

Integrating Thoreau and Emerson into American Voices and Expository Writing:

English Elective Courses at Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School

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American Voices  
One semester course  
Open to 10, 11, 12  
Range of difficulty 2-4

### 1. Rationale

American Voices may focus on literary works from any of the following cultures: African American, Latin American, Canadian, immigrant, women's literature, and Native American. The goal of this course is to deepen the students' understanding of the various cultures in the Western Hemisphere through a variety of genres.

### 2. Topics and Themes Emphasized

- seeing the Western Hemisphere as a whole, as a spectrum of cultures, peoples, and ecologies
- examining the heroes and villains engendered here, the choices that confront them, their aspirations and fears
- hearing how voice is established in poetry, drama, and fiction, using word, image, tone, and rhythm
- hearing how students construct their voices using these same tools each time they speak or write; hearing their own voice as poetic
- recognizing the spirit of place established by terrain, weather, season, architecture, light, and history
- asking, "Is reality fabulous?" when exploring the possibilities of "magic realism" in Latin American fiction and poetry
- comparing the place of poets in Latin and North American cultures
- tracing the influence of U.S. and Canadian film on hemispheric values

### 3. Methods and Sample Assignments

The following list represents several methods that may be used to expose students to various aspects of the different cultures studied as well as to help students find their own voice:

- short stories, novels, plays, poems, etc.
- art
- music
- foods
- individual projects and presentations
- group discussion
- films
- reading aloud in class
- guest speakers who might be immigrants, or Latin American, Native American, Canadian, African American, etc.

### Types of Assignments:

Writing will be done both in and out of class. Types of writing assignments will include: journal entries, short reaction pieces, informal papers, mini-research papers, creative pieces, and analytical papers.

Reading assignments will vary on a nightly basis, depending primarily upon the work being studied. Approximately 20 pages a night will be assigned when short stories and novels are being studied; less when poetry is being studied. Some assignments will be read in class by the instructor and students.

Students may also be asked to do group projects and presentations. They will be expected to do some research on various topics that deal with the culture, history, and other facts about the people and countries being studied. Students will be expected to present their work in a coherent, intelligent, and entertaining manner.

### 4. Expectations for Students

We expect students to enter into the reading of the literature of various cultures enthusiastically and with open minds. We also expect students to challenge their own assumptions. Reading and writing assignments and other projects will facilitate this process.

5. Reading List and Other Materials

*Eight Men*

*The Women of Brewster Place*

*Dutchman and the Slave*

*Eye of the Heart (collection)*

*Pedro Paramo*

*View from the Bridge*

*Dharma Bums*

*Sula*

*The American Experience in Literature*

*Black Voices*

*Imagining America*

*One Day When I Was Lost*

*New Worlds of Literature*

*Crossing the River*

a variety of current films

*No No Boy*

*Bright Lights, Big City*

## Sample Assignments

1. We view one or two Charlie Chaplin films, preferably *The Kid* and *The Immigrant*. The class is reduced to silence and laughter. It is magic. Then we read aloud the six-part poem, "Songs for that Man of the People Charlie Chaplin" by the Brazilian poet Carlos Drummond de Andrade. Students are then asked to catalogue the images of Chaplin each section of the poem offers. Students are asked to link as many of these images in the poem to particular scenes in the film. Students are asked to write a 500 word essay on the consonance of poem and film, of Chaplin's verbal and visual image. This may lead to discussion of the impact American film has had on the hemisphere's code of conduct.

2. We read Elizabeth Bishop poems: "The Armadillo" (written in Brazil), "The Waiting Room" (written in Worcester, MA), and "The Moose" (written in Nova Scotia).

Then the spirit of place in each poem is examined and established. We discuss flora, fauna, weather, architecture, terrain, traditions, people, history, and influential objects.

We write in class on how each place offers an illumination or insight that moves far beyond the immediate locale, trying to locate the exact line where this insight commences, the lines where it flourishes, the line where it subsides.

## American Voices:

I'll be teaching American Voices second semester, and plan to focus the course on voices that are often silenced that need to be heard. Therefore, I intend to start the course with an abridged version of Thoreau's Civil Disobedience and use Cris Tovani metacognitive strategies for approaching the first sections of the essay. I then intend to show Thoreau's influence on Martin Luther King by using King's letter from the Birmingham jail. Thus, the course opens raising the questions what voices need to be heard and what actions should be taken once we hear these often silenced voices.

Titles I have chosen for the course this semester are:

*Krik? Krak!* by Edwidge Danticat

*Sula* by Toni Morrison

*Women of Brewster Place* by Gloria Naylor

*When I Was Puerto Rican*

*Winter in the Blood* by James Welch

Excerpts from *Woman Warrior* by Maxine Kingston

Excerpts from the *Norton Anthology of Nature Writing*

A new section I want to add to the course, given current ecological realities such as global warming, is the voice of the naturalist writer. I intend to use excerpts from the Odell Shepard's *Heart of Thoreau's Journals*, Emerson's *Nature*, Terry Tempest Williams' *Refuge*, Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitude*, Gary Snyder's *Practice of the Wild*, E.O. Wilson's *The Naturalist*, and Bill McKibben's "A Special Moment in History."

## Expository Writing:

Expository Writing is a course I am teaching first semester. I plan to use Emerson and Thoreau as models for my students' journal assignments. Students are required to keep a journal for each quarter. If the journal is full, they receive an A; if the journal is not full, they receive an F. I will use selected quotations from the journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Bill Schechter's "Journal Drippings" that he prints for us at Lincoln-Sudbury on email, and also from Odell Shepard's *The Heart of Thoreau's Journals*. Students will spend will spend one class period writing in their journals at the replica of Thoreau's cabin built at L-S by Bill Schechter's Thoreau elective course.