

NEH LANDMARKS OF AMERICAN HISTORY AND CULTURE WORKSHOP

LIVING AND WRITING DELIBERATELY: THE CONCORD LANDSCAPES AND LEGACY OF HENRY THOREAU

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LESSON PLAN CONTACT! THOREAU'S MOST PIVOTAL PASSAGE

CONTENT AREA
English Language Arts

GRADE LEVELS
11-12

BACKGROUND

In 1846, while still conducting his experiment at Walden Pond, Thoreau was invited by a relative to travel upriver in Maine. He went, determined to climb Mount Katahdin, which he did, a summit “vast titanic & such as man never inhabits.” Back at Walden about two weeks later, Thoreau’s writing caught fire; he was composing better than ever. What happened to him on that mountain in Maine that electrified his voice and vision?

PASSAGE MOST PIVOTAL

In *Henry David Thoreau: A Life*, Laura Dassow Walls claims that soon after returning from his climb up Katahdin the “**most pivotal and most emotional passage in all of Thoreau’s work**” occurs:

What is 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?*

Walls goes on to suggest that here Thoreau found and embraced his bedrock truth—a deep truth, trustworthy, satisfying and wild. “The mystery that surrounds us, that touches us, that even caresses us, *is* us, all of us, for like all bodied beings we, too, are ‘hard matter in its home.’” Of course, Thoreau’s response was eager and bold--“reach out, touch back, body to body: ‘Contact! Contact!’” (p. 227)

PASSAGE ANALYSIS: STYLE

Remind students that an expert on Thoreau’s life and writing claims that this passage is the most pivotal and emotional of all his writing. How? Why?

1. Ask students to copy the passage in their learning journals, paying attention to everything.
2. Ask students to circle or underline 3-5 keywords—words that matter most. (Ha!)

They need to be prepared to explain their decisions: Why that word, that set of words?

3. Have students share their list with a partner or with the class.
4. Do they notice any relationships or patterns between the words they chose?
5. What do they notice about Thoreau's style: diction, syntax, tone?
6. What does "*common sense*" mean? How is "*Contact*" pivotal?
7. In order to assess student understanding, I may ask them to summarize the passage into one strong original sentence.
8. Volunteers share their sentences with the class.

PASSAGE ANALYSIS: APPLICATION

Remind students that an expert on Thoreau's life and writing claims that this passage is the most pivotal and emotional of all his writing. How? Why?

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

*At first I thought this activity would work best at the end of my Thoreau unit, but I wonder if it couldn't work near the beginning or in the middle also, hopefully to add challenge and momentum to student understanding.

1. Organize students into small groups.
2. Assign each group one of the threads from the Landmark workshop:
 - (1) Being Awake, Aware, and Alive
 - (2) Hearing that Different Drummer
 - (3) Examining Desperate and Deliberate Lives
 - (4) Living in Society
 - (5) Living in Nature
 - (6) Practicing Simplicity
 - (7) Choosing Life *with* Principle
3. Have students discuss the relationship of the "*Contact!*" passage to their assigned thread.

Although the passage is considered pivotal, that doesn't mean it's an easy fit for all seven threads.

Students are welcome to move from the assigned thread to their broader understanding of Thoreau.

Threads can stretch. Some may break. I still think there's enough thematic value there to reach for it.

Wrestling with the significance of the "*Contact!*" passage, however, should be a priority.
4. Each group shares their analysis of the relationship between thread and passage.
5. In their learning journals, students answer the following question: How and Why could the passage be the most pivotal of all of Thoreau's words?

STUDENT ALTERNATIVE CHOICE: DECIDE AND DEFEND

Some students may have a different passage they judge to be Thoreau's most pivotal. They can identify that passage and defend it, either in writing or in speaking. If some students happen to pick the same passage, they can present and defend that passage as a group. Student decisions should reflect strong analysis of the passage and impressive understanding of Thoreau's main ideas as a whole.