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Grades 11-12 Honors or Advanced classes
American Lit., English Lit., or World Lit.
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Henry David Thoreau

The Roots of Thoreau's Nature Writing: English Romanticism to American Transcendentalism

Abstract:

This teaching unit is designed to help introduce students to writing about nature and to the history of doing so. It is by no means comprehensive but may serve as a self-contained introduction to Wordsworth, Keats, Coleridge, and Thoreau, or as springboard from which teachers might generate their own approaches and activities.

Time Frame:

Ten lessons over a period of two or three weeks depending on other curriculum needs.

Objectives:

Students become more aware of and connected to the natural world around them.

Students discover and develop personal writing voices and explore their own opinions and attitudes.

Students sharpen their observations of nature.

Students are introduced to Henry David Thoreau as a nature writer and much more.

Students appreciate the British Romantic poets Wordsworth, Keats, and Coleridge, who preceded and likely influenced Thoreau.

Students learn that imagery is defined as language that appeals to any of the five senses, and they learn to identify nature imagery in poetry and prose.

Students learn the literary device called "pathetic fallacy," which is when an author makes it seem as if nature is sympathizing with or reflecting human emotions.

Outline:

1. Wordsworth's "Lines Written in Early Spring," "The World is Too Much With Us," "To a Butterfly" and "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud"
2. Wordsworth's "Lines: Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye During a Tour, July 13, 1798"
3. Wordsworth's "Resolution and Independence"
4. Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality From Recollections of Early Childhood"
5. Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" and Thoreau's *Walden* Chapter 4. "Sounds"
6. Coleridge's "The Aeolian Harp"
7. Thoreau's *Walden* Chapter 5. "Solitude"
8. Thoreau's *Walden* Chapter 7. "The Bean Field"
9. Thoreau's *Walden* Chapter 8. "The Ponds"
10. Thoreau's *Walden* Chapter 11. "Higher Laws"

[Journal assignments are intended to be done as homework assignments]

Lesson Details:

Lesson 1 – Wordsworth’s “Lines Written in Early Spring” and “The World is Too Much With Us” and “To a Butterfly” and “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud”

Journal assignment--find a place to sit outside and write for half an hour about the nature you see, hear, smell, touch, or even taste. Start by writing about the sky you can see overhead.

Divide class into 4 groups—Each takes charge of a poem and shares their findings with the rest of the class.

What imagery of nature do you find in the poem?

How does it affect the speaker’s mood or message?

Lesson 2 – Wordsworth’s “Lines: Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye During a Tour, July 13, 1798”

Journal assignment—In *Walden* Thoreau writes, “When I was four years old, as I well remember, I was brought from Boston to this my native town, through these very woods and this field, to the pond. It is one of the oldest scenes stamped on my memory” (107). In “Tintern Abbey” Wordsworth recalls visiting there five years earlier. Think back at least 5 years to a pleasant memory of nature from your childhood. It could be a beautiful day at the beach. It could be a big snowstorm. It could be a pile of raked leaves you jumped in. Write about your memory, including as much detail of the natural surroundings as you can. If possible revisit the place before you write.

What imagery of nature do you find in Wordsworth’s poem?

How has the speaker changed since he last visited that place five years before?

Lesson 3 – Wordsworth’s “Resolution and Independence”

Journal assignment--Find some body of water—stream, river, pond, lake, even a big puddle that you can stir with a stick like the lonely leech-gatherer—and describe it in detail using imagery. Feel free to record your thoughts as they drift.

What is the change of mood experienced by the speaker?

How does the nature imagery relate to the speaker’s mood or thoughts?

How does the Leech-gatherer impact the speaker? What does the speaker learn from him?

Lesson 4 – Wordsworth’s “Ode: Intimations of Immortality From Recollections of Early Childhood”

Journal assignment—Find a place to sit outside and draw a picture in your journal of some element of nature that you observe. It could be a tree, some leaves, a flower, or even the grass growing in the crack of a sidewalk.

Find 10 examples of nature imagery.

What is the connection between nature and childhood expressed in the poem?
What happens to the speaker's relationship to nature as he passes from childhood to adulthood?

Lesson 5 – Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" and Thoreau's *Walden* Chapter 4. "Sounds"

Journal assignment—Write about a sound in nature that you have heard and what associations your mind makes from hearing that sound. The sound could be a bird, some crickets (like I'm hearing right now ☺), a dog barking, thunder, the wind, etc.

What thoughts does hearing the song of the Nightingale provoke in Keats's speaker and how do those thoughts change through the poem?

What sounds of animals does Thoreau identify? What associations does he make with those sounds?

What manmade sounds does Thoreau identify? What associations does he make with those?

Lesson 6 – Coleridge's "The Aeolian Harp"

Journal assignment—Write about how the following excerpt relates to the concept of nature writing.

“Whilst thro' my half-clos'd eye-lids I behold
The sunbeams dance, like diamonds, on the main,
And tranquil muse upon tranquility ;
Full many a thought uncall'd and undetain'd,
And many idle flitting phantasies,
Traverse my indolent and passive brain,
As wild and various, as the random gales
That swell and flutter on this subject Lute !”

What imagery of nature do you find in the poem?
How does the nature imagery relate to the speaker's mood or thoughts?

Lesson 7 – Thoreau's *Walden* Chapter 5. "Solitude"

Journal assignment—Thoreau writes, "I love to be alone" (95). Write about being alone in your journal. Do you love it? hate it? something in between? why?

Find the example of "pathetic fallacy" in this chapter.
Find an example of extended personification.

Lesson 8 – Thoreau's *Walden* Chapter 7. "The Bean Field"

Journal assignment— Thoreau writes, "I was determined to know beans" (111). Write about what you know of farming and agriculture. Have you ever been to a farm? Do you not know beans about it? What is your opinion about buying organic produce?

Reread the last two paragraphs of “The Bean Field” chapter. What ironies does Thoreau point out? What ironies to you see in his attitude or opinions?

Lesson 9 – Thoreau’s *Walden* Chapter 8. “The Ponds”

Journal assignment—write about your visit to Walden Pond or another pond. Alternatively, write an entry in your journal late at night about anything you want.

Thoreau writes, “Sometimes, after staying in a village parlor till the family had all retired, I have returned to the woods, and, partly with a view to the next day’s dinner, spent the hours of midnight fishing from a boat by moonlight, serenaded by owls and foxes, and hearing, from time to time, the creaking note of some unknown bird close at hand. These experiences were very memorable and valuable to me” (120).

Do you notice any difference in the sounds of night or in your thinking compared to during the daylight?

Lesson 10 – Thoreau’s *Walden* Chapter 11. “Higher Laws”

Journal assignment—Thoreau writes, “I have no doubt that it is a part of the destiny of the human race, in its gradual improvement, to leave off eating animals, as surely as the savage tribes have left off eating each other [. . .]” (146-47). Do you agree or disagree? Write about your opinion of vegetarianism.

What is Thoreau’s opinion toward hunting?
What is his opinion toward diet and eating?

Materials:

copies of Thoreau’s *Walden*
journals
copies of poems are attached

Grading:

Journal assignments count as homework assignments. They cannot be kept in the regular notebook, but must be in a separate notebook that can be collected by the teacher for review and assessment.

Mass. State Standards:

Language Strand: 1, 2, 4, 6
Reading and Literature Strand: 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15
Composition Strand: 19, 20, 23

Bibliography:

See attached for sources of poems and pictures of Wordsworth, Keats, and Coleridge. Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden and Civil Disobedience*. New York: Penguin Signet Classic, 1980.

William Wordsworth



“LINES WRITTEN IN EARLY SPRING”

I HEARD a thousand blended notes,
While in a grove I sate reclined,
In that sweet mood when pleasant thoughts
Bring sad thoughts to the mind.

To her fair works did Nature link
The human soul that through me ran;
And much it grieved my heart to think
What man has made of man.

10 Through primrose tufts, in that green bower,
The periwinkle trailed its wreaths;

And 'tis my faith that every flower
Enjoys the air it breathes.

The birds around me hopped and played,
Their thoughts I cannot measure:--
But the least motion which they made
It seemed a thrill of pleasure.

20 The budding twigs spread out their fan,
To catch the breezy air;
And I must think, do all I can,
That there was pleasure there.

If this belief from heaven be sent,
If such be Nature's holy plan,
Have I not reason to lament
What man has made of man?

"TO A BUTTERFLY"

I'VE watched you now a full half-hour;
Self-poised upon that yellow flower
And, little Butterfly! indeed
I know not if you sleep or feed.
How motionless!--not frozen seas
More motionless! and then
What joy awaits you, when the breeze
Hath found you out among the trees,
And calls you forth again!

10 This plot of orchard-ground is ours;

My trees they are, my Sister's flowers;
Here rest your wings when they are weary;
Here lodge as in a sanctuary!
Come often to us, fear no wrong;
Sit near us on the bough!
We'll talk of sunshine and of song,
And summer days, when we were young;
Sweet childish days, that were as long
As twenty days are now.

1801.

"I WANDERED LONELY AS A CLOUD"

I WANDERED lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

10 Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way,
They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of a bay:

Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced; but they
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:
A poet could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company:
I gazed--and gazed--but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:

20 For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,

They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

1804.

"THE WORLD IS TOO MUCH WITH US; LATE AND SOON"

THE world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
The Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not.--Great God! I'd rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;

10

So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn.

1806.

"LINES: COMPOSED A FEW MILES ABOVE TINTERN ABBEY, ON REVISITING THE BANKS OF THE WYE DURING A TOUR. JULY 13, 1798"

FIVE years have past; five summers, with the length
Of five long winters! and again I hear
These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs
With a soft inland murmur.--Once again
Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,
That on a wild secluded scene impress
Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect
The landscape with the quiet of the sky.
The day is come when I again repose
Here, under this dark sycamore, and view

10

These plots of cottage-ground, these orchard-tufts,
Which at this season, with their unripe fruits,
Are clad in one green hue, and lose themselves
'Mid groves and copses. Once again I see
These hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines
Of sportive wood run wild: these pastoral farms,
Green to the very door; and wreaths of smoke
Sent up, in silence, from among the trees!
With some uncertain notice, as might seem
Of vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods,

20

Or of some Hermit's cave, where by his fire
The Hermit sits alone.

These beauteous forms,
Through a long absence, have not been to me
As is a landscape to a blind man's eye:
But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;
And passing even into my purer mind,

140 Into a sober pleasure; when thy mind
Shall be a mansion for all lovely forms,
Thy memory be as a dwelling-place
For all sweet sounds and harmonies; oh! then,
If solitude, or fear, or pain, or grief,
Should be thy portion, with what healing thoughts
Of tender joy wilt thou remember me,
And these my exhortations! Nor, perchance--
If I should be where I no more can hear
Thy voice, nor catch from thy wild eyes these gleams
Of past existence--wilt thou then forget
That on the banks of this delightful stream

150 We stood together; and that I, so long
A worshipper of Nature, hither came
Unwearied in that service: rather say
With warmer love--oh! with far deeper zeal
Of holier love. Nor wilt thou then forget,
That after many wanderings, many years
Of absence, these steep woods and lofty cliffs,
And this green pastoral landscape, were to me
More dear, both for themselves and for thy sake!

1798.

<http://www.thetalisman.org.uk/tintern/index.htm>
Hear an audio reading, take a quiz, read commentary

“RESOLUTION AND INDEPENDENCE”

I

THERE was a roaring in the wind all night;
The rain came heavily and fell in floods;
But now the sun is rising calm and bright;
The birds are singing in the distant woods;
Over his own sweet voice the Stock-dove broods;
The Jay makes answer as the Magpie chatters;
And all the air is filled with pleasant noise of waters.

II

All things that love the sun are out of doors;
The sky rejoices in the morning's birth;
The grass is bright with rain-drops;--on the moors
The hare is running races in her mirth;
And with her feet she from the plashy earth
Raises a mist, that, glittering in the sun,
Runs with her all the way, wherever she doth run.

III

I was a Traveller then upon the moor,
I saw the hare that raced about with joy;
I heard the woods and distant waters roar;
Or heard them not, as happy as a boy:
The pleasant season did my heart employ:

My old remembrances went from me wholly;
And all the ways of men, so vain and melancholy.

IV

But, as it sometimes chanceth, from the might
Of joy in minds that can no further go,
As high as we have mounted in delight
In our dejection do we sink as low;
To me that morning did it happen so;
And fears and fancies thick upon me came;
Dim sadness--and blind thoughts, I knew not, nor could name.

V

I heard the sky-lark warbling in the sky;
And I bethought me of the playful hare:
Even such a happy Child of earth am I;
Even as these blissful creatures do I fare;
Far from the world I walk, and from all care;
But there may come another day to me--
Solitude, pain of heart, distress, and poverty.

VI

My whole life I have lived in pleasant thought,
As if life's business were a summer mood;
As if all needful things would come unsought
To genial faith, still rich in genial good;
But how can He expect that others should
Build for him, sow for him, and at his call
Love him, who for himself will take no heed at all?

VII

I thought of Chatterton, the marvellous Boy,
The sleepless Soul that perished in his pride;
Of Him who walked in glory and in joy
Following his plough, along the mountain-side:
By our own spirits are we deified:
We Poets in our youth begin in gladness;
But thereof come in the end despondency and madness.

VIII

Now, whether it were by peculiar grace,
A leading from above, a something given,
Yet it befell, that, in this lonely place,
When I with these untoward thoughts had striven,
Beside a pool bare to the eye of heaven
I saw a Man before me unawares:
The oldest man he seemed that ever wore grey hairs.

IX

As a huge stone is sometimes seen to lie
Couched on the bald top of an eminence;
Wonder to all who do the same espy,
By what means it could thither come, and whence;
So that it seems a thing endued with sense:
Like a sea-beast crawled forth, that on a shelf

Of rock or sand repositeth, there to sun itself;

X

Such seemed this Man, not all alive nor dead,
Nor all asleep--in his extreme old age:
His body was bent double, feet and head
Coming together in life's pilgrimage;
As if some dire constraint of pain, or rage
Of sickness felt by him in times long past,
A more than human weight upon his frame had cast.

XI

Himself he propped, limbs, body, and pale face,
Upon a long grey staff of shaven wood:
And, still as I drew near with gentle pace,
Upon the margin of that moorish flood
Motionless as a cloud the old Man stood,
That heareth not the loud winds when they call
And moveth all together, if it move at all.

XII

At length, himself unsettling, he the pond
Stirred with his staff, and fixedly did look
Upon the muddy water, which he conned,
As if he had been reading in a book:
And now a stranger's privilege I took;
And, drawing to his side, to him did say,
"This morning gives us promise of a glorious day."

XIII

A gentle answer did the old Man make,
In courteous speech which forth he slowly drew:
And him with further words I thus bespake,
"What occupation do you there pursue?
This is a lonesome place for one like you."
Ere he replied, a flash of mild surprise
Broke from the sable orbs of his yet-vivid eyes,

XIV

His words came feebly, from a feeble chest,
But each in solemn order followed each,
With something of a lofty utterance drest--
Choice word and measured phrase, above the reach
Of ordinary men; a stately speech;
Such as grave Livers do in Scotland use,
Religious men, who give to God and man their dues.

XV

He told, that to these waters he had come
To gather leeches, being old and poor:
Employment hazardous and wearisome!
And he had many hardships to endure:
From pond to pond he roamed, from moor to moor;
Housing, with God's good help, by choice or chance,
And in this way he gained an honest maintenance.

XVI

The old Man still stood talking by my side;
But now his voice to me was like a stream
Scarce heard; nor word from word could I divide;
And the whole body of the Man did seem
Like one whom I had met with in a dream;
Or like a man from some far region sent,
To give me human strength, by apt admonishment.

XVII

My former thoughts returned: the fear that kills;
And hope that is unwilling to be fed;
Cold, pain, and labour, and all fleshly ills;
And mighty Poets in their misery dead.
--Perplexed, and longing to be comforted,
My question eagerly did I renew,
"How is it that you live, and what is it you do?"

XVIII

He with a smile did then his words repeat;
And said, that, gathering leeches, far and wide
He travelled; stirring thus about his feet
The waters of the pools where they abide.
"Once I could meet with them on every side;
But they have dwindled long by slow decay;
Yet still I persevere, and find them where I may."

XIX

While he was talking thus, the lonely place,
The old Man's shape, and speech--all troubled me:
In my mind's eye I seemed to see him pace
About the weary moors continually,
Wandering about alone and silently.
While I these thoughts within myself pursued,
He, having made a pause, the same discourse renewed.

XX

And soon with this he other matter blended,
Cheerfully uttered, with demeanour kind,
But stately in the main; and when he ended,
I could have laughed myself to scorn to find
In that decrepit Man so firm a mind.
"God," said I, "be my help and stay secure;
I'll think of the Leech-gatherer on the lonely moor!"

1807.

John Keats



crop from the original manuscript of 'Ode to a Nightingale' in John Keats's handwriting

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:
'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,
But being too happy in thine happiness, -
That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees,
In some melodious plot
Of beechen green and shadows numberless,
Singest of summer in full-throated ease.

O, for a draught of vintage! that hath been
Cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth,
Tasting of Flora and the country green,
Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth!
O for a beaker full of the warm South,
Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,
With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,
And purple-stained mouth;
That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,
And with thee fade away into the forest dim:

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
What thou among the leaves hast never known,
The weariness, the fever, and the fret
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
And leaden-eyed despairs,
Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow.

Away! away! for I will fly to thee,
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
But on the viewless wings of Poesy,
Though the dull brain perplexes and retards:
Already with thee! tender is the night,
And hapy the Queen-Moon is on her throne,
Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays;

But here there is no light,
Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown
Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways.

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,
But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet
Wherewith the seasonable month endows
The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;
White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;
Fast fading violets cover'd up in leaves;
And mid-May's eldest child,
The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,
The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.

Darkling I listen; and, for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
To take into the air my quiet breath;
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
In such an ecstasy!
Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain -
To thy high requiem become a sod.

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
No hungry generations tread thee down;
The voice I hear this passing night was heard
In ancient days by emperor and clown:
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
The same that oft-times hath
Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell
To toll me back from thee to my sole self!
Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well
As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf.
Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades
Past the near meadows, over the still stream,
Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep
In the next valley-glades:
Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music: - Do I wake or sleep?

'Keats listening to a nightingale on Hampstead Heath'. By Joseph Severn



<http://englishhistory.net/keats/images/keats45.jpg>

Samuel Taylor Coleridge



The Æolian Harp

COMPOSED AUGUST 20TH, 1795
AT CLEVEDON, SOMERSETSHIRE

My pensive SARA ! thy soft cheek reclined
Thus on mine arm, most soothing sweet it is
To sit beside our Cot, our Cot o'ergrown
With white-flower'd Jasmin, and the broad-leav'd Myrtle,
(Meet emblems they of Innocence and Love !)
And watch the clouds, that late were rich with light,
Slow saddening round, and mark the star of eve
Serenely brilliant (such should Wisdom be)
Shine opposite ! How exquisite the scents
Snatch'd from yon bean-field ! and the world *so* hush'd !
The stilly murmur of the distant Sea
Tells us of silence.

And that simplest Lute,
Plac'd length-ways in the clasping casement, hark !
How by the desultory breeze caress'd,
Like some coy maid half-yielding to her lover,
It pours such sweet upbraiding, as must needs
Tempt to repeat the wrong ! And now, its strings
Boldlier swept, the long sequacious notes
Over delicious surges sink and rise,
Such a soft floating witchery of sound
As twilight Elfin's make, when they at eve
Voyage on gentle gales from Faery-Land,
Where Melodies round honey-dropping flowers,

Footless and wild, like birds of Paradise,
Nor pause, nor perch, hovering on untam'd wing !
O ! the one Life within us and abroad,
Which meets all motion and becomes its soul,
A light in sound, a sound-like power in light,
Rhythm in all thought, and joyance every where--
Methinks, it should have been impossible
Not to love all things in a world so fill'd ;
Where the breeze warbles, and the mute still air
Is Music slumbering on her instrument.

And thus, my Love ! as on the midway slope
Of yonder hill I stretch my limbs at noon,
Whilst thro' my half-clos'd eye-lids I behold
The sunbeams dance, like diamonds, on the main,
And tranquil muse upon tranquility ;
Full many a thought uncall'd and undetain'd,
And many idle flitting phantasies,
Traverse my indolent and passive brain,
As wild and various, as the random gales
That swell and flutter on this subject Lute !

And what if all of animated nature
Be but organic Harps diversly fram'd,
That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps
Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,
At once the Soul of each, and God of all ?

But thy more serious eye a mild reproof
Darts, O belovéd Woman ! nor such thoughts
Dim and unhallow'd dost thou not reject,
And biddest me walk humbly with my God.
Meek Daughter in the Family of Christ !
Well hast thou said and holily disprais'd
These shapings of the unregenerate mind ;
Bubbles that glitter as they rise and break
On vain Philosophy's aye-babbling spring.
For never guiltless may I speak of him,
The Incomprehensible ! save when with awe
I praise him, and with Faith that inly *feels* ;
Who with his saving mercies healéd me,
A sinful and most miserable man,
Wilder'd and dark, and gave me to possess
Peace, and this Cot, and thee, heart-honour'd Maid !

http://etext.virginia.edu/stc/Coleridge/poems/AEolian_Harp.html