

Transcendentalist thought in mid-19th century America and how it affects me

Abstract:

Many students of American history are confused by the mid-nineteenth century period, finding it difficult to understand or relate to what life was like during those decades. To many it is a nebulous uncertain period between major historical conflicts. Sandwiched between the Revolutionary War, War of 1812, and the impending Civil War, little seemed to happen of significance other than a growth in territory and avoidance of disunion. Change appeared to be happening under the surface, but it did not have the obvious and enormous social and political upheaval of the Civil War and later Gilded Age.

However, this period marked a blossoming of American art, thought and philosophy, and nowhere is that more apparent than in the Transcendentalist period from the 1830s to 1870s. The objective of this unit is to allow students to understand the major philosophical Transcendentalist thinking at the time, and to relate it to themselves and their experience locally. Transcendentalism is a somewhat scary term, but students will recognize many of its major ideas in their own lives. The writings, philosophies, and material are intricate, rich and difficult to absorb, but so are the lessons and life experiences they go through. Much of the thoughts of that period still resonate strongly today, and go a long way in explaining what it is to be American.

The first set of lessons will provide a background to transcendentalism from a social and historic perspective so that students can identify its characteristics, and gain a basic framework of its influence at the time. The next lessons will introduce Journaling to promote student reflection and writing about their experiences with nature. The last set of lessons will examine individualism versus societal responsibility, how this is reflected in Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience", and other historical developments from its legacy.

Unit Objectives & Duration

Over the course of 12 days of lessons, students will be able to:

- Understand the major philosophical tenets of Transcendentalism
- Learn to construct an argument with supporting text-based evidence
- Interpret and write about what Transcendentalist ideas mean to them personally
- Reflect and record their thinking about Nature, and how is connected to a larger understanding of Transcendentalism
- Gain a place-based and local understanding of how Nature and landscape changes over time
- Use journal writing to internalize and process their thinking about Transcendentalism, their own life thoughts

Outline of Unit

Lessons	Days	Activity/Readings
Lesson 1: What is Transcendentalism	1	Introduction Presentation & Research
Lesson 2: What is Transcendentalism: Finding text-based evidence to support a claim	2	Graphic organizer, pairs support a claim, 30-second speech, handout reading
Lesson 3: What is Transcendentalism: What do these ideas mean to me? Identifying evidence in text	2	Groups of 4, interpret and write personalized responses, use primary source to enrich responses
Lesson 4: My idea of Nature: Journaling	1	Journaling introduction Journal prompt questions Emerson's "Nature" Memories of Nature activity
Lesson 5: Journaling and Observing Nature in your hometown	2	Donahue's excerpt Thoreau's Journal Field Study & Guided Tour Journal responses & questions
Lesson 6: Individualism vs. Societal responsibility	2	1 vs. 1 Table Debate
Lesson 6: Individualism vs. Societal responsibility	1	Civil Disobedience excerpts, graphic organizer & Thoreau's response to table debate
Lesson 6: Individualism vs. Societal responsibility	1	Civil Disobedience, Journal homework response, Thoreau's legacy on history, presentation

Unit: Transcendentalism

Lesson 1: What is Transcendentalism? Research and Presentation

Objective: In the first lesson, students will be introduced to the philosophical roots and major ideas of Transcendentalism.

Procedure: Introductory Word Splash with class to define terms:

A) What is philosophy? (Love of knowledge, define the nature of existence, world of ideas, being and reality, knowledge, truth, nature of God and creation)

B) What differentiates humans from other creatures? (5 senses, transition to definition of Transcendentalism); Listing of major terms/ideas: Individualism, Moral Sense/OverSoul, Self-Reliance, Genius, Idealism, Transcendentalism, Nature, Determinism vs. Rationalism, introduce Plato, Kant

Lesson 2:

What is Transcendentalism? Finding Text-Based Evidence to support a claim

Objective: Students will define a claim, support a claim with evidence

Procedure:

Students find a partner and are given a graphic organizer (below). Read the first of the claims aloud to class. Students write out claim and decide whether they support it or not, based on previous introductory lesson. Poll each group to gauge level of support and why. If answers to why it is supportable are weak, explain the importance of text-based evidence.

Have pairs read the handout, finding evidence in the text that supports their position. Annotate the article with comments and underline the main ideas. Circle words they don't know.

Using the graphic organizer below, pairs write a 30-second speech that restates the claim and states evidence to support it, along with how the evidence supports it. One representative from each pair reads the speech. Students should take notes for supporting evidence they did not find. The process is then repeated for the 2nd claim.

Claim 1): The individual is the most important aspect of Transcendentalist thought.

Claim 2): American Transcendentalist thought relied solely on previous European philosophical thought.

Graphic organizer

Name _____

Based on reading the handout “What is Transcendentalism?,” annotate the article, circle terms you are unfamiliar with, and respond to the claims based on evidence found in the reading.

The first claim is:

The evidence I found to refute/support this claim is:

Explain how the evidence works to prove/disprove the claim:

The second claim is:

The evidence I found to refute/support this claim is:

Explain how the evidence works to prove/disprove the claim:

Text: Reading Handout “What is Transcendentalism?” from A Teacher’s Guide to Transcendentalism, Michael Crim 1997.

Timing/Pacing: Completed responses by groups reviewed at end of class.

Notes: Discuss how to support an argument claim with text-based evidence

Followup Activities: Responses that need more evidence to be completed for homework and turned in the next day. Responses graded based on 3 supporting pieces of evidence per claim. Further assessment via in-group work, presentation of 30-second speeches.

Unit: Transcendentalism

Title: What is Transcendentalism? Lesson Three

Activity: Identifying Evidence in a text, incorporating primary sources into arguments

Objective: Students will interpret and write about Transcendentalist ideas personally and then use text-based evidence to enrich their understanding

Procedure: Activity Term Groups

Students will break into groups of 3-4 each and will be assigned a major Transcendentalist idea (written on chart pages and displayed at each group location). Initially, each group will write in a 2-3 sentence response about what the assigned major idea might mean to them. Each group leader will read their interpretation to the class.

Major ideas

Live Deliberately/SelfKnowledge
Simplify
Individualism
SelfReliance/Learn by Doing
Conformity vs. Genius
Nature

Corresponding Source reading, Thoreau

“Walden”, “I went to the woods...” pg 59
“Walden”, “Simplify, simplify...”
“Walden”, “It is remarkable how... pg 209
“Self-Reliance”, Emerson
“Walden”, “I learned this, at least...” pg209
“Walden”, “Our Village life...” pg 205

Next, a corresponding source reading will be distributed to each Transcendentalist idea group. After reading this, each group will edit and add to their responses using evidence from the text. Responses will again be shared from each group with class, now supported by textual evidence.

Timing/Pacing:

Allow 2-3 minutes for groups to reflect and write an initial response to ideas. Slightly more time (5-6 minutes) to read and incorporate source readings into their second written response.

Text: Corresponding Source readings:

Live Deliberately/SelfKnowledge

From Walden—Henry David Thoreau

“We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by the infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep. I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor. It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue, and so to make a few objects beautiful; but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look, which morally we can do. To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts. Every man is tasked to make his life, even in its details, worthy of the contemplation of his most elevated and critical hour.

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.”

Simplify

From Walden—Henry David Thoreau

“Our life is frittered away by detail. Simplify, simplify, simplify! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumb-nail.”

“Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things. They are but improved means to an unimproved end, an end which it was already but too easy to arrive at.”

“Most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind.”

Individualism

From Walden—Henry David Thoreau

“It is remarkable how easily and insensibly we fall into a particular route, and make a beaten track for ourselves. . . . The surface of the earth is soft and impressible by the feet of men; and so with the paths which the mind travels.”

SelfReliance/Learn by Doing

From Nature—Ralph Waldo Emerson

“Dare to live the life you have dreamed for yourself. Go forward and make your dreams come true.”

“Without ambition one starts nothing. Without work one finishes nothing. The prize will not be sent to you. You have to win it.”

Conformity vs. Genius

From Walden—Henry David Thoreau

“I learned this, at least, by my experiment: that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavours to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. He will put some things behind, will pass an invisible boundary; new, universal, and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him; or the old laws be expanded, and interpreted in his favour in a more liberal sense, and he will live with the license of a higher order of beings. In proportion as he simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex, and solitude will not be solitude, nor poverty poverty, nor weakness weakness. If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.”

Nature

From Walden—Henry David Thoreau

“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 the 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 that 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.”

From Nature—Ralph Waldo Emerson

“I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty. In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in streets or villages. In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature.”

Unit: Transcendentalism

Title: Journaling, Lesson Four

Activity: Journaling

Objective: Students will relate Transcendentalist ideas to their own lives, write reflectively about their experiences with Nature and how those might connect with Transcendentalist philosophy.

Procedure:

Students will bring their Journal notebook to class where the Nature Journal exercises will be previewed. This Journal should be a place where students can reflect, react, and write about their experiences and reactions to Transcendentalist ideas. It will store several different types of Journal entries:

- Nature Journal entries (3 weekly entries due on the Monday of each week)
- Excerpt reading Journal entries (both homework and in-class)
- Field Study Journal responses (during field study trip)

Students will keep a weekly journal (similar to Janet Burne's string journal) in which they'll observe nature, write down their observations and explore their own relationship with nature. They can choose a favorite spot in their yard or in a park where they'll spend an uninterrupted 20 minutes observing and reflecting about what they experience. Write freely in prose after these observations, and entries should be a minimum of 2 pages in length. There won't be any rubrics as to style and content, but you should strive to make these a personal reflection that goes beyond simply describing the outside spot you have chosen. Take the small observation of nature and expand it to a larger theme in life.

The following questions can help guide you when writing these Nature journals:

- Where have I chosen my spot to observe and write from?
- Are there any memories or events associated with this spot?
- What do I notice, sounds, sights, smells?
- What is the smallest detail I can notice?
- As I continue to return to this same spot weekly, are there changes to it that I notice?
- What other thoughts enter my head as I reflect nature? Where and on what topics does my mind wander to?
- As I observe the details in nature, do other thoughts and worries enter or fade from my mind?
- What thoughts do I have about Thoreau's writings and reflections on Nature?

In-class Journal assignment

Choose one of the major ideas of Transcendentalism that we were introduced to previously (major ideas still listed on chart paper). You cannot choose the same idea that your group already worked on. Respond in your Journal to the following prompts:

- What is your definition of the idea?
- How does it relate to your own life?
- What experiences/memories/events illustrate this idea to you?
- Do you agree/disagree with Thoreau's interpretation and why/why not?

Followup Activities: Memories of Nature

What is your first memory of Nature? You may jot notes about it, or sketch a drawing that represents it. Share your memory of Nature with the class.

4 quadrant drawing:

First memory of Nature

early childhood memory of Nature

Teen Years memory of Nature

Future showing where you hope to live or do in Nature

Timing/Pacing

Allow enough time so that each student who wishes can share their favorite Nature experience. This activity usually opens up the class to each other.

Unit: Transcendentalism

Title: Journaling and Observing Nature in your Hometown, Lesson Five

Activity: Journaling and Place-based Guided Tour of Thoreau's travels

Objective: Through historical text, students will analyze the changing local economies and how these changes effected the local natural landscape. They will gain an understanding of what the landscape looked like during the Transcendentalist period, and compare that to our current time. Walking where Thoreau walked, they'll gain a place-based understanding of nature, changing economies, and communities through a guided Field Study.

Procedure:

Prior homework reading excerpt of Brian Donahue's Sustainable Husbandry in Colonial Concord: Homework response to guiding questions for Journal entries:

- Why was Concord and local farm economies driven to animal husbandry by the mid-nineteenth century?
- What did the local landscape look like in 1850? How much of it was forest? How had this occurred?
- How might this landscape have affected local champions of Nature like Henry David Thoreau?
- How do you see our current economy effecting Nature?

Check for homework responses in Journals, ask for specific readings.

Show 19th century portrait of Concord Farming (source unknown):



Background notes for discussion of portrait:

From the English settlement of Concord into the 19th century, farming was an almost universal occupation, practiced by the town's minister and other educated men as well as by humbler folk. Crops were raised for personal consumption and for trade. But during the 19th century, agriculture underwent tremendous change. At its outset, New Englanders worked the land essentially as generation after generation had before them. Over the course of the century, however, the West was explored and developed, diminishing New England's agricultural importance and draining manpower from the region. The railroad, which came through Concord in 1844, opened up new markets and allowed easy transportation of products -- particularly wood -- that were difficult to haul in quantity by wagon or too perishable or delicate for traditional modes of transportation. By the end of the century, new crops had edged out the old staples and new techniques and tools had

been introduced. Local farming had to adapt to market needs, dairy and animal husbandry were becoming paramount and diversification of crops lessened. More land was plowed and cleared to raise hay to feed cattle, which then could be shipped to market. By 1850 only 11% of Concord was forest.

Ask for students to make any connections between what they see in portrait and to what the Donahue reading discussed. Conclusion – in Thoreau’s time, the woods were disappearing.

Students should update Journal responses to questions with new information.

Field Study & Guided Tour

Activity: Field Trip, Lesson Five continued

Objective: Students will visit the same woods in Boxborough MA where Thoreau spent time. They will describe their experiences in Nature, assess how landscape has changed, predict how it may change in the future with their Journal responses. There will be readings and a list of questions distributed during the field trip to encourage Journal responses.

In November 1860, Henry Thoreau visited Inches Woods in Boxborough: “...this noble stand of oak wood. I doubt if there is a finer one in Massachusetts,” as was noted in his journals. The discussion will include maps and site photographs. Accompaniment and narration from Alan Rohwer, curator of the Boxborough Historical Society, will be arranged. Plots of Thoreau’s exact path through Boxborough will be shown and will form the basis of the field trip.

Students should:

- bring questions they have about the local landscape and Thoreau’s time in Boxborough woods to the trip.
- bring their journals as there will be a 20-minute silent reflection time to ponder Nature and make entries
- read the below Text for Field Study handouts to answer:
 - 1) Based on what you see and notice around you, what are your favorite aspects of these woods?
 - 2) Identify the two major types of trees currently in these woods. Based on the readings, how have these woods changed from Thoreau’s time? Based on what he described then, how are things different now? the same?
 - 3) Based on what you know of Thoreau, would he approve of these changes?
 - 4) How do you imagine these woods will be like 100 years from now? How would you like the woods to be 100 years from now?
 - 5) Thoreau imagines that he can “realize how this country appeared when it was discovered. Such were the oak woods which the Indian treaded hereabouts” What aspects of these older woods is he speaking about? Does being in Nature allow you to see things from a long time ago? Why or why not?

Text for Field Study

"The handsomest thing I saw in Boxboro was this noble stand of oak wood. I doubt if there is a finer one in Massachusetts. Let her keep it a century longer, and men will make pilgrimages to it from all parts of the country..." "Though a great many of those white oaks of the Inches Wood branch quite as low and are as spreading as pasture oaks, yet generally they rise up in stately columns thirty to fifty feet, diminishing very little... When, in the midst of this great oak wood, you look around, you are struck by the great mass of gray-barked wood that fills the air... consisting of sturdy trees from one to three and even four feet in diameter, whose interlacing branches form a canopy... A peculiarity of this, as compared with much younger woods, is that there is little or no underwood and you walk freely in every direction, though in the midst of a dense wood. You walk, in fact, under the wood... Seeing this, I can realize how this country appeared when it was discovered. Such were the oak woods which the Indian treaded hereabouts."

Thoreau's Journals, pp. 223-249, Houghton-Mifflin, 1906.
Boxborough Historical Society

Thoreau returns on November 16, 1860 proceeding "first from Harvard turnpike [Mass. Ave.] at where Guggins Brook leaves it... due north along near the edge of the old wood... to the cross road, a strong mile [to Depot Rd]. He proceeds along Depot Road describing the woods and trees as he proceeds. He ends up eventually walking "across open land to the high hill northeast of Boxboro Center [off Picnic Street]. He finds: "In this neighborhood are many very large chestnuts... "beyond a new house, 13 11/12 feet in circumference..." plus other specimens. "These nine (or thirteen) specimens are evidently the relics of one chestnut wood of which a part remains and makes the northeast part of Inches Woods..." These were remarkable trees which now only remain in Thoreau's writings. Any of these which survived the ax would have fallen to disease earlier in this century.

Thoreau's Journals, pp. 223-249, Houghton-Mifflin, 1906.

Handout:

The Great Meadow: Sustainable Husbandry in Colonial Concord, Brian Donahue
Pages 11-12.

Unit: Transcendentalism

Title: Individualism versus Societal responsibility, Lesson Six

Activity: 1 vs 1 Table Debate

Objective: Students will be able to quickly defend a position assigned to them in a 30-second speech. This exercise will stimulate any prior knowledge on the subject and stimulate interest. Both sides of a controversy will be argued (with perhaps a rebuttal from the opposing speaker). Students will gain confidence in arguing a position in front of a peer, and can later work up to debating in front of larger groups. Students will also learn to provide evidence to support a claim and make the argument stronger. Students may also create counterarguments that weaken the opposing counterclaim.

Claims:

- A. 1st Claim: The Individual is always more important than society...
- B. 1st Counterclaim: The good of the whole society is more critical than the whims of an Individual...
- A. 2nd Claim: The laws of the state should be obeyed, as they are constructed by majority and the consent of the governed...
- B. 2nd Counterclaim: Individuals should resist unfairness and wrongs, no matter where they are...

Procedure:

Class is divided into pairs, each partner identifies self as either A or B. Each pair has sets of corresponding cards so that A will have the first claim and partner B will have the counterclaim. Students may each have 20 seconds to rebut after each speech. Set timer so pairs stay on task. Encourage students to jot down bullet points on the graphic organizer below to support or refute a claim. The next round and set of cards should correspond so that A has the second claim and B has the second counterclaim.

There is no winning or speeches in front of the class, and presentation and rebuttal is restricted to the partner.

Graphic Organizer - 1 vs 1 Table Debate

1st Claim

Evidence to support 1st Claim:

1.

2.

1st Counter Claim

Evidence to support 1st Counter Claim:

1.

2.

2nd Claim

Evidence to support 2nd Claim:

3.

4. _____

2nd Counter Claim

Evidence to support 2nd Counter Claim:

3. _____

4. _____

Followup Activity:

Read Thoreau's Civil Disobedience handout excerpts. Now imagine you are Henry David Thoreau. Using evidence found in the text, write Thoreau's response to Claim 1 (e.g. The individual is always more important than society...).

Do you agree with Thoreau? Why or why not?

Write Thoreau's possible response to the Counterclaim 1. Include textual evidence where possible. Do you agree with him?

Repeat for 2nd Claim and Counterclaim

Text:

Civil Disobedience, handout excerpts pages 6-9, 18; graphic organizer

Journaling Exercise for homework:

Read entire piece on Civil Disobedience, 1-18.

Respond to these questions in your Journal, based on your readings of Thoreau and your own views:

1. Always follow the rules and obey the law, that's what parents and teachers usually say to you. What does Thoreau say about this? Why?
2. Do you agree with Thoreau's claim that the government which governs least is better? Why or why not?
3. Would it be good to have a government that governs not at all? Why?
4. What was happening historically at Thoreau's time that led him to believe that revolution was a possible course?
5. What moral obligation does he believe every citizen has? Does this apply to your own life? How?
6. Why does Thoreau believe a minority should achieve its ends? Under what circumstances is that okay?
7. What is more important: the individual, the citizens as a whole, or the government? According to Thoreau? According to society? According to you?

In class discussions, we'll review these questions and share Journal entries. PowerPoint presentation will connect Thoreau's legacy in the nonviolence movement (Ghandi, Martin Luther King), civil rights movement, and antiwar movement of the 1960s.

Grading System

Lesson One, Two, Three: What is Transcendentalism?

	<u>%</u>
Annotation of handout	10
Graphic Organizer completion	15
Presentation of 30-second speech	15
Activity Term Group responses	30
Incorporating primary sources into responses	<u>30</u>
	Quiz grade

Lesson Four: Journaling

Nature Journal entry 1 (after Lesson 1)	33 ¹ / ₃
Nature Journal entry 2 (after Lesson 3)	33 ¹ / ₃
Nature Journal entry 3 (after Lesson 6)	<u>33</u> ¹ / ₃
	Test grade

Lesson Five: Place-based Journaling

Excerpt reading Journal response (Lesson 5)	33 ¹ / ₃
Field Study Journal response (Lesson 5)	33 ¹ / ₃

Lesson Six: Civil Disobedience Journal (Lesson 6)

	<u>33</u> ¹ / ₃
	Test grade

Links to Massachusetts History and Social Science Curriculum Framework

Reading of Primary Source Documents.

Lesson Three incorporating source readings into responses, Lesson Five “Thoreau Journals”, Lesson Six “Civil Disobedience”

Show connections, causal and otherwise, between particular historical events and ideas and larger social, economic, and political trends and developments.

Lesson Two finding text-based evidence to support a claim

Distinguish between long-term and short-term cause and effect relationships.

Lesson Five place-based Journaling on excerpt reading

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