

NEH Landmarks of American History and Culture
Living and Writing Deliberately: The Concord Landscapes and Legacy
of Henry David Thoreau

Curriculum Unit: Living in Nature

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The Literature of Nature, an English elective at The Park School, Fall 2017

Readings

- Chapter V of *Walden*, “Solitude”
- “Walking”—split into two roughly equal parts: (1) from the beginning of the essay to the section ending “... the hero is commonly the simplest and obscurest of men”; (2) from the next section, which begins, “The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild ...,” to the end of the essay
- Paragraph from near the end of Chapter XVII of *Walden*, “Spring”

Our village life would stagnate if it were not for the unexplored forests and meadows which surround it. We need the tonic of wildness,—to wade sometimes in marshes where the bittern and meadow-hen lurk, and hear the booming of the snipe; to smell the whispering sedge where only some wilder and more solitary fowl builds her nest, and the mink crawls with its belly close to the ground. At the same time we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be infinitely wild, unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because unfathomable. We can never have enough of Nature. We must be refreshed by the sight of inexhaustible vigor, vast and Titanic features, the sea-coast with its wrecks, the wilderness with its living and its decaying trees, the thunder cloud, and the rain which lasts three week and produces freshets. We need to witness our own limits transgressed, and some life pasturing freely where we never wander. We are cheered when we observe the vulture feeding on the carrion, which disgusts and disheartens us, and deriving health and strength from the repast. There was a dead horse in the hollow by the path to my house, which compelled me sometimes to go out of my way, especially in the night when the air was heavy, but the assurance it gave me of the strong appetite and inviolable health of Nature was my compensation for this. I love to see that Nature is so rife with life that myriads can be afforded to be sacrificed and suffered to prey on one another, that tender organizations can be so serenely squashed out of existence like pulp,—tadpoles which herons gobble up, and tortoises and toads run over in the road; and that sometimes it has rained flesh and blood! With the liability to accident, we must see how little account is to be made of it. The impression made on a wise man is that of universal innocence. Poison is not poison after all, nor are any wounds fatal. Compassion is very untenable ground. It must be expeditious. Its pleadings will not bear to be stereotyped.

- Sentences on “wildness” from *Journal*, 30 August 1856

It is in vain to dream of a wildness distant from ourselves. There is none such. It is the bog in our brains and bowels, the primitive vigor of Nature in us, that inspires that dream. I shall never find in the wilds of Labrador any greater wildness than in some recess in Concord.

Objectives

- For nearly all the students, who are juniors and seniors, this will be their first time reading Thoreau, and I know that they will find him challenging in a number of ways. My first objective, then, is to help them get the hang of reading Thoreau, learning how to follow his trail on the page and appreciate his extravagances and extreme statements. Ideally, I'd like my students to say, "Yeah, Thoreau's prose can be tough going, but he's invigorating to read and I want to check out more of his stuff."
- Second, I want the students to gain a sense of why in a course called The Literature of Nature you *have* to read some Thoreau, of why later writers like Annie Dillard consider him an essential forebear.
- My third objective is for students to begin to understand some of Thoreau's crucial ideas about nature, such as the value of "wildness" in preserving our health and sanity. I want them to at least consider how they might apply Thoreau's insights about humans as "part and parcel of Nature" to their own lives.
- Finally, I want the students to clarify and demonstrate their understanding of this material by writing about some aspect of Thoreau that they find engaging, calling upon not only their reading and discussion, but also their own experience of the world as they venture their thoughts on paper.

Essential Questions

- What is the nature of the companionship Thoreau finds in solitude at Walden Pond? Why does the natural world seem to him so cheering and sympathetic?
- What does it mean for a person to be "a part or parcel of Nature," a phrase that Thoreau uses twice in "Walking"?
- The word "wildness" (as opposed to "wilderness") is one that he puts great emphasis upon in both *Walden* and "Walking." Where does he find wildness? What does he mean by this word?
- Why is walking in wild places so important to Thoreau? Why does he consider it a sacred activity, a journey "to the Holy Land"? What exactly does walking *do* for him?
- Why, in Thoreau's view, is "Wildness" essential to "the preservation of the world," both at the level of individual human experience and at the global level?
- How does Nature inspire "Useful Ignorance" or "Beautiful Knowledge"? How does the natural world reveal "the insufficiency of all that we called Knowledge before"? What sort of experience is Thoreau describing in this part of "Walking"?
- If we accept what Thoreau says about human beings and the natural world, how ought we to live from day to day? What are the practical implications of his thinking?

The Assignment for "Solitude" from *Walden*

Read Henry David Thoreau's "Solitude," Chapter V of *Walden* (handout). Four vocabulary words to pay attention to: *imbibe*, *remunerate*, *ennui*, *panacea*.

Thoreau's little house at Walden Pond was only about a mile and a half from the town of Concord and a mile from his "nearest neighbor," but this was enough distance to give him the sense that he lived in a truly "solitary" place. People often asked him if he felt lonely at the pond.

As you read, mark a couple sentences that strike you, either because you think them beautiful or because you're puzzled by them. What do you notice about *how* Thoreau writes of his experiences in nature?

During class we'll take some time to write in response to this chapter. Here are the questions: Thoreau emphasizes that he feels "sweet and beneficent society in Nature," "an infinite and unaccountable friendliness" in natural objects. Based on your reading, why do you think he feels this way? Is his feeling particular to him or is it something you experience as well? Can you recall a particular time when you felt "the friendship of the seasons"? What was it like?

The Plan for Class on "Solitude"

1. Talk through the four vocabulary words (meaning and etymology).
2. Take a few minutes to go outside, pick up something natural (a leaf, an acorn, a stone, a maple key, etc.), and bring it back to the classroom. Spend a little time examining it, using as many senses as you can. What do you notice about the object that wasn't obvious at first? What do you wonder about it? Has your close study made you feel differently about your object from when you first scooped it up?
3. From the assignment: What is something in the chapter you found beautiful or puzzling? How does Thoreau strike you? Talk through some reactions.
4. Take ten minutes or so to jot responses to the prompts in the assignment.
5. Share these thoughts (maybe in small groups) and then use them to consider what Thoreau is saying in this chapter. Does contact with nature seem to you a good cure for loneliness and a necessity for human health? Why or why not?

The Assignment for First Half of "Walking"

Read roughly the first half of Thoreau's "Walking"—stopping at the section break where you find the words "... the hero is commonly the simplest and obscurest of men." Note that at the outset of the piece Thoreau says that he's making "an extreme statement" on behalf of "absolute freedom and wildness"; he's delivering his thoughts as emphatically as he can; he's letting it fly.

As you read, keep track of things you want to ask about and just try to follow Thoreau's line of thought. (For instance, what's up with his etymology of the word *saunter*? Is what he says about the word's origins really accurate?) In class we'll take on questions like these:

- What does it mean to "saunter"? Why does walking outdoors mean so much to Thoreau? What does this daily activity do for him exactly?
- How does he suggest we walk? What might it mean to make walking "the enterprise and adventure of the day"?
- Why does Thoreau feel so drawn to "the western horizon," writing that "I must walk toward Oregon and not toward Europe"? What does this essay have to do with America and the development of our nation? What are Thoreau's hopes for the United States, given the country's open space and natural resources?

The Plan for Class

1. Ask about words and details that students found puzzling.
2. Begin with the sentence "In my walks I would fain return to my senses," considering the ambiguity of the noun "senses." What does Thoreau mean here?

3. Take a little walk of ten minutes or so outdoors informed by that conversation. The emphasis is on using your senses to attend to what's around you in the present moment. No talking.
4. Back in the classroom, talk about the experience. What did you notice as you walked? Was it difficult to return to your senses? What made it so?
5. Then consider Thoreau's idea of "the art of Walking" by taking up the question of what it means to "saunter." If we act on Thoreau's views, what might that actually look like?
6. Take a few minutes to gather thoughts on paper: What in "Walking" so far strikes you as particularly interesting? What are things you find troubling or disagree with? What do you think Thoreau might be up to here? Where do you think he'll go in the second half of the piece? Use these jottings to shape the discussion of the reading, going where the greatest student interest lies.
7. If there's time, start to read aloud together the second half of "Walking" ("The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild ...").

Assignment for Second Half of "Walking"

Finish reading "Walking." In particular, read the last two sections (beginning "Above all, we cannot afford not to live in the present") slowly and attentively. These are among the most beautiful passages I know about living in nature. Come to class ready to explore "wildness."

The Plan for Class

1. Ask about words and details that students found puzzling.
2. As you did last class, take a little walk devoted to returning to your senses.
3. Upon returning, talk about the walk. How did our time together in the previous class and your finishing "Walking" affect your experience today? What's your take on Thoreau now?
4. An overarching question: Why is "Walking" considered one of the central texts of environmental conservation?
5. Approach that question by focusing on a few more specific ones in discussion. Of course, you can't do justice to all of these in one class, so go where the greatest student interest lies, making sure to consider the last question.
 - a. What does "wildness" mean to Thoreau?
 - b. Why does he love "the impervious and quaking swamps" so much? How do his claims here strike you?
 - c. How does the natural world promote "Useful Ignorance," which Thoreau also calls "Beautiful Knowledge"? How can our experience of "wildness" make us aware "of the insufficiency of all that we called Knowledge before"?
 - d. Why, then, does Thoreau say that "in Wildness is the preservation of the world"?
6. Leave time at the end to read the last two sections of "Walking" aloud. What impressions does Thoreau leave us with here? What is the essay calling us to?

Continuing the Exploration and Responding in Writing

At this point the students have done three quite challenging and long readings from Thoreau. For the fourth class, I'll give them only the paragraph from "Spring" and the *Journal* passage from 30 August 1856 (see above), asking them to think about how these connect to what they've read so far. In the fourth class, we'll look closely at these and use them to help us gain greater

understanding of Thoreau's idea that living as "a part and parcel of Nature" is an absolute necessity for human beings. We'll also talk together about the possibilities for writing in response to Thoreau. I find that if students have a few choices of what to write about and how to approach an assignment, they put more effort into the writing and gain more from it. Here are some options that strike me now as good ones, but I should add that students often come up with the best ideas.

1. What is something you've encountered in Thoreau that resonates with you? To ground yourself, pick a particular passage and explain why you find it so striking and powerful. In doing so, draw both upon our reading and conversations and upon your own experiences in the natural world.
2. We've thought a great deal in the past few classes about the notion of "wildness." What do you think this word means to Thoreau? What does it mean to you? Where do you find "wildness" that connects you to "the health and soundness of Nature"? Here again, draw both upon our work together and your own experience.
3. Thoreau is often celebrated as a writer with an acute sense of where the world was heading 160 or so years ago—greater technological connectivity among human beings, ever faster transportation, increasing loss of wild lands—and of what the dangers of such development could be. He's known as a gadfly who makes extreme statements to get our attention. Where, in your view, does he get it wrong? Are there things in the reading that you emphatically disagree with? Pick one or two and explain as *thoroughly* as you can (yeah, you knew that was coming) why you disagree. Be sure to refer to specific bits from our reading to help you clarify Thoreau's position and then take him on.