

A Series of Classes on Images from Nature in Romantic Literature
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“The Earth is not a mere fragment of dead history, stratum upon stratum like the leaves of a book, to be studied by geologists and antiquaries chiefly, but living poetry like the leaves of a tree...”

UNIT OUTLINE:

Goals:

1. To provide students with a good general overview of the American literature and authors of the Romantic period [roughly 1800-1861].
2. To give students a basic understanding of Transcendentalism, its philosophical significance in the history of American thought, and particular relevance today.
3. To note the basic poetic device of the Romantics of drawing striking images from the direct observation of nature, and using them as metaphors for human experience.
4. To give students an understanding of what Emerson and Thoreau meant by “seeing” nature, why many people fail to “see” nature in their sense, and the price we pay for this failure.
5. The use of the stars as an image from nature, and an example people seeing and failing to “see” nature by Emerson and Walt Whitman.
6. To incorporate the concepts of place-based and interdisciplinary education in this unit through a field trip to “see” the stars, doing some basic astronomical observation with binoculars and a low-power telescope.

State Standards:

Two objectives common to the state, system, and school-based standards are increasing cultural awareness regarding the ethnicities in the school population, and that of reading and writing in the content areas. Many of my students are Asian – Indian, Chinese, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Malaysian – and are Hindu or Buddhist. Emerson and Thoreau are the first American thinkers to be influenced by Asian religions, so they provide an opportunity to discuss these. Their concern with and observation of nature provides an opportunity to bring in Science, and their involvement with contemporary issues provides a basis for bringing in History.

Overall course Objectives:

An overarching concern is the preparation of students for college. Many gifted students from Boston’s district high schools are accepted into college, but fail because they are totally unprepared. Boston’s three “exam” schools have the mission of providing the genuine equality of opportunity that, in theory, it is the function of the American public schools to provide. Giving students the necessary background in academic content and study skills is essential. Guiding and preparing appropriate students for a liberal arts education is also important, when the focus is overwhelmingly on the technicalities of job preparation. Conversely, for some high school will be their last experience with the humanities; it must be good enough to last them through life.

Reading List:

- Wm. Cullen Bryant: “To a Waterfowl”, “Thanatopsis”
- Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: “The Cross of Snow”, “The Ropewalk”, “The Tide Rises, the Tide Falls”
- Oliver Wendell Holmes: “The Chambered Nautilus”

- James Russell Lowell: “She Came and Went”
- Ralph Waldo Emerson: “The Rhodora”, “Brahma”, “Hamatreya”, selections from “Nature”, and “Self-Reliance”
- Henry David Thoreau: selections from “Walden” and “Resistance to Civil Government”
- Walt Whitman: selections from “Song of Myself”, also “On the Beach at Night”, “On the Beach at Night Alone”, “When I Heard the Learned Astronomer”, “A Sight in Camp in the Daybreak Gray and Dim”

*All these are in Holt Rinehart’s “Elements of Literature, Fifth Course – Literature of the United States” except “Brahma” and “Hamatreya” provided as handouts.

Day-to-day Lesson Plan Outline:

[Note: lessons in this unit will necessarily be interspersed with lessons devoted to other issues, e.g. grammar, vocabulary, technical aspects of writing, and the term paper, including oral reports presented to the class on the author and the work of American literature each student is reading independently, which will certainly include some of these authors and others from the period. Thus, students will hear an oral report from the student who has chosen and read all of “Walden”, for example.]

Day 1 of the unit will provide a background to the Romantic Period, basically contrasting it to the Rationalism of the 1700’s. In contrast to Rationalism, Romanticism values the feeling heart over the rational mind, intuition over logic, art over science, nature over civilization.

Day 2: Bryant

Day 3, 4: Longfellow, the sonnet form

Day 5: Holmes

Day 6: Lowell

Day 7, 8: Discussion, brainstorming, drafting, writing, reading aloud and discussing student essays [final drafts completed at home] comparing these poems. Possible topics: the poets’ use of images from nature, or the poets’ attitude towards death – positive or negative, abstract or personal.

Day 9-12: Background on Emerson and Transcendentalism, “Nature”, “Self-Reliance”, poetry.

Day 13-15: Background on Thoreau, “Walden”, “Civil Government”

Day 15: Exam on Emerson and Thoreau, a combination of essay questions and passages to explain. For example: “Why does Emerson say the experience of nature is part of our daily food?” or “What does Emerson mean by ‘Most persons do not see the sun’. How do they not see it? Why do they not ‘see’ it this way?”

Day 16-19: background on Walt Whitman, blank verse, the Transcendentalist vision of “Leaves of Grass”, Whitman’s theory of empathy, “Song of Myself”, shorter poems.

Day 20, 21: Essay on Whitman. Topic: his use of the stars as an image from nature expressing a spiritual truth in the three poems.

The field trip (see below) will probably be on a weekend. It will require class time to explain and discuss the science – what we’ll be seeing – and the philosophy – whether we’ll “see” the stars as the Transcendentalists would have us, and what the significance of this will be to us. Details and arrangements will take up some class time; also since I plan to ask parents to drive their children I will need to phone those who respond and touch base with them.

[Note: Almost all 45-min. classes will contain homework, either questions from the text or essay questions provided by myself, framed to direct students toward the meaning of the literature, reading passages aloud, open-ended class discussion, sometimes a quiz on the homework questions as a reading check, or an impromptu short essay. An essential aspect of every class is taking notes on what is SAID in class, on

background information given by the teacher and ideas expressed in class discussions – this is a basic survival skill for college.]

Grading Criteria:

Students' grades are based on homework, quizzes, and notebooks – this rewards students for consistently meeting daily responsibilities [another crucial survival skill for college]. Also on tests, essays, class discussions, which rewards individual understanding, insight, and creativity. Essays are basically graded on understanding of the material [with individual insights especially valued], clarity and logic of organization, expression and writing style, mechanics [which basically means eliminating minor errors through thorough proofreading.]

Final Exam and Term Paper: The students will select their own topics as well as the American author and the work read independently for the long, foot-noted, research paper due at the end of term four. However, I must accept their topics, and I consistently seek to direct them toward the meaning and significance of that particular work. As we work through the main periods in American literature, starting with its background in the English Renaissance, the Puritans, 18th cent. Rationalism, Romanticism, the Realism and Darwinism of the post-Civil War era, the philosophical materialism, Existentialism, Freud, and Marx of the 20th century, I constantly refer back to other periods, their views, and their influence on our present-day thinking. The final exam will largely consist of an essay which asks the students to reflect on and compare these ideas and their main spokesmen in American literature.

Seeing the Stars: A Field Trip

When we discuss Emerson's "Nature" I always ask them who looks up at the stars, so why not a field trip to do just that? A good pair of binoculars will show them the mountains and map of the moon, and the "el cheapo" 3" reflector from Edmund Scientific [my first one from the 50's cost \$30.00!] will resolve Mars, Saturn, Jupiter, into discs and show Mars' red tint, the rings of Saturn, Jupiter's latitudinal bands and four moons, as well as the Great Nebula in the Sword of Orion. All the things Galileo could see with his primitive telescope! And note I'm using scientific curiosity, not beauty to get them to look up. Hopefully, the aesthetic sense will be awakened by indirection. And when we discuss it some will still say, as many of their science teachers DO tell them: the stars are just matter; they don't mean anything; I don't believe in anything else." OK – and some won't. But at least all will have heard the Emersonian viewpoint.

For multi-disciplinary activities, besides the science dept., the Classics dept. could discuss the myths behind the constellations. From a practical standpoint, recognizing these is essential; they give a map to the sky, making the profusion of stars intelligible. Then it becomes possible to identify and name the great ones, Sirius, Rigel, Spica, Aldebaran, red Betelgeuse, with their Arabic or Classical names.

In Boston there's a lot of light from the city, but on a very clear night, this isn't so bad – again, it reduces the profusion of the stars. Only the greater ones, with names, that form the constellations, are visible. Larz Andersen Park in Brookline has a good clear hilltop that faces away from the city; possibly the Blue Hills, a little further out, would be better. If the number of students was very small, I could drive them myself; otherwise I'd ask parents to drive and, hopefully, stay and participate.