

## Transcendentalism's Enduring Principles

### Works Included

*Walden* - Thoreau  
*Nature* Excerpt - Emerson  
*Self Reliance* - Emerson  
"Wild Geese" - Mary Oliver  
"The Summer Day" - Mary Oliver  
"Letters From Two Gardens" Ross Gay and Aimee Nezhukumatathil

### Essential Questions

How does our relationship with nature inform who we are?

*Throughout this unit, students will be studying essays and poetry that reflect the tenets of Thoreau's idea of Transcendentalism. Students will trace one or more of the themes of Transcendentalism throughout the literature and will conclude the unit by creating a photo essay explaining their personal Walden*

**Day 1:** Present students with the following threads:

1. Being Awake, Aware, and Alive
2. Living in Nature
3. Practicing Simplicity
4. Choosing Life with Principle
5. Examining Desperate and Deliberate Lives

Explain to students that throughout the next few weeks, they will be reading and examining literature. While they read, they need to collect observations from the texts about one or more of the threads. You may choose to have students collect those observations through a dialectical journal, informal annotation, blog, daily reflective writing, etc.

I begin this unit with a class reading of Emerson's *Self Reliance*. I think it is a great piece to start with because students can relate to the many aphorisms within the essay and can draw conclusions about Emerson/Transcendentalism based on those aphorisms. After reading the essay together in class, students will complete an informal aphorism essay.

**Aphorism Essay:** Choose of the aphorisms (nuggets of wisdom) from Emerson's essay and write a 1-1.5 page essay relating that aphorism to your life.

## **Day 2-3:**

Next, I ask students to read excerpts from *Walden*. I enjoy working through *Where I Lived*, and *What I Lived For*, *Solitude*, *The Pond In Winter*, *Spring*, and *Conclusion*. Sometimes I ask students to read sections individually, sometimes in groups, sometimes aloud. Often we will create summaries, visual summaries, conduct a Socratic Seminar, etc. While reading, I will post large butcher paper around the room. Each of the themes we are tracing,

1. Being Awake, Aware, and Alive
2. Living in Nature
3. Practicing Simplicity
4. Choosing Life with Principle
5. Examining Desperate and Deliberate Lives

will have its own piece of paper. As we read, we will record text evidence of those themes from *Walden*. We will do this together as a class.

## **Day 4**

Today we read an excerpt from Emerson's essay *Nature*. This time, students will read and record their observations in a small group.

## **Days 5-6**

Days 5-6 are the days we bring Transcendentalism to the 21st century. We will begin with Oliver's "The Summer Day." I like to print the poem with large font and cut each line. I put the lines in a ziploc and give each group of 3-4 students a ziploc. I project the first line of the poem, "Who made the world?" and ask students to construct the other lines of the poem. This helps students think about and discuss structure. While discussing specific lines, students closely read the poem. After compiling the poem correctly, we make observations about the Transcendentalism themes present in Oliver's poem. We do this one together as a class to model how to think about poetry. Students apply this same thinking, finding patterns, and making observations about poetry with the other two poems individually.

## **Day 7**

Today we have a class Socratic Seminar. Asking students to converse about literature and common themes between genres, authors, and texts is an important skill. Before the Seminar, we will develop some class norms to help it run smoothly. Even our older students need to practice thinking about group norms. I'm hoping the Seminar will help students see another perspective. They will also be practicing close reading skills by returning to the texts.

## **Day 8**

Today I assign the Photo Essay Assignment:

## *Transcendentalism*

### **Photo Essay Assignment**

For this project you will create a photo essay based on your view of what a modern Walden would be.

**Background:** Think about what Thoreau, Emerson, Oliver, Nezhukumatathil and Gay learned from nature and how they portrayed nature in each of their works. You will create an essay accompanied by pictures that **you take** that illustrates a modern view of the natural world AND what it has to offer us and teach us. Make sure that your essay and photographs compliment each other and work together to illustrate the points you are making. You will have a minimum of 4 pictures of different elements of the natural world. Consider close-ups. Zero in on that flower or bumble bee or veins in a leaf. For each photograph, you will write a minimum of one paragraph (8 sentences minimum each) or one poem. Revisit *Walden* in your books to see what Thoreau has to say about each season or each element of nature, and use this as a model. You will be doing that, but you will also be discussing or creating **your** own place and mirroring the transcendentalists we discussed. So, you might learn something completely different from nature. Your essay will not just be a story of where you travel or what you are taking pictures of, but rather an interpretation of your life philosophy.

**Essay Description:** Take photographs of landscapes that represent qualities of the writers we have studied. It may or may not include you, but you shouldn't visually dominate it. You will need to take the photos which best depict what you are learning from nature. You could do a rural scene, a cityscape, a backyard, a park, a forest, a body of water, flowers, trees, or a still life. The importance of this picture is that the scene be the focal point. Your photograph may be taken in color, black and white, with a digital or standard camera.

You may choose to compile your photo essay in a Google Slide presentation, prezi, flip grid, photo book, etc.

After students turn in the photo essay, we will have a gallery walk so that students may view the work of their peers. As with all assignments we do in class, we will spend some time reflecting on the unit and what we have learned.