

UNIT: PLACE IN THE WORLD

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English, grade 12

Goals and Objectives:

This unit is designed to heighten students' awareness of their social, cultural, ecological, and political surroundings, and to get them to think about their own place within these matrices. One goal of the reading and writing assignments is to empower students – with knowledge about themselves and their surroundings and the skills to seek out that knowledge for themselves. A second goal is to alert students to the risk of oversimplifying or ignoring the complexities of our world by providing them with conflicting viewpoints and challenging questions. Students will hopefully come to recognize the power of language, both written and spoken, to effect inner and outer change. With the power to speak comes the responsibility to speak carefully.

Summary of Unit:

The unit is composed of three general sections: learning about where you live through observation, reflection, and first-hand experience; learning about where you live through research and investigation; and learning about your responsibility and power as individuals and writers. I have mapped out the first five days of class in detail and outlined the rest of the unit.

Evaluation Techniques:

Writing journals will compose a significant part of student work, but students will also be graded on at least two formal projects, a series of drafts, worksheets, and quizzes.

Weekly Journal Exercise

Once a week, students will copy out a quotation from one of the week's reading assignments into their journals and respond to it. The passage could be one that they find compelling, one they find confusing, one they disagree with, or one that uses imagery or poetic language that "speaks" to them. Their response should clearly explain their reasons for selecting the passage, emphasizing how it has impacted them as people and as writers. The in-class discussion of selections during the first few days of the unit will prepare the students for the sort of response we are looking for in their journals.

In-class and Take-home Journal Assignments

These assignments are explained in detail within the day-by-day section of the lesson plan.

Vocabulary Worksheets and Quizzes

The teacher will distribute vocabulary worksheets (see handouts section). The students are asked to fill in the sheets with difficult vocabulary or grammatical structures from their reading. They are responsible for finding the definitions or explanations and providing examples. The teacher will collect the vocabulary sheets once a week to correct, compile a list for the class, and quiz the students on the communal list. There will also be pop

vocabulary quizzes from the readings to be sure that students are looking up any words they don't know.

Drafts and Formal Writing

There will be several pieces of formal writing generated in this unit along with a series of experimental drafts and progress reports. Drafts and reports will be graded with a check system and formal writing with a letter grade.

Research

Students will work on one major research project for the second section of the unit, responding to the question: What should you know about where you live? In pairs or groups, depending on how many topics the class compiles, students will submit a proposal for approval and suggestions, submit progress reports once a week, and present a final project to the class along with a poster display.

Presentations and Class Participation

Students will be asked to present both of their major projects to the entire class. They will also be asked to read aloud from assigned readings and to engage in class discussions and brainstorming activities.

MA Standards Applied in this Unit:

Standard 1 (Discussion), Standard 2 (Questioning Listening, and Contributing), Standard 3 (Oral Presentation), Standard 4 (Vocabulary and Concept Development), Standard 8 (Understanding a Text), Standard 9 (Making Connections), Standard 10 (Genre), Standard 11 (Theme), Standard 13 (Nonfiction), Standard 14 (Poetry), Standard 15 (Style and Language), Standard 19 (Writing), Standard 20 (Audience and Purpose), Standard 21 (Revising), Standard 22 (Standard English Conventions), Standard 23 (Organizing Ideas in Writing), Standard 24 (Research), and Standard 27 (Media Production).

UNIT: PLACE IN THE WORD

Who are you?

Where do you live?

What do you want?

What do you need?

This questionnaire is to be handed out at the start of class on the second day of the unit. Students should take about five minutes to complete it, with single word answers or a single sentence per question. They should then paste or staple the questionnaire to the first page of their journal. For homework, have them take about 15-20 minutes to write their reflections on both the questions and their answers in the space below the questionnaire. This same questionnaire will be given out randomly at least four more times during the course of the unit. Students should write whatever comes to mind, whether the same or different from their previous answers, but then they must use the reflection space to discuss *why* their answers were the same or different. Be sure that the students understand that there is no right or wrong answer to the questions. They will be graded on this journal exercise based on the effort and thought they put into their reflections.

These questions underpin the readings and writing assignments.

Section I

Day 1

Once we see our place, our part of the world, as *surrounding* us, we have already made a profound division between it and ourselves. We have given up the understanding – dropped it out of our language and so out of our thought – that we and our country create one another, depend on one another, are literally part of one another; that our land passes in and out of our bodies just as our bodies pass in and out of our land; that as we and our land are part of one another, so all who are living as neighbors here, human and plant and animal, are part of one another, and so cannot possibly flourish alone; that, therefore, our culture must be our response to our place, our culture and our place are images of each other and inseparable from each other, and so neither can be better than the other.

(Wendell Berry “The Ecological Crisis as a Crisis of Character”)

Start class off by reading this passage aloud with students reading along. Write “surrounding” up on the board and ask the students what Wendell Berry is saying about this word. What

does he see as the problem with it? What language does he prefer? Have students look through the passage for Berry's examples of what he sees as our place in the world. In their journals, have students paraphrase the passage in their own words and then respond to it in their journals for the rest of the class, leaving 10 minutes to share some of those responses with the class.

For homework, students must use their grammar guide to look up commas, semi-colons, and dashes (to be discussed in reference to this passage the following class). Also, students must begin reading Thoreau's "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For" (about half). Have students look out for tricky vocabulary and confusing sentences as well as read for content.

Day 2

Begin with a study of the grammatical structure of Berry's piece, emphasizing the role of punctuation in clarifying meaning and helping a reader know how to read out loud (pauses, etc.).

Hand out the questionnaire and ask the students to fill it out with the first responses that comes to mind – single word or single sentence responses. Assure them that they will have time to explain more later. Have them paste or staple the questionnaire onto the top of the next blank page of their journals.

Discuss Thoreau, asking the students for vocabulary and structural trouble spots, offering your own if they do not respond. Ask the students what they know about Thoreau's life and philosophy. Share with them a brief history of Thoreau and his time at Walden. Ask for responses to Thoreau's ideas in their reading. Did anything surprise you? Intrigue you? See if the students can draw connections between Thoreau and Berry. Direct students to specific passages and have them explain what Thoreau is saying and how they feel about it.

For homework, have the students respond to the questionnaire and finish reading "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For," paying special attention to the ideas of "living deliberately" and "simplicity." Have them also read Annie Dillard's "Living Like Weasels."

Day 3

Have a student read aloud the quotation from Thoreau:

"I went into 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."

Ask the class to explain what they think Thoreau means. What is it to "live deliberately"? What are the "essential facts of life" (and what does "to front" mean)? Ask them to look again at Dillard's piece and locate a similar sentiment there. Is Dillard living deliberately and fronting essential facts? If so, how? Why is she writing about a weasel? What do Thoreau and Dillard see in animals that is worth learning from? Do you relate to these ideas or not?

Write “wildness” on the board and, for the rest of the class period, have the students write in their journals what they think wildness means.

For homework, have the students read Walt Whitman’s “There Was a Child Went Forth” and think about the following questions:

What does Whitman mean by objects becoming “part of this child”?

Re-read lines 27-30. Is there a shift? How is the child’s relationship to his surroundings different from this point on?

Depending on how much work you want to give as homework, you can have the students also read Annie Dillard’s essay, “Seeing.” Both of these readings should help prepare the students for the next day of experiencing nature first-hand.

Day 4

Outdoor classroom day.

Take the students to a patch of wildness either on or off school grounds. Have them bring their journal and choose a place to sit. Ask them to set their journal aside and just concentrate very hard on seeing something. Suggest that they try to experience what Whitman describes in the poem – try to open their minds to a thing (preferably a living thing – and let it become a part of them. After about 20 minutes, ask the students to document the experience in note form to expand later. What did they see? What did they feel? What did they think about? Have them spend another 10 minutes drawing what they had been observing. Ask if they discovered anything new about their study subject through drawing it and if so to write down what they found.

For homework, ask the students to reflect critically on the experience in writing (but not in their journals). What is the relationship between you and your subject based on? Why did you feel the way you did? What does this object represent to you and why? What connects you to it?

Day 5

This day is devoted to identifying and developing descriptive language. Revisit Dillard’s “Living Like Weasels” and have the students identify powerful descriptive language. What makes it powerful?

Distribute a handout of poems: Donald Hall’s “Digging,” Olive Senior’s “Plants,” William Carlos Williams’ “A Sort of a Song,” and Stephen Dobyns’ “Fragments.” In groups, have the students discuss how these poems show emotion, sensation, and connection between people and the physical world.

Have the students look back at what they wrote last class and at home about their experience outside. Now they must reconstruct the experience in language that *shows* and evokes the

experience itself (have a set of thesauruses on hand). Have students write on a separate sheet of paper because you will be collecting the journals today.

For homework, have the students finish writing their first draft of the descriptive piece to hand in next class.

Days 6-?

Over the next few days, the students will continue crafting their language to best match their experience. One day at least should be devoted to repeating the outdoor exercise, this time with field guides to help students learn about their study subject in a broader way. Have them do further research on their subject at home. Also have them experiment with style – writing a draft as poetry, another as prose, a third that incorporates other types of media, such as photography, drawing, or models. Encourage the students to be daring and creative. Finally, have them select their favorite version to submit as their formal paper. Students will be asked to share their final product with the class (reading aloud and describing the writing and thought process that led to this final outcome).

Section II

What should you know about where you live? Ask the students to individually compose a list of 20 things, thinking about what anyone would need to know or want to know about the place they live and why. For a week, students should be hyper-sensitive to what surrounds them, what they interact with, and what forces shape their daily existence. Encourage them to keep Wendell Berry's passage from Day 1 in mind so that they include not only their everyday surroundings but local environmental resources and social/political sites of importance to the community. Students and the teacher will compile a class list and decide together, with the help of a guide on designing research topics, which items on the list could serve as viable research projects (see <http://www.dianahacker.com/pocket/index.html>, for example). The class must identify the items on their list that qualify as researchable topics and defend their choices. In pairs or groups, depending on how many topics the class compiles, students will work in class on a proposal for their research – what aspects they would like to find out about and how they intend to gain the information – and submit the proposal for approval and suggestions.

Students must divide the labor as equally as possible and initial their own work. Students will submit progress reports once a week and present a final project to the class along with a poster display.

Section III

This final section will emphasize the “What do I want? What do I need?” questions, asking students to think about their responsibilities to themselves and the world as they struggle to answer these questions. Students will go back to Thoreau's “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For” and read it alongside of Donella Meadows' “Living Lightly and Inconsistently on the Land.”

They will then read Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" along with Alice Walker's poem, "We Alone" and the following passage by K.D. Moore:

I can't say I always, or even often, know what is right. But I'm pretty well convinced that whatever I do – what I decided to do and what I do without deciding – shapes the world and shapes me as a moral agent. Perhaps humans are the only beings in the universe capable of regret and resolve. If this is so, then the most important question is how – by what sort of education or process of moral development – does a person come to grow these moral synapses, this strong sense that the world-as-it-is asks something of them.

Kathleen Dean Moore. *The Pine Island Paradox* 114

Finally, they will read Lucille Clifton's poem, "at the cemetery, walnut grove plantation, South Carolina, 1989," and the interview with Bill Moyers. Also have them read the responses of Martin Luther King and Gandhi to Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" and maybe Emerson's "The Poet." Ask them to think about the power of writing, of getting your voice heard, and what enables a voice to *be* heard. How do these writers reach an audience? How does writing translate into action? What would they like to bring awareness to (and change?) in their own lives and the place they live, and how might they use writing to make that happen?

Supplementary Materials and Bibliography:

The larger reading assignments are:

"at the cemetery, walnut grove plantation, South Carolina, 1989" by Lucille Clifton

"Civil Disobedience" by Henry David Thoreau

"Fragments" by Stephen Dobyns

"Living Lightly and Inconsistently on the Land" by Donella Meadows

"Living Like Weasels" by Annie Dillard

"Seeing" by Annie Dillard

"There Was a Child Went Forth" by Walt Whitman

"Where I Lived, and What I Lived For" by Henry David Thoreau

A good online dictionary for students to use: <http://dictionary.reference.com>

A good online grammar and style guide (with a fun quiz on identifying good research topics)

<http://www.dianahacker.com/pocket/index.html>

Quotations and Shorter Poems:

Once we see our place, our part of the world, as *surrounding* us, we have already made a profound division between it and ourselves. We have given up the understanding – dropped it out of our language and so out of our thought – that we and our country create one another, depend on one another, are literally part of one another; that our land passes in and out of our bodies just as our bodies pass in and out of our land; that as we and our land are part of one another, so all who are living as neighbors here, human and plant and animal, are part of one another, and so cannot possibly flourish alone; that, therefore, our culture must be our response to our place, our culture and our place are images of each other and inseparable from each other, and so neither can be better than the other.

Wendell Berry, “**The Ecological Crisis as a Crisis of Character.**”

“**A Sort of a Song**” – William Carlos Williams

Let the snake wait under
his weed
and the writing
be of words, slow and quick, sharp
to strike, quiet to wait,
sleepless.

-- through metaphor to reconcile
The people and the stones.
Compose. (No ideas
But in things) Invent!
Saxifrage is my flower that splits
The rocks.

“**Plants**” – Olive Senior

Plants are deceptive. You see them there
looking as if once rooted they know
their places; not like animals, like us
always running around, leaving traces.

Yet from the way they breed (excuse me!)
and twine, from their exhibitionist
and rather prolific nature, we must infer
a sinister not to say imperialistic

grand design. Perhaps you’ve regarded,
as beneath your notice, armies of mangrove
on the march, roots in the air, clinging
tendrils anchoring themselves everywhere?

The world is full of shoots bent on conquest,
invasive seedlings seeking wide open spaces,
materiel gathered for explosive dispersal
in capsules and seed cases.

Maybe you haven’t quite taken in the
colonizing ambitions of hitchhiking
burrs on your sweater, surf-riding nuts
bobbing on ocean, parachuting seeds and other

airborne traffic dropping in. And what
about those special agents called flowers?

dressed, perfumed, and made-up for romancing
insects, bats, birds, bees, even you –

-- don't deny it, my dear, I've seen you
sniff and exclaim. Believe me, Innocent,
that sweet fruit, that berry, is nothing
more than ovary, the instrument to seduce

you into scattering plant progeny. Part of
a vast cosmic program that once set
in motion cannot be undone though we
become plant food and earth wind down.

They'll outlast us, they were always there
One step ahead of us: plants gone to seed,
Generating the original profligate,
Extravagant, reckless, improvident, weed.
(Senior 161-2)

“**Digging**” – Donald Hall

One midnight, after a day when lilies
lift themselves out of the ground while you watch them,
and you come into the house at dark
your fingers grubby with digging, your eyes
vague with the pleasure of digging,

let a wind raised from the South
climb through your bedroom window, lift you in its arms
-- you have become as small as a seed –
and carry you out of the house, over the black garden,
spinning and fluttering,
and drop you in cracked ground.
The dirt will be cool, rough to your clasped skin
like a man you have never known.
You will die into the ground
in a dead sleep, surrendered to water.

You will wake suffering
a widening pain in your side, a breach
gapped in your tight ribs
where a green shoot struggles to lift itself upwards
through the tomb of your dead flesh

to the sun, to the air of your garden
where you will blossom
in the shape of your own self, thoughtless
with flowers, speaking
to bees, in the language of green and yellow, white and red.

I can't say I always, or even often, know what is right. But I'm pretty well convinced that whatever I do – what I decided to do and what I do without deciding – shapes the world and shapes me as a moral agent. Perhaps humans are the only beings in the universe capable of regret and resolve. If this is so, then the most important question is how – by what sort of education or process of moral development – does a person come to grow these moral synapses, this strong sense that the world-as-it-is asks something of them.

Kathleen Dean Moore, *The Pine Island Paradox*

“We Alone” – Alice Walker

We alone can devalue gold
by not caring
if it falls or rises
in the marketplace.
Wherever there is gold
there is a chain, you know,
and if your chain
is gold
so much the worse
for you.

Feathers, shells
and sea-shaped stones
are all as rare.

This could be our revolution:
To love what is plentiful
as much as
what is scarce.

On "at the cemetery, walnut grove plantation, South Carolina, 1989"

Lucille Clifton (from an interview with Bill Moyers)

CLIFTON: Well, let me tell you what happened with that poem. I went to Walnut Grove Plantation in South Carolina in 1989 and I was the only person of color on the tour. It's a wonderful two thousand acres, but on the tour there was no mention of slaves. The plantation had the original furniture, and the guide talked about the difficulty of the work for a small family, but there was no mention of slavery. Now I'm very nosy--I want to know everything when I travel to give readings, all the gossip, everything. I like to know what happened here, so I always ask about the people who were here before these people? And then the uncomfortable question always is "Where are they now?"

Well, Walnut Grove Plantation has the family burying ground, and on the sides of the roped-off path leading to that burying ground there are crosses and rocks and other things sitting on edge that to me clearly mark the graves of slaves. So I asked, "Why don't you mention slaves?" The first answer was "Maybe the guide didn't want to embarrass you." "Well," I said, "I'm not a slave. I don't know why he would think I'd be embarrassed." Then I asked again, and the answer was, "Maybe they didn't have any." Well, they had two thousand acres in South Carolina in the early part of the nineteenth century. Be serious!

When I suggested that the guide check the inventory--because slaves were considered property and were often inventoried--they discovered that the plantation had an inventory of ten slaves, but they might have had more because women weren't counted. Now, well, I had to find out about that! I mean, some things say, hey, like "No!" Then when I learned that the women were not considered valuable enough to inventory, I definitely wanted to write about that.

MOYERS: What do you want the readers to do at the end of the poem when you change the word "here" to "hear"?

CLIFTON: I want them to recognize that only half the truth was being told. At that time schoolchildren were taken there on field trips to Walnut Grove, and half the children in the town were denied the knowledge that their ancestors had helped to build that plantation. That is unjust, and I'm into justice big-time.

I read that poem in South Carolina a lot, and someone in the audience--I think she was the director of the group which has restored the plantation--wrote me a letter saying that she just didn't realize. Two years ago they began building a model slave cabin, and now they are going to include all the people who lived there in the tour. So that's one poem doing something, making a difference. Then once when I did a reading at the nearby town a woman came up and told me that her family had owned Walnut Grove, but she had never gone back--she was ashamed--so I said the next time I come here, we must go together. You see, we cannot ignore history. History doesn't go away. The past isn't back there, the past is here too.

MOYERS: Is it part of poetry's job to recover history, to proclaim it, and to correct it when necessary?

CLIFTON: Yes. All that may be needed is that the injustice in the world be mentioned so that nobody can ever say, "Nobody told me."

From *The Language of Life: A festival of Poets*. By Bill Moyers. Ed. James Haba. New York: Doubleday, 1995. Copyright © 1995 by Public Affairs Television, Inc., and David Grubin Productions, Inc.

Vocabulary and Grammar Worksheet

Word or structure:

Definition and explanation:

First example:

Second example:

Third example:

Who are you?

Where do you live?

What do you want?

What do you need?