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Identity and Nature and Society: Transcendentalism

Burlington High School; Burlington, MA

Grade 11 (College Prep)

Course: American Literature

08/04/2016

Unit Overview:

Students at Burlington High School spend their junior year focusing on the theme of identity. This includes identity in community/society, race, class, gender, and nature. The Transcendentalism unit focuses on finding identity in Nature and society. With the help of works from Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, students learn to understand their connection with nature, as well as with society. This unit is introduced in the Spring; typically beginning in March and ending in mid-April. It is a 3 week unit which includes readings from Thoreau and Emerson, viewing the film *Into the Wild*, and culminating in an argumentative essay which focuses on *Into the Wild* and Transcendental ideas. By the end of this unit, students will understand Transcendental ideas, find importance in the connection with nature, and make connections between society today and society in the 1800s based on Emerson and Thoreau's ideas.

Timeline:

Day 1: Introduce Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson; Transcendental ideas; America at the time; content vocabulary; Anticipation Guide

Day 2-4: "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience" and "Self-Reliance" excerpts (Identity and Society)

Day 5-7: "Nature" and "Walden" excerpts (Identity and Nature)

Day 8-11: *Into the Wild* film viewing

Day 12-15: Argumentative Essay based on *Into the Wild* film viewing

Unit objectives:

Students will connect social movements in the 19th century with current social movements by reading the works of Emerson and Thoreau and researching relevant current events

Students will explore the value of nature through the writing of Emerson and Thoreau

Students will recognize the tenets of Transcendentalism in the writings of Thoreau and Emerson

Students will decide if Christopher McCandless is a true Transcendental hero or a foolish young man and create a well-structured argumentative essay using evidence from the film and their knowledge of Transcendentalism

Connections to ELA Common Core Standards: RL-1, RL-9, RI-7, W-1, W-4, W-6, W-9, SL-1, L-1, L-2, L-3

Lesson 1: Introduction (1 class day - 44 minutes)

Materials needed: American Literature textbook, overhead projector, highlighter/pen/pencil

Objectives: At the end of this lesson, students will know the tenets of Transcendentalism, understand the beliefs of authors Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, decide which Transcendental ideas they do or do not believe in, and recognize the development of America at the time

Process:

Upon entering the room, students will be handed an anticipation guide with statements relating to Transcendental ideas. They will be asked to either “agree” or “disagree” with each idea. (3-5 minutes) (See attached WS-A)

Discussion: We will select 3-5 statements that students want to discuss in class. Students will stand either on the “agree” or “disagree” side of the room and discuss the chosen statements (15 minutes)

Students return to their seats and open their textbooks to the Transcendentalism section. We will read through the information together and I will explain concepts that are unclear (8-10 minutes)

Students will read the short Emerson and Thoreau biographies in their book and highlight important ideas (7-10 minutes)

For the remainder of the period we will discuss their highlighted selections

Homework: Students will choose one of the statements from their anticipation guide and write a one page response (see attached WS-B)

Lesson 2: “On the Duty of Civil Disobedience”/Excerpts from “Self-Reliance” (4 days)

Objectives: To understand the meaning of “civil disobedience” and make connections to modern day civil protests. To apply the ideas of “Self-Reliance” to students’ own lives.

Materials: Chart paper/markers, American Literature textbook, “Civil Disobedience” assignment sheet, “Self-Reliance” reader response questions, “Self-Reliance” aphorisms

Process:

Day 1 (Class time: 44 minutes)

Begin by discussing what the word “civil” means - hang chart paper on the board with the word “civil” in the middle. Have students come up and write a word or phrase that they associate with the word civil. Discuss these ideas (6-8 minutes)

Introduce the idea of civil disobedience by explaining Thoreau’s refusal to pay his poll tax and his idea of civil disobedience (5-10 minutes depending on questions from students)

Break students into groups to work on current day civil disobedience project (remainder of period) Assignment sheet attached - WS-C

HW: Read excerpts from “On the Duty of Civil Disobedience”

Day 2 (Class time: 44 minutes)

Project gallery walk presentations (15 minutes)

Discuss presentations as a whole class (5-8 minutes)

Complete the reader response questions for “On the Duty of Civil Disobedience” (8-10 minutes) Assignment sheet attached - WS-D

Discuss student ideas (remainder of period)

HW: "Self-Reliance" pre-read quick write (prompt attached - [WS-E](#))

Day 3 (Class time: 44 minutes)

Hang chart paper on wall - as students enter the room, they should write down a single word or short phrase associated with the word "self-reliance" (this can be taken from their homework) (5 minutes)

Define and discuss the term aphorism and how this relates to Thoreau and Emerson

Break students into pairs and hand out the aphorism worksheet for students to work on (worksheet attached - [WS-F](#)) (20-25 minutes)

Whole class discussion of favorite quote (remainder of period)

Homework: no homework due tomorrow

Day 4 (Class time: 44 minutes)

Students will spend this class period working on a collaborative writing assignment. For this assignment, students will take on the persona of either Emerson or Thoreau to write a letter to a living person or an organization that exists in society today. The letter will address either Emerson or Thoreau's own thoughts on American society specifically relating to this person or organization. This acts as a formative assessment to ensure that students understand Emerson and Thoreau's views on society. (see assignment attached - [WS-G](#))

HW: Walden pre-read (see attached - [WS-H](#))

Lesson 3: Walden/Nature (3 days)

Materials: American Literature textbook, assignment sheets for "Walden" and "Nature," Construction paper/markers/colored pencils

Day 1 (Class time: 44 minutes)

Introduction to Walden (6-8 minutes depending on questions)

Hand out Walden assignment sheet and explain expectations for reading Walden (3-5 minutes depending on questions)

Break students into reading groups (already designated by me for differentiated learning). Walk around as students read and complete assignment to ensure understanding and answer questions. (Remainder of the period - assignment sheet attached [WS-I](#))

Day 2 (Class time: 44 minutes)

Walden discussion (10 minutes)

Brainstorm with students - make a list on the board of all items they consider necessary and a second list of items they consider to be material items (7 minutes)

Hand out simplicity worksheet and go over the facts listed at the top of the page together. Hold discussion about student thoughts regarding the list. (5 minutes) (Worksheet attached - [WS-J](#))

Allow students time to complete the 5 questions regarding Americans and materialism (6-8 minutes)

Break into small groups and allow students time to discuss their opinion on each of the questions (15 minutes)

HW: Read excerpt of "Nature" by Ralph Waldo Emerson in textbook

Day 3: (Class time: 44 minutes)

Discuss last night's reading with students, responding to questions as they have them and pointing out important quotes or passages that they may have missed or had a difficult time understanding (10 minutes)

Nature observation for the remainder of the period - students will walk to outside area and sit apart from one another. Students will take their independent outside time to journal their thoughts as they sit and observe nature. Students will reflect on their time outside and describe their feelings in relation to those of Emerson and Thoreau.

Lesson 4: Into the Wild (3 days) *(Class time: 44 minutes)*

Materials: Into the Wild film, 2 column notes

Rationale: Students should show their understanding of Transcendentalism by making notes on the tenets of Transcendentalism as they view the film Into the Wild. Many believe this film holds several transcendental ideas, specifically that the main character, Chris McCandless, was an avid believer in Thoreau's ideas. The purpose of showing this in class is for students to recognize modern transcendental ideas and decide if Chris McCandless should be considered heroic for his actions, or if his actions should be considered foolish. This lesson is a lead-in to the culminating argumentative essay.

Process: Hand out 2 column notes to students. Introduce the film and remind students that this film will be the topic of their argumentative essay for this unit. Show film while students take notes. (Notes attached - WS-K)

Lesson 5: Argument essay (5 days)

Materials: argument essay assignment sheet, pre-write worksheets

Objective/Rationale: Students have been working on creating effective and analytical arguments for the majority of the year. This assignment serves as a summative assessment of student knowledge of Transcendentalism and Henry David Thoreau's views on society and nature, as well as improve on their argumentative writing skills. This assignment is used to assess student understanding of the unit in its entirety.

Process:

Day 1 (Class time: 44 minutes)

Introduce argument assignment (5-8 minutes depending on questions) (Assignment sheet attached WS-M)

Recall argument structure, which students have previously learned and utilized in prior units (5-8 minutes depending on questions)

Students will begin brainstorming ideas for their argument essay (Remainder of the period) (See WS-L)

Day 2-Day 4 (Class time: 44 minutes)

Students will spend time working on their argument essays in the library where I will be available to answer questions and help with any element of the assignment students may need

HW: Students need to have a first draft complete before class on Day 5

Day 5 (Class time: 44 minutes)

Students will peer-edit their essays before submitting their final draft

Worksheets and Materials needed for unit:

WS-A: Transcendentalism: Anticipation Guide

Directions: Below are statements that relate to the big ideas of Transcendentalist thinkers. Decide if you agree or disagree with each of the statements. Below each statement, write 2-4 sentences explaining your decision.

_____ A simple person who lives in the country has a greater wisdom and insight into the mysteries of life than a sophisticated person from the city

Explanation:

_____ Logic and facts are more important than emotions and feelings

Explanation:

_____ Nature should be controlled by humans

Explanation:

_____ People should follow standards and traditions set forth by society

Explanation:

_____ We should never be satisfied with existing ideas (politically, socially, etc.), but rather we should desire radical change

Explanation:

_____ The needs of individuals are more important than the needs of society as a whole

Explanation:

_____ People should act with moderation and self-restraint and avoid expressing the extremes of their personalities in public

Explanation:

_____ I tend to follow my gut instinct in most situations

Explanation:

_____ I tend to see the glass half full

Explanation:

WS-B Transcendentalism: Anticipation Guide Response

Homework due Wednesday, 04/27/2016

Directions: Choose one statement from your Transcendentalism anticipation guide given in class today that you feel most strongly about. Use this page to type a one page response on your topic and turn it in on Classroom. Give specific reasoning - an anecdote, connection to someone you know or an event you have heard about in the news, or a hypothetical scenerio that would leave you feeling the way that you do. This is informal and counts for a homework grade - you may use first person pronouns, contractions, etc.

WS-C Transcendentalism: Civil Disobedience in our society

Assignment: Research a modern example of civil disobedience and create a poster informing your classmates of the protest and its results.

Tasks:

- With your group, research modern examples of civil disobedience. Here are some sites to help get you started:
 - <https://civildisobedience100.wordpress.com/>,
 - <https://ironline.american.edu/honoring-martin-luther-king-jr/>,
 - <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/aug/20/civil-disobedience-sanchez-gordillo>

- Respond to the following questions regarding your protest:
 - When and where did the person's act(s) of civil disobedience take place?
 - What specific societal issue(s) inspired him/her to commit civil disobedience?
 - How much recognition (or notoriety) did the person receive as a result?
 - When viewed in hindsight, how successful were the actions? Was there a change in policy as a result? Did the acts bring the issues into focus for the public?

- Using the information from your research and responses to the above questions, create a poster that informs your classmates of the act of civil disobedience
 - Make your poster interesting - use color and images, as well as words. You do not have to use paragraph form; you just need to make sure your audience understands the purpose of the civil disobedience, as well as the results
 - Cite your sources on the back of the poster

Presentation will be in the form of a gallery walk during tomorrow's class

WS-D Transcendentalism: “On the Duty of Civil Disobedience”

Directions: Respond to the following questions based on last night’s reading assignment of Henry David Thoreau’s “On the Duty of Civil Disobedience.” Each response should show thoughtful reflection and be written using well-developed sentences - each of these questions requires more than a one word or one sentence response.

1. From your reading last night, you discovered that Thoreau believed that the government which governs least is best. What did Thoreau mean by this? Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?

2. Because of this belief, Thoreau was sent to jail for his refusal to pay a poll tax. Do you agree with his decision to go to jail for this reason? Why or why not?

3. Over what major social issue would you be willing to go to prison? Describe your reasoning for this.

4. Choose one quote from your reading that you either agree or disagree with. Discuss your reasons for choosing this quote.

WS-E Transcendentalism: “Self-Reliance”

Directions: On a separate sheet of paper, take 8-10 minutes to write down a response to the following questions and be ready to discuss your responses

Americans have always taken tremendous pride in their personal liberty (freedom). Ralph Waldo Emerson nourished this individualistic idea with his essay “self-reliance.” What associations do you make with the word self-reliance? How does self-reliance differ from selfishness and self-centeredness? What are the benefits of non-conformity? Of conformity?

WS-F Transcendentalism: “Self-Reliance”

After reading Emerson’s “Self-Reliance” together as a class, you are going to spend 20-25 minutes discussing the following *aphorisms* with a partner.

Aphorism: A saying embodying a general truth.

Directions: Think about each quote carefully and write a response for each one. Then, choose your favorite to share with the class.

Your responses can include, but are not limited to, answers to each/any of the following questions:

- What does the quote mean?
- How can you relate it to society today?
- What Transcendental ideas are present?
- What are your initial reactions to Emerson’s idea?

1. There is a time in every man’s education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance, that imitation is suicide, and that he must take himself for better or worse as his portion.
2. Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members.
3. Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist. A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do.
4. To be great is to be misunderstood.
5. It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude after one’s own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.
6. Insist on yourself; never imitate

WS-G Transcendentalism: Emerson/Thoreau Collaborative Writing

Directions: Based on your readings of Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience” and Emerson’s “Self-Reliance,” you and your partner will imagine that either Thoreau or Emerson were alive today.

With your partner, write a letter from EITHER Emerson or Thoreau to a person/ group alive today.

Your letter must include the following:

- A proper greeting and closing
- Include at least 3 aphorisms from your author’s written works
 - If you are writing from Thoreau’s perspective, 3 big idea quotes from “Civil Disobedience”
 - If you are writing from Emerson’s perspective, 3 big idea quotes from either “Self-Reliance”
- Either Thoreau or Emerson’s thoughts about Americans today, particularly the group/ person to whom he is writing.
- As Transcendentalism suggests, be creative, follow your own path, and come up with your own ideas!
- Make the letter interesting!

Options of people/groups to whom you may choose to write your letter:

- a. The president/ a political party
- b. A social group at school
- c. Environmentalists
- d. A celebrity

Your letter should be a minimum of one page double spaced and be written from EITHER Thoreau or Emerson’s perspective, as you are taking on his persona.

WS-H Walden: Pre-read Quick Write

Directions: Read the following prompt. Write for 7-10 minutes in response to the prompt. Submit to Classroom when complete.

Walden was the most significant place for Thoreau and a source of inspiration. Thoreau teaches us that that one does not need to travel far to find curious and inspiring things. In fact, he spent most of his life in and around Concord, MA. He believes that the special places are the ones we know well. To him this place was Walden. What is your “Walden?” This is up to you: it does not need to be a pristine or spectacular place, just what is your place. Use descriptive language and imagery to describe your place.

WS-I Transcendentalism: “Walden” (pgs. 102-105)

Assignment:

Henry David Thoreau spent two years living in a small cabin in the woods on Walden Pond. While there, he wrote of his experiences in his story “Walden,” of which we will read excerpts. In these excerpts, you will read of Thoreau’s experiences through different seasons in Walden, as well as his reason for choosing to live so long in the woods.

Through his story, the main points of Thoreau’s philosophy is emphasized: to live simply, to live in the present, to live as an individual, and to appreciate man’s connection to nature. As you read the excerpts with your partner, underline or highlight quotes that show these ideas.

Focus on imagery: Thoreau’s use of imagery helps to give his reader a better sense of his experiences in the woods. Your job, as you read the excerpts from Walden, is to sketch a picture of what you believe Thoreau’s woods looked like. Your images should be supported with at least 5 quotes found in the excerpts - write these quotes on the back of your sketch.

Types of imagery: visual, auditory, gustatory, tactile, olfactory, thermal (*reference Emily Dickinson unit*)

WS-J Transcendentalism: “Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity”

One of Henry David Thoreau’s strongest beliefs was in living simply, with no materialistic items. This is partially what brought him to Walden. Think about the list of items we made that at the beginning of class that would be considered materialistic. What would life be like without them?

Below is a list (compiled from multiple sources) with some statistics regarding the way Americans live today:

- In 1958, only 4 percent of American homes had dishwashers. Now more than half do.
- Less than 1 percent had color televisions. Now 97 percent do. In addition, in the '50s there were no microwave ovens, DVR’s, or personal computers.
- Today, many new homes have three-car garages and are nearly 900 square feet (the same as an entire house in the 1950s).
- Americans fly 25 times as many passenger miles as they did in the 1950s.
- Although Americans had fewer material goods, the number of Americans who say they are very happy peaked back in 1957.
- Seventy percent of Americans visit malls each week, more than attend churches or synagogues.
- On average, Americans shop six hours a week and spend only 40 minutes playing with their children.

What are some of your initial thoughts after reading this list?

Directions: Respond to each of the following questions citing very specific reasons for your thoughts. Maybe you make a personal connection to yourself, your family, your friends, etc.; otherwise, you can also make connections to celebrities, activists, or those in the public eye. Be ready to discuss your responses in small groups.

1. Are Americans too materialistic? Discuss your reasons.
2. Does money equal happiness?
3. Why might people be so obsessed with buying small “things”?
4. What might Thoreau think about society today?
5. What are ways to combat this obsession with money and materialism? Do we need to?

WS-K *Into the Wild*: Two-Column Notes

As you know from your summer reading, Chris McCandless received a lot of criticism for making his journey into the wild. While he did receive criticism, many also lauded him as a sort of hero who set out to channel the beliefs of well-respected transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau.

Directions: As you view the film *Into the Wild*, take note of specific scenes which Chris McCandless makes foolish decisions and where he follows the tenets of transcendentalism as we have studied them throughout this unit. After viewing the film, you will need to decide if you are on the same side as McCandless' critics or if you put him in the category of transcendental hero. You will need to use specific scenes from the film in your essay, so be sure to be specific in your descriptions of the scenes. Let me know if you need me to stop or rewind at any point. You may use the back of this sheet if you run out of room.

Chris McCandless	Film Scenes
Transcendentalist Actions	
Foolish Actions	

WS-L American Literature: Creating an effective argument

Think back to your Transcendentalism unit and the film we viewed, *Into the Wild*. The main character, Chris McCandless, is often highly criticized for his decision to live, seemingly unprepared, in the wilderness. He is also praised by many, as a sort of hero for his willingness to abandon society and choose his own path.

Take a few minutes to think about McCandless's actions. Using the options below, choose your position on the topic.

Do you regard Chris as an admirable hero? Independent, resourceful, rugged and resilient?

OR

Do you regard Chris as a reckless fool? Proud, overconfident, unimaginative?

Spend 8-10 minutes reflecting on your reasoning and write your thoughts here:

WS-M Argument Essay: Christopher McCandless

Your essay should focus on one of two positions:

Do you regard Chris as an admirable hero? Independent, resourceful, rugged and resilient?

OR

Do you regard Chris as a reckless fool? Proud, overconfident, unimaginative?

Requirements:

The essay should be three pages max, two pages minimum and it is mandatory that the essay use the classical argument structure discussed in class.

Students must label the hard copy of their essay, indicating where the different portions of the structure are located.

This essay *requires* a minimum of four developed examples from the film. Students should use dialogue or descriptions of a scene and explain how the example supports their position on McCandless.

Students *may* bring in additional outside sources including current events; historical examples; and relevant literature to provide additional support to their argument.

Bibliography

Assignments were adapted with the help of the attached list of resources

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