

Obey or Rebel: A Two-Day Unit on Obeying Authority or One's Conscience After Reading Sophocle's *Antigone* and Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience"

English 9 with Mr. Ryan Smith at Maryknoll School in Honolulu, HI
[2019 Thoreau NEH Landmarks Seminar in Concord, Week 2]

All men recognize the right of revolution;
That is, the right to refuse allegiance to, and to resist, the government,
When tyranny or its inefficiency are great and unendurable.

Henry David Thoreau
"Civil Disobedience" 1849

STEP 1: PREPLANNING

OBJECTIVES and PURPOSE

- Deepen students (Ss) understanding of the difficult internal conflict that Antigone faces at the beginning of the play: to obey the State or bury her brother
- Introduce Ss to Henry David Thoreau and his essay "Civil Disobedience".
- Challenge Ss to contemplate contemporary issues in which they feel a moral call to protest with civil disobedience.

CCSS STANDARDS

- CCSS.ELA.9-10.RL.2,5,7,10
- CCSS.ELA.9-10.RI.1,2,3,6,8,10
- CCSS.ELA.9-10.W.2,6,7
- CCSS.ELA.9-10.SL.1,4,5
- CCSS.ELA.9-10.L.2,6

MATERIALS

Readings

- Antigone* by Sophocles (Sophocles. *The Theban Plays*. Penguin Classics.)
- ["Civil Disobedience" by Henry David Thoreau](#)

Videos on Thoreau

- [Laura Walls Lecture](#)

Vides on "Civil Disobedience"

- BBC video: [Civil Disobedience](#)
- The School of Life Video: [Thoreau and Civil Disobedience](#)

STEP 2: THE LESSON PLAN

ACTIVITIES

Day 1: Introduction to the theme and a close reading of *Antigone* (90-minute class)

1. [time: 1 min.] Welcome students (Ss) and review the agenda and clarify the purposes and objectives
2. [time: 5 min.] Quick personal anecdote of a time I was conflicted about following authority or my conscience: Age 14 and divided about attending the religious retreat my parents desired for me or the ODP State soccer team tryout that I had long looked forward to.
3. [time: 15 min.] Silent journal writing: When were you faced with a tough decision to follow a person in an authority position instructing you to do something you didn't feel was right? Did you obey and go along or did you protest and do your thing? Reflect on the situation/context of the conflict, the relationship to the person of authority, the personal/social consequences of disobeying, the outcome of your decision.
4. [time: 10 min.] Ss form groups of 4 and first, read your writing, and then, take questions from peers.
5. [time: 20 min.] Whole class sharing. Have groups pick their most interesting conflict to share aloud. Analyze and discuss the situation by considering the context, authority figure, potential consequences, cultural expectations, etc.
6. [time: 20 min.] Ask Ss to get out *Antigone* by Sophocles. Close read and analyze her internal conflict between obeying the State or her conscience. Passages to note:
 - a. Page 126-129 from *The Theban Plays* by Sophocles published by Penguin
 - b. Page 143-151
 - c.
7. [time: 2 min.] Explain the homework:
 - a. Watch the two videos above and take one page of 'creative notes' in your journal.
 - b. Read and annotate the excerpts from "Civil Disobedience". Give Ss time in class to begin if time allows.

Day 2: Connecting Thoreau to *Antigone*

1. [time: 5 min.] Explain there is a long history of peaceful civil disobedience. (*Civil Disobedience: An Encyclopedic History of Dissidence in the US* by Mary Ellen Snodgrass)
 - a. Individual protesters: John Brown, Cesar Chavez, Dorothy Day, William L Garrison, Allan Ginsberg, MLK Jr., Rosa Parks, Standing Bear, Harriet Tubman.

- b. Groups and movements: ACT-UP, Animal Liberation Front, black militants and Black Panthers, Earth First!, Greenpeace, KKK, Liberty Men, Minutemen, PETA, Quakers, Sons of Liberty, Underground Railroad.
 - c. Forms of protest: conscientious objectors, draft card burning, educating slaves, fish-ins, flag burning, Freedom Rides, labor strikes, protests, sit-ins, tax resistance, Underground Railroad.
 - d. Historical events: Boston Tea Party, Freedom Rides, Fugitive Slave Law, Great Starvation Experiment, Green Corn Rebellion, Haymarket Riot, Pullman Strike of 1894, Scopes trial, Shay's Rebellion, Vietnam War, Whisky Rebellion
2. [time: 5 min.] Short personal anecdote: Finding *Walden* on Jim's bookshelf at age 17 in the SSU dorm in 1996. Explain ways I was inspired to be Thoreauvian. My Walden: Iowa, U of U, SSU MA, Vista del Lago, Hawaii, and then Walden at 2019 NEH.
 3. [time: 10 min.] Introduce Henry David Thoreau by calling on Ss to share their notes on the videos and the essay.
 4. [time: 60 min.] Group project directions
 - a. Create a shared PowerPoint document. Collect your group ideas there. Don't worry about making it pretty, just make sure it thoroughly records your group ideas.
 - b. Select a contemporary social or environmental injustice that you find to be morally wrong and opposed to your values. Topics to consider: police brutality, unequal funding for education, low pay for teachers, plastic pollution, Military bases on Oahu, telescopes on Mauna Kea, housing development on the North Shore, etc.
 - c. Brainstorm a list of reasons by it is morally wrong and a serious issue. Also, make a list of reasons why someone else may disagree and think it is right and not a serious issue worthy of protest.
 - d. Make an action plan for civil disobedience to protest the injustice. What exactly will you do?
 - e. Explain why you think this is the very best act of civil disobedience to make your statement and get social change.
 - f. Turn in your slides on the Microsoft Teams discussion forum.
 5. [time: 5 min.] Explain the homework: Review each group's PowerPoint and comment on their ideas.
 - a. Offer your thoughts on the issue they chose to protest.
 - b. Offer ideas to improve their list of reasons it's a serious issue and morally wrong.
 - c. Explain why you agree or disagree that their act of civil disobedience is the best way to make a statement and spur social change.
 - d. Compliment them on what they did well.

ASSESSMENTS

1. Journal writing

2. *Antigone* close reading annotations and class discussion
3. One page of 'creative notes' on the Thoreau videos
4. Group PowerPoint
5. Comments on other groups' PowerPoints in Microsoft Teams

TEACHER NOTES AND REFLECTION

I wrote these lessons, before trying them; this is not a plan perfected with years of teaching it and revision; it's just something I intend to try this year, having recently been assigned to teach world literature to freshman.

This plan could be shortened into one 90-minute class period or expanded into a long unit.

Feel free to contact me for more ideas and resources when you are teaching "Civil Disobedience" or *Antigone*.

AUTHOR

Ryan Smith
English teacher, department chairperson
Maryknoll School, Honolulu HI
ryan.smith@maryknollschoool.org