

NEH Landmarks of American History Teacher Workshop, July 16-21, 2017
Living and Writing Deliberately: The Concord Landscapes and Legacy of Henry Thoreau
Lesson Plan Thread: Living in Society

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Level: Appropriate for 10th-12th grade, preferably in an American Literature course

**TITLE: Applying Transcendental Philosophy Across American Literature Texts:
Close Reading of Paired Passages of Thoreau and Emerson with *The Scarlet Letter*,
The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, and *The Great Gatsby***

Objective:

Students will be able to apply Thoreau's transcendental philosophy to key American novels in my semester-long American Literary Traditions course in order to understand the legacy of Transcendentalism in American thought and generate new ways of seeing the novels. While applying Transcendental philosophy, students will gain skills in both close reading and comparative analysis.

Overall Essential Questions for this approach of paired passages:

Each of the novels we read asks a question that transcendentalists were concerned with: How can one live independently while living in a world with social hierarchy? This unit will explore how Transcendentalism can help us understand Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*.

With regard to developing analytical thinking, we will ask how can a compare/contrast mode of close reading analysis with paired passages from transcendentalism and the novels evoke new meaning, interpretations, and understanding?

LESSON 1: Using Transcendentalism to Introduce and Generate Thinking About *The Scarlet Letter*:

Essential Question: How do Thoreau's themes of "simplicity," "leading lives of quiet desperation," and living "deliberately," along with Emerson's theme of connecting spiritually with nature, apply to *The Scarlet Letter*?

Procedures:

As a way to prepare for a study of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, students will read Emerson's essay "Nature," and read excerpts from "Economy," and the entirety of the chapter "Where I Live, and What I Lived For" from Thoreau's *Walden*. Students will take 1-2 class periods to discuss these essays. For "Nature," students will focus on deciphering Emerson's argument, highlighting passages they choose, with an emphasis on the "transparent eyeball." For *Walden*,

students will focus in particular on the passages associated with the ideas of “simplicity,” what it means to “lead lives of quiet desperation,” and what it means to “live deliberately.”

Then, with this background knowledge in Transcendentalism, students will later be asked to return to these essays at various touchstone points in *The Scarlet Letter* as a way to understand the strains of transcendentalism in Hawthorne’s novel, and their influence on the novel’s message.

Paired Passage Close Reading for *Walden* and *The Scarlet Letter*:

- 1) Compare Thoreau’s description of his house to the description of Hester Prynne’s house.

[Context: Emerson published “Nature” in 1836, Hawthorne published *The Scarlet Letter* in 1850, and Thoreau published *Walden* in 1854. So we are not looking for evidence that Hawthorne was influenced by *Walden*, which would be anachronistic, but we are interested in the thinking we as readers can generate when we examine two passages about two homes in the woods, one real, and one fictional. It is also important to note that while Hawthorne was friends with transcendentalists, and even spent some time at the utopian transcendental community Brook Farm, that he himself cannot be considered a transcendentalist, though the ideas of transcendentalism can be seen in his work. It might be worth asking as an extension activity to what extent are there limitations to his brand of transcendentalism in his novel, given the fact that he was not, himself, a transcendentalist.]

Thoreau passage:

“When first I took up my abode in the woods, that is, began to spend my nights as well as days there, which, by accident, was on Independence Day, or the Fourth of July, 1845, my house was not finished for winter, but was merely a defence against weather-stained boards, with wide chinks, which made it cool at night. The upright white hewn studs and freshly planed door and window casings gave it a clean and airy look, especially in the morning, when its timbers were saturated with dew, so that I fancied that by noon some sweet gum would exude from them. To my imagination it retained throughout the day more or less of this auroral character, reminding me of a certain house on a mountain which I had visited a year before. This was an airy and unplastered cabin, fit to entertain a travelling god, and where a goddess might trail her garments. The winds which passed over my dwelling were such as sweep over the ridges of mountains, bearing the broken strains, or celestial parts only, of terrestrial music. The morning wind forever blows, the poem of creation is uninterrupted; but few are the ears that hear it. Olympus is but the outside of the earth everywhere.”

Guided close reading questions:

In what ways does Thoreau's passage work metaphorically? Why might his mention of "Independence Day" be important? In what ways do the details he offers about his house connect with his theme of "simplicity" and 'living deliberately'? What is significant that "few are the ears that hear" the "terrestrial music" that passes over his "dwelling"? How does Thoreau paint himself, and how does he paint society in this passage?

Now, given your insights into Thoreau's intent as he describes his cabin, turn your attention to Hawthorne's intent as he describes Hester's cabin, and annotate for your ideas:

"Hester Prynne, therefore, did not flee. On the outskirts of the town, within the verge of the peninsula, but not in close vicinity to any other habitation, there was a small thatched cottage. It had been built by an earlier settler, and abandoned, because the soil about it was too sterile for cultivation, while its comparative remoteness put it out of the sphere of that social activity which already marked the habits of the emigrants. It stood on the shore, looking across a basin of the sea at the forest-covered hills, towards the west. A clump of scrubby trees, such as alone grew on the peninsula, did not so much conceal the cottage from view, as seem to denote that here was some object which would fain have been, or at least ought to be, concealed. In this little, lonesome dwelling, with some slender means that she possessed, and by the license of the magistrates, who still kept an inquisitorial watch over her, Hester established herself, with her infant child. A mystic shadow of suspicion immediately attached itself to the spot. Children, too young to comprehend wherefore this woman should be shut out from the sphere of human charities, would creep nigh enough to behold her plying her needle at the cottage-window, or standing in the door-way, or laboring in her little garden, or coming forth along the pathway that led townward; and, discerning the scarlet letter on her breast, would scamper off, with a strange, contagious fear."

In what ways is Hester's experience different from Thoreau's? In what ways might it have the potential to be similar? How is it significant that Hester lives removed from town? In what ways is it significant that she lives close to nature? Look at the language describing the nature. What is significant that her dwelling 'looks' "across a basin of the sea at the forest-covered hills"? In what ways are there both positive and negative connotations to her dwelling? What might we conclude about her character, given the description of her dwelling? How is she portrayed, and how is society portrayed? What can we conclude about the society and its attitudes towards Hester and her cottage?

Broader questions for later in the novel: How do you see strains of “simplicity” in Hester’s approach to life? Compare her to, say, the Governor and his elaborate home, dress, and insistence on pomp and circumstance. Who ‘complicates’ his life in this novel? How so? Look at Dimmesdale and Chillingworth. What is the message about simplicity versus complication in this novel? Who “lives deliberately,” and who lives lives of “quiet desperation”? What is the answer about how one should live, according to Thoreau and Hawthorne?

Extension activity: Recall Emerson’s “transparent eyeball” and apply it to scenes in *The Scarlet Letter*. Does anyone in the novel *see* like a transparent eyeball? When? To what effect? Who does not see like a transparent eyeball? What is that effect? (Suggested scenes: Pearl in the forest, connecting to nature, and able to discern the truth about her mother and the reverend’s relationship; Dimmesdale with his renewed energy in the forest; the townspeople who avoid the forest.

Extension activity: Compare Hester and her home to the characters in Thoreau’s *Walden* chapter “Former Inhabitants,” such as Zilpha, the “colored woman,” whose “little house, where she spun linen for townfolk” “was set on fire by English soldiers,” or the “Irishman” whom Thoreau describes as “Capable of more civil speech than you could well attend to,” but whose home the neighbors “avoided” “as an unlucky castle.” What does Thoreau see in these outsiders who make their dwelling by Walden Pond that others do not see? What does Hawthorne see in Hester that the Puritans don’t see? What can you then conclude about transcendentalism as a result of these inquiries?

Lesson 2

Procedures for using Transcendentalism to Introduce and Generate Thinking about *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*:

Essential Question:

How does Henry David Thoreau, in “Civil Disobedience,” suggest ways to live responsibly and ‘deliberately’ in society?

What effect does Thoreau understand nature to have on society, and vice versa?

How can reading “Civil Disobedience” generate new thinking about Huck’s own struggle in society and with his conscience?

Process: Students will read Thoreau’s essay “Civil Disobedience” and discuss it on its own in advance of reading *Huck*.

Then, as a touchstone during the study of the novel, students can be asked to discuss the following questions:

Does Huck embark on civil disobedience at any point? When? How so? How not? What is at stake for him? What do we learn about morality from watching Huck, an individual, act within society? What do we learn about the forces that influence someone to act morally versus the forces that influence someone to act without conscience? What are Thoreau and Twain arguing about man's responsibility to man?

CLOSE READING: [The following lesson was inspired by Professor James Finley's lecture on "Civil Disobedience," as part of the NEH program. He brought attention to the 'huckleberry party' passage, which in turn prompted me to think about how to connect this to *Huckleberry Finn*.]

Study the passage near the end of "Civil Disobedience" when Thoreau writes:

"It was formerly the custom in our village, when a poor debtor came out of jail, for his acquaintances to salute him, looking through their fingers, which were crossed to represent the grating of a jail window, "How do ye do?" My neighbors did not thus salute me, but first looked at me, and then at one another, as if I had returned from a long journey. I was put into jail as I was going to the shoemaker's to get a shoe which was mended. When I was let out the next morning, I proceeded to finish my errand, and, having put on my mended shoe, joined a huckleberry party, who were impatient to put themselves under my conduct; and in half an hour—for the horse was soon tackled—was in the midst of a huckleberry field, on one of our highest hills, two miles off, and then the State was nowhere to be seen."

Questions: How do you interpret Thoreau heading off to join a "huckleberry party" after his night in jail? Is he negating his social protest from earlier in the essay by going off and having 'fun'? Or, is going off on the huckleberry party *part* of his protest? How can you bring in Thoreau's ideas of 'nature' to make sense of this act? Is nature connected to his radical ideas? Where is the true place for a man in an unjust state? What might be significant about the act of picking 'huckleberries'? Compare such an act to, say, picking cotton? By showing people how to pick huckleberries, what alternative economy does Thoreau model for his readers?

Now study the last page of *Huck*, when he narrates:

"And then Tom he talked along and talked along, and says, le's all three slide out of here one of these nights and get an outfit, and go for howling adventures amongst the Injuns, over in the Territory, for a couple of weeks or two; and I says, all right, that suits me, but I ain't got no money for to buy the outfit, and I reckon

I couldn't get none from home, because it's likely pap's been back before now, and got it all away from Judge Thatcher and drunk it up.

"No, he hain't," Tom says; "it's all there yet—six thousand dollars and more; and your pap hain't ever been back since. Hadn't when I come away, anyhow."

Jim says, kind of solemn: "He ain't a-comin' back no mo', Huck."

I says: "Why, Jim?"

"Nemmine why, Huck—but he ain't comin' back no mo'."

But I kept at him; so at last he says: "Doan' you 'member de house dat was float'n down de river, en dey wuz a man in dah, kivered up, en I went in en unkivered him and didn' let you come in? Well, den, you kin git yo' money when you wants it, kase dat wuz him."

Tom's most well now, and got his bullet around his neck on a watch-guard for a watch, and is always seeing what time it is, and so there ain't nothing more to write about, and I am rotten glad of it, because if I'd a knowed what a trouble it was to make a book I wouldn't a tackled it, and ain't a-going to no more. But I reckon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can't stand it. I been there before.

THE END

Yours truly, Huck Finn"

Questions: Keeping in mind your thoughts on Thoreau at the end of "Civil Disobedience," How do you understand Huck's last act at the end of the novel? Is he rejecting society by 'lighting' "out for the Territory?" Is he abandoning the moral compass he had begun to develop on his journey with Jim? What forces prey on him to force this decision? Is Huck like Thoreau at the end or not? Is he part of a kind of white, masculine fantasy of exploring adventure in the rugged wilderness, as opposed to Thoreau, who likely has a moral purpose in going on the huckleberry party? Or, is Huck failed by a society that makes meaningful connection between whites and blacks impossible? Look at Huck's silence after Jim tells him his Pap has been dead all this time. Think of the implication Huck must realize, here, that Jim withheld this crucial information from Huck. Huck, the trickster, has been duped and betrayed. Is Huck a victim of a society that forces Jim to manipulate Huck into believing he still was running from his abusive Pap, when in fact Jim just needed Huck as a white ally? Is Huck betrayed by Jim *and* by society? What might Twain be arguing about the condition of man in society at this time?

Symbolic Epilogue:

Thoreau knew huckleberries grew wild. How might he be using them symbolically? How might you see Huck's own name as symbolic, given this discussion?

Extension Activity:

In his eulogy for Thoreau, Emerson states:

“Had his genius been only contemplative, he had been fitted to his life, but with his energy and practical ability he seemed born for great enterprise and for command; and I so much regret the loss of his rare powers of action, that I cannot help counting it a fault in him that he had no ambition. Wanting this, instead of engineering for all America, he was the captain of a huckleberry-party. Pounding beans is good to the end of empires one of these days; but if, at the end of years, it is still only beans?”

In what ways might being a “captain of a huckleberry party” be a dig by Emerson? In what ways might it be praise? Which do you think it is? Do you think Huck is a “captain of a huckleberry party,” too?

Extension activity: Time permitting, look at the “white lily” passage from the end of Thoreau’s essay “Slavery in Massachusetts” for discussion on how Thoreau uses symbol to attack slavery. Lead a discussion in Twain’s strategies for attacking slavery and the failure of reconstruction, the point of view from which he wrote the novel.

Lesson 3

Procedures for using Emerson’s Self-Reliance to introduce *The Great Gatsby*:

Students will read and discuss Emerson’s essay “Self Reliance” in advance of reading *Gatsby*.

Then, as a touchstone during the study of the novel, student can be asked to discuss the following questions:

Is it possible to be self-reliant?

Is Rebirth possible?

What forces make self-reliance challenging?

What forces make it possible?

Is anyone self-reliant in *The Great Gatsby*?

What is Fitzgerald saying about self-reliance by the end of the novel?

Students can also think about the *absence* of nature in *The Great Gatsby*, and discuss the materialism Fitzgerald argues has replaced that nature, to disastrous effects.

For a close reading opportunity, look particularly at the last few pages of chapter 9, when Nick recalls the Long Island from the perspective of the first settlers:

“Most of the big shore places were closed now and there were hardly any lights except the shadowy, moving glow of a ferryboat across the Sound. And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes – a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.

Questions: How does language such as “the fresh green breast of the new world” reveal Fitzgerald’s opinion on the role of nature in society? What other words or phrases help argue for nature as an antidote to capitalism?

Find your own passage to pair with *Gatsby*: What would Thoreau have to say about the materialistic drive of the characters in *The Great Gatsby*? Find a quote from *Walden* that Thoreau might have used to offer advice to the characters in *The Great Gatsby*. Find an appropriate passage from Emerson’s “Self Reliance” to pair with *The Great Gatsby*. Explain your choice.

Assessment: Students will write an essay on the final exam at the end of the semester that synthesizes their work on Transcendentalism as applied to these three great American novels.

Topic:

Write an essay that argues how Transcendentalism is essential to understanding the American Literature that follows it, particularly *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and *The Great Gatsby*.

Tips: Narrow your focus to a particular strain of Transcendentalism, such as nature, spirit, Civil Disobedience, or man and woman in society. Use that one thread to apply to the three texts.

In your introduction, make sure to give context to Emerson and Thoreau and the Transcendental Movement in general.

Consider one body paragraph per text. Make sure to refer specifically to Transcendentalism and the novel in question. You may bring in a piece of paper with quotes from Emerson and Thoreau that you think you might like to use as part of your essay.

In your conclusion, wrap up by asserting which novel seems to be most heavily influenced by Transcendental philosophy.

