

WRITERS & THEIR WORLDS:

**A JOURNEY INTO THE LANDSCAPES
OF WORDSWORTH, THOREAU, & WHITMAN**

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Writers & Their Worlds: An Abstract

This curriculum unit is sculpted and woven together to reveal a single key truth about the literary world: writers are bonded – regardless of their disparate visions – to the worlds that minted them. This is to say, quite simply, that the environments and settings, which coat writers as they grow into their role as artists, *do* have a major impact upon their work. Whether it is the fog-dipped streets which lace every crevice of Dickens’ London or the pastoral swathes of forest which pock of the poetry of Spenser, the power of landscape is clearly evident as a force revealing the deeper thematic threads of literary texts. And it is for this undeniable reason that students should cull the full implications of this dynamic – *place impacts people, people give shape to place*. This unit, delineated

through four lessons, will help young scholars access how this premise is fully realized through the study of the work of the following writers: William Wordsworth, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman.

Why these artists? What firm connection can be stitched between an English poet, a Massachusetts transcendentalist, and a largely self-published American poet? A two-fold answer can deal with this question. Foremost, these writers were all exceptionally aware of the landscapes around them and how such locales played an active role in their work and lives. Additionally, these men *did* inform each other's visions (though, of course, not in a chronological fashion) – Wordsworth's awareness of the natural world as a literary subject was certainly shared by Thoreau, and Thoreau's keen observational skills were equally emulated in a more poetically hyperbolic manner by the verse of Whitman. Hence, the grouping of these artists highlights a workable symmetry. As for the broad-stroke specifics of the unit, the lessons will be divided along three segments, one for each artist. The following essential questions will drive the lessons for these segments:

- Wordsworth: What does it mean to be a trailblazer? How does one achieve doing a task/endeavor in a new way?
- Thoreau: What does it mean to truly observe? What skills are necessary to be observant?
- Whitman: How does one blend observation with new experience? How does this dynamic craft a person's voice and vision?

Duration & Unit Objectives

Duration: This unit can be taught over a 3-5 four week time period, depending on the grade or ability level of the students. The unit would work as a centerpiece of an American Literature course, yet could equally fit into an interdisciplinary model (American Studies, Humanities, or even World Lit.)

Unit Objectives:

- To enhance the cultural literacy of students through their exposure to the writings of prominent British and American writers.
- To provide students with a deeper understanding of naturalist writing, as well as cultivating engagement with contemporary environmental issues.
- To foster students' awareness of 'place' as a construct – that is, to develop a better of understanding of the history and character of the worlds they inhabit, to be able to discern which forces influence the evolution of a locale, and – most importantly – to develop observational skills necessary to view landscapes around them.
- To expose students to a variety of creative, expository, and analytical writing modes:
 - Journaling
 - The analytical short response

- Process writing
 - Descriptive writing
- To promote various modes of differentiation and literary discourse (Socratic seminar, fish-bowling, writing workshops, use of multimedia)

Unit Outline

- I. Lesson One: Wordsworth, the Lyricist of the Landscape.
- A. Readings: “Three Years She Grew,” “The World is Too Much With us,” “Lines Written in Early Spring,” “Composed Upon Westminster Bridge, Sept. 3, 1802.” (Completed as prep before unit begins)
 - B. Activator: “Blind Sketch in-class Activity” (Class one)
 - C. In-Class Discussion: “Roving Socratic Seminar” (Class two)
 - D. Homework Assignment/Assessment: “All Things New & Novel”
 - E. Completion/Turn-in of Journaling Assignment or Creative Writing Dialogue. (Class three – completion of first week of unit)
- II. Lesson Two: Thoreau, the King of All He Sees
- A. Readings: “Walking” and selections from *Walden* (“Where I Lived, and What I Lived for,” “Solitude,” “The Ponds,” & “Spring”. . . completed as homework over a three day period + weekend)
 - B. Activator: “Smashed Mug Observation Activity” (Class six – after reading break + weekend)

- C. In-Class Discussion/Activity: “Group Work: ‘Topic Tag’” (Class seven)
- D. Homework Assignment/Assessment (long term differentiated project): Choice of the following: “String Journaling,”¹ “Multimedia Research Option: ‘Understanding Place’ ” or Nature Sketches w/Written Commentaries”² (Class eight/end of week two . . .projects due two weeks *after* culmination of the unit)

III. Lesson Three: Whitman, Singer of Self

- A. Readings: *Song of Myself* (sections 1-10 . . .completed as homework over a two day period for class ten)
- B. Activator: “ ‘Who am I’ Game” (Class ten)
- C. In-Class Discussion/Activity: “Theatrical Presentations: Uncle Walt’s Coming over for Dinner” (Class ten & eleven)
- D. Homework Assignment/Assessment: “Original ‘Songs of Self’: Poems, musical/visual composition, or brief ‘This I Believe’ essay. (Four academic days given to complete one of these options: Due for Class fifteen. . .this marks the end of week three)

IV Lesson Four: Reflections

- A. Prewriting work for prompt: How do these three artists/ visions coalesce? Differ? How do their visions connect with your own sense of place? (Class fifteen)
- B. Reflective Essay Test (Class sixteen . . .completion of unit)

¹ Created via lessons presented by J. Burne, Reading High School, MA.

² Created via lessons presented by C.W. Walker

Lesson Frameworks

➤ **Wordsworth, Lyricist of the Landscape**

Premise:

The central focus in surveying some of the works of the Romantic poet, William Wordsworth, is to garner within students two cornerstones of the poet's vision: His proclivity to trail blaze as a poet (his work broke established boundaries for the form and function of poetry), and his tendency to ground his new vision not in classical antiquity or allusions (like many of his predecessors), but in the natural world around him. Hence, not only was Wordsworth breaking the functionality of poetic rhythms (i.e. writing in blank verse), he was also one of the first writers to understand the power of place – that is, the very tones and textures of landscape, vista, and locale were ripe material for poetic fodder! The readings herein all express Wordsworth's connection to the ground he walked upon, the sights he beheld, and the sounds he absorbed.

The first portion of this unit will highlight these themes and ultimately connect them with the visions of Thoreau and Whitman – artists who borrowed some of these sensibilities, even as they made them uniquely their own.

Activator:

“Blind Sketching Activity” – For this hook, students (2-3) will be asked to volunteer to approach the dry erase board. Then, with eyes blindfolded, they will individually and sequentially be asked to draw specific shapes on the board (i.e. a tree/school bus/cat) without knowing the identity of their visual subjects. The rest of the class will verbally guide each student in terms of how they should render the subjects, although their visual cues should not reveal the identities of the subjects. Getting these drawings correct, without the use of students’ eyes, is a truly challenging, yet highly entertaining, endeavor. Cat heads become amorphous blobs, tree branches transform into chaotic blotches, and school buses are etched as haphazard rectangles not fit for the road!

But the idea herein is not to depict subjects with impressive detail – instead, the goal is to tackle a task in a new and fresh way. Trying to draw an ordinary subject without the basic use of sight hurls students into the direction of being unorthodox – they are on essentially new footing. Just as Wordsworth was “seeing’ the world in a new and careful manner, students here are forced, albeit in a lighter way, to engage with the world around them in an unconventional fashion. And it is this step that serves as a good introduction to the thematic threads of Wordsworth’s poetry.

In-class Activity:

Roving Socratic Seminar – After reading Wordsworth’s poems, students will review their content by participating in a Socratic seminar that will follow the following parameters:

- Five pupils will join the center of the room to ignite conversation while the rest of the class silently listens to the arc of the conversation.
- After five-minute intervals new students may “tap” into the conversation by moving toward the center circle and relieving a fellow student.
- Every student, at some point, must enter the roving discussion and contribute at least one comment.
- The instructor will spark debate/conversation when discussion lags by focusing upon key target points – Wordsworth’s depiction of nature, his use of poetic conventions, his pioneering of blank verse, his evocation of place, and his ability to conjure atmospheric details in his verse.

Upon completion of the seminar, assigned recorders will summarize what the key talking points were of the class discussion. This activity serves to not only review the content of Wordsworth’s poems, but also to set up and frame the evening’s writing assessment for this lesson.

Assessment: See assignment # 1 in the “Materials” section of this unit.

➤ **Thoreau, the king of all he sees.**

Premise:

Leaping from Wordsworth to Thoreau is an easy movement – despite some of their obvious differences (nationality, writing genres). Both writers' vision is deeply embedded to the physical world – especially the role of the natural, and even pastoral, landscape. Why then Wordsworth before Thoreau?

Especially when the latter artist certainly delved even more deeply into the study of ecology and the mechanisms fueling the environment? The answer is simple: Wordsworth (and to a lesser extent Keats) was one of the first major writers to elevate the natural place as a subject which can function wholly on its own terms – that is, nature in his work did not serve as a backdrop for love poetry, or simply to temporarily conjure an image; rather, Wordsworth detailed the places around him because they, on their very own terms, deserved detailing. Rivers, forests, and even cathedrals – these subjects were beautiful to behold and conjure.

Thoreau, while not always aiming for such poetic elevation, was clearly also concerned with understanding the locales which he saw, smelled, heard, and touched. And, to a greater extent than Wordsworth, Thoreau was the more expansive observer. While Wordsworth proffered stanzas, Thoreau compiled hundreds of journal entries about nature. Wordsworth gives us sonnets,

Thoreau the tome of *Walden*. The transcendentalist's poetic sensibilities were also more firmly married to a keen scientific comprehension of the physical world. And it is this latter attribute – Thoreau's supreme observational skills – that will fuel this second lesson of the unit.

Activator:

“The smashed mug” activity – For this hook, students will initially be asked to describe an ordinary mug -- its shape, color, and texture. A simple list of observations will be highlighted upon the dry erase board. Typically, students will offer very sound, though not quite dynamic, observations.

After 5-10 minutes of brainstorming observations, the instructor will then – without warning – safely smash this mug into several pieces (this usually elicits some shock, but also engagement, among students). This action will distort the conception of what a mug looks like or conjures for students. The class will now once again describe the shards of mug. These pieces now lend themselves to more sophisticated and metaphoric descriptions since the shapes no longer resemble a cup, but now a wide swathe of possibilities: The moon? An ear? A sword?

The key concept herein is that students must now carefully and creatively observe what they see. An ordinary object, one that they previously gave little

attention to, now must be transformed into something more expansive.
Observation and creativity are being tested throughout this activator.

In-class Activity

“Topics” Group Work – To review the thematic concepts strewn throughout Thoreau’s writing, students will articulate their understanding of the assigned reading through a topics-paced group work project. Students will:

- Be divided into teams of 4-6 members
- Be assigned thematic topics for each individual group– “depiction of the environment,” “the writer’s voice,” and “transcendentalist thought.”
- Collectively detail as much information regarding each topic
- Report orally back to the whole class each group’s findings.

This entire activity allows students to synthesize what they know about Thoreau, and to do so in a manner that is different from the previous lesson (Socratic seminar).

Assessment:

See assignment sheet # 2 in the “Materials” section of this unit.

➤ **Whitman, singer of self**

Premise:

Walt Whitman rounds off the trinity of place-based writers for this unit. What dimension does Whitman bring to this thematic progression? While Wordsworth poetically highlights the beauty of place and Thoreau teaches audiences how to observe the nuances of place, Whitman adds his own variable to an appreciation of place: He forcefully expounds upon the relationship between place *and* person. More specifically, Whitman draws out the uniquely American texture of locale. He uses his poetic gifts to flesh out the delineations of place (like Wordsworth); however, within Whitman's vision resides not the passive or distanced poetic observer, but rather an active 'singer' who forcefully celebrates setting and a person's role within this setting.

In *Song of Myself*, he lauds the majesty of American milieus – the bustling Hudson River, the rippling Appalachian Mountains, the ruggedness and serenity of the New England coastline. And he parallels such places with an equally impassioned celebration of the splendor of people – the New York merchant, the southern slave, the rural farmer. Whitman truly was the poet of democracy, but what solidifies his importance in terms of the thematic currents of this unit is his recognition that place defines our national character. This interplay serves as the perfect concluding element for the unit: The places where we live, travel, and witness define us.

Activator:

“Who am I” game – For this activator, students will arrive to class to see poster boards coating different corners of the room. These posters will have varying identity labels, including “Teenager,” “Sharon resident,” “Boy/girl,” “American”, and “New Englander.” Class members will be issued markers and given an abridged amount of time (no more than seven minutes) to instantly cake these posters with content points which they feel best describes and defines being a member of each label (i.e. for the “Teenager” label, students may detail how they love cell phones/iPods, hate homework, love the beach, want more freedom). The idea herein, in quick fashion, is to gauge the class’ sense of what constitutes their various identities. This activator instantly creates “talking points” as an entryway into the work of Whitman.

Whitman, after all, is essentially concerned with the elements of identity (What is American? What specific details define this national construct?), and place looms as one of the primary facets of constructing or impacting this identity. This activator allows for students to consider the components – including place – which defines their own identities.

In-class Activity:

“Uncle Walt’s coming to Dinner” – For this lesson, the primary review method for assessing young scholars’ understanding of the reading (*Song of Myself*) will revolve around theatrical presentations; hence, each lesson aims for differentiation (lesson one: discussion; lesson two: group work; lesson three: performance skills).

Students will be divided into four groups and will have two full class sessions to create, and ultimately perform, a theatrical sketch built upon the following familiar premise: “If you could invite any five people from history to dinner, whom would you select?” Students will tackle this very premise, although one of the guests *must* be Whitman, and at least a portion of the skit must revolve around the major themes residing in his poetry. Beyond this requirement, however, students will have creative license to theatrically see what happens when diverse minds cross paths. Imagine Richard Nixon, Elvis Presley, Michael Jordan, Hilary Clinton, and Whitman sitting around a dinner table and chatting. What would constitute their chatter? Would they accept or reject Whitman’s ideals? This activity allows for students to creatively express themselves, while also keeping them grounded within the world of Whitman.

Assessment:

See assignment sheet # 3 in the “Materials” section of this unit.

➤ **Final Lesson: Synthesis**

This quick lesson is simply built around the notion of allowing students to weave together the elements of the three writers' visions in a coherent and useful manner. On the penultimate day of the unit, students will be given a writing prompt (*How do the ideas of these three writers shape your own understanding of place?*) and will be allowed to brainstorm ideas about how to answer and write upon this prompt. Any prewriting format will be accepted (outline, list, Cornell/Harvard method, principle thought diagram) for the lesson's final assessment: A timed essay that will be given the following class period. Students may bring their notes to class and even render an initial draft for homework if they feel this will help them compose during the final class. The idea herein is for them to reflect upon what they learned, as opposed to fixating upon a grade.

Lesson Materials

Assignment Sheet # 1 – All things New & Novel

Who: Students in Mr. Heller's _____ class.

What: They must complete the following assignment tasks:

- Consider the many tasks and activities we complete every day of our lives – perhaps millions of rote actions are taken every day, the same way, without a single reflective thought about *why* or *how* we take such actions.
- For the purposes of this exercise, choose a minor or major endeavor you routinely tackle (brushing your teeth, playing an instrument, making a cup of tea, completing homework). Consider the way in which you normally complete this task. What are your typical steps? Actions?
- Now, rethink these steps and approach this endeavor in a completely new way – that is, literally reshuffle the fashion in which you conventionally approach this task. If you normally come home from school and take a nap, do homework, and then chat with friends . . . now try finding a quiet locale and solely reading a book or writing a letter. If you typically snack of potato chips, now try carrots and dip. Do something in a completely new way.
- Finally, it's time to assess what this new approach felt like. In a brief journal entry, detail a few paragraphs that highlight how this new imagining felt. Was it easy to mix things up? A challenge?

Where: Students may choose any setting to complete this assignment.

When: Complete your “new” task tonight, as well as completing your journal entry.

The written record of the experience is due during the *next* class.

Why: Perhaps the greatest thematic thread evident in Wordsworth's poetry is the notion he is trying out a new and novel approach to writing, and envisioning the world he witnesses around him with a fresh perspective.

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Assignment Sheet # 2 – Major Assessment (Differentiated Project on Place)

For this assignment, students will be given the option of completing any *one* of the following projects:

- **String Journaling** – Over a period of several weeks, students will keep a record of observations about their string “territories”. The idea is to pay close attention to the shifting terrain, the effects of weather, the spaces within and immediately beyond the string, and any other factor that impresses upon the locale. Like Thoreau, pay close attention and detail observations in an expansive manner. Use figurative language, shifting P.O.V, and any other literary convention necessary to bring to “life” the spaces you are observing. Upon the completion of your journal, also include a synthesizing entry that expounds upon any of the larger thematic notions which were revealed throughout the composing of this journal.

- **Multimedia Research Project** – Over the course of several weeks, students will choose a local small-scale setting (a park, business, street corner) to bring to historical “life” – that is, students will conduct primary and secondary research about their subject, tracing the history and evolution of the place. How or why was the place created/founded/designed? What did it once look like? Why did it change? Who were the people affiliated with the setting? Ultimately, students should present their findings in multimedia format (United Streaming, Flip, or YouTube video, PowerPoint Presentation, blog diary) with an included works cited page. Like many of Thoreau’s evocations of parts of Concord, the idea herein is to breathe some life into those ordinary places we unreflectively see or pass by every day.

- **Nature Journal** – Over the course of several weeks, students will create a nature journal, a record of all they witness in a natural environment. Using many of C. Walker’s sketching techniques, observers should compile a full visual tapestry of the natural scenes they encounter. Written commentary should enhance these renderings, although they may be of any variety: analytical, expository, descriptive, or creative. The idea is simply to echo one of Thoreau’s key attributes – move within the natural world and pay attention to all you encounter!

For all three of these options, the same intent is evident: Understanding the nuances of Thoreau’s vision.

Assignment Sheet # 3 – Original Songs of Myself

For this assignment, students will compose original songs, or renderings, of their own artistic selves. Students may choose from the following options:

- Write an original poem that, like Whitman’s intent throughout *Leaves of Grass*, highlights the persona of the poet. Students may choose any classroom appropriate style (blank, free, or structured verse) to give “voice” to a poetic work that reveals a political, social, or personal worldview. The sole requirement is that these poems reveal a dimension of the author.

- Paint or musically record an original work that highlights the persona of the artist. Similar to option # 1, the intent is to give an artistic direction to some dimension of the artist.

- Listen to 3-5 online recordings of NPR’s *All Things Considered* “This I Believe” essays. Now, compose your own “This I Believe” essay on any classroom appropriate topic that highlights an aspect of your vision. Students will need a written record of the essay (following MLA guidelines), as well as a voice recording of the essay.

The lengths of all of these options are open-ended; however, they are all due within five academic school days.

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Grading/Assessment Guidelines

Weighting:

Assignment # 1 = 10 pts.

Assignment # 2 = 50 pts.

Assignment # 3 = 20 pts.

Assignment # 4 (reflective essay) = 10 pts.

Rubrics:

This unit will rely on the NEASC approved school-wide rubrics which MHS faculty uses to assess a wide range of learning

standards. For the purposes of this project, three rubrics would be employed:

- Writing rubric for the formal writing assignments.
 - Reading rubric to gauge understanding of the unit's reading assignments.
 - Oral Presentation rubric for those aspects of the unit which rely upon presentations and/or discussion.
- **Rubrics connected as email attachments.**

Appendix

I. Link(s) to Massachusetts State Frameworks/Standards

The lessons, assessments, and in-class activities connect with, but are not necessarily limited to, the following state standards:

Language Strands:

- Students will pose questions, listen to others, and contribute their own ideas to group discussions to acquire new knowledge.

(2)

Reading and Literature Strand:

- Students will identify the basic facts and main ideas in a text and use them as the basis for interpretation. (8)
- Students will identify, analyze, and apply knowledge of the themes, structure, and elements of poetry and provide evidence from the text to support their understanding. (14)

Composition Strand:

- Students will write with a clear focus, coherent organization and sufficient detail. (19)
- Students will write for different audiences and purposes. (20)
- Students will organize ideas in writing in a way that makes sense for their purpose. (23)

Media Strand:

- Students will design and create coherent media productions (audio, video) with a clear controlling idea, adequate detail, and appropriate consideration of audience, purpose, and medium. (27)

Works Cited

Abrams, H.. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. 5th Edition. New York: W.W. Norton Company, 1986. Print.

Thoreau, Henry David. *Civil Disobediance and Other Essays*. Minneola, NY: Dover Publications, 1993. Print.

Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1997. Print

Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass*. Rutland, VT: Everyman, 1994. Print.

Writing Assessments Rubric (from NEASC school-wide rubrics)

Category	Exceeds Standard	Meets Standard	Does Not Meet Standard
Clarity of Purpose	Main topic or theme is evident, presented in a clear, concise, engaging and powerful way.	Main topic or theme is evident, presented in a clear, concise way.	Main topic or theme is non-existent/unclear/unrecognizable.
Quality of Information	Information clearly and consistently relates to the main topic/theme.	Most information relates to the main topic/theme.	Information relates to the main topic/theme, but irrelevant information replaces necessary content.
Closure or Resolution	Conclusion is strong, engaging; leaves reader with a real sense of the author's message.	Conclusion is recognizable and relates to main idea. No new topics are introduced.	Conclusion is not clear, is missing, or introduces a new topic.
Organization	Ideas are unified, coherent and fluid; information conveyed in a logical, engaging manner. Organization enhances the message.	Most ideas are unified; information conveyed in a logical manner, but organization could be improved. Although organization could be improved, overall the organization does not detract from the message.	Lack of organization detracts from the message.
Style	Sentences are varied in length and structure. Author's voice and diction are appropriate for assignment guidelines.	Most sentences are varied in structure and length. Author's voice is generally clear. Diction is appropriate but lacks sophistication.	Inadequate variety in sentence structure. Author's voice is sometimes unclear. Vocabulary is sometimes simplistic.
Mechanics	Spelling, punctuation, grammar and usage do not distract the reader.	Minor errors in spelling punctuation, grammar and usage exist, but do not distract the reader.	Errors in spelling, punctuation, grammar and usage distract the reader.

Active Reading Rubric

Category	Exceeds Standard	Meets Standard	Does Not Meet Standard
Understands main idea	Correctly identifies key concepts without reference to the material.	Correctly identifies key concepts with reference to the material.	Demonstrates inconsistent ability to identify key concepts even with reference to the material.
Understands specialized language of the text	Utilizes strategies to ensure their own comprehension when reading.	Through instruction is able to find meaning of new vocabulary and concepts.	With instruction does not identify the meaning of new vocabulary and concepts.
Identifies opinions	Consistently and correctly articulates how abstractions, inferences, and bias are used in the writing	Through instruction, articulates how abstractions, inferences, and bias are used in the text.	Does not articulate how abstractions, inferences, and bias are used in the text.
Interprets and analyzes	Consistently and independently interprets reading selections. Consistently shows ability to connect current reading to past reading or knowledge.	Through instruction, interprets reading selections. Through instruction is able to connect current reading to past reading and/or knowledge.	Has difficulty interpreting reading selections. Has difficulty connecting current reading to past reading and/or knowledge.
applies concepts	Accurately applies information, makes inferences, and forms opinions about selections read.	Applies information, makes inferences, and forms opinions about selections read.	Has difficulty applying information, making inferences, and forming opinions about selections read.

Oral Presentation Rubric

Category	Exceeds Standard	Meets Standard	Does Not Meet Standard
Content	<p>Demonstrates thorough preparation by providing relevant information.</p> <p>Exemplary development demonstrated by use of supporting details.</p> <p>Organization is clearly evident by speakers ability to remain on topic.</p>	<p>Provides relevant information.</p> <p>Some supporting details are provided.</p> <p>Usually the speaker remains on topic, but at times the organization is not clear.</p>	<p>Requires assistance with preparation.</p> <p>Few, if any, supporting details are provided.</p> <p>Speaker jumps back and forth between ideas.</p>
Delivery	<p>Presentation is convincing and dynamic because of consistent and appropriate volume, pace, diction, and grammatical accuracy.</p> <p>Maintains composure through exemplary eye contact, body language, and confidence in voice.</p>	<p>Presentation is convincing, but includes some errors in volume, pace, diction and/or grammar.</p> <p>Maintains composure through appropriate eye contact, body language, and confidence in voice.</p>	<p>Content is misunderstood due to problems with delivery such as use of improper grammar.</p> <p>Fails to maintain composure due to problems with eye contact, body language, and confidence in voice.</p>