

The Scarlet Letter and Transcendentalism

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Abstract: Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* is a wonderful text to couple with the teaching of Transcendentalism. The protagonist, Hester Prynne, displays many acts of civil disobedience throughout the course of the novel, and Hawthorne often criticizes the Puritan society that punishes her so harshly. The lessons students take away from this novel relate very closely to the ideas espoused by the great transcendental thinkers—civil disobedience, self-reliance, and nature as a reflection of God. In addition to using Transcendentalism as a historical context and lens for the novel, this text is a wonderful tool with which to teach students symbolism. Once the students grasp the concept of symbolism and can think in a more abstract manner, they will tap into the greatest local resource—New York City—and look for symbolism and connections to some themes and characters in *The Scarlet Letter* during a visit to the Museum of Modern Art.

Duration of the Unit: 4 weeks

Objectives:

- Students will understand the literary definition of “tone” and be able to analyze Hawthorne’s tone
- Students will contrast the ideals of the Puritan society with the tenets of Transcendentalism and use that tension as the backdrop for their understanding of the novel
- Students will understand, identify and analyze the novel’s symbols
- Student’s will explore and analyze the following themes / concepts in the context of the novel: redemption, self-sufficiency, feminism, truth, sin, redemption and judgment
- Students will complete a variety of writing assignments—analytical, reflective, journal—to assess their mastery of the objectives
- By visiting one of the world’s most renowned museums, The Museum of Modern Art, located just 25 minutes from Great Neck, students will learn to identify symbolism in mediums other than literature as well as make connection between the ideas in *The Scarlet Letter* and a work of art of their choice

Outline:

I propose to teach the unit on *The Scarlet Letter* in approximately five weeks. The students will meet four times a week for 50 minutes a class period. For this project, I have composed six lessons that will be used during various points during the five-week unit, and I have done my best to explain where I believe they will fall in the scope of the unit. Many of the other lessons that will complete this unit will focus on Hawthorne’ characterization of each character, structured discussions on sin and redemption, the issue of gender, the definition of a hero, etc. Also, sprinkled throughout the unit will be grammar, vocabulary and writing exercises.

Lesson One: Introduction to Transcendentalism and Puritanism

This lesson is the first lesson of the unit, and will help students read the novel through a more focused lens.

The teacher will use direct instruction, readings and instruction to convey the historical background and key beliefs of the conflicting schools of thought. Students will take notes and participate in teacher-guided discussion.

LECTURE (15 minutes)

Puritanism:

Puritanism began in New England after a group of people fled England to avoid religious persecution. There were two main types of separatists: **Non-separatists** who believed in reform of the established church through voluntary compacts and **separatists** who believe that the Church of England was corrupt and therefore Christians must separate themselves. The separatist founded a colony in Salem in 1626 and that was the epicenter of Puritan life. Puritans led a very simple, modest, austere lifestyle. Main leaders in Puritan thought: John Winthrop, Governor of MA Bay Colony; John Edwards, a Puritan Minister in CT.

Ideals:

1. United devotion to Christianity
2. Government will address both civil and religious matters
3. The good of the public is greater than the good of the individual
4. Service to the Lord improves lives
5. If you break the bond with community or God, you will suffer from God

READING and DISCUSSION (20 minutes)

In class the students will read aloud excerpts from John Edwards' "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" [see "List of Readings"]. The teacher will ask students to pick out quotations that either represent some of the Puritan ideals or that they found interesting and striking. The teacher will ask the students to explain why they chose the quotation they did and explain their feelings about the quotations.

LECTURE (15 minutes)

Transcendentalism:

Transcendentalism is a school of thought that began to take form in New England, mainly Concord, MA around 1836 when Ralph Waldo Emerson published *Nature*. Major thinkers in the Transcendentalist Movement include: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Bronson Alcott. It was a part of a larger literary movement called Romanticism, which emphasized the importance of nature, the emotions and individualism. The teacher will also talk to students about the definition of the word transcend (to rise above) and how that relates to the main principles of the movement.

Ideals:

1. The individual is important, inherently good and has free will
2. Conscience, morality and intuition are present at birth
3. Intuition is what one must use to perceive basic truths
4. Each individual is connected to God

5. God is omnipresent
6. One of the best ways to connect to God is to study nature. (Crim, “A Teacher’s Guide to Transcendentalism”)

HOMEWORK:

For homework students will receive Emerson’s essay, “Self-Reliance” [See “List of Readings”]. Students will read the essay and be asked to highlight important words and phrases. They will be asked to come to class prepared to discuss three of Emerson’s sentiments from the essay. The discussion in class will be about 15 minutes and will deepen students’ understanding of Transcendentalism.

Lesson Two: Introduction to Symbolism

This lesson is about the second or third lesson in the unit and will provide scaffolding for the students so they can identify and analyze symbolism within the text and within other forms of art.

LECTURE (10 minutes)

Teacher will define the concept of a literary symbol to the students and students will take notes. Teacher will give examples of common symbols (i.e. heart = love, skull = death, hands together = friendship).

DISCUSSION OF ARTWORK (10 minutes)

In order to demonstrate how symbolism works, the teacher will project two of Frida Khalo’s paintings on the board and ask students to look at the paintings and discuss the images and what they might represent in terms of larger concepts. Students will be asked to explain and support their reasoning.

READING (30 minutes students may finish for homework)

Students will read Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown” [see “List of Readings”] and complete a worksheet asking them to look at the specific symbols in the text (*Appendix #1*). Together the teacher will review the symbols with the students.

DISCUSSION (20 minutes next class period)

The teacher will ask students to share their responses and explanations to the symbols in the stories using textual evidence. This discussion will segue into a larger discussion on the moral of the story.

APPLICATION OF SYMBOLISM AS WE BEGIN TO READ *THE SCARLET LETTER*:

As a follow up to this lesson, the teacher will guide students through the passage in the beginning of *The Scarlet Letter* in which Hawthorne describes the rose bush that is growing right outside the ominous prison door. The students will contrast the description of the bush with that of the prison. Students will be asked to draw conclusions about what the bush might symbolize.

Furthermore, students will explore the initial characterization of the main characters—Hester, Dimmesdale, the Puritans—and make connections between the way Hawthorne describes these

characters and the way he describes either the prison or the rose bush. Here, Hawthorne is giving the reader a sense of who the antagonists are and who the protagonist is.

Lesson Three: The Letter A

This lesson will be about the fifth or so lesson in the unit, as students will have read “The Custom House” as well as up to chapter three.

With every discussion pertaining to the reading, the teacher is making sure these conversations happen in the context of the tension between Puritanism and Transcendentalism. For instance, the initial characterization of the townspeople will be discussed in terms of the way the unit functions as a singular character, one of the antagonists even, surely a deliberate choice on Hawthorne’s part to underscore the absence of individuality in the Puritan society.

DISCUSSION (25 minutes)

The class will go back and look at the passages that describe and or refer to Hester’s scarlet letter:

“But the point which drew eyes, and, as it were, transfigured the wearer,— so that both men and women, who had been familiarly acquainted with Hester Prynne, were now impressed as if they beheld her for the first time,— was the SCARLET LETTER, so fantastically embroidered and illuminated upon her bosom. It had the effect of a spell, taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity, and inclosing her in a sphere by herself

‘She hath good skills at her needle, that’s certain,’ remarked one of the female spectators; ‘but did ever a woman, before this brazen hussy, contrive such a way of showing it! Why, gossips, what is it but to laugh in the faces of our godly magistrates, and make a pride out of what they, worthy gentleman, meant for punishment?’” (Hawthorne 37 - 38)

“Hester Prynne... who stood at the scaffold of the pillory, an infant on her arm, and the letter A, in scarlet fantastically embroidered with gold thread, upon her bosom!” (Hawthorne 41)

Teacher may also refer to passage on page 57 where Hester’s skill as an embroiderer is described as well as her own stark dress in contrast to Pearl’s ornate clothing.

Discussion Questions:

- Describe the scene in these passages. What is going on?
- What does the scarlet letter look like?
- Why is the woman in the first passage so upset with Hester? And, I’ll give you a hint, it’s not just because she’s a “hussy.”
- Why is the letter an A?
- Who made the letter and why do you think she made it this way?
- How is the scarlet letter functioning as a symbol here? What does it represent?
- Is the letter the on symbol we see in these two passages? Why or why not.
- So far, which ideals does Hester seem to be adopting here—Puritan or Transcendentalist and why?

WORKSHEET (15 minutes)

Students will begin to trace symbols throughout the novel using their symbol tracker worksheets. Students will be responsible for creating a new sheet every time a new symbol is discovered as well as updating that sheet each time reference to that symbol is made in the novel. (*See Appendix #2*) During these 15 minutes the teacher will give instructions about the symbol tracking sheet and walk students through their first entries using the scarlet letter passage and the rose bush passage as examples.

Lesson Four: What’s Your Letter?

This lesson takes a day and a half and will come the day after lesson three and our discussion on the symbolism in Hester’s scarlet letter. The first day students will be given the reflective essay assignment and the day the assignment is due, students will participate in a daylong activity and in-class journaling assignment.

DISTRIBUTION AND EXPLANATION OF PROJECT (15 minutes)

The teacher will distribute and go over the project assignment—which has several components. (*See Appendix #3*)

- Component #1: Personal Essay
- Component #2: Design and wear your scarlet letter around school for the entire day
- Component #3: Reflect on the experience of wearing your letter in school all day through an in-class journal assignment

ACTIVITY (full day)

Students will wear their letter all day around school. The teacher will “check in” on the students during her free periods to make sure students are indeed wearing them.

REFLECTION (25 minutes)

Students will respond to journaling prompts about their experiences wearing the letter all day

- How did wearing the letter all day make you feel? Why?
- Did anyone ask you questions about your letter? If so, what did they ask and how did you respond?
- How do you feel about your flaw now? Why?
- How do you feel about yourself as a result of this experience?

The teacher will ask students to share their responses and feeling with each other either in a full class circle or through a think-pair-share format.

Lesson Five: Making Connections between Henry David Thoreau and Hester Prynne Through Journaling

This lesson can be modified in a variety of ways—students can choose which quotation to respond to or students can respond to each of the quotations if the teacher chooses to sprinkle these journal assignments throughout the unit. This lesson can begin after students have read nearly half the novel.

After students have read through Chapter X, the teacher will start class giving students a quotation from Thoreau’s *Walden* [See “List of Readings”]. The teacher will give these quotations to students every third day, so they will be sprinkled throughout the unit as students complete the novel.

JOURNAL EXPECTATIONS:

The instructions are to respond to the quotation and explain, using specific references and examples from the text, how the quotation relates to an idea, theme, character or conflict in the text. Students are expected to go beyond simply relating the quotation to a moment, as that is merely the starting point for the journal entry. Students are expected to explore the values and philosophies that Thoreau demonstrates in the quotation as well as the ideas Hawthorne espouses in his novel.

Students will be graded holistically, and the teacher will look for complexity of the student's thoughts (going beyond plot), the use of specific examples to the text, and quality of writing. Each journal entry will be worth 20 points.

Quotations (will be presented to students in this order):

“The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation” (Thoreau 7).

“Our whole life is startlingly moral. There is never an instant's truce between virtue and vice. Goodness is the only investment that never fails. In the music of the harp which trembles round the world it is the insisting on this which thrills us. The harp is the traveling patterer for the Universe's Insurance Company, recommending its laws, and our little goodness is all the assessment that we pay” (Thoreau 103).

“The greater part of what my neighbors call good I believe in my soul to be bad, and if I repent anything, it is very likely to be my good behavior” (Thoreau 8).

“We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep. I know of no more encouraging the fact that the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by 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” (Thoreau 45).

Lesson Six: Making Connections--*The Scarlet Letter and Modern Art*

This project will be one of the final assessments of The Scarlet Letter unit. It asks students to build on the knowledge of symbolism they have applied to their reading of the novel through their use and discussion of the symbol trackers, and asks them to apply this skill in a different medium while also making connections to the novel.

ACTIVITY (full day)

The students and the teacher will travel to the Museum of Modern Art in New York City (the trip to the museum should take about 35 minutes from the school to the museum). Once there the teacher

will take the students to the Museum’s Drawing and Painting Collection where students will have three hours to complete the assignment (*See Appendix #4*) and visit the museum.

This project will make connections among several artistic forms as well as expose students to a resource that is easy for them to access. It encourages students to think critically about the text as well as abstractly because they must make connections between a work of art that may be seemingly unrelated to the text in subject matter, but may be related in emotion and symbolism.

Students’ assignments will be collected the following day in class.

List of Materials:

- Copy of *The Scarlet Letter*
- Copies of readings—“Young Goodman Brown” and “Sinners in the Hand of an Angry God” and “Self-Reliance”
- Computer and LCD projector in order to show Kahlo’s artwork
- Copies of handouts—“Young Goodman Brown” worksheet, symbol tracker worksheet, What’s Your Scarlet Letter Project Assignment, Making Connections Project Assignment

State Standards:

New York State Standards addressed in this unit:

- Students will read, write, listen, and speak for information and understanding.
- Students will read, write, listen, and speak for literary response and expression.
- Students will read, write, listen, and speak for critical analysis and evaluation. □
- Students will read, write, listen, and speak for social interaction.

List of Readings:

The Scarlet Letter (Dover edition)

“Self-Reliance” (photocopied from the Dover edition)

“Sinners in the Hands of Angry God” printed from the WJE Online

“Young Goodman Brown” printed from a handout given to me by a cooperating teacher

Bibliography

Crim, Michael F. A Teacher's Guide to Transcendentalism. Printed with permission by the Walden Woods Project.

Emerson, Henry David. Self-Reliance and Other Essays. Dover: New York, 1993.

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. The Scarlet Letter. Dover: New York, 1994.

Jonathan Edwards [1739], *Sermons and Discourses, 1739-1742 (WJE Online Vol. 22)*, Ed. Harry S. Stout

Thoreau, Henry David. Walden or, Life in the Woods. Digreads.com: Kansas, 2005.

APPENDIX

1. “Young Goodman Brown” Handout
2. Symbol Tracker
3. Personal Scarlet Letter Assignment with rubric
4. Making Connections: *The Scarlet Letter* and Modern Art Assignment with Rubric

“Young Goodman Brown” Reading Assignment

SYMBOLISM: The representation of something by something else. Usually the representation is through resemblance, association or convention.

EX. A red rose (association / convention)

A red rose is simply a flower. It is often associated with love, so an author may choose to use the red rose as a symbol for love in a story.

EX. An ugly man (resemblance)

Though perhaps not politically correct, Hawthorne uses physical description to symbolize the character’s initial traits. (An ugly man is not only ugly on the outside but on the inside as well.)

Please write what the following items may symbolize in the story. For each item, use specific quotation to **SHOW** me why you think as you do.

YOUNG GOODMAN BROWN (his name):

FAITH (her name):

THE FOREST:

Please discuss at least **three ways** in which the old man tempts Young Goodman Brown to go deeper into the forest and Brown’s specific reaction to each temptation. (Use the back of this sheet as necessary).

Name _____

The Scarlet Letter Symbol Tracker

SYMBOL _____

Quotation with page # (Copy down the quotation that makes reference to this symbol word for word)	Context (tell me what is going on in the plot of the novel when this quotation appears)	Explanation (Why is this quotation important? In other words, how does this quotation help us make meaning of the significance of the symbol? Feel free to highlight any specific words the author uses.)

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Your ScArlet Letter Project

We have been discussing the nature of sin, judgment and redemption in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Throughout the novel Hawthorne criticizes the Puritans for judging others and refusing to see their own sins. According to Hawthorne, we should all wear our own scarlet letter."

This project is three-fold:

1) PERSONAL ESSAY ASSIGNMENT:

It is your task to face one of your own flaws or weaknesses and write about it. If you were branded with your own letter, what would it be? Why? Please write a personal essay of three pages in which you explore a particular weakness. You should begin your essay with a story that describes a moment that shows your personal flaw. The rest of your discussion should address the following:

- How does this flaw affect your perception of yourself?
- Do you worry about this weakness or have you tried to change it?
- Do others notice this flaw? If so, how does it affect their perception of you? If not, what might happen if your private weakness became public knowledge?
- Are you your own worst critic or are people who surround you more critical? Why? Would it be more important to be forgiven by your community or yourself? Why?

Although the above questions are a guide, don't merely answer the questions as you write. If you do, this essay will sound more like a grocery list than a fluid, cohesive essay. The above list is here to help you develop your ideas; if you feel you need to go in another direction, fine.

Use this essay as a moment of catharsis or release. Your personal exploration can be a dramatic moment of truth and self-discovery or a moment to let your wit come through. Regardless of your approach, I want you to be original, creative and thoughtful.

2) DESIGN AND WEAR YOUR LETTER:

On the day the essay is due, I would like you to come to school wearing your letter pinned to your chest. You can design your letter in any material and in any way you like; however, I expect that your design will display thoughtfulness and creativity. You must wear this letter throughout the entire school day. I will be in communication with your teachers to check up on you. Students and teachers may ask about your letter, and you can divulge as little or as much information as you like. If you do not want to elaborate on what your letter represents, you don't have to.

3) JOURNAL

When you get to English class on the day you're wearing your letter, I will ask each of you to complete an in-class journal assignment in which I will ask you to respond to prompts designed to have you reflect on the experience of wearing your letter during school. This will help begin a discussion.

Your ScArlet Letter Rubric

ESSAY:

Content

- The essay begins with a story that shows your flaw
- Discussion shows several angles for exploration, reflecting the complexity of your flaw and its impact on your life
- The first line of your essay should thrust us immediately into action

- You use strong description and vivid language to make your essay come to life
- You let your authentic voice come through. Don't get lost in formal language!
- Emotional response to your flaw is evident—this essay shouldn't be guided solely by logic!

_____ / 25

Organization / Mechanics and Grammar

- The flow of ideas is clear from one paragraph to the next as well as within paragraphs
- You avoid statements that are vague or general and you make no assumptions—this essay is about you, not about everyone or society in general
- The tenses in your paper are consistent
- Essay displays proofreading
- Essay is in MLA format

_____ /15

Essay TOTAL

_____ /40

WEAR YOUR LETTER FOR A DAY:

- You must wear your letter for the entire day. I am trusting that you will have a sense of integrity with this project. I will also be asking your teachers to keep a look out for me!
- The design of your letter displays thoughtfulness and effort

_____ /10

JOURNAL:

- You thoughtfully consider and address the journal prompts
- You display true reflection about the experience
- Your writing is clear and uses correct punctuation

_____ /5

TOTAL PROJECT GRADE:

_____ /55

Due Date / Letter Date _____

Making Connections: *The Scarlet Letter* and a Work of Modern Art

On _____ we will be taking a field trip into New York City to visit the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). It's important to realize that art, no matter the form, conveys emotion, symbolism, history and power, and what better place to explore art than New York City. When we get to the museum, we will head to the museum's Paintings and Drawings Collections; you must limit your project to this collection.

Your task: Find any painting or drawing that you feel relates to *The Scarlet Letter*. Warning: you're not going to find a painting of a Puritan woman wearing a red A. In fact, you probably won't even see a conventional portrait of a woman. So, you must think in more abstract terms. Think about the colors of the work, the emotions, the subject matter and any symbols the painting might have, and make connections between different aspects of the novel. You can make connections to emotions, themes, conflicts or characters.

Step #1: Survey the collection and pick a work of art that you feel connects to *The Scarlet Letter* in some way

Step #2: Write down the work's title and artist's name

Step #3: Study the work—pay attention to detail, colors, any thing that isn't immediately apparent

Step #4: In your journal describe that work of art in vivid detail. You can sketch it too if you'd like!

Step #5: Write down the connections to *The Scarlet Letter*. Make sure your connecting the details from the painting to a moment, idea, symbol in the novel. Make sure to explain your reasoning—why and how you made the connection.

Step #6: Take home your notes and type up Steps 3 & 4 into a well written, organized and thoughtful essay.

RUBRIC:

Display concentration and diligence at the museum _____ / 5

Vivid description of the work _____ / 5

Make clear and thoughtful connections between painting and novel

- You must refer to specific details in the painting and in the novel to support these connections _____ /20

Explain your choice and reasoning clearly and thoughtfully _____ /5

Grammar and Mechanics _____ /5

TOTAL: _____ /40