th-6th) grade novels that each have a theme that parallels that of Walden. In each book the main character sets off, consciously or accidentally, on a journey of self-discovery. In the end, each had emerged a stronger and more independent person.

Essential questions:

How does the setting of a book influence the story?

What do "alone in the wilderness" books have in common?

How does reading about a person's time in solitude, survival and reflection impact a reader?

Thoreau quotes:

"I never found a companion that was so companionable as solitude."

"I think that I cannot preserve my health and spirits, unless I spend four hours a day at least - and it is commonly more than that - sauntering through the woods and over the hills and fields, absolutely free from all worldly engagements."

"I had three chairs in my house; one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society."

"I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time. To be in company, even with the best, is soon wearisome and dissipating. I love to be alone. I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude."

Lesson 1 (and ongoing) Class read aloud: My Side of the Mountain

Summary and rationale: The class will use the book My Side of the Mountain by Jean Crahhead George as the class mentor text. This book has many parallels to Walden, but is accessible to a younger audience.

Essential questions:

- Why would a person want to live by themselves?
- How did Sam change over the course of his year alone?

- What did he learn about himself, that he only could have learned by himself?

Anticipated outcomes: Students will participate in multiple classroom discussions about the book. They will simultaneously be independently reading a book from the independent reading list (see below) and be able to draw similarities and differences between the situations and characters.

Lesson 2 (and ongoing) Independent Reading Reflections

Preliminary independent reading list. Students will read at least one book of their choice from this list. Each of these books has a main character that spends a considerable amount of time alone, and in doing so embarks on a journey of self-discovery and growth. These books are all at the 4th-6th grade reading level.

- Hatchet (Set in the woods of Canada)
- On a Mountain in Maine (Set in Maine, based on a true story)
- Shadow on the Mountain (Set in Norway during World War 2, based on a true story)
- Island of the Blue Dolphins (Set in a similar time period as Walden, 1835-1853)
- Sign of the Beaver (Colonial America)
- A Long Walk to Water (Set in Sudan, based on a true story)
- Mixed up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler (urban adventure)
- The Whipping Boy (medieval setting)
- The Lightning Thief (Fantasy setting, based on Greek Mythology. A boy trying to 'find out who he really is.')

Lesson 3: Writing: Considering self discovery through solitude

Summary and rationale: Students will write a literary analysis (a fourth grade standard) comparing and contrasting elements of the main character's self-discovery from our read aloud (My Side of the Mountain) and their independent book.

Essential questions:

- Why do people change when they are faced with new situations?
- How does solitude affect people? Does it affect different people differently?

Anticipated outcomes: Students will write a literary analysis using specific text evidence from two books. They will show how characters have changed as a result of their experiences.

Math Applications based on Thoreau's Walden House

Unit summary and rationale: Students will meet 4th grade Common Core Standards in Math through an investigation into the size and cost of Thoreau's house.

Unit essential questions:

- Why is it important to apply math skills to real situations?
- How can math help us to understand human experiences?

Lesson 1: House Area and Perimeter

Summary and rationale: Students will use Thoreau's house as inspiration for a project on area and perimeter. It will meet the CCS in math in a real-world context.

Essential questions:

How and why do people use 'scale' when drawing buildings?

How are the area and perimeter of a space related?

Why do some shapes have the same area but a different perimeter?

Vocabulary:

Area

Perimeter

Scale conversions

Multiples

Directions for students:

Thoreau's house was 10 feet by 15 feet.

1. Using graph paper, with a scale of one inch to one foot, draw a diagram of the house.
2. Label the area and perimeter of the house (in feet.)
3. Convert the perimeter of the house into inches.
4. If Thoreau decided to add an addition to his house that would double the area, but not the perimeter, show two ways that he could do that. Draw them on the graph paper using the same scale and label the area and perimeter in feet.

****You can extend the activity by making the scale 1.5 inches to 1 foot and then 1 inch to 1.5 feet and compare the sketches****

Anticipated outcomes:

- Students will be able to sketch a scaled diagram of Thoreau's house and label the area and perimeter to scale.
- Students that do the extension activity will see how scale and size are related
- Students will be able to identify and diagram the correlation (or lack thereof) between area and perimeter.

Lesson 2: The Cost of the House

Summary and rationale: The students will calculate the actual cost of building Thoreau's house (rounded to the nearest cent.) They will then compare that to the current day cost of a 10 by 15 foot shed.

Essential questions:

- How was Thoreau able to save money when building his house (there are several clues in the description)?
- Why are current structures of the same size all listed as 'sheds'?

Cost of Materials for Thoreau's House (from *Walden*) Rounded to the nearest cent

Boards: \$8.03,

Refuse shingles for roof and sides: \$4.00

Laths: \$1.25

Two second-hand windows with glass: \$2.43

One thousand old bricks: \$4.00

Two casts of lime: \$2.40.

Hair: \$0.31. More than I needed

Mantle-tree iron: \$0.15

Nails: \$3.90

Hinges and screws: \$0.14

Latch: \$0.10

Chalk: \$0.01

Transportation: \$1.40. I carried a good part on my back.

Directions for students:

- 1) Add up the total cost of Thoreau's shed
- 2) In what ways did he save money?
- 3) What other costs (other than money) do you think there were?
- 4) Do a Google search for 10 by 15 foot sheds. List the costs of three different sheds.
- 5) How much would a similar sized structure cost today?

6) Why are current structures of the same size are all listed as 'sheds'?