Transcendentalism 101: An Interdisciplinary Approach

Unit Overview:

The purpose of this unit is to give the students an interdisciplinary understanding of transcendentalism from both an historical context and through the lens of English Language Arts.

At the end of the unit students will have their own personal experience with transcendental writing and also understand where and when it developed in US History, and why it is important. The unit will take 4 normal (47 minute) class periods and 1 long (90 minute) class period for instruction with 1 final class period for a summative assessment.

At the end of the unit, students will be able to:

1) Identify themes and style of Transcendentalist writing
2) Place Transcendentalism in the context of US History
3) Write in the style of Transcendental literature
4) Explain how Henry David Thoreau exemplifies the Transcendentalist style of writing
5) Determine if John Brown serves as a case study in Transcendentalism

The lessons are organized to be completed sequentially or non-sequentially depending on the schedules of the US History and ELA classes. The first two classes focus on the historical context of transcendentalism, while the last three focus on the style, format, and meaning of transcendental writing.
## Lesson 1: What is Transcendentalism?

| Objectives | 1) Identify the elements of Transcendentalism  
2) Understand the development of Transcendentalism in American history  
3) Analyze Transcendental qualities in Emerson’s “Nature” |
| --- | --- |
| Standards | **AP US History:**  
Key Concept 4.1: The United States began to develop a modern democracy and celebrated a new national culture, while Americans sought to define the nation’s democratic ideals and change their society and institutions to match them.  
While Americans embraced a new national culture, various groups developed distinctive cultures of their own.  
A) The rise of democratic and individualistic beliefs, a response to rationalism, and changes to society caused by the market revolution, along with greater social and geographical mobility, contributed to a Second Great Awakening among Protestants that influenced moral and social reforms and inspired utopian and other religious movements.  
B) A new national culture emerged that combined American elements, European influences, and regional cultural sensibilities.  
C) Liberal social ideas from abroad and Romantic beliefs in human perfectibility influenced literature, art, philosophy, and architecture. |
| Essential Questions | What was happening in America to create the only truly American philosophy?  
What is Transcendentalism?  
Who were well-known Transcendentalists? |
| Process | -Prereading: Students will read the New England Renaissance historical context section of the Prentice Hall Literature anthology.  
-Hook: Have students take out their journals from the previous day. Ask them to analyze their journal for overarching sentiments (abstract nouns) such as freedom, hope, excitement, etc. Ask them to choose three sentiments that prevail most, and share them with a partner. Hopefully answers such as “freedom,” “individuality,” and “spirituality” come about. |
If not, steer it there. (5 minutes)

- Use this think-pair-share as a springboard for a discussion of Transcendentalism--its historical context and actual ideology. Using the textbook, they will fill in the blanks on the “New England Renaissance” worksheet. (5 minutes)

- Lead students in a lecture in order to fill in the seven elements of Transcendentalism, with ironic emphasis on its lack of a true definition. Introduce popular Transcendentalists of the time: Emerson and Thoreau. (10 minutes)

- Class read aloud (SEI strategy) of “Nature” by Ralph Waldo Emerson; it’s an excerpt from the Prentice Hall Literature Book. (5 minutes)

- Pass out the Ralph Waldo Emerson worksheet. Students will paraphrase each Emerson quote into their own words, keeping special consideration for the elements of Transcendentalism. (10 minutes)

- After students pass in their assessments, connect today’s material (Transcendentalism and Emerson) to tonight’s reading on John Brown; an aspect of Transcendentalism is a dedication to justice for humanity. (5 minutes)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment</th>
<th>Students will pass in the Emerson worksheet for an informal assessment so teacher can see if students are grasping the weighty concept of Transcendentalism.</th>
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**Lesson 2: John Brown and Harper’s Ferry**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objectives</th>
<th>1) Students will determine if John Brown was insane AND if it mattered 2) Students will analyze the short term and long term impact of Harper’s Ferry</th>
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</thead>
</table>
| Standards  | AP US History:  
Key Concept 5.2B: African American and white abolitionists, although a minority in the North, mounted a highly visible campaign against slavery, presenting moral arguments against the institution, assisting slaves’ |
escapes, and sometimes expressing a willingness to use violence to achieve their goals.

**Common Core:**
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1
Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

| Essential Questions | 1) Was John Brown insane?  
|                     | 2) Why was Harper’s Ferry so controversial?  
|                     | 3) How has John Brown been remembered in history? |

|         | AND complete guide questions (attached)  
|         | In class, students will arrange in a circle and complete an historian’s roundtable (a routine we have done multiple times up to this point – students take turns discussing the reading, making sure to hit the major points in the guide, but also asking questions, posing ideas, etc. The teacher participates minimally unless the discussion needs a jumpstart). Roundtable participation and guide questions are worth a homework grade.  
|         | Short PPT presentation on John Brown and Harper’s Ferry (attached) |

| Assessment | Ticket to leave (formative assessment) : Triangle/Square/Circle – 3 points (triangle) made today, 1 thing that squared with your thinking, and 1 thing still circling in your head (graphic organizer attached) |

| Homework | For tomorrow, students will read “A Plea for Captain John Brown” (annotated version) at [http://thoreau.eserver.org/plea.html](http://thoreau.eserver.org/plea.html) OR listen to audio version at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kQRCVGvdvc0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kQRCVGvdvc0) |

**Lesson 3: John Brown: Transcendentalist?**
| Objectives | 1) Students will interpret the meaning of Henry David Thoreau’s “Plea for Captain John Brown  
2) Students will determine if John Brown fits the definition of a Transcendentalist  
3) Students will critically apply the Harper’s Ferry story to today’s world. |
| Standards | **AP US History:**  
Key Concept 4.1: The United States began to develop a modern democracy and celebrated a new national culture, while Americans sought to define the nation’s democratic ideals and change their society and institutions to match them.  
While Americans embraced a new national culture, various groups developed distinctive cultures of their own.  
A) The rise of democratic and individualistic beliefs, a response to rationalism, and changes to society caused by the market revolution, along with greater social and geographical mobility, contributed to a Second Great Awakening among Protestants that influenced moral and social reforms and inspired utopian and other religious movements.  
B) A new national culture emerged that combined American elements, European influences, and regional cultural sensibilities.  
C) Liberal social ideas from abroad and Romantic beliefs in human perfectibility influenced literature, art, philosophy, and architecture.  
**Common Core:**  
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.3  
Evaluate a speaker’s point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, assessing the stance, premises, links among ideas, word choice, points of emphasis, and tone used. |
| Essential Questions | 4) What was the main idea of Thoreau’s Plea for Captain Brown?  
5) Thoreau paints Brown as a transcendentalist. Does he fit the description?  
6) How can John Brown, Harper’s Ferry, and a Plea for Captain Brown fit into today’s current events? |
| Process | Pre-reading – students will read “A Plea for Captain John Brown” (annotated version) at [http://thoreau.eserver.org/plea.html](http://thoreau.eserver.org/plea.html) OR listen to audio version at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kQRCVGvdvc0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kQRCVGvdvc0)  
Have students pick a favorite quote from the document to share at the beginning of class.  
Start class by handing out sticky notes/index cards and have them anonymously write down their favorite quote from a “Plea for John
Brown”

Students will place them on poster paper, creating a parking lot/gallery walk of ideas. Have them read each other’s. Did others choose similar quotes? Different?

Have students meet in groups of 3-4 to discuss their quote and why they picked it. Groups cannot have 2 people with the same quote.

Big group discussion. How convincing was Thoreau? Remember the national mood regarding Brown to this point. Would his words have changed your mind? How courageous was Thoreau in making this speech? What does it tell us about his personality/worldview? Connect Thoreau to future reading of *Walden*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment</th>
<th>Synthesis: Draw connection between John Brown, Harper’s Ferry and/or Thoreau’s Essay to a current event. 5 minute free write then pair share with the rest of the class. (formative assessment of the day)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Homework</td>
<td>To prepare students for tomorrow’s nature discovery, students will complete an exercise which relates Transcendentalism to their lives while also drawing upon a play they have already read this year, <em>Our Town</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**Lesson 4: A Sense of Place**

| Objective | Analyze nature using the 5 senses and metaphysical faculties  
Write in the style of Transcendentalism |
| Standards | CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.10  
Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences. |
| Essential Questions | 1) What is Nature saying to you?  
2) What does it mean to write like a Transcendentalist?  
3) Is a sense of place as important to you as it was to Thoreau? |
<p>| Process | Explain today’s activity (see below-5 minutes) |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Travel outside</td>
<td>5 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>String Journal: Students will go out into nature for 30 minutes without any cell phones or distractions. They will place their string wherever they wish to observe nature. Our school is surrounded by woods which are fairly open. They will observe nature and simply free write, letting their minds take them wherever they will. The goal is for them to write in a Transcendental style. Students should not interact with another during this time. (30 minutes)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Students will return to school</td>
<td>5 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Students will reflect on their experience with a partner. They will choose their own partner and read the journals out loud. (10 minutes)</td>
<td>Students will come back together for a more formal discussion. Members of the class will comment on the connections between their peers’ writing and what they now know about Transcendentalism. Participants will be given credit based on their discussion. (30 minutes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>Students will pass in their journals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students will pass in their homework from the previous night which connected the upcoming ideas of Thoreau and the play Our Town.</td>
<td>Students will be graded on their participation in a class discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homework</td>
<td>Students will read a section of Walden from the Prentice Hall literature book.</td>
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# Lesson 5: Thoreau and his Sense of Place

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Explain how Henry David Thoreau exemplifies the Transcendentalist style of writing and thinking</th>
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| Standards | **AP US History:**  
Key Concept 4.1: The United States began to develop a modern democracy and celebrated a new national culture, while Americans sought to define the nation’s democratic ideals and change their society and institutions to match them.

While Americans embraced a new national culture, various groups developed distinctive cultures of their own.

A) The rise of democratic and individualistic beliefs, a response to rationalism, and changes to society caused by the market revolution, along with greater social and geographical mobility, contributed to a Second Great Awakening among Protestants that influenced moral and social reforms and inspired utopian and other religious movements.  
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**Common Core:**  
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1  
Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain. |
| Essential Questions | How did Thoreau put Transcendental theory into practice during his time at Walden Pond? |
| Process | Students will take a reading check on the excerpt from *Walden* in the Prentice Hall literature book. (10 minutes)  
Pass out the worksheet on Thoreau. Briefly go over his background and life, calling back to the information from day 2 regarding John Brown. (5 minutes)  
Use the reading check to go over the basic “plot” of the excerpt with the students: give the answers to the questions. (5 minutes) |
Put students in groups of 3. Each pair will be assigned two quotations from *Walden*. All of the notable quotations are on the worksheet. Each group will be responsible for explaining their quotations to the class as they relate to Thoreau’s life and Transcendental theory. The group must also make one connection to modern life using the quotation. Each group will be graded on its presentation. (10 minutes)

Groups will present their quotations. (15 minutes)

Using the various whiteboards in my classroom, students will write their favorite quotation from Thoreau using whatever marke/style they choose. (5 minutes)

Explain this: For extra credit in this course, they can take this favorite quotation and represent it artistically in whatever way they choose. The due date will be 5 days after this lesson. (5 minutes)

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<tr>
<th>Assessments</th>
<th>Reading Check on <em>Walden</em></th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Group presentations of Thoreauvian quotations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homework</td>
<td>Study for upcoming test on this unit</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**Work Cited**


Guided Notes: New England Renaissance
(1840-1855)

- ____________________ became the main city of America.
- ____________________ in Lowell, Lawrence hired young women known as “Lowell girls”
- ____________________ expansion (most Westward state was Texas at this point)
- American _________________ was steadily improving with railroads, canals, highways.
- Poor factory conditions and issues with government (women not being able to vote, etc.)
  clouded the _________________ of the Romantic period.
- ____________________ societies were developed and attracted writers like Emerson.
- ____________________ , ________________, and ____________________ were the main
  Utopian societies.
- A movement towards better ____________________ occurred during this period. Education
  would be ________________.
- Main writers during this time period:
1) ______________________
2) ______________________

Transcendentalism

1)
2)
3)
4)
5)
6)
7)

Lesson 2: Exit Ticket: Triangle, Square, Circle

3 Important Points from Today’s lesson
Something that “squared” with my thinking
Something still circling in my head

Lesson 2 Pre-read: The Madness of John Brown Guide Questions
1. Support, modify, or refute Ralph Waldo Emerson’s assertion that John Brown was a "saint.... whose martyrdom, if it shall be perfected, will make the gallows as glorious as the cross."

2. Why did the Republican Party censure John Brown and his raid?

3. Based off of your reading AND insights, do you think John Brown was insane?

4. Examine the role of John Brown’s upbringing in shaping his personality and worldviews.

5. Despite its failure in execution, was Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry a success?

6. Add in 3 more talking points
John Brown and Harper’s Ferry

John Brown (1800-59)

- Failed businessman
- Pottawatomie Massacre
- Goes into hiding
- Secret Six
- Harper’s Ferry
- Northern vs. Southern Reaction
- Thoreau’s “Plea for Captain John Brown”
John Brown in American Memory

- John Brown’s Body, ca. 1861 (listen/sing)
- John Steuart Curry, 1939, Kansas Capitol Rotunda (next slide)
John Brown the Transcendentalist?

• “A man of rare common sense and directness of speech, as of action; a transcendentalist above all, a man of ideas and principles, that was what distinguished him.” — A Plea for Captain John Brown

• Support, modify, or refute this statement

• In doing so, attempt to address what you think is meant by the term “transcendentalist”
Worksheet: Ralph Waldo Emerson
1803-1882

Essayist, poet, orator, and philosopher
Born in Boston, Father died when he was 8 years old
Graduated from Harvard Divinity School and became a pastor in Boston
Young wife, Ellen, died and he became depressed. He resigned from being a Pastor.
Settled in Concord, MA and remarried.
Became part of the Transcendental Club

Transcendentalism: Believed that humans can only experience the physical world through the 5 senses. Outside of this, fundamental truths can only be experienced through intuition.

“Nature” is an Essay.

Briefly explain each of these quotations in your own words as they relate to the ideas of Transcendentalism and pass them in:

“In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in the streets or villages.”

“The waving of the boughs is new to me and old”

“Yet it is certain that the power to produce this delight does not reside in nature, but in man, or in the harmony of both.”

This question relates to tomorrow’s reading. Please answer it:
Essential Question: What are the advantages of conforming to society’s expectations? Of not conforming?
Thoreau Exercise

Consider the teachings of Henry David Thoreau and the dialogue of Our Town by Thornton Wilder. Keeping in mind Emily Webb’s goodbye speech in Act 3, read the following quote by Thoreau:

We are often reminded that if there were bestowed on us the wealth of Croesus, our aims must still be the same, and our means essentially the same. Moreover, if you are restricted in your range by poverty, if you cannot buy books and newspapers, for instance, you are not confined to the most significant and vital experiences; you are compelled to deal with the material which yields the most sugar and the most starch. It is life near the bone where it is ever on a lower level by magnanimity of a higher. Superfluous wealth can buy superfluities only. Money is not required to buy one necessary of the soul.

1. Write down some elements that you think Emily Webb would consider necessary to the soul. Here is an excerpt from her goodbye speech:

It goes so fast. We don’t have time to look at one another. (she breaks down sobbing, she looks around) I didn’t realize. All that was going on in life and we never noticed. Take me back - up the hill - to my grave. But first: Wait! One more look. Good-by, Good-by, world. Good-by, Grover’s Corners? Mama and Papa. Good-by to clocks ticking? and Mama's sunflowers. And food and coffee. And new-ironed dresses and hot baths? and sleeping and waking up. Oh, earth, you’re too wonderful for anybody to realize you. (she asks abruptly through her tears) Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it? - every, every minute? (she sighs) I'm ready to go back. I should have listened to you. That's all human beings are! Just blind people.

2. Next, consider your own necessaries of the soul. Write down a list of these physical or abstract items which you cannot live without or which make life worth living.

3. Choose one of these from your list and briefly describe this essence. Why is this a necessary to the soul? Why does this essence make your life worth living? Spend the bulk of your response discussing the following questions: What would humanity be like if we only strove for the necessaries of the soul? Why is this such a hard concept to grasp for some and not at all for others? What is this quote saying about rich and poor people? Who does Thoreau make out to be more enlightened? What, according to these authors, is the meaning of life?

Walden Reading Check

1. On which farm did Thoreau almost settle? Why did he not settle there?
2. On which holiday did Thoreau move into his cabin?

3. According to Thoreau, how many meals should we eat a day?

4. Which word does Thoreau use multiple times to make his point? (The word means “to make less complex.”) ____________________

6. What physical sign of his being there did Thoreau leave in the woods, other than his cabin?

7. Why did he leave the woods?

8. What comments does he make about human beings and routines?

9. Explain the meaning of the following quote:
   *However mean your life is, meet it and live it; do not shun it and call it hard names. It is not so bad as you are. It looks poorest when you are richest. The faultfinder will find faults even in paradise.*

10. Explain the meaning of the following quote:
    *The life in us is like the water in the river. It may rise this year higher than man has ever known it, and flood the parched uplands; even this may be the eventful year, which will drown out all our muskrats. It was not always dry land where we dwell.*

11. “At a certain season of life, we are accustomed to consider every spot as the possible site of a house.” In your opinion, what is the most ideal spot for a house? If you could live on any piece of land, what would it look like? Describe.

**Bonus: Name one allusion made in this selection.**
- Born and raised in Concord, MA
- Graduated from Harvard and became a teacher
- Moved in with Emerson in 1842; they became best friends
- Dedicated himself to the Transcendentalist philosophy
- For 2 years, he lived alone in a cabin he built himself at Walden Pond. It provided him with material for *Walden*.
- He used the four seasons as structural framework for the book.
- *Walden* was a unique blend of natural observation, social criticism, and philosophical insight.
- Died of Tuberculosis at age 42. Very few people knew of him yet.

**Style:** Refers to the manner in which a writer puts his or her thoughts into words.

“*Well, there I might live, I said; and there I did live, for an hour, a summer and a winter life; saw how I could let the years run off, buffet the winter through, and see the spring come in.*”

“The real attractions of the Hollowell farm, to me, were: its complete retirement, being about two miles from the village, half a mile from the nearest neighbor, and separated from the highway by a broad field”

“I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.”

“Our life is frittered away by detail”

“Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand.”

“Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in.”

“I learned this at least, by my experiment: that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.”

“If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; this is where they should be. Not put the foundations under them.”

“If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer.”

Name_______________________
Date________________________
New England Renaissance Test

Part I: Historical Background
Questions requiring one answer: 2 points
Open response questions: 5 points

1. What was the main city of America at this time? ________________
2. What kind of society was attempted in Concord? ________________
3. Which areas of America improved during this literary period? ________________ and ________________
4. Which piece of writing identified the qualities of transcendentalism? ________________
5. What is Transcendentalism?
6. What is anti-transcendentalism?
7. Ralph Waldo Emerson was a ________________ before he became a poet.
8. Emerson believes in the "oversoul." Explain this concept.
10. What does Thoreau think about human beings and routines?

11. What was Thoreau’s book called? ______________________

12. Why was Thoreau put in prison? _______________________

13. As a result, which essay did he write? ______________________

**John Brown**

14. Describe John Brown’s attempts to end slavery. How rational were these?

15. Should John Brown be considered a martyr?

16. Was John Brown a transcendentalist? Explain
17. How has John Brown been treated in historical memory?

Identify who wrote the following quotations: 2 points

18. ________________________________
   “I am a transparent eyeball.”

19. ________________________________
   If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost--now put the foundations under them.

20. ________________________________
   I say, let your affairs be two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand...our life is frittered away by detail.

Open Response: 20 points
“Many an object is not seen, though it falls within the range of our visual ray, because it does not come within the range of our intellectual ray, i.e., we are not looking for it. So, in the largest sense, we find only the world we look for.”


Using your knowledge of transcendental qualities, discuss and expand on the above quote’s meaning while integrating your own experiences and observations of the world.