

The Transcendental Gospel: From Thoreau's Walden to Freddie Gray's Baltimore

Grades: 9-12

Lesson Plan Type: Standard Lesson Plan

Estimated Time: 60-90 minute sessions

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Preview

Overview

This lesson explores the complexity of Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* through close reading, annotation, and analysis. The piece may be read and analyzed during a study of Transcendentalism and its themes of individuality, non-conformity, intuition, and social reform. Thoreau's excerpt from "Where I Lived and What I Lived For" is placed in conversation with Brian Mooney's poem "The Transcendental Gospel of Freddie Gray." Freddie Carlos Gray Jr. was a 25-year-old African American who sustained injuries and died a week after his arrest on April 12, 2015 in Baltimore, Maryland. The poem makes clear reference to the philosophy and themes of Transcendentalism and to Thoreau's *Walden*. This lesson situates the ideals of Transcendentalism in the context of today.

Featured Resources

From Theory to Practice

Donachie, Pat. "Culturally-relevant pedagogy critical to meet needs of today's students." Education Dive. 21 July 2017.

Emdin, Christopher. "Teaching Isn't About Managing Behavior: It's about reaching students where they really are." The Atlantic. 24 July 2020.

Love, Bettina L. and Gholnecsar E. Muhammad. "What do we have to lose: toward disruption, agitation, and abolition in Black education." International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education 2020. DOI: 10.1080/09518398.2020.1753257.

Shipp, Lyschel. "Revolutionizing the English Classroom through Consciousness, Justice, and Self-Awareness." English Journal, Vol. 106, No. 4, March 2017, 35-40.

Smith, Michelle. "About." *Teach Living Poets*. <https://teachlivingpoets.com/about/>. Accessed 12 Feb. 2021.

These authors and educators encourage or engage in the use of culturally relevant, reality pedagogy and abolitionist teaching that amplifies and centers the voices, experiences, and culture of marginalized youth. This movement in education is to disrupt oppressive educational practices through the dismantling of Eurocentric curriculums. It is a push to recognize, acknowledge and affirm the identities, lives, and realities of the students we teach and the societies in which they currently live. It is also an emphasis on creating meaningful, highly engaging lessons by connecting what students are already familiar with to help them make sense of the histories, the content, and ways in which they are being taught.

Standards

NCTE/IRA NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

1. Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
11. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.
12. Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

State Standards (Georgia);

Subject: Language Arts

Grade(s): 11

Standard: ELACC11-12RL1. – Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

Standard: ELAGSE11-12RL2: Determine two or more themes or central ideas of text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.

Standard: ELAGSE11-12RL4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful.

Standard ELAGSE11-12RI6: Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text in which the rhetoric is particularly effective, analyzing how style and content contribute to the power, persuasiveness, or beauty of the text.

Standard: ELAGSE11-12W4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

Resources and Preparation

Materials & Technology

- Electronic devices to access the articles.
- Blank copy paper/chart paper to create sketch notes.
- Art supplies (pens, markers, crayons, colored pencils)

Printouts

- Optional (you may provide students with printed copies of the [Excerpt from Walden: Where I Lived and What I Lived For](#) and of the poem “[The Transcendental Gospel of Freddie Gray](#)”; otherwise allow students to access both texts online).

Websites

- [Excerpt from Walden: Where I Lived and What I Lived For](#) (www.commonlit.org)
- [Timeline of Freddie Gray’s arrest and death](#)

Preparation

1. Visit the links for each article to make sure that they are still active and working.
2. Create QR codes or short URL links so that students may access the links quickly and easily.
3. Make sure that all students have access to an electronic device (laptop, tablet, cell phone, or desktop computer). Students will need internet access to view the articles.
4. Students have the option to work in groups of four or individually to complete the sketch notes/close reading quad. If students work in groups, decide how you will group students or allow them to group themselves.
5. If you plan to have students complete the assessment for the “Excerpt from Walden: Where I Lived and What I Lived For,” create your classes on www.commonlit.org beforehand under the Manage Classes section. Allow students enough time to join your class using your class code.

Instructional Plan

Student Objectives

Students will

- Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of multiple texts
- Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account;
- Provide an objective summary of the text
- Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings;

- Analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful

Session One

1. Students should close read and annotate excerpt from Henry David Thoreau’s Walden. Students may create close reading quad or design group/individual sketch notes for this close reading. The close reading quad should include four sections: **Key Words/Phrases**- add key words/phrases that are important to the theme or central idea; add explanations; **Unfamiliar Words**- Use a dictionary to define unfamiliar words; Explain how the words clarified ideas; **Respond to the author**- cite the text & respond with your own idea or connection; **Questions**- ask specific questions for clarity or about a concept and questions that deepen the conversation or concepts within the text. For sketch notes students should add **images/graphics** that help to clarify ideas and add meaning to the text.

2. To enrich or provide extensions for students who demonstrate full content and skill mastery, offer these students the opportunity to serve as context experts to guide the class in thought/conversation about the railroad before you read the poem “The Transcendental Gospel of Freddie Gray.”

Provide student(s) with the following challenge:

- Think deeply about what Thoreau means when he discusses the railroad.
 - Explain both the figurative and literal meaning.
 - What does he mean when he says, “We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us.”
 - Who are the sleepers? Who has the pleasure of riding the railroad?
 - How is this relevant to the rest of his argument?
3. Teacher should introduce or review the literary term, allusion. Provide a definition and examples to provide background knowledge for students. You may also allow students to offer examples.
 4. Teacher should introduce information about Freddie Gray. Have the class read through the [Timeline of Freddie Gray’s arrest and death](#) (via Baltimore Sun).
 5. Read and annotate “[The Transcendental Gospel of Freddie Gray](#)”

Look for:

- Meaning/Read for Understanding/Ideas/ Themes
 - Poetic/Rhetorical Devices
 - Allusions to Walden/Thoreau/Transcendentalism
 - If you consider The Transcendental Gospel as a response poem (like I, Too by Langston Hughes was to I Hear America Singing by Walt Whitman), in what ways does the poem allude to and respond to ideas of transcendentalism?
- 6.

Extensions

Read the poems “I Hear America Singing” by Walt Whitman and “I, Too” by Langston Hughes. Both poems are available on www.commonlit.org. Allow students to answer the comprehension and/or discussion questions. As a class discuss Hughes’ allusion to Whitman’s poem. Discuss how Hughes’ poem acts as a response poem.

Have students read poems by any author of their choice. Ask students to write their own response poem with clear allusions to the anchor poem. Host an open mic poetry day in class. Allow students to read their poems. You may do this activity after studying poetry and poetic devices.

Student Assessment/Reflections

- Observe students’ participation as they work to create their sketch notes/close reading quad.
- Assess students’ understanding and analysis of poetry by having student engage in the CommonLit discussion questions and answer the guiding and assessment questions.
- Assess students’ depth of knowledge evidenced by their analysis of the intersection and overlapping of central ideas, allusions and their examination of poetic devices used in the texts.
- Assess students’ ability to produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience by having students write response poems.