

Doug Atkins

English 11 Honors (American Literature)

Catholic Memorial School – West Roxbury, MA

Approaching Walden: Summer 2015

ROOTS AND SHOOTS: A THOREAUVIAN ODYSSEY FROM WORDSWORTH TO ROETHKE

*Great Nature has another thing to do
To you and me, so take the lively air,
And, lovely, learn by going where to go*

From *The Waking* by Theodore Roethke

Overview of Curriculum Unit: This set of lessons explores the antecedents and “progeny” of select works of Henry David Thoreau. It is an enhancement of units already covered in English 11 Honors; indeed, a “fleshing out” of a pre-existing Thoreau unit and Dickinson/Frost unit. The first unit sets out to show how British Romantic poet William Wordsworth influenced Ralph Waldo Emerson, and subsequently how Emerson helped to nurture Thoreau’s ethos. The second unit looks at two seminal works of Thoreau in the context of Transcendentalism but also in light of his living legacy. The final unit explores sense of place through the poetry of Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, and Theodore Roethke. The overarching purpose of these units is to foster in the student a closer relationship with the natural world through literature but also through experiential practice – “field work” inspired by the presenters at Approaching Walden.

Lesson Objectives:

In these lessons students will

- learn to appreciate that literature, indeed all forms of human knowledge, does not exist in a vacuum.
- improve their close reading of literary texts
- explore various literary forms with special attention to the essay and poetry
- hone their observation skills
- improve their powers of reflection/introspection
- refine their process writing skills
- exercise their creativity by crafting their own poetry
- forge interdisciplinary connections, especially how literature and ecology can intersect

Lesson Overview

LESSON ONE – Digging up the Roots: Wordsworth’s poetry (“*The Tables Turned*,” *My Heat Leaps Up*,” and “*The World Is Too Much With Us*”) and excerpts from Emerson’s essays *Self-Reliance* and *Nature*.

This lesson unit serves as a precursor to the class unit on Thoreau’s works – grappling with the historical, literary philosophical underpinnings of Thoreau’s works. Student products – the string journal and Description of a Natural Wonder. September

LESSON TWO – Transplanting the Transcendental Seed: excerpts from Thoreau’s *Walden* and his essay *Life Without Principle*. Student product – process writing leading to the “Live Deliberately” Essay to be submitted to the WWP contest page. Late September

LESSON THREE – Cultivating an Environmental Ethos and a Sense of Place in the Poetry of Dickinson, Frost, and Roethke. Student products - Vernal Pool research project born of experience in the field (Allendale Woods Urban Wild in West Roxbury, MA) and/or in the classroom (Matt Burne’s vernal pool specimen tanks) to complement reading of Frost’s “*Spring Pools*” and a nature poem born of string journal reflections modeled after Dickinson’s “*A narrow fellow in the grass*” and Theodore Roethke’s “*The Pike*” and “*The Voice*.” Late March/early April

LESSON ONE – A: Read and discuss William Wordsworth’s “*The Tables Turned*” to understand the his embrace of nature and as a catalyst for the string journaling exercise.

Up! up! my Friend, and quit your books;

Or surely you'll grow double:

Up! up! my Friend, and clear your looks;

Why all this toil and trouble?

The sun above the mountain's head,

A freshening lustre mellow

Through all the long green fields has spread,

His first sweet evening yellow.

Books! 'tis a dull and endless strife:

Come, hear the woodland linnet,

How sweet his music! on my life,

There's more of wisdom in it.

And hark! how blithe the throstle sings!

He, too, is no mean preacher:

Come forth into the light of things,

Let Nature be your teacher.

She has a world of ready wealth,

Our minds and hearts to bless—

Spontaneous wisdom breathed by health,

Truth breathed by cheerfulness.

One impulse from a vernal wood

May teach you more of man,

Of moral evil and of good,

Than all the sages can.

Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;

Our meddling intellect

Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:—

We murder to dissect.

Enough of Science and of Art;

Close up those barren leaves;

Come forth, and bring with you a heart

That watches and receives.

1. **Discussion questions –**

- a. What does Wordsworth imply about “book” learning here? What alternate arena of learning does he propose? Given a choice, which do you prefer? Why?
- b. What is a linnet? A throstle? What do they inspire in the poet?
- c. What does the word “vernal” mean in the 3rd to last stanza?
- d. Explain the following lines from the poem in the context of a text you read last year – Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* – “Our meddling intellect/Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:- /We murder to dissect.” How might this line apply to how an “old school” lepidopterist would go about his or her business? What is problematic about this practice?
- e. What is the irony inherent in the line “close up those barren leaves”? (what various meanings can “leaves” have in the context of this poem?)

2. **Writing Exercise** - following Wordsworth’s admonition in the last stanza – students will get out into “Nature’s classroom” and start **string journal** entries in the spirit of Janet Burne’s model at Approaching Walden workshop. Journals will be submitted to the online platform www.writetheworld.com which allows for instructor input/assessment as well as peer review.

LESSON ONE – B: Read Wordsworth’s “My Heart Leaps Up” and respond to the discussion questions.

My heart leaps up when I behold

A rainbow in the sky:

So was it when my life began;

So is it now I am a man;

So be it when I shall grow old,

Or let me die!

The Child is father of the Man;

And I could wish my days to be

Bound each to each by natural piety.

Discussion Questions –

- a. What natural phenomenon excites the poet? Does it inspire the same reaction in you?
- b. How would a physicist explain this phenomenon? A two year old child?
- c. What is meant by the paradox “The Child is the father of the Man”?

Extended Reading and Writing Assignment - As a follow-up to Wordsworth’s poem, students will read John Wesley Powell’s description of the Grand Canyon - “*The Most Sublime Spectacle on Earth*” - from the account of his 1869 exploration of the Colorado River and respond to the accompanying questions set forth in the Prentice-Hall literature anthology – Timeless Voices, Timeless Themes: The American Experience, 1999. They will then take their accrued string journal entries and develop a description of their observed place, which will be submitted on the writetheworld.com platform.

LESSON ONE – C: Read Wordsworth’s “The World Is Too Much With Us”

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!
This 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;
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 wreathèd horn.

Discussion Questions:

- a. What is the rhyme scheme of this poem? By virtue of its length and the rhyme scheme, what is the specific form of this poem? What sort of poetic “formula” is embraced by such a poem?
- b. What “world” is alluded to in line one? What sentiment is expressed here about this “world”? How does this sentiment reflect the tenets of the Romantic movement?
- c. What desperate “solution” is entertained in the last 6 lines of this poem? Is it a realistic solution to the problem that the poet rails against?

Lesson One – D: Read excerpts from Emerson’s *Nature* and *Self-Reliance* in class anthology.

1. Discussion Questions on *Nature* (taken from class anthology)

- a. Do you find any evidence of Emerson’s reverence for nature in American culture today? Explain.
- b. What does Emerson mean when he says that in the woods “a man casts off his years”?
- c. What does Emerson mean when he describes himself as a “transparent eyeball”?
- d. Find evidence in this essay to support the Transcendental belief in the unity of the human spirit and the natural world.
- e. How persuasive is Emerson? Explain why you do or do not accept his ideas about nature.
- f. In what ways is Emerson’s attitude toward nature different from that of a scientist? (How does this resonate with Wordsworth’s “rainbow” poem? Powell was a trained geologist, yet would you say that his description of the Grand Canyon is a sterile, factual account?)

2. Discussion Questions on *Self-Reliance* (taken from class anthology)

- a. Which of Emerson’s statements, if any, would you choose as a guideline for personal conduct?
- b. What aspects of today’s American culture reflect Emerson’s belief in self-reliance?
- c. According to Emerson, why should people trust themselves?
- d. How does Emerson believe people should be affected by the way others perceive them?
- e. How does Emerson support his claim that “to be great is to be misunderstood”?
- f. Conforming to society’s expectations can have its advantages and disadvantages, as can nonconformity. Discuss the pros and cons of each.

3. Song Lyric Analysis: Read the following lyrics and discuss ways that they reflect Emerson's ethos of self-reliance.

I Don't Want To Be – Gavin DeGraw

I don't need to be anything other
Than a prison guard's son
I don't need to be anything other
Than a specialist's son
I don't have to be anyone other
Than the birth of two souls in one
Part of where I'm going, is knowing where I'm coming from

[Chorus:]

I don't want to be
Anything other than what I've been trying to be lately
All I have to do
Is think of me and I have peace of mind
I'm tired of looking 'round rooms
Wondering what I've got to do
Or who I'm supposed to be
I don't want to be anything other than me

I'm surrounded by liars everywhere I turn
I'm surrounded by imposters everywhere I turn
I'm surrounded by identity crisis everywhere I turn
Am I the only one who noticed?
I can't be the only one who's learned!

[Chorus]

Can I have everyone's attention please?
If you're not like this and that, you're gonna have to leave
I came from the mountain
The crust of creation
My whole situation-made from clay to stone
And now I'm telling everybody

[Chorus]

I don't want to be [x4]

Subdivisions – Rush

Sprawling on the fringes of the city
In geometric order
An insulated border
In-between the bright lights
And the far, unlit unknown

Growing up, it all seems so one-sided
Opinions all provided
The future pre-decided
Detached and subdivided
In the mass-production zone

Nowhere is the dreamer
Or the misfit so alone

Subdivisions
In the high school halls
In the shopping malls
Conform or be cast out
Subdivisions
In the basement bars
In the backs of cars
Be cool or be cast out
Any escape might help to smooth
The unattractive truth
But the suburbs have no charms to soothe
The restless dreams of youth

Drawn like moths, we drift into the city
The timeless old attraction
Cruising for the action
Lit up like a firefly
Just to feel the living night

Some will sell their dreams for small desires
Or lose the race to rats
Get caught in ticking traps
And start to dream of somewhere
To relax their restless flight

Somewhere out of a memory
Of lighted streets on quiet nights

Discussion Questions for the lyrics

1. What aspects of Emerson's essay *Self-Reliance* are captured by Gavin DeGraw's lyrics?
2. How are Emerson's ideas rooted in the song by Rush?
3. Do you have a favorite song that echoes the sentiments of Emerson's essay? Name the song/artist, supply sample lyrics, and explain how it applies here.

LESSON TWO – Thoreau's *Walden* (excerpts from "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For" and from "Conclusion" in class text) and "Life Without Principle" (students will use the annotated online version- <http://thoreau.eserver.org/lifewout.html>)

A. Read excerpts from *Walden* and *Life Without Principle* and respond to the following questions (*denotes those contained in Prentice-Hall anthology)

1. Why does Thoreau go to live in the woods? Why does he eventually leave? *
2. What does Thoreau mean by his comment: "It makes but little difference whether you are committed to a farm or the county jail"? *
3. In your own words, describe Thoreau's attitude toward individuality and conformity. *
4. How do the views expressed in these works connect with Wordsworth? Emerson? Rush's song "Subdivisions"? How would he view today's fast-paced society? What things might he take issue with?

B. Convictions Essay (a precursor to WWP's "Living Deliberately" Essay Contest Entry): After grappling with Thoreau, students are asked to clearly articulate a principle that guides their lives. Their thesis should be an appropriately aphoristic statement that encapsulates their philosophy. Students will "flesh out" their philosophy in Thoreauvian fashion by grounding abstract concepts in concrete imagery. The goal is to not write in fuzzy generalizations but to support their thesis with details and examples that clearly communicate a guiding principle. All phases of the writing process will make use of the writing platform on www.writetheworld.com. The final draft is expected to be 2-3 typewritten pages.

LESSON THREE - This lesson is intended to augment a pre-existing poetry unit on Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost.

- A. Students read Frost's "Spring Pools." In addition to discussing its poetic merits, the poem is provides a portal for exploring the ephemeral entity that is the subject of the poem: the vernal pool. The class will visit Allandale Woods with its streams, marsh, and certified vernal pool (www.cityofboston.gov/parks/urbanwilds/AllandaleWoods.asp) and/or entertain a

school visit by WWP's Matt Burne. An invaluable teacher resource for this lesson is Matt Burne and Leo Kenney's [A Field Guide to the Animals of Vernal Pools](#) published by the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife and the Vernal Pool Association, 2000.

Spring Pools by Robert Frost

These pools that, though in forests, still reflect
The total sky almost without defect,
And like the flowers beside them, chill and shiver,
Will like the flowers beside them soon be gone,
And yet not out by any brook or river,
But up by roots to bring dark foliage on.

The trees that have it in their pent-up buds
To darken nature and be summer woods—
Let them think twice before they use their powers
To blot out and drink up and sweep away
These flowery waters and these watery flowers
From snow that melted only yesterday.

- B. Before the experiential “field study,” students will break into small groups and research/report to the class on the following: the definition and certification of vernal pools, the myriad of life that can be found in vernal pools (frogs, salamanders, invertebrates, etc.), their importance in the environment, and human impacts on vernal pools (of special interest to the Allandale Woods is a recently proposed sustainable housing project on adjoining land - www.bostonherald.com/business/real_estate/2015/07/20m_sustainable_energy_subdivision_proposed_for_woods_in_west_roxbury)**
- C. Sense of Place Poetry exercise – Students will read Dickinson’s “A Narrow Fellow in the Grass” and Theodore Roethke’s “The Pike” and “The Voice” as models of poems that capture a sense of place in nature. Using their accrued string journal entries or visiting another natural space, students will write their own nature poem.**

Emily Dickinson

A narrow fellow in the grass
Occasionally rides;
You may have met him,—did you not,
His notice sudden is.

The grass divides as with a comb,
A spotted shaft is seen;
And then it closes at your feet
And opens further on.

He likes a boggy acre,
A floor too cool for corn.

Yet when a child, and barefoot,
I more than once, at morn,

Have passed, I thought, a whip-lash
Unbraiding in the sun,—
When, stopping to secure it,
It wrinkled, and was gone.

Several of nature's people
I know, and they know me;
I feel for them a transport
Of cordiality;

But never met this fellow,
Attended or alone,
Without a tighter breathing,
And zero at the bone.

The Pike - by Theodore Roethke

The river turns,
Leaving a place for the eye to rest,
A furred, a rocky pool,
A bottom of water.

The crabs tilt and eat, leisurely,
And the small fish lie, without shadow, motionless,
Or drift lazily in and out of the weeds.
The bottom-stones shimmer back their irregular striations,
And the half-sunken branch bends away from the gazer's eye.

A scene for the self to abjure!-
And I lean, almost into the water,
My eye always beyond the surface reflection;
I lean, and love these manifold shapes,
Until, out from a dark cove,
From beyond the end of a mossy log,
With one sinuous ripple, then a rush,
A thrashing-up of the whole pool
The pike strikes.

The Voice - by Theodore Roethke

One feather is a bird,
I claim; one tree, a wood;
In her low voice I heard
More than a mortal should;

And so I stood apart,
Hidden in my own heart.

And yet I roamed out where
Those notes went, like the bird,
Whose thin song hung in air,
Diminished, yet still heard:
I lived with open sound,
Aloft, and on the ground.

That ghost was my own choice,
The shy cerulean bird;
It sang with her true voice,
And it was I who heard
A slight voice reply;
I heard; and only I.

Desire exults the ear:
Bird, girl, and ghostly tree,
The earth, the solid air--
Their slow song sang in me;
The long noon pulsed away,
Like any summer day.

