

Transcendentalists

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Abstract: Careful observation of the natural world can provide students with personal insights as well as creative inspiration. We have found over the last few years that when we ask students to put away their devices, step outside, pause and pay attention to their surroundings, they are rewarded with an authentic experience that inspires thoughtful and focussed artwork and writing. For this project, we are asking our students to approach this experience through the lens of the Transcendentalists - reflecting on their own sense of place as it relates to their creative efforts. This unit is intended for our combined classes of AP Studio Art and AP Literature, a group of about sixty high school seniors. It could be modified, however, for any grade level - with obvious changes in the expected readings.

Timeline:

This unit will take place intermittently over the course of the fall semester, with the final phase of the project taking place the following spring.

September 2023: All students will create journal entries based on the writings of Thoreau, the concept of Transcendentalism, Siddhartha by Herman Hesse, and local conservation history of specific protected lands in our home town.

Late September, 2023: Connecting to Walden in person. Students in AP Art and AP Literature will travel to Concord, Massachusetts to experience Walden Woods first-hand and observe and take notes/sketches of their observations. This experience will be a combination of teacher-directed experiences as well as Thoreau-inspired activities led by the "Approaching Walden" staff.

Mid-October 2023: Connecting to "Walden" at home. All students involved in the project will travel to the Coonamessett River in Falmouth to connect to their own river (Siddhartha) and learn about its restoration. We will also travel to Peterson Farm and Beebe's woods - local examples of restored land in our town for students to connect with our own protected woods. Students will finally apply what they have learned through Thoreau, Siddhartha, and local conservation leaders toward their own understanding of what it means to have a "sense of place" and how they can apply that to their own lives.

Winter 2023-24: All students will create artwork and broadside poems based on their experiences and journal entries. AP Studio Art Students will create an additional art piece based on their field trips, AP Literature students will create prose in response to the Approaching Walden "Live Deliberately" essay contest. All students will also work together to create large-scale group kites based on the philosophy of Henry David Thoreau to fly in the spring at the Coonamessett River.

Spring 2024: Exhibition of student works and broadside poems in the high school art gallery, the school science fair (naturalist studies), downtown at the Rinaldo Gallery on Main Street, and in a class display at the Barnstable County Fair. Broadside poems will also be reproduced and displayed at the Woods Hole Library.

The exhibition of student transcendental kites will take place in a sky gallery over the Coonamessett River during the herring run season (April - May).

Objectives:

1. To educate students regarding the philosophies of Thoreau, naturalist artists, and other writers tuned in to the theme of finding purpose in place and living deliberately.
2. To train students in AP Art and AP Literature in the practice of mindfulness and meditation as it relates to their art-making and note-taking.
3. To take our students first to Walden for inspiration based on the work of Thoreau and other Transcendental writers, and then to conservation lands in our own town to apply Transcendental philosophies to their impressions there.
4. To ask students to build on their understanding of “place” according to Thoreau and according to our town conservation groups - and find their own connection to a local place that inspires their connection.
5. To ask students to create broadside poems, artworks and prose based on these experiences and to further ask the students to organize the exhibition of these poems and artworks in their school and in the community.
6. To ask students to work together in groups composed of both art and literature students to transfer their artwork based in Transcendental philosophy to large-scale kites for a sky gallery installation.

Materials / Resources needed: We are fortunate in our town to have a generous grant funding source dedicated to our local public school teachers, (started almost 20 years ago by retired teachers!) They enable us to take field trips and purchase supplies that we would not be able to afford otherwise. It is a group that we strongly encourage people to try and start in their own town. Other funding sources for trips and materials are local banks, which often have silent grant opportunities and local cultural councils.

Materials / resources needed for this specific project:

The Walden Woods Project - resource for information and local field trip assistance.

The 300 Committee land trust & the Coonamessett River Trust - local land conservation groups

School buses

Student journals, pens & pencils

Art materials (Whatever is available and relevant to your own budget and curriculum)

Camera

Computer with linked scanner

Online publishing companies for books (blurb.com) and show invitations (vistaprint)

Lesson Details: This unit has a general format of: Topic introduction, Field trip experiences, Artwork and writings in response to the experiences and a variety of final presentations. Massachusetts State [Standards for Art](#) and [Standards for ELA](#) are linked here as well as at the end of this unit overview.

All lessons are linked at the end of each lesson description.

Lesson 1: What is Transcendentalism? How does one reflect and effectively record one's responses? Students will be asked to consider that question by watching a short [Introduction to Transcendentalism](#). They will then review the writings of Thoreau and the habit of nature journaling through class discussion, lectures and readings. AP Art & Literature students will learn in class as a group about Transcendentalism as a concept. They will also learn in class about productive field note habits in the style of John Muir Law (*Law's Guide to Nature Drawing and Journaling*). In the four weeks leading up to the first field trip, we will start each Friday with a silent journal response to a [quote](#), followed by a short class discussion.

Lesson 1 - [Reading Assignments in preparation for Field Trips](#). [Student Journal Entry Rubric](#)
[Reading assignment check sheet for journals](#)

Lesson 2: Learning from the Woods - Field Trip #1 to Walden Pond in Concord, MA. What was it about Walden Pond and the surrounding areas that inspired Thoreau? How can we learn from his example of “living deliberately”? We will travel to Walden Pond, stopping by the cabin replica, then on to Thoreau’s original house site. Students will have space and time for independent journaling. We will then travel to Brister’s Hill in Concord with the Walden Woods Project, stopping at historical points, engaging with selected Thoreau quotes, and spending time at the quote circle on the path for reflection and journaling. A good portion of this walk will be done silently for the students to have a better understanding of what they are trying to hear and think (*per Sarah Walker - WWP*). Our next stop will be the Old North Bridge, a place that Thoreau would have visited, at which we will re-read Emerson’s “Concord Hymn”, and again reflect and journal. We will conclude the trip with a stop at Sleepy Hollow Cemetery to visit the graves of Transcendental writers. Students from AP Art and AP Literature will be expected to create journal pages that relate to each stop on the field trip, following the reminders glued into their books noted here: [Field trip reminders](#)

Lesson 2 - [Field Trip # 1 - Learning from the woods.](#) [Student Journal Entry Rubric](#)

Lesson 3: Learning From the Local Woods: Listening to the woods and listening to ourselves. Field Trip #2 to local conservation lands with added meditation breaks. How can we apply the knowledge gained through our shared readings and experiences visiting Thoreau’s places in Concord? What are the similarities between connecting to Walden and connecting to our own lands? AP Art and AP Literature students will travel together by bus to two local conservation areas. Peterson Farm / Beebe’s Woods are connected land parcels that were originally used for farming and ice production. They were saved from real estate developers in the seventies and eighties and turned into walking trails and fields. Coonamessett River is an active herring run and nature preserve that was recently restored to its natural form from a working cranberry bog. Students will be asked to connect with these places in the same manner used in their trip to Concord, with the addition of first participating in an on-site group meditation exercise led by Tami McGeough, a local family yoga specialist.

Lesson 3 - [Field Trip #2 - Learning from the local woods.](#) [Student Journal Entry Rubric](#)

Lesson 4: Broadside, Zoom-in & Zoom-out works. How do we go about creating Artworks & Writing in response to these group trips? The main product resulting from reading, experiencing, reflecting, and journaling will be a Broadside poem (see professional examples [here](#), as well as a copy of our previous student broadside collection here; [Atmospheric Perspectives](#)). All AP Literature and AP Art students are expected to create a poem/art composition centered on their time in the fields and woods of Falmouth. Students will be expected to attend sessions with both Art and Literature teachers to craft and edit their compositions. Studio Art students are further expected to create one major artwork based on their time in Concord and one major artwork based on their Falmouth trips.

Lesson 4: [Broadside Poems and Zoom in / Zoom out works.](#)
[Rubric for Broadside poems.](#) [Rubric for Studio Art projects](#)

Lesson 5. Where is your Walden? How do these experiences of seeing Thoreau’s land and our own town land impact our understanding of place? What is a place that defines and inspires you? Reflecting on our readings and our trips to Walden Pond and Falmouth conservation lands, students will be asked to contemplate where locally they find personal inspiration in their surroundings. This experience will conclude for AP Literature students with a [“Live Deliberately” personal essay](#) (prompt TBD based on Live Deliberately essay prompt). AP Studio Art Students will create a final artwork based on their place of inspiration

Lesson 5: [A Sense of Place - “Where’s your Walden”.](#) [Rubric for Studio Art projects](#) AP Literature Rubric is [here](#).

Presentation of learning: Sky Gallery and Town-based art show and readings. How can we share this work with others to inspire change? How can we make the teachings of Thoreau relevant? How can we encourage people to advocate for open space in their community? We will reproduce the broadside poems in a published book that is shared with families, the school library and the town library. We will also make it available for purchase online. The students will organize a winter display of broadsides and artwork in the school art gallery and they will hold a public reception for people to come in and see their show. The students will also hang the same show downtown at the Rinaldo Cross gallery on Main street, where we will again hold a reception as well as a poetry reading that the entire community will be invited to. The broadsides will also be posted on a traveling folding art panel which will be displayed at the town science fair to showcase naturalist studies, the town library and finally at the county fair youth art display in July. AP Art and Literature Students will also collaborate in small groups to create large-scale kites inspired by their favorite Thoreau quote. These kites will be flown over the river in the spring during the herring migration period.

Relevant Massachusetts State ELA Standards:

RI3: Analyze a complex set of ideas or sequence of events and explain how specific individuals, ideas, or events interact and develop over the course of the text.

W3: Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and figurative and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences

W4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

W9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support written analysis, interpretation, reflection, and research

SL1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions

Relevant Massachusetts State Visual Arts Standards - Advanced Course Standards:

Creating:

- **Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.** Generate original ideas that integrate aesthetic principles with individual personal style while pushing the boundaries of style, genre, medium, and connections. (A.V.Cr.01)
- **Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.** Document personal strategies used regularly to organize artistic ideas (e.g., sketchbook, visual journal, etc.). (A.V.Cr.02)

Presenting:

- **Select, analyze and interpret artistic work for presentation.** Explain how personal experience of culture or history has influenced a piece of artwork or collection or works. (A.V.P.04)
- **Develop and refine artistic techniques and work for presentation.** Organize and plan an art exhibition that explores a personally meaningful theme, idea, or concept (e.g., identify and coordinate an artistic space; intentionally choose lighting). (A.V.P.05)
- **Convey meaning through the presentation of artistic work.** Present an artwork that causes audience reflection through its use of different artistic styles or viewpoints (A.V.P.06)

Connecting:

- **Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.** Explain the development of a personal aesthetic vision as a visual artist and how it is represented in a specific piece or collection. (A.V.Co.10)

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