

## Citizens of Concord!

A High School English Lesson Plan On Sophocles' *Antigone* and Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience"  
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This lesson plan originated in my participation in the 2019 National Endowment for the Humanities Landmarks Seminar, "Living and Writing Deliberately: The Concord Landscapes and Legacy of Henry Thoreau." I am extremely grateful to the leaders of the seminar for helping me understand Thoreau, his social context, and his political legacy. When I originally studied *Walden* in college in the late 1970s, Thoreau was cast as a "back-to-the-land" isolationist who eschewed contact with his fellow citizens and who disdained social connections. (By that time in academia, the white heat of political revolution at my alma mater, Columbia University, had cooled; instead of waiting for the final workers' uprising, professors and students were bargaining that following Thoreau's path of finding personal peace through nature was more feasible.) My studies in Concord, Ma., this July broadened my appreciation of Thoreau as a social actor and community presence, a man who engaged in a difficult dance that allowed him to step sometimes into the circle of political engagement and sometimes back into his relative isolation. This pack of five lessons explores that dance, and uses Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience* as a link that connects classic Greek thinking, as embodied by Sophocles' *Antigone*, with modern political struggles. Through creative writing and the creation of a dramatic version of "Civil Disobedience," students will explore what it is like to navigate the space between radical change and conservative adherence to tradition and stability. Students will write a dramatic scene, in the style of *Antigone*, in which Thoreau presents his ideas to the citizens of Concord, and they respond. This approach, sometimes termed "readers' theatre," encourages direct interaction with and a creative response to a text.

Target Audience	10th grade English students
Objectives	To help students explore the connections between classical Greek literature and the modern world; to demonstrate the effectiveness of two forms of writing, drama and the essay; to explore the complexity of the role of "average citizen" in polarized political life.
Essential Questions	Are humans political animals? To what extent do we owe allegiance to the state? Are we really, as Emerson said in his famous essay, "self-reliant"? Do we depend on others? Is compromise viable?
Procedures	Students will read <i>A Burial at Thebes</i> , Seamus Heaney's modern version of Sophocles' Greek tragedy <i>Antigone</i> and Thoreau's "Civil

	Disobedience.” Using the Greek drama as a mentor text and format, students will then write a scene in which they use Thoreau’s own words from Civil Disobedience as part of the dialogue. Using their creative writing skills, students will create the characters of the antagonist and the chorus. This plan will require five 60-minute periods.
Assessment	Students, working in groups of three, will submit and read aloud a short scene from a play. This play will be in the format of Greek tragedy, as exemplified by <i>A Burial at Thebes</i> , but be based on Thoreau’s own words. Students will also be given “exit” questions.
Materials	Copies of <i>A Burial at Thebes</i> Photocopies of “Civil Disobedience” Markers 8x11 sheets of paper Yellow, blue, and pink Post-it notes
Key vocabulary	Analogy, justice, community, ethics, anarchy tragedy, protagonist, antagonist, ambiguity chorus, tyrant, tragic flaw/tragic mistake

### Day One (60 minute class)

Aim: To introduce students to the context of Greek drama as political theatre and to review the basics of Sophocles’ *Antigone*, in the modern version called *A Burial at Thebes*.

Students will have arrived having read the first 1/3 of play.

Questions to consider in full class discussion for 30 minutes:

How is Greek drama different from popular theatre today?

What is the mythological “backstory” to the play?

Who is Antigone and how does she see as her ultimate responsibility?

Who is Creon, and what is his responsibility?

What is the role of the chorus in this play? How does the chorus respond to Creon and Antigone?

The second half of the class (30 minutes) will be devoted to students reading *Burial* in small groups.

Homework: Finish reading *A Burial In Thebes*

### Day Two (60 minute class)

Aim for part one of class: To explore the ending of *Burial* (45 minutes)

Whole class discussion:

Which characters uphold their civic responsibilities?

Which characters uphold their ethical responsibilities?

What are the arguments, pro and con, supporting Antigone's heroism?

What are the arguments, pro and con, supporting Creon's heroism?

Can the chorus be called heroic?

Which character would readers most identify with?

How would Greek theatregoers have responded to the following question:

Which is more weighty, conscience or civic responsibility?

If you had lived in 1846, the year in which Thoreau was jailed for a night for refusing to pay taxes, would you have paid taxes to the U.S. government?

Aim for Part Two: To introduce Thoreau and "Civil Disobedience"

If you had lived in 1846, would you have paid taxes to the U.S. government?

Discussion of the Abolitionist Movement

PBS Film Clip about Abolitionists and Fugitive Slave Law:

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/the-abolitionists-fugitive-slave-act/>

Homework: Read and highlight sections of Thoreau's Civil Disobedience

### Day Three (60 minute class)

Aim: To help students see the connection between the ancient play and "Civil Disobedience."

Walk through discussion (30 minutes): Begin class by asking students to write out one quotation from Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience." Students should write the quotation on an 8x11 sheet of paper and make it visible. Students should then post those quotations around the room. Using yellow post-its, students should write personal reactions to the Thoreau quotations, and post those on the 8x11 sheets.

Comparison to Antigone (30 minutes): Ask students to compare Thoreau and Antigone. How are they alike? Different? What risks did they take?

Then ask students to imagine that Sophocles had written a play about Thoreau. Who would have been the antagonist? (Probably the local tax collector) Who would have been the chorus? (Probably Thoreau's neighbors in Concord). Ask students to imagine and write out the tax collector's responses to Thoreau's statements. Ask students to imagine and post the neighbor's reactions to Thoreau's comments using pink post-it notes. Spend the last five minutes of class discussing the tension between Thoreau, the tax collector, and the chorus of citizens.

### Day Four (60 minute class): Creative Writing Lab

Students, working in groups of three, write a short scene in the style of the Greek play, in which Thoreau is the protagonist, the tax assessor is the antagonist, and a group of Concord citizens functions as the Greek chorus. Students will have access to the postings that were done in the previous class. They will use their copies of *A Burial in Thebes* to help them reproduce the

format of the Greek drama; they will use their photocopies of “Civil Disobedience” for Thoreau’s words. Students will make up the lines attributed to the chorus and the tax collector.

Day Five (60 minutes class): Performance

Student groups will be asked to read their plays to the class.

In addition to the scripts, students will complete and submit the following question as part of the assessment:

How did this lesson affect your understanding of *A Burial in Thebes* or “Civil Disobedience”?

What lessons would the plays leave with audience members?

How does “Civil Disobedience” complement or contradict *A Burial in Thebes*?

Does the public nature of a play affect the work’s message?

Did your understanding of “the average citizen” change as you participated in this exercise?

What role does or could civil disobedience play in our world in 2019?