A Dead Cat at Last
Connecting Thoreau’s Resistance to Dystopian Text

Lesson plans developed for “Living and Writing Deliberately: The Concord Landscapes of Henry Thoreau” July 21-26, 2019

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THREAD: "EXAMINING DESPERATE AND DELIBERATE LIVES"
A DEAD CAT AT LAST:  
CONNECTING THOREAU’S RESISTANCE TO DYSTOPIAN TEXT

FOCUSING QUOTES:

"One large bundle held their all,—bed, coffee-mill, looking glass, hens,—all but the cat; she took to the woods and became a wild cat, and, as I learned afterward, trod in a trap set for woodchucks, and so became a dead cat at last" (Walden 34).

“There is no odor so bad as that which arises from goodness tainted” (Walden 54).

“Not till we are lost, in other words not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations” (Walden 118).

“The government itself, which is only the mode which the people have chosen to execute their will, is equally liable to be abused and perverted before the people can act through it” (“Civil Disobedience” 222).

“All men recognize the right of revolution; that is, the right to refuse allegiance to and to resist the government, when its tyranny or its inefficiency are great and unendurable” (“Civil Disobedience” 225).

"Let your life be a counter-friction to stop the machine" (“Civil Disobedience" 229).

“In fact, I quietly declare war with the State, after my fashion, though I will still make what use and get what advantage of her I can, as is usual in such cases” (“Civil Disobedience” 236).

“There will never be a really free and enlightened State, until the state comes to recognize the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived, and treats him accordingly” (“Civil Disobedience" 240).
UNIT RATIONALE:

The following lesson plans are designed to make connections among the philosophies and practices of Thoreau and the critical analysis of dystopian texts such as George Orwell’s *1984* or Ray Bradbury’s “The Pedestrian.” Designed for a 12th grade English literature course, the plans assume that students have studied American literature, in particular the American Romantics and Transcendentalists, during their junior year.

Thoreau demonstrated resistance to issues of his day, such as slavery and other oppressive policies of government, in ways to which students can relate. Likewise, students can recognize that Thoreau, situated in the rich tapestry of Concord’s significance to the Revolutionary War and later towards abolition, lends historical precedence to resistance against dystopian forces.

Readings from Thoreau’s *Walden*, “Civil Disobedience,” “Walking” and others leave a breadcrumb trail for students to follow as they reach back to previous analysis of 19th century American texts to inform their current uptake of dystopian text. Consistent throughout all the texts is the assurance that in hegemonies of dystopian nature, those who are unable to exert power are often the ones who will suffer the most. Thoreau observed the plight of victims to institutions such as slavery and poverty, even noting the fate of the unlucky Collin’s feline, abandoned as they sold their shanty and left with their meager possessions. Ultimately, as students learn from the examples of those who resisted before them, they can be inspired to be a “counter-friction to stop the machine” and refuse to be “a dead cat at last” in a dystopian future.
LESSON PLAN 1: Priming Resistance

Objectives
Students will discuss their knowledge of 19th century American texts and demonstrate understanding of connections to concepts of “dystopia.”

Essential Questions
What texts do you remember reading from the American Romanticism period?
Why is it important to study these texts?
Which texts stood out and why?
Regarding Thoreau specifically, which essays do you recall? What were the issues discussed in these essays?
In “Civil Disobedience,” to what was Thoreau objecting and what specific actions of resistance did he take?
How do you imagine you would react if you were in Thoreau’s shoes?
What is “dystopia”?
What texts have you read, watched, listened that demonstrate qualities of dystopia?
When you think about issues in our society, which would you consider dystopian?
If we were to resist dystopia in society, what can we learn from Thoreau’s actions to guide us in 2019?

Reading Selections
Selections of “Civil Disobedience” by Henry David Thoreau
“Dystopias: Definitions and Characteristics” (ReadWriteThink.org)
Headlines from various news sources, for example: CNN, Fox News, MSNBC

Materials Needed
Thoreau’s Resistance Trajectory Chart handout
Laptop/cell phone/electronic device with internet connection

Procedures
Teachers can begin with a conversation about the American Romantics and what students remember about them from previous courses. As the conversation draws upon Thoreau’s essays, students can (re)read selections of “Civil Disobedience.” Students can use the following chart to note a list of issues from the text and Thoreau’s specific actions of resistance. The informal list can serve as a stimulus for students to discuss/debate the text.
Thoreau's Resistance Trajectory Chart Handout

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issues from “Civil Disobedience”</th>
<th>Thoreau’s specific actions of resistance</th>
<th>Characteristics of dystopia</th>
<th>Examples of headlines/news stories with dystopian themes</th>
<th>What can we learn about resistance for Thoreau in 2019?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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Next, students should read “Dystopias: Definitions and Characteristics” from ReadWriteThink. After they record characteristics of dystopia on the chart, teachers can ask students to recall dystopian texts with which they are familiar and discuss how they display oppressive forces like what Thoreau experienced in “Civil Disobedience.”

If students have access to the internet, they can begin by looking at that day’s headlines on various websites. If no technology, newspapers can be provided (sorry, Thoreau, we disagree on newspapers). Ask students to carefully scan for headlines and then read articles that seem to project the qualities of dystopia and make note of them on the chart. A Google doc to which students have access can be prepared ahead of time and they can copy and paste links for others to see and read or to have displayed on an overhead or Smartboard.
After time reading and discussing articles as a class, teachers can ask students what they believe they have learned from Thoreau in order to participate in resistance to the contemporary issues that worry them. Issues will of course be varied, but hot topics such as climate change, immigration, racism, and others are strong possibilities.

**Assessment**
Teachers can collect an exit slip that asks students to choose an issue discussed in class and briefly explain the following:

*In 2109, what can I do to be a responsible “counter-friction to stop the machine”?*
LESSON PLAN 2: A Critical Analysis of Walking

“It requires a direct dispensation from Heaven to become a walker” - “Walking” by Henry David Thoreau

Objectives
Students will demonstrate an understanding of two complex texts and draw comparisons of themes through critical analysis.

Essential Questions
For what reasons do people walk?
What difference does setting make for essays and stories about walking?
What are the issues about society the two texts explore for their respective settings?
In “Walking,” what arguments does the text make about utopian themes?
In “The Pedestrian,” what argument does the text make for dystopian themes?
In Bradbury’s own words, what was the inspiration for “The Pedestrian?”
What would Thoreau and Bradbury have to say to each other about their respective texts?

Reading and Video Selections
“Walking” by Henry David Thoreau
“The Pedestrian” by Ray Bradbury
NEA Big Read: Fahrenheit 451 (Multimedia, 8:54-14:52)

Materials Needed
Printouts of “Walking” and “The Pedestrian”
Thoreau vs. Bradbury Annotation Assignment handout

Procedures
Students will have read Thoreau’s “Walking” prior to the lesson. Class begins with a teacher-led discussion of the themes in the essay including quotes such as "life consists with wildness. The most alive is the wildest" and the concept of the “sanctum sanctorum” (those who have seen Dr. Strange will know this term). Hand out the Thoreau vs. Bradbury Annotation Assignment and allow students to work on this together. When completed, students can compare annotations and look for patterns among what they identified in the text. Teachers could also create an annotation along with students projected on an overhead or Smartboard.
Next, as a class read the short story “The Pedestrian.” Ask students to create an annotation for that text as well. When completed, have students work in pairs to look for similarities in words and ideas among the two texts. Just as important, have students look for words and ideas that are diametrically opposed. As a class, draw critical comparisons between the two texts.

Finally, watch a brief video of Bradbury discussing the inspiration for *Fahrenheit 451* which includes the origin of “The Pedestrian” (NEA Big Read: *Fahrenheit 451* approximately between minutes 8:54-14:52). For the final discussion, consider the dystopian concerns which sparked the writing of “The Pedestrian” and how Thoreau’s values in “Walking” could help to avoid this imagined future.

**Assessment**
Students can demonstrate their understanding of the lesson by composing a short piece speculating what Thoreau and Bradbury might say to each other about their respective texts. One idea is to create a dialogue using the student’s interpretation of the two author’s voices to debate the themes each contributed to a larger conversation about the tensions between utopian and dystopian visions.
Both Thoreau and Bradbury published influential texts about walking. Thoreau’s essay is a nonfiction piece discussing his experience in 19th century America. Bradbury, on the other hand, considers in a 1950 fictional short story what walking in 2050 might be like.

Instructions: Reread “Walking” and annotate it. Annotation simply means taking notes on the text. You could…

- circle the unfamiliar or tricky words and replace those words with easier synonyms or phrases by using an online Thesaurus.
- circle the pronouns (i.e., it, its, which) and replace them with the nouns they represent.
- underline the symbols and explain what they represent.

Sample annotation adapted from:
www.visualthesaurus.com/cm/lessons/tackling-text-complexity-through-annotation/
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Next, read “The Pedestrian” and annotate. When you have completed both annotations, look for any similar words or ideas you highlighted. Likewise, look for words and ideas that are direct opposites.
LESSON PLAN 3: Trajectory of Resistance

Objectives
Students will grasp the point of views and analyze the impact of choices by two authors. Students will also demonstrate an understanding of shared goals of two different texts by synthesizing an argument for their own potential choices.

Essential Questions
What were the circumstances of Thoreau’s and Orwell’s arrests?
What core philosophies or opinions did Thoreau and Orwell hold that caused them to take their respective courses of action?
In 2019, what are the circumstances that you believe deserve your attention and perhaps your own course of action?
Like Thoreau and Orwell, what would you be willing to do to resist oppressive forces of dystopia?

Reading Selections
Selections of “Civil Disobedience” by Henry David Thoreau
“Clink” (pp. 11-22) by George Orwell (This originally unpublished essay contains graphic language, so teachers may want to use “In the Clink: George Orwell’s Time in Prison” by Zeljka Marosevic instead)
Selections of 1984 by George Orwell

Materials Needed
Laptop with internet connection
Online platform such as Moodle or Google Classroom with an E-forum option

Procedures
Over the last two lessons, students have reviewed Thoreau from a new perspective as a theorist of resistance in a 19th century world of proto-dystopian concerns. Likewise, they have been analyzing dystopian texts and issues. At this point in the unit, they may have already read Orwell’s 1984.

Teachers should begin by reading out loud portions of “Civil Disobedience” that refer to Thoreau’s time spent in jail. Students should discuss and take notes concerning Thoreau’s reasoning and subsequent choices and actions.
Next, students should either read ‘Clink” or “In the Clink: George Orwell’s Time in Prison.” Students need to be aware of the very different set of circumstances of each occurrence (Thoreau’s arrest was not planned, while Orwell deliberately attempted to get arrested so he could experience jail firsthand), yet both authors composed narratives of their experiences as a method of documenting their actions. As a class, discuss and take notes on both the circumstances and motivations for both authors and how these shaped their texts.

As students have analyzed the above, ask them to speculate with each other any situations (perhaps drawn from the headlines and news sources of Lesson 1) about which they feel they could take action and possibly “resist.” By using an E-forum such as on Moodle or Google Classroom, students can link online articles to their responses so those responding can access the same media. Likewise, having the E-forum allows teachers to participate and students to revise their posts as their thinking develops.

**Assessment**
Although it is largely impossible to know what actions students will take in the future, we can certainly ask them to speculate. Orwell’s decision to get himself arrested was born out of a social justice-driven need to understand how prisoners were treated in London. Although his experiment was a failure in that he was treated rather well and released the next day, his drastic actions gave birth to the characterization of Winston Smith, the protagonist of *1984*, who takes his own drastic action of resistance against the tyranny of Big Brother. One way to assess students’ understanding of the lesson is to ask them to create a fictional character of their own who is resisting to some oppressive force in society. Students need to explain their characterization choices in detail and “Thoreau-ly” develop the dystopian circumstances and drastic actions taken.
WORKS CITED


RECOMMENDED READING