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## Thoreau's Marginalized Voice and His Landscape

### Abstract:

This curriculum unit is intended for students in my junior-year Honors American literature class. In many of the texts studied in this course, we encounter characters who are marginalized from society for various reasons—race, gender, age, creed, political ideology, or socio-economic status. During the summer prior to junior-year English, students read Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* and journey with the displaced characters Tom Joad and Jim Casey. These marginalized "Okies" discover their voice and become spokesmen for the migrant farmers of the Hoovervilles and government camps. The motif of the alienated character is continued as we read Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* and study the pariahs Hester Prynne and Mistress Hibbins. Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of a Slave*, Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and a collection of short stories by Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty, and Shirley Jackson also feature alienated characters who are displaced from society and forced to find meaning in their own private "landscape"—be it the forest, the Mississippi River, the Underground Railroad, or Planet Tralfamadore. The voices of these "marginalized characters" are subversive, compelling, provocative, threatening, and haunting, and prophetic. They challenge my students, force them to examine their role in society, and force them to examine society in general.

Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* and *Civil Disobedience* also feature the voice of a marginalized "character"—though Thoreau's marginalization was unique and somewhat deliberate/ self-imposed. During the Approaching Walden Seminar, scholars Jeffrey Cramer and Robert Gross explained Thoreau's decision to retreat from the society of Concord (Gross's essay *That Terrible Thoreau: Concord and Its Hermit* is particularly illuminating on the subject of Thoreau's alienating personality).

During his time at Walden, Thoreau's status as a Harvard-educated middle-class white male also set him apart from the other "residents" of the woods (who were primarily former slaves and Irish migrant workers). As Michelle Nijhuis declares in her *Smithsonian* article *Teaming up With Thoreau*:

The cabin on Walden Pond, the night in jail for tax evasion—it all seemed like a waste of a perfectly good Harvard education... *Walden* and his handful of other published writings languished near obscurity, and even his close friend and mentor, Ralph Waldo Emerson, said that Thoreau had squandered his talents in the woods. 'I cannot help counting it a fault in him that he had no ambition... Instead of engineering for all America, he was the captain of a huckleberry party,' Emerson lamented in his eulogy of Thoreau. *Walden*, of course is now a classic of American literature, and Thoreau is considered a secular prophet. In Concord, tourists buy T-

shirts printed with Thoreau's best-known sayings, including 'beware of all enterprises that require new clothes.'

Moreover, Thoreau's very "landscape" was a geologically "marginalized" piece of earth. Surrounding the kettlehole of Walden Pond is the undesirable sandy run-off or "dregs" of a glacier. It is here where "Concord's terrible hermit" built his cabin, lived deliberately, and cultivated his voice.

### **Objectives and Duration:**

In this unit, we will study how and why Thoreau's "marginalized status" enabled him to make trenchant observations about the natural world, his society, and the U.S. government. We will consider Thoreau's place among other "marginalized characters" from American texts. We will identify public figures from our own world (both present and past) who share Thoreau's vision and voice, and we will study how Thoreau's relationship with his landscape can help us find our *own* "Waldens" within our community.

During the course of this three-week unit, students will read:

- excerpts from *Walden*
- *Civil Disobedience*
- Bob Gross' essay *That Terrible Thoreau: Concord and Its Hermit*
- Michelle Nijuhis' *Smithsonian* magazine article *Teaming Up with Thoreau*
- selected essays from Henley and Marsh's *Heaven is Under Our Feet*
- selected chapters from Richard Louv's *Last Child in the Woods*

A timeframe and required readings for individual lessons is provided under the "lesson details" section of each activity.

Day 1: Introduction & Deduction: Thoreaus from the Past and Present

Day 2: Student Presentations: Thoreaus from the past and present

- Required reading (for homework): Bob Gross' essay *That Terrible Thoreau: Concord and Its Hermit*
- Michelle Nijuhis' *Smithsonian* magazine article *Teaming Up with Thoreau*

Day3: Marginalized Characters and Their Landscapes

- Required reading (for homework): "Economy" (*Walden*)

Day 4: Student Presentations & Discussion: Marginalized Characters and Their Landscapes

- Required reading (for homework) "Where I Lived and What I Lived For" (*Walden*)

Days 5 & 6: Marginalized Creatures and Characters from Thoreau's *Walden*

- Required reading (for homework):  
From *Walden*:

*Where I Lived, What I Lived For*  
*Sounds*  
*Solitude*  
*Visitors*

Days 7 & 8: Embracing Discomfort:

- Required reading (for homework day 7):  
*From Walden:*  
*The Bean-Field*  
*The Ponds*  
*Higher Laws*  
*Brute Neighbors*
- Required reading (for homework day 8):  
*House-Warming*  
*Former Inhabitants*  
*The Pond in Winter*  
*Spring*  
*Conclusion*

Days 9 & 10: A Sense of Place Memoir/ Personal Landscapes

- Required reading (completed prior to day's lesson):
  - from Richard Louv's *Last Child in the Woods:*
    - Introduction
    - Part I: The New Relationship Between Child and Nature
    - Part II: Why the Young (and the Rest of Us) Need Nature
    - Part III: the Nature-Child Reunion
    - Part VII: To Be Amazed

Day 11 (and beyond): Nature Journaling

Day 12: Thoreau's Legacy: Marginalized to Idolized

Days 13: Once Upon a Government

- Required reading (for homework):  
*Civil Disobedience*; pgs. 1-18

Day 14: Government According to Thoreau

Day 15: Socratic Seminar: *Civil Disobedience*

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## **Thoreaus from the Past and Present**

(*Walden* Lesson #1; Day 1)

### Lesson Details:

Duration: two class periods (57 minutes X 2)

### Materials:

- whiteboard and markers
- notebook paper
- access to library/ Internet

### Preparation:

#### Activity #1: Deductive Responses & Predictions (15 minutes)

- Students will walk into the classroom and will be “greeted” by the following list of “luminaries” written on the front board (see next page). Students will thoughtfully respond in writing (coherent paragraphs!) to the following series of questions/ prompts:
- Using your knowledge of history, literature, and current events, deduce what all of the public figures listed below have in common.
- Explain how you reached this deduction, and explain any connections you see among the figures.
- Add other names of public figures you believe belong on the list.
- Predict which author from American literature we will be reading next.
- Using prior knowledge, explain why you think this author would be placed among such “luminaries”/ renegades.

Socrates (as gadfly)  
Cassandra (Greek mythology)  
Galileus Galileo  
Dante Alighieri  
Anne Hutchinson  
Roger Williams  
Henry David Thoreau  
Mark Twain  
Upton Sinclair  
Arthur Miller  
Mohandas Gandhi  
Martin Luther King Jr.

Julius Lester  
Salman Rushdie  
Ralph Nader  
Bono  
Veronica Guerin  
Michael Moore  
Susan Sarandon/  
Tim Robbins  
Rev. Al Sharpton  
Al Gore  
Orhan Pamuk  
Elvira Ariano

**Activity #2: Sharing of Responses** (20 minutes)

- Share responses & teacher will record additional, student-generated names to list on board.
- Teacher will introduce the next author & text of study—Henry David Thoreau & his essays *Walden* and *Civil Disobedience*.
- Teacher will record on board any prior knowledge/ hearsay students have “learned” about Thoreau.

**Activity #3: Independent Research** (will become homework; findings will be shared on Day #2 of lesson)

- Select one figure and research his/ her “marginalization” from society.
- Prepare a one-page synopsis/ analysis of the figure’s history of marginalization. Be sure your response addresses the following questions:
  - What (specific) kinds of messages did/ does your figure preach? Provide pertinent anecdotes to illustrate.
  - Why was the figure’s message regarded as threatening/ subversive/ heretical/ renegade? Which subjects/ audiences felt most challenged?
  - How & why was the figure’s voice silenced/ rejected?
  - How did figure respond to this marginalization?
  - Has the public’s opinion of this figure changed/ shifted, at all, throughout history? Has public sentiment about this figure changed—during his or her lifetime/ throughout history/ more recently?
  - How so & why? To what do you attribute this shift?
- Student write-ups on individual figures will be shared on Day 2 of lesson.

**Homework:** Actively read Bob Gross’ essay *That Terrible Thoreau: Concord and Its Hermit* and Michelle Nijuhis’ *Smithsonian* magazine article *Teaming Up with Thoreau*, highlighting key passages, asking questions, and writing marginalia.

## American Literature's Legacy of Marginalized Voices (*Walden* Lesson #2; Days 3 & 4 of unit)

### Lesson Details:

Duration: one class periods (57 minutes)

### Materials:

- graphic organizer handouts
- notebook paper

### Preparation:

#### Activity #1: Revisiting *The Scarlet Letter* (15 minutes)

- To begin our study of marginalized characters encountered in American literature, we will return to the earliest text read this year that features a protagonist who is alienated or marginalized from her society—Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* and his character Hester Prynne. We first meet Hester as she stands on the scaffold in Puritan Boston, accused of the sin of adultery and spared the punishment of death. Prynne is banished from her respective society, but instead of fleeing to Rhode Island or back to England, she retreats to the outskirts of the town, to the forest. It is here where she raises her daughter Pearl, the product of her adultery. In a class discussion, we will address the following questions:
- In what ways is Hester's voice marginalized throughout the book—not just during her hours of “officially sanctioned” punishment on the scaffold?
- How does Hester respond to this marginalization? Any specific examples of her response(s)?
- How does the character emerge by the story's end as a result of this marginalization?
- Who else, apart from the main character, would be considered a marginalized character in this work? (i.e. Mistress Hibbins, the sailors)
- To what marginalized piece of “landscape” is Hester relegated?
- Who else inhabits this landscape?
- How is the marginalized landscape sacred and unique?
- How does the landscape contribute to Hester's growth and development?
- How and why is Hester able to find meaning in this landscape?

By discussing this early piece of American literature as a class, we start to consider the pattern of marginalized characters and landscapes that emerge from our nation's body of literature.

#### **Activity #2: Graphic Organizer: Marginalized Characters from American Literature and Their Landscapes** (45 minutes)

In pairs, students will brainstorm titles of other American novels, plays, and short stories studied in class that featured marginalized characters and their unique “marginalized landscapes.” They will complete a graphic organizer that asks them to consider specific details about both the character and his/her landscape.

**Marginalized Characters and Their Landscapes**  
**Graphic Organizer**  
 (details to be provided by students)

<b><u>Title of Work</u></b>	<b><u>Marginalized Character</u></b>	<b><u>Marginalized Landscape</u></b>
	--How & why is this character's voice Marginalized throughout the book? --How does the character specifically respond to This marginalization? --How does the character emerge by the story's end As a result of this marginalization? --Who else, apart from the main character, would be Considered a marginalized character in this work?	--Where does the character retreat/ flee? --Who else inhabits this marginalized space? --What are the unique features of this landscape? --How does society view this "marginalized space"? --How is the marginalized landscape sacred? --How does the landscape contribute to the character's growth/ development? --How & why does the character find meaning within this landscape?
<i>The Scarlet Letter</i> (Hawthorne)	--Hester Prynne  --Mistress Hibbins  --sailors	--the forest
<i>The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i> (Twain)	--Huckleberry Finn --slave Jim	--the Mississippi River --Jackson Island
<i>Narrative of the Life of a Slave</i> (Douglass)	--Frederick Douglass	-- Baltimore's streets & harbor --Underground Railroad
<i>Bartleby the Scrivener</i> (Melville)	--Bartleby	--narrator's office; --adjacent building's brick wall
<i>The Grapes of Wrath</i> (Steinbeck)	--Tom Joad --Jim Casy	--Oklahoma farmland (Dustbowl) --Route 66 --Hoovervilles --Government camp at Weedpatch
<i>The Glass Menagerie</i> (Tennessee Williams)	--Tom Wingfield	--movie halls --the Merchant Marines
<i>Slaughterhouse-Five</i> (Vonnegut)	--Billy Pilgrim	--Planet Tralfamador
"The Lottery" (Shirley Jackson)	--Tessie Hutchinson	--lottery platform/ "scaffold"
"Why I Live at the P.O." (Eudora Welty)	--Sister/ narrator	--the post office



**Marginalized Characters and Their Landscapes**  
 Graphic Organizer (c'td.)  
 (details to be provided by students)

<b><u>Title of Work</u></b>	<b><u>Marginalized Character</u></b>	<b><u>Marginalized Landscape</u></b>
	--How & why is this character's voice Marginalized throughout the book? --How does the character specifically respond to This marginalization? --How does the character emerge by the story's end As a result of this marginalization? --Who else, apart from the main character, would be Considered a marginalized character in this work?	--Where does the character retreat/ flee? --Who else inhabits this marginalized space? --What are the unique features of this landscape? --How does society view this "marginalized space"? --How is the marginalized landscape sacred? --How does the landscape contribute to the character's growth/ development? --How & why does the character find meaning within this landscape?
<b>"The Worn Path"</b> (Eudora Welty)	--Grandmother Phoenix	--path from old Natchez Trace, MI into town
<b>"A Good Man is Hard to Find"</b> (Flannery O'Connor)	--Grandmother --the Misfit	--backseat of family's car --Red Sam's Barbecue Joint --roadside ditch
<b>"The Life You Save May be Your Own"</b> (Flannery O'Connor)	--Mr. Shiftlet --Lucynell Crater Sr. & Jr.	--the road/ highway --the Crater's farm

- **Follow-up activity: Presentation of Stories** (Day 4 ~ 57 minutes): Each group will prepare an overhead transparency detailing the specifics of a single literary work's marginalized character and his/ her respective landscape. Pairs of students will present and discuss their findings to the rest of the class on Day 4.

**Marginalized Characters and Creatures from Thoreau's *Walden***  
**(*Walden* Lesson #3; Days 5 & 6)**

Lesson Details:

Duration: Two class periods (57 minutes each)

Preparation: Students will have read the *Economy* section of *Walden* prior to today's lesson, paying special attention to Thoreau's treatment of the "marginalized" people and animals he encounters during his time in the woods and uses as examples in analogies.

Activity #1: Brainstorming a list of Thoreau's "marginalized" subjects (10 minutes): Students will share their lists of marginalized humans and creatures discussed by Thoreau in his opening section of *Walden*.

Possible subjects include:

\*the oxen (pg. 9)  
New Hollanders/ Australian aborigines (p.12)  
"strolling Indian" (p. 18)  
Penobscot Indians (p.28)  
\*Almshouse & its tenants (p. 33)  
\*Mason (p. 34-5)  
Shanties that border the railroad (p. 34)  
\*Irish famine victims (p. 34 & 52)  
\*Ireland's blighted landscape  
\*slaves/ "laborers in our southern states") (p. 35)  
"Arabian" furniture (p. 35)  
Unfurnished house (p. 35)  
\*Irishman James Collins & family (p. 41-2)  
Cellar/ woodchuck burrow (p. 443)  
Students (p. 48-9)  
Mucclasse/ Muklasa Indians (p. 65)  
Mexicans (p. 66)  
Penn, Howard & Mrs. Fry (p. 73)

**Activity #2: (Looking Further: Partners)** (20 minutes)

In groups of two, students will select five 'marginalized' subjects from the *Economy* section of *Walden* and ascertain Thoreau's tone and sentiments about each one. Starred items refer to subjects that are discussed more elaborately than others.

- Why does Thoreau include each "character" in his essay? To what end?
- What does each example accomplish?
- What does Thoreau say about each, and to whom or what does he contrast each example?

For example, the strong, sturdy vegetarian oxen (p. 9) are contrasted with their omnivorous owners who are unable to plow their field without the help of these “beasts of burden.”

For homework, as the class continues reading the various assigned sections of *Walden*, students will be asked to keep a list of marginalized people, creatures, and “allusions” Thoreau includes in his observations. Ultimately, they will select any ten subjects to analyze at greater depth.

Possible subjects in future readings include:

- From *Brute Neighbors*:
  - The mouse, otter, ants loon
- From *House-warming*:
  - The wasps and mole
- From Former Inhabitants & Former Winter Visitors:
  - Cato Ingraham (slave of Duncan Ingraham), Brister Freeman

**Sense of Place Memoir/ Personal Landscapes**  
**(with special thanks to Robert Gross)**  
(Walden Lesson #5; Days 7 & 8)

*Here is this vast, savage, howling mother of ours,  
Nature, lying all around, with such beauty, and such affection for her children,  
as the leopard; and yet we are so early weaned  
from her breast to society, to that culture which is exclusively  
An interaction of man on man.*  
--Henry David Thoreau

Lesson Details:

Duration: One class period (57 minutes)

Preparation: Prior to this writing assignment, students will have completed reading their assigned excerpts from *Walden* and the following chapters from Richard Louv's *Last Child in the Woods*:

Introduction

Part I: The New Relationship Between Child and Nature

Part II: Why the Young (and the Rest of Us) Need Nature

Part III: the Nature-Child Reunion

Part VII: To Be Amazed

Activity #1 (Discussion) *Last Child in the Woods* (25 minutes)

As a class, we will discuss the author's experiences as a youth climbing trees and building tree houses as well as the experiences of the following featured subjects: Benjamin Franklin, Eleanor Roosevelt, Charles Darwin, John Muir, Rachel Carson, Elaine Brooks, Richard Hermann, Leslie Stephens, Janet Fout, and Erin Lau.

Activity #2 (Poetry reading and discussion) (20 minutes)

Next, we will read and discuss two classic poems in class to gain a poetic perspective on the powerful effects of the natural world on the young: William Wordsworth's "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey" and Robert Frost's "Birches"

Activity #3 (Brainstorm and drafting: Sense of Place Memoir) (10+ minutes → homework)

Drawing from their own personal experiences, their reading of Thoreau, Louv, Wordsworth, and Frost, as well as class discussions, students will reflect upon an outdoor place/ landscape that was important to them when they were young (as was the case with Thoreau's childhood visits to Walden Pond). First we will brainstorm, as a class, possible landscapes or/ subjects for their memoir (i.e. forest, tree, bush, beach, dune, lake, river, swamp, hill, field, garden, snow fort, etc). Students will compose a one-page "memoir" describing the nature of their visits, the emotions this place evoke(d)(s), why this place was so special/ unique, and how it informed their childhood and adolescent years (and beyond). I will also share/ model my personal "sense of place" memoir about

my youthful relationship with a mighty pine tree that bordered my property. Students will bring their memoirs into class the following day and will be prepared to share.

**“Driving Life into a Corner”: Nature Journaling**  
(*Walden* Lesson 6; Day 9 and beyond)

Thoreau went to nature to “live deeply,” “suck the marrow of life,” “drive life into a corner,” and “reduce it to its lowest terms.” He recorded his accounts of the simple, sublime, and mean qualities of nature in *Walden* and his *Journals*. In his essay “Nature,” Emerson speaks of casting off his years, as a snake does his slough, in nature. He believed that the natural world allowed one to return to the sanctified state of childhood, to reason, and to faith. According to Emerson, nature allows all “mean egotism” to vanish. He adds, “There I feel that nothing can befall me in life—no disgrace, no calamity...which nature cannot repair.”

For this journaling assignment, you will refer to Thoreau’s minute, detailed, fine-tuned observations of the natural world (as seen in his *Nature Journals*). Select one “corner” of your natural world—be it a tree, a bush, a pond, a brook, a river, a flowering plant, a hive, a nest, etc) and observe this setting five times over a period of two weeks. You will take close notes and prepare a two-paragraph journal entry for each observation. Your journal entries will describe a natural feature in technical detail, but will be stripped of interpretation.

Suggested natural features for observation:

a tree, bush, pond, vernal pool, river, brook, swamp, wood pile, garden bed, patch of grass, snow, tree stump, toad stool, hive, nest, etc.

Suggested conditions:

In rain, sun, morning/ sunrise, afternoon, dusk, evening (w/ a flashlight!), windy conditions

Suggested points of observation:

Shape, color, texture, weight, size, smell, surrounding natural life (insect and otherwise), appearance of your feature during different times of day/ under different weather conditions

**Once Upon a Government...**  
*Civil Disobedience (Lesson #7; Days 10 & 11)*

Lesson Details:

Duration: one class period (57 minutes)

Materials:

- chart paper and markers

Preparation:

- **Broaching the subject** (15 minutes): As a class, students will brainstorm a list of current U.S. laws they view as unjust/ unfair. Students will be encouraged to call out their ideas, and the teacher will record the class list on the board. Laws pertaining to drug and alcohol use, driving, parental rights, education, the military draft, warfare, voting, the electoral process, imprisonment, immigration, and government monitoring (e-mail, phone records, etc.) are “popular” topics of discussion/ debate among high school students.
- **Small group activity: The “Top Ten List”** (40-45 minutes): Being sufficiently “revved up” by the previous brainstorming task, students will then be placed in groups of three. They will not yet have started reading *Civil Disobedience* (reading the first half—pages 1-15 will be assigned for the evening’s homework).
  - Groups will be asked to generate an original “top ten” list that identifies the most important roles and responsibilities of the government as they see it.
  - Students will be asked to consider the role of government in:
    - law enforcement
    - national defense/military
    - voting
    - taxation
    - the economy
    - the environment
    - protection of “vulnerable” citizens: poor/ young/ elderly/ infirm/ mentally & physically challenged
    - education
    - immigration
    - intervention in “moral issues”
    - dealing with dissent
- First, groups will draft a list of ten government “credos”/ responsibilities on lined paper/ an 8 X 11 handout.
- Next, groups will rank their items from least important (#10) to most important (#1).

- Finally, groups will transfer their “top ten lists” onto chart paper and will hang their final product on the classroom bulletin board. Groups will orally present their lists during the next class.

Draft—“Top Ten” List—Government’s Roles & Responsibilities

- 10.
- 9.
- 8.
- 7.
- 6.
- 5.
- 4.
- 3.
- 2.
- 1.

**Government According to Thoreau**  
*Civil Disobedience (Lesson #8; Day 12)*

Lesson Details:

Duration: one class period (57 minutes)

Materials:

- chart paper and markers

Preparation:

- Students will be placed in the same groups of three and will have completed reading *Civil Disobedience* (over the course of two evenings; 15 pgs./ night).
- Groups will be asked to formulate a “top ten” list that identifies the most important roles and responsibilities of government according to Thoreau. Students are able to purchase inexpensive copies of the Dover Thrift edition of *Civil Disobedience* from the school, so they have been highlighting and writing marginalia next to key ideas from the reading.
- Students will consider Thoreau’s position on the role of government in: law enforcement, national defense/military, voting, taxation, the economy, protection of the poor, education, intervention in “moral issues” & dealing with dissent.
- Groups will first draft a list of ten government responsibilities on lined paper/ an 8 X 11 handout.

- Next, groups will rank their items from least important (#10) to most important (#1) according to Thoreau.
- Finally, groups will transfer their “top ten lists” onto chart paper and will hang their final product on the classroom bulletin board. Groups will present their lists orally.

Draft—“Top Ten” List—Government According to Thoreau

- 10.
- 9.
- 8.
- 7.
- 6.
- 5.
- 4.
- 3.
- 2.
- 1.

**Socratic Seminar:**

*Civil Disobedience (Lesson #9; Day 13)*

Lesson Details:

Duration: one class period (57 minutes); each group will be given approximately 15 minutes to discuss their assigned prompt.

Materials:

- 12 “outer circle” observation prompts (written on notecards; see attached)
- 24 chairs, arranged in two concentric circles of 12 chairs each.
- texts: *Civil Disobedience*

Preparation: The Socratic Seminar is a culminating activity. Students will have already read *Civil Disobedience* and will be expected to refer to specific passages from the text in their discussions. Students have received copies of the two discussion prompts during the class prior to the seminar and have been assigned to one of the discussion groups. The previous night’s homework is to generate one side of notes for an *assigned* discussion prompt, indicating passages, page numbers, and ideas from *Civil Disobedience* that support their position as well as examples from current events, history, and literature.



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**Discussion Group A (The “Moral” Government):**

One belief Thoreau espouses in *Civil Disobedience* is that government oversteps its authority when it becomes involved in moral issues. Thoreau regards government as useless in such situations. Instead, he argues, these issues must be decided by the individual and his conscience. He pleads, “Can there not be a government in which majorities do not virtually decide right and wrong, but conscience?—in which majorities decide only those questions to which the rule of expedience is applicable? Must the individual ever for a moment, or in this least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator?”

Are Thoreau’s ideals achievable, practical, and relevant in today’s world? Can you think of any moral issues in which government intervention has brought about overall good *or* disastrous results? Defend or refute Thoreau’s position and find a passage from the essay that best encapsulates this argument.

**Discussion Group B (“Responsibility to Self or Society”):**

Thoreau asserts that man’s first responsibility is to live deliberately and extract meaning from his own life. Social responsibilities, he maintains, are secondary—such as overseeing the machinery of the government, etc. In fact, Thoreau writes dismissively of social reform. He claims, “I have other affairs to attend to. I came into this world, not chiefly to make this a good place to live, but to live in it, be it good or bad.”

Explain how Thoreau’s belief could be viewed as *either* irresponsible *or* wise. Select a passage from the essay that encapsulates the ideas mentioned above. Brainstorm examples of man living responsibly for himself and man acting as an agent of social change. To which belief do you ascribe? Why?

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**Outer Circle Observation Prompts** (written on individual notecards)

“Outer circle” students share their observations immediately following each discussion.

- Who emerged as the leader of the group during discussion? Why did you select this person?
- What was the best point made during the discussion? Why did you pick this idea?
- Make a list of the major topics of discussion (in the order they were raised).
- Count the number of times males speak/ females speak. How does this compare to the ratio of males to females in the group? Compare/ contrast speech patterns between males and females.
- Compare/ contrast the body language & eye contact of males and females.
- What happens during lulls or silences in the discussion?

- What happens when two people start to speak at the same time? How is the situation handled? Does a student ever interrupt another speaker? How is the issue resolved?
- Count the number of ‘likes,’ ‘ums,’ and ‘uhs’ during the discussion.
- Count the number of times the text is referred to/ quoted. What was the best textual reference made during the discussion?
- Observe the quiet students during the discussion. What are they doing?
- Observe the teacher during the discussion. What is s/he doing?
- Ask a question that was not asked/ answered during the discussion.

