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Through the Eyes of a Transcendentalist

Abstract: This unit will give students an overview of American Transcendentalism and two of its most prominent contributors; Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson. It will begin with some basic information, followed by critical thinking on the students' part regarding the authors' theories and belief system. Students will take a day trip to Farm Pond in Dover to rediscover an appreciation for nature and get into the mindset of Thoreau and Emerson to generate ideas for a poem that they will be required to write from one or both authors' perspectives.

Grade Level: 7th

Subject: English (heterogeneously grouped)

Objectives: Students will gain basic knowledge of the transcendentalist movement, Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Once equipped with this information, students will demonstrate ability to think critically about the authors' beliefs by making connections to the goals and priorities of Americans today. They will do this through both journal entries and nature sketches during a visit to a local pond and through writing poetry. In the journal entries, students will explain their thoughts and mindset when out in nature, doing the things that the transcendentalists encouraged people to incorporate into their daily lives. The goal is for students' to notice the contrast of this experience and the typically rushed schedule of their daily lives. In the poetry portion, students will display knowledge of Thoreau's and Emerson's philosophies based on our current lifestyle. They will also demonstrate skills in the application of specific poetic devices learned prior to this unit, such as; rhyme scheme, figurative language, speaker and point-of-view. Finally, this unit provides students with a foundation of transcendentalism that will help them better understand American Literature in eighth grade and high school.

Duration: Lesson will take 7 class periods of 42 minutes each. (One will be extended to 2 hours.)

Time frame outline:

Day 1: Lesson 1-Research Overview of Transcendentalism in pairs and discuss as a class.

Day 2: Lesson 2: Learning about Thoreau and Emerson

Day 3: Lesson 2 Continued

Day 4: Lesson 3: *Let's Appreciate Nature!* Part One: Remembering Your Childhood Relationship with Nature

Day 5: Lesson 3 continued- Part Two: *A Visit to Farm Pond*

Day 6: Lesson 4: *How Would Thoreau and Emerson Feel?*
Go over direction for poetry assignment and have students begin assignment.

Day 7: Lesson 4 continued- Finish poetry assignment and submit

Lesson Details:

Lesson #1 What is Transcendentalism?

Directions: Pair up with one person and use the websites below to find information on transcendentalism. Fill out each category, as specifically as possible. You have approximately 25 minutes to complete chart. Be prepared to contribute your findings at end of class.

www.transcendentalists.com

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/ihas/icon/transcend.html>

Defintion	
Time Period	
3-4 Beliefs of Philosophies	
Founder	
Famous transcendentalists	
Who did the transcendentalists advocate for?	

Lesson #2: Who are Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson?

Description: For this portion of the lesson, we will focus in on Thoreau and Emerson. Students will be given a fact sheet on each author (see following handouts) to learn some background. These sheets will also provide quotes from *Nature* and *Walden*, so that students will get a sense of their personal beliefs expressed in their writing. Then I will read aloud the following illustrated books: *A Man Named Thoreau* by Robert Burleigh and excerpts from *Ralph Waldo Emerson: The Father of the American Renaissance*, by Jamie Poolos. This will provide the information necessary for students to do the next 2 steps to the unit: *Let's Appreciate Nature!* and *How Would Thoreau and Emerson Feel?* It will also help students who are more visual learners and/or have difficulty grasping some of the abstract concepts surrounding transcendentalists, since the information is simplified and focuses on main ideas. Review of the fact sheets and oral reading of the illustrated books will take 2 class periods.

Ralph Waldo Emerson Fact Sheet

Born: May 25, 1803 in Boston, MA

Died: April 27, 1882 in Concord, MA

Education: Boston Latin School, Harvard College

Occupations: teacher, minister, lecturer, author

Beliefs: Abolition of slavery, appreciation of nature, reliance on intuition, individualism, non-conformity

Famous Work: Nature, Self Reliance, The American Scholar

Quote from Emerson's "Nature":

"The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?"

"Nature never became a toy to a wise spirit. The flowers, the animals, the mountains, reflected wisdom of his best hour, as much as they had delighted the simplicity of his childhood."

"To the body and mind which have been cramped by noxious work or company, nature is medicinal and restores their tone. The tradesman, the attorney comes out of the din and craft of the street, and sees the sky and the woods, and is a man again."

"The inhabitants of cities suppose that the country landscape is pleasant only half the year. I please myself with the graces of the winter scenery, and believe that we are as much touched by it as by the genial influences of summer."

Henry David Thoreau Fact Sheet

Born: July 12, 1817 Concord, MA

Died: May 6, 1862 (age 44) Concord, MA

Education: Harvard University

Occupations: teacher, author

Beliefs: nonviolent resistance, simple lifestyle, abolition of slavery, celebrating God in nature

Famous Work: Walden, Civil Disobedience, A Plea for Captain John Brown

Quotes by from Thoreau's "Walden":

"I had three pieces of limestone on my desk, but I was terrified to find that they required to be dusted daily, when the furniture of my mind was all undusted still, and threw them out the window in disgust."

"I would rather sit on a pumpkin and have it all to myself, than be crowded on a velvet cushion."

"Before I had done I was more the friend than the foe of the pine tree, though I had cut down some of them, having become better acquainted with it."

"Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity!"

"We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us."

"Why should we live with such hurry and waste of life?"

"Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is."

Materials: excerpts from *Walden* and *Nature*, art supplies (paper, shading pencils), notes on poetry taken earlier in the year

Rubrics: (see poetry assignment)

MA Standards: Reading and Literature Strand: Standards 14 and 16

Lesson #3: Let's Appreciate Nature!

Part One: Remembering Your Childhood Relationship with Nature: As you get older, you may notice yourself spending less time outdoors, unless you're at the beach, playing a sport, etc. When you were younger, it may have been catching toads and bugs, jumping in leaves, smelling dandelions, building a snow fort, etc. For the four seasons provided, list things you used to do in nature during each season. Only list things that involved observing, smelling, feeling nature, not an activity that just happened to be outside.

<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Fall</u></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Winter</u></p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Spring</u></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Summer</u></p>

Part Two: A Trip to Farm Pond: Farm Pond is a place that nearly all of you have visited growing up. You've skated, fished, swam there...and probably have many memories there. It may be a place that you go to less now that you're older. At our two hour visit to Farm Pond, choose one piece of nature (for example; an acorn, pine needle, leaf, dandelion, tree, rock, etc.) Sketch the item using the strategies for shading you just learned in art class. This must be a silent activity. When you have finished your sketch, complete the following journal prompt:

How did this activity compare to your usual school day? How was your pace, mental state different, if at all? Why might it be good to visit a place like this on a regular basis? Which quote(s) from *Walden* or *Nature* can you connect this experience with? Explain. Do you tend to agree with the author is saying? Disagree?

Name _____

Grade 7 English

Ms. Draper

How Would Thoreau and Emerson Feel?

Directions: Now that you are familiar with Thoreau's and Emerson's beliefs and have learned about some of the problems in our environment in science class, use these ideas to create some poetry. The topic must be either one aspect of Americans' present lifestyle OR one aspect of Americans' relationship with the environment. The first two lines should focus on the problem. The last 2 lines should be the solution from Thoreau's and Emerson's perspective. (In other words, what would he/they tell us to do about it?) The poem must have either aabb or abab rhyme scheme. Include at least one simile OR metaphor.

Requirement Checklist:

_____/10 Poem is 4 lines

_____/10 Topic of poem is either: one aspect of Americans' present lifestyle OR one aspect of Americans' relationship with the environment.

_____/20 Poem is has aabb OR abab rhyme scheme.

_____/40 First Two Lines: Problem/Last Two Lines: Solution (from Thoreau's and/or Emerson's perspective)

_____/20 Poem contains one simile OR metaphor

_____/100 Total