

Unit Theme: Lowell and the Industrial Revolution

11th grade Inclusion/US History

Time: 1 class period

Thoreau, Transcendentalism, and Lowell

Synopsis: Students will discuss the rise of transcendentalism in the context of Lowell and the Industrial Revolution. Students will work with excerpts of Henry David Thoreau's *Life in the Woods*. His experience of two years living in relative seclusion offers deep insights not just into the natural world and humanity's place in it, but how that relationship was being impacted — and degraded — by the Industrial Revolution.

Standards:

NYS 1: History of the United States and New York

Objectives:

1. Define transcendentalism.
2. Discuss the rise of the movement in the context of the Industrial Revolution.
3. Interpret key excerpts from Thoreau's *Life in the Woods*
4. Critique Thoreau's opinion by utilizing key players in the Industrial Revolution such as factory owners and mill workers.

Materials: Student Handout with excerpts from Henry David Thoreau's *Life in the Woods*

Introduction: Class will begin with an introduction to transcendentalism. Teacher will talk about the rise of the movement within the context of the early 19th century and the Industrial Revolution. Key figures of the transcendentalist movement will be identified including Henry David Thoreau. The PowerPoint presentation will include pictures from our visit to Walden Pond.

Student handout will be distributed to the class that includes key excerpts from *Life in the Woods*. Students will work with partners to interpret these excerpts and identify Walden's position on technology, the conditions of the laborers, and the fashion of the time. Teacher will walk around the room and support groups when necessary.

Teacher will review the excerpts with the class.

Summary/Assessment: Students will imagine to be a factory owner, mill worker, or laborer living in the 1850s and respond to Thoreau's critique of the Industrial Revolution.

Student Handout

Thoreau on the telegraph:

We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate.

Thoreau on the railroad

One says to me, "I wonder that you do not lay up money; you love to travel; you might take the cars and go to Fitchburg today and see the country." But I am wiser than that. I have learned that the swiftest traveller is he that goes afoot. I say to my friend, Suppose we try who will get there first. The distance is thirty miles; the fare ninety cents. That is almost a day's wages. I remember when wages were sixty cents a day for laborers on this very road. Well, I start now on foot, and get there before night; I have travelled at that rate by the week together. You will in the meanwhile have earned your fare, and arrive there some time tomorrow, or possibly this evening, if you are lucky enough to get a job in season. Instead of going to Fitchburg, you will be working here the greater part of the day. And so, if the railroad reached round the world, I think that I should keep ahead of you.

Thoreau on the conditions of laborers:

We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us. Did you ever think what those sleepers are that underlie the railroad? Each one is a man.... The rails are laid on them, and they are covered with sand, and the cars run smoothly over them. They are sound sleepers, I assure you. And every few years a new lot is laid down and run over; so that, if some have the pleasure of riding on a rail, others have the misfortune to be ridden upon.

Thoreau on fashion:

I say, beware of all enterprises that require new clothes....

When I ask for a garment of a particular form, my tailoress tells me gravely, "They do not make them so now," not emphasizing the "They" at all, as if she quoted an authority as impersonal as the Fates.... We worship not the Graces, nor the Parcae, but Fashion. She spins and weaves and cuts with full authority. The head monkey at Paris puts on a traveller's cap, and all the monkeys in America do the same....

The manufacturers have learned that this taste is merely whimsical. Of two patterns which differ only by a few threads more or less of a particular color, the one will be sold readily, the other lie on the shelf, though it frequently happens that after the lapse of a season the latter becomes the most fashionable....

I cannot believe that our factory system is the best mode by which men may get clothing. The ... principal object is, not that mankind may be well and honestly clad, but, unquestionably, that corporations may be enriched. In the long run men hit only what they aim at. Therefore, though they should fail immediately, they had better aim at something high.