

Adam Kotlarczyk, Ph.D.  
Email: akotlarczyk@imsa.edu  
Twitter: @IMSAEnglish  
Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy

### Thoreau's *Walden*: Experiential Learning and a Transcendental Walk

#### **Abstract:**

Many English classes struggle with Thoreau's dense and often ponderous prose in *Walden*. Classes often become mired in his text and its romantic ideals of seclusion and self-reliance. This activity rips the words of *Walden* off the page and puts them where they belong: outside. It compels students to move beyond basic interpretations of *Walden* as "connecting with nature" and "keeping life simple," and instead to see and interpret their modern, living world through the lens of Transcendentalism, as Thoreau did.

This lesson encourages students to see and interpret their worlds as Thoreau did through a modeling-based writing experience.

This lesson should take one-to-two class periods.

#### **Common Core State Standards:**

ELA-Literacy.RL11-12.9 Demonstrate knowledge of eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century foundational works of American literature, including how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics.

ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.3d Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.

ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.3e Provide a conclusion that follows from and reflects on what is experienced, observed, or resolved over the course of the narrative.

#### **Prerequisites (Optional):**

Although this activity works well independently, it is best instituted in the context of a rigorous American literature curriculum. This activity extensively examines nature metaphors, so it helps if your class is acquainted with their earlier uses and appearances in American literature, for example, in the Puritan poetry of Edward Taylor, or Jonathon Edwards' famous sermon. You can also contextualize this activity as part of American romanticism by giving your students a chance to read the short stories of Washington Irving (e.g. "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" or "Rip Van Winkle") or Nathaniel Hawthorne ("Young Goodman Brown"), or some of the poetry of the Fireside Poets. The romantic emphasis on nature and individualism tends to resonate well with high school students, and can serve as a valuable prelude to this activity.

The best pairing with this activity, though – and the one I recommend to fulfill RL11-12.9 above – is Emerson's "Nature" (1836). If you don't have time to read the entire essay, I would suggest reading at least its introduction and Part I: Nature.

**Procedure:**

1. This works best after your students have read part or all of Thoreau’s *Walden* and had a chance to discuss it. You may want to try it before reading, but you’ll risk a lot of “why are we doing this?” looks.
2. Take your students for a “Transcendental walk.” If you are fortunate enough to be at a school where you can safely take the students outside, take them out for a five or ten minute walk.

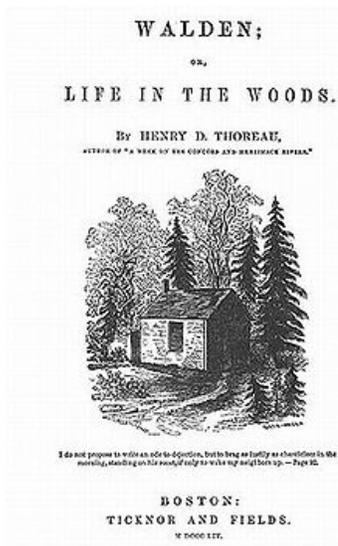
If it isn’t possible or practical to take your students outside, see the take-home prompt for this assignment in Appendix A. Use this prompt in place of steps 2-4 here.

Give them the following rules, effective the moment you step out of the classroom:

- a. Absolutely no talking to anyone in the class or anyone you may see.
- b. No nonverbal communication either – including looking at other people.
- c. Instead, focus intensely on your senses – what you see, smell, hear, and feel (hopefully no tasting happens during this activity). Become Emerson’s “Transparent eyeball” – “I am nothing, I see all.” Notice details you wouldn’t notice normally. Emerson says “To speak truly, few adult persons can see nature” – make yourself be one of the people who *does* see it.

Go slow – give them time to sense and observe the world.

3. Stop somewhere quiet halfway through the walk and read to them these paragraphs from *Walden*:



We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep. I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor. *It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue, and so to make a few objects beautiful; but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look, which morally we can do. Every man is tasked to make his life, even in its details, worthy of contemplation of his most elevate and critical hour.* If we refused, or rather used up, such paltry information as we get, the oracles would distinctly inform us how this might be done.

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. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. [italics mine]

4. Upon returning to the classroom, still without the students being able to talk to each other, have them free-write their experiences, focusing again on their sensory input. They can list all the experiences that they remember from the walk, and should *describe each in as vivid, objective detail as possible*.
5. After they’ve spent some time on this free-writing (at least five minutes), ask them individually to pick out the single image that stands out the most to them. Let them focus on developing that single image by spending another few minutes writing about it or revising it.

6. Go around the room and hear some or all of the images. Some students may have focused on the same image (a tree on our campus is often the focus for several of my students). That's okay – eventually their papers will diverge.
7. Remind them that this is part of what Thoreau did – observation. But he did more, too. Remind them of the italicized passage that you read to them outside – the idea that it is “far more glorious to paint the very atmosphere” and to make **“life, even in its details, worthy of contemplation”** (I like to project the italicized portion on a screen). Thoreau and the Transcendentalists believed that their eyes were drawn to specific images (especially in nature) for a reason – that nature worked *through* them, if they let it, and revealed larger ideas. Ask your students to consider and write about what reasons and ideas are in their images – e.g., how can their chosen image be symbolic of a personal belief, an experience in life, or a deeply-held personal philosophy? How does the image represent something the student believes to be true?

Let them turn again to their descriptions and begin to make these connections by explaining how the image they've described is a symbol for one of the beliefs. Time permitting, you can let them write these interpretations in class – there's something to be said for striking while the iron is hot and the inspiration fresh. But for more cerebral classes, you may want to give them overnight to develop their ideas and really flesh out the connection between their belief and the image in nature they just encountered.

8. The final step is to take the writing beyond the personal. Tell them to interpret what they have seen not just as a physical manifestation of one of their personal beliefs or philosophies, but as an expression about the human condition. What can that single image teach us about being human?



In his essay “The Poet” (1844), Emerson said that **“Poets turn the world to glass”**; that is, they allow us to see through the surfaces of things to something deeper. Encourage your students to become Emerson's poets, writing in prose.

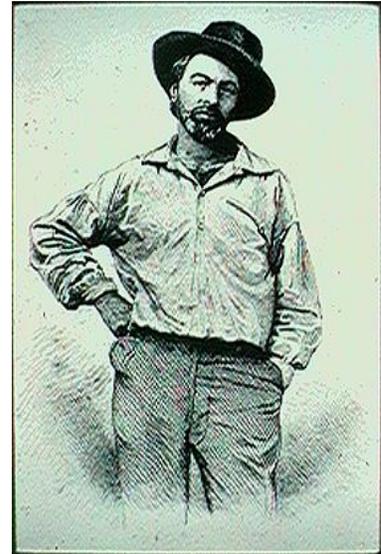
Be prepared for some clichéd responses – the students who see in the multi-colored leaves of a tree the multi-cultural elements of their own schools or communities, for example. But you will also get some pleasant surprises as students learn to interpret their own world, and to see it in metaphor the way Thoreau did and wrote about in *Walden*.

9. As you can tell your students, this is really what Transcendentalism is all about – it's not just the simplicity and solitude of living in the woods (as Emerson wrote in *Nature*, **“To go into solitude, a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society.”**). Rather, it's learning about oneself and mankind through that solitude. It is connecting to everyone and everything – to what Emerson called the Over-Soul - , paradoxically by being alone.



Because man and nature are connected, when one is out in nature, one is able to learn more about man (and even oneself), if one's senses are receptive. **“Only that day dawns,” Thoreau writes near the end of *Walden's Conclusion*, “to which we are awake.”** Thoreau's writing (and, hopefully, this exercise) should help awaken students and help them realize that his book is less important than their experience. As Emerson writes in “The American Scholar” (1837), “Books are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst.” Later, the poet Walt Whitman, a disciple of Emerson's and like Thoreau a Transcendentalist, would write in “Song of Myself” (1855) that

You shall no longer take things second or third hand, nor look  
through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the spectres in  
books,  
You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from  
me,  
You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self.



This project will pry students away from those bookish spectres, from learning second or third hand, and help them to listen to all sides and filter them for themselves through direct experience.

## APPENDIX A

### Transcendental Walk: Take-Home Prompt for Students

1. Go for a walk. It doesn't have to be far – even ten minutes of walking will do.
2. As you walk, don't communicate with anyone. Unplug. No phone calls, no texting. Also, no headphones or music. If you break any part of this rule at any point, you have to start over.
3. Walk slowly. Focus intensely and vividly on your thoughts and your senses – what do you see (look for colors and shades, light and shadow, textures, etc.)? What do you smell? What do you hear (near or far, loud or soft, etc.)? What do you feel?

Try to notice details to which you wouldn't normally pay attention. Become a version of Emerson's "Transparent Eyeball."

4. When you get home, immediately spend ten uninterrupted minutes writing down all the images you remember. Be as detailed and descriptive as possible – make the reader feel like he or she is there with you. No detail is unimportant. Bring this writing to class with you tomorrow.

