

Searching for Meaning

Learning Targets

- Develop a working definition of Transcendentalism and its key tenets.
 - Analyze foundational works of American literature to identify philosophical tenets.
 - Explain how the Transcendentalists envisioned the pursuit of happiness.

LEARNING STRATEGIES:

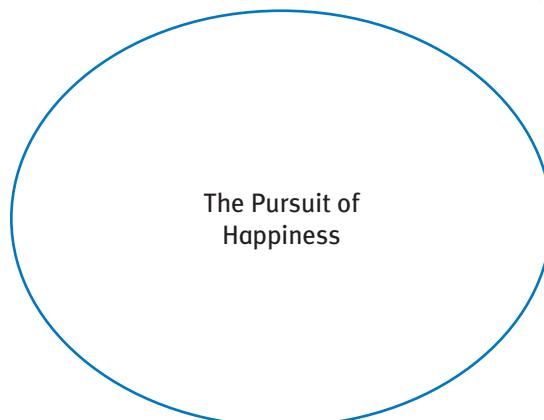
Close Reading, Marking the Text, Graphic Organizer, Shared Reading

Before Reading

1. The following excerpt from Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild* quotes a message carved into plywood by the subject of the book, Chris McCandless. As you read it, identify concepts that seem to be central to his world view and create a web of them below the passage.

TWO YEARS HE WALKS THE EARTH. NO PHONE, NO POOL, NO PETS, NO CIGARETTES. ULTIMATE FREEDOM. AN EXTREMIST. AN AESTHETIC ¹VOYAGER WHOSE HOME IS THE ROAD. ESCAPED FROM ATLANTA. THOU SHALT NOT RETURN, 'CAUSE "THE WEST IS THE BEST." AND NOW AFTER TWO RAMBLING YEARS COMES THE FINAL AND GREATEST ADVENTURE. THE CLIMACTIC BATTLE TO KILL THE FALSE BEING WITHIN AND VICTORIOUSLY CONCLUDE THE SPIRITUAL REVOLUTION. TEN DAYS AND NIGHTS OF FREIGHT TRAINS AND HITCHHIKING BRING HIM TO THE GREAT WHITE NORTH. NO LONGER TO BE POISONED BY CIVILIZATION HE FLEES, AND WALKS ALONE UPON THE LAND TO BECOME LOST IN THE WILD.

ALEXANDER SUPERTRAMP
MAY 1992
(Into the Wild, 163)



My Notes

¹ aesthetic (*adj.*): relating to the appreciation of beauty

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WORD CONNECTIONS

Analogies

Analogies express relationships between meanings of words. When creating or analyzing analogies, pay attention to consistency in parts of speech. For example, if a set of words is noun : adjective, then the related set of words will be noun : adjective.

Is this analogy correct? Explain.
appoint : ambassador ::
elect : President

GRAMMAR & USAGE

Semicolons

Emerson uses semicolons to string together a series of relative clauses into one long sentence to show his convictions are broad and deep.

My Notes

KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS
In the first two paragraphs, Emerson contrasts the image of the individual as a farmer with that of being a shareholder. What is he attempting to establish through these analogies?

During Reading

- The following excerpts are from two of the foundational texts of Transcendentalism in America, a literary and philosophical movement associated with Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, and others. It asserts the existence of an ideal spiritual reality that transcends the empirical world and is knowable through intuition. As you read each excerpt, you will discover key concepts and define the values that are central to Emerson and Thoreau's perspectives.
- First, as you read the passage from Emerson's essay, "Self Reliance," highlight one sentence in each paragraph that seems to best express the main idea of the paragraph. Then, paraphrase the highlighted phrases.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Educated at Harvard University, Ralph Waldo Emerson was the chief founder of the Transcendentalist movement. Fueled by strong optimism and the belief in the importance of the individual, Emerson helped to inspire social reforms in education, slavery, and the rights of women and Native Americans.

Essay

from “Self-Reliance”

by Ralph Waldo Emerson

1 There is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better, for worse, as his portion; that though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed² on that plot of ground which is given him to till. The power which resides in him is new in nature, and none but he knows what he can do, nor does he know until he has tried. . . .

2 Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion³. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs.

3 Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist. He who would gather immortal palms must not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be goodness. Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind. . . .

² bestowed (*v.*): presented as a gift or an honor

³ aversion (*n.*): strong feeling of dislike

4 A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin⁴ of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. He may as well concern himself with his shadow on the wall. Speak what you think now in hard words, and tomorrow speak what tomorrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict everything you said today." Ah, so you shall be sure to be misunderstood." Is it so bad, then, to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood. . . .

5 The civilized man has built a coach, but has lost the use of his feet. He is supported on crutches, but lacks so much support of muscle. He has got a fine Geneva watch, but he has lost the skill to tell the hour by the sun. A Greenwich nautical almanac he has, and so, being sure of the information when he wants it, the man in the street does not know a star in the sky. The solstice he does not observe; the equinox he knows as little; and the whole bright calendar of the year is without a dial in his mind. His notebooks impair his memory; his libraries overload his wit; the insurance office increases the number of accidents; and it may be a question whether machinery does not encumber,⁵ whether we have not lost by refinement some energy, by a Christianity entrenched in establishments and forms some vigor of wild virtue. For every Stoic was a Stoic; but in Christendom, where is the Christian?

Check Your Understanding

Writing Prompt: Choose two or three lines from the “Self-Reliance” excerpt that state a strong opinion. Write a personal response to these lines, reflecting on how they compare with your own beliefs. Be sure to:

- Demonstrate your understanding of the text by summarizing at least one quote from Emerson in your reflection.
 - Support your response with details and examples from personal experience.
 - Embed your quotation using correct conventions.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Well educated and brilliant, Henry David Thoreau defied expectations to live an uncommon life of reflection and simplicity. As an experiment to reconnect with nature and discover the meaning of life, he lived for two years in a cabin in the woods of Massachusetts. He wrote about his experiences in *Walden*, one of the most well-known works in American literature.

My Notes

KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

What is Emerson's criticism of consistency?

GRAMMAR & USAGE

Infinitive Phrases

Emerson's use of parallel infinitive phrases effectively creates a memorable line:

“To be great is to be misunderstood.”

Infinitive phrases may function as nouns, adjectives, or adverbs. In this sentence, Emerson uses infinitive phrases as the subject and as the predicate nominative in the sentence.

⁴ hobgoblin (*n.*): something causing superstitious fear

5 encumber (v.): to impede or hinder

Searching for Meaning

My Notes

KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

In paragraphs 3 and 4, Thoreau describes the importance of morning. Pick two or three phrases or sentences that show he is talking about more than the literal morning; rather, he is expressing the significance of morning as it relates to leading a full life. Explain Thoreau's thinking.

Essay

“Where I Lived and What I Lived For”

from *Walden*
by Henry David Thoreau

1 When first I took up my abode in the woods, that is, began to spend my nights as well as days there, which by accident, was on Independence Day, or the Fourth of July, 1845, my house was not finished for winter, but was merely a defense against the rain, without plastering or chimney, the walls being of rough, weather-stained boards, with wide chinks, which made it cool at night. The upright white hewn studs and freshly planed door and window casings gave it a clean and airy look, especially in the morning, when its timbers were saturated¹ with dew, so that I fancied that by noon some sweet gum would exude² from them.

2 I was seated by the shore of a small pond, about a mile and a half south of the village of Concord and somewhat higher than it, in the midst of an extensive wood between that town and Lincoln,³ and about two miles south of our only field known to fame, Concord Battle Ground;⁴ but I was so low in the woods that the opposite shore, half a mile off, like the rest, covered with wood, was my most distant horizon.

3 Every morning was a cheerful invitation to make my life of equal simplicity, and I may say innocence, with Nature herself. I have been as sincere a worshiper of Aurora⁵ as the Greeks. I got up early and bathed in the pond; that was a religious exercise, and one of the best things which I did. They say that characters were engraven on the bathing tub of King Tching-thang to this effect: "Renew thyself completely each day; do it again, and again, and forever again." I can understand that. Morning brings back the heroic ages. I was as much affected by the faint hum of a mosquito making its invisible and unimaginable tour through my apartment at earliest dawn, when I was sitting with door and windows open, as I could be by any trumpet that ever sang of fame. It was Homer's requiem⁶; itself an *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in the air, singing its own wrath and wanderings.⁷ There was something cosmical about it; a standing advertisement, till forbidden, of the everlasting vigor and fertility of the world. The morning, which is the most memorable season of the day, is the awakening hour. Then there is least somnolence⁸ in us; and for an hour, at least, some part of us awakes which slumbers all the rest of the day and night. After a partial cessation of his sensuous life, the soul of man, or its organs rather, are reinvigorated each day, and his Genius tries again what noble life it can make. All memorable events, I should say, transpire in morning time and in a morning atmosphere. The Vedas⁹ say, "All intelligences awake with the morning." Poetry and art, and the fairest

GRAMMAR & USAGE

Infinitive Phrases

Like Emerson, Thoreau uses infinitive phrases for effect. Identify where he does so at the end of paragraph 3 and in paragraphs 4 and 5. Then, craft your own statement about life using this pattern.

¹ **saturated (adj.):** soaked, full to capacity

² **exude (v.):** to ooze or spread in all directions

³ **Lincoln:** small town in Massachusetts between Concord and Sudbury

⁴ **Concord Battle Ground:** reference to Emerson's poem "Concord Hymn."

⁵ **Aurora:** Greek goddess of dawn

⁶ **requiem (n.):** a mass or a solemn ceremony for a deceased person

⁷ **wrath and wanderings:** Homer's *Iliad* concerns the "wrath" of Achilles and the *Odyssey* tells of the "wanderings" of Odysseus

⁸ **somnolence (n.):** sleepiness, drowsiness

⁹ **Vedas:** collection of sacred Hindu literature

and most memorable of the actions of men, date from such an hour. All poets and heroes, like Memnon,¹⁰ are the children of Aurora, and emit their music at sunrise. To him whose elastic and vigorous thought keeps pace with the sun, the day is a perpetual morning. It matters not what the clocks say or the attitudes and labors of men. Morning is when I am awake and there is a dawn in me. Moral reform is the effort to throw off sleep. Why is it that men give so poor an account of their day if they have not been slumbering? They are not such poor calculators. If they had not been overcome with drowsiness, they would have performed something. The millions are awake enough for physical labor; but only one in a million is awake enough for effective intellectual exertion, only one in a hundred millions to a poetic or divine life. To be awake is to be alive. I have never yet met a man who was quite awake. How could I have looked him in the face?

4 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. To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts. Every man is tasked to make his life, even in its details, worthy of the contemplation of his most elevated 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.

5 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 live so sturdily and Spartanlike¹¹ as to put to rout all that was not 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,¹² to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. For most men, it appears to me, are in a strange uncertainty about it, whether it is of the devil or of God, and have somewhat hastily concluded that it is the chief end of man here to “glorify God and enjoy him forever.”¹³

6 Still we live meanly, like ants; though the fable tells us that we were long ago changed into men; like pygmies we fight with cranes; it is error upon error, and clout upon clout, and our best virtue has for its occasion a superfluous and evitable¹⁴ wretchedness. Our life is frittered away by detail. An honest man has hardly need to count more than his ten fingers or in extreme cases he may add his ten toes, and lump the rest. Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumbnail. In the midst of this chopping sea of civilized life such are the clouds and storms and quicksands and thousand-and-one items to be allowed for, that a man has to live, if he would not founder and go to the bottom and not make his port at all, by dead

WORD CONNECTIONS

Roots and Affixes

Infinite comes from the Latin word meaning “unbounded” or “unlimited.” The word is formed from the root *fini*, meaning “end” plus *in*, meaning “not.” Other words based on *fini* include *final*, *confine*, and *definitive*.

My Notes

KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

What is the connection between Emerson’s ideas of ‘self-reliance’ and Thoreau’s idea of living in the woods? Use a quote from each in formulating your answer.

KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

Based on his description of the value of communication and news, how do you think Thoreau would feel about the role of the Internet and social media in modern life?

¹⁰ **Memnon:** In Greek mythology, the King of the Ethiopians whom Zeus made immortal. Memnon’s statue at Thebes was supposed to emit musical notes at dawn.

¹¹ **Spartanlike:** The inhabitants of the ancient Greek city-state of Sparta were famed for their courage, discipline, and frugality.

¹² **sublime (adj.):** elevated or lofty in thought or language

¹³ **“glorify . . forever”:** From the Presbyterian book of beliefs: *Westminster Shorter Catechism*

¹⁴ **evitable (adj.):** avoidable

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GRAMMAR & USAGE

Conditional Mood

Thoreau uses conditional tense to suggest what *would* happen if a change were made. Consider this example: "If we respected only what is inevitable . . . music and poetry *would* resound . . ."

My Notes

reckoning,¹⁵ and he must be a great calculator indeed who succeeds. Simplify, simplify. Instead of three meals a day, if it be necessary eat but one; instead of a hundred dishes, five; and reduce other things in proportion. Our life is like a German Confederacy,¹⁶ made up of petty states, with its boundary forever fluctuating, so that even a German cannot tell you how it is bounded at any moment. The nation itself, with all its so-called internal improvements, which, by the way are all external and superficial, is just such an unwieldy and overgrown establishment, cluttered with furniture and tripped up by its own traps, ruined by luxury and heedless expense, by want of calculation and a worthy aim, as the million households in the land; and the only cure for it, as for them, is in a rigid economy, a stern and more than Spartan simplicity of life and elevation of purpose. It lives too fast. Men think that it is essential that the Nation have commerce, and export ice, and talk through a telegraph, and ride thirty miles an hour, without a doubt, whether they do or not; but whether we should live like baboons or like men, is a little uncertain. If we do not get out sleepers,¹⁷ and forge rails and devote days and nights to the work, but go to tinkering upon our lives to improve them, who will build railroads? And if railroads are not built, how shall we get to heaven in season? But if we stay at home and mind our business, who will want railroads? 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, an Irishman, or a Yankee man. The rails are laid on them, and they are covered with sand, and the cars run smoothly over them.

7 For my part, I could easily do without the post office. I think that there are very few important communications made through it. To speak critically, I never received more than one or two letters in my life—I wrote this some years ago—that were worth the postage. The penny post is, commonly, an institution through which you seriously offer a man that penny for his thoughts which is so often safely offered in jest. And I am sure that I never read any memorable news in the newspaper. If we read of one man robbed, or murdered, or killed by accident, or one house burned, or one vessel wrecked, or one steamboat blown up, or one cow run over on the Western Railroad, or one mad dog killed, or one lot of grasshoppers in the winter—we never need read of another. One is enough. If you are acquainted with the principle, what do you care for myriad instances and applications? To a philosopher all news as it is called, is gossip, and they who edit and read it are old women over their tea. Yet not a few are greedy after this gossip. There was such a rush, as I hear, the other day at one of the offices to learn the foreign news by the last arrival, that several large squares of plate glass belonging to the establishment were broken by the pressure—news which I seriously think a ready wit might write a twelvemonth, or twelve years, beforehand with sufficient accuracy. . . .

8 Shams and delusions are esteemed for soundest truths, while reality is fabulous. If men would steadily observe realities only, and not allow themselves to be deluded, life, to compare it with such things as we know, would be like a fairy tale and the Arabian Nights' Entertainments. If we respected only what is inevitable and has a right to be, music and poetry would resound along the streets. When we are unhurried and wise, we perceive that only great and worthy things have any permanent and absolute existence, that petty fears and petty pleasures are but the shadow of the reality. This is always exhilarating and sublime. By closing the eyes and slumbering, and consenting to be deceived by shows, men establish and confirm their daily life of routine and habit everywhere, which still is built on purely illusory foundations. Children, who play life, discern its true law and

¹⁵ **dead reckoning (n.):** nautical term for a method of positioning a ship without using the more reliable method of astronomical observation

¹⁶ German Confederacy: in 1815, the first ineffective alliance of German territories

¹⁷ sleepers (*n.*): wooden beams to which railway tracks are riveted

relations more clearly than men, who fail to live it worthily, but who think that they are wiser by experience, that is, by failure. . . .

9 Time is but the stream I go-a-fishing in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains. I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars. I cannot count one. I know not the first letter of the alphabet. I have always been regretting that I was not as wise as the day I was born. The intellect is a cleaver; it discerns and rifts its way into the secret of things. I do not wish to be any more busy with my hands than is necessary. My head is hands and feet. I feel all my best faculties concentrated in it. My instinct tells me that my head is an organ for burrowing, as some creatures use their snout and forepaws, and with it I would mine and burrow my way through these hills. I think that the richest vein is somewhere hereabouts; so by the divining rod and thin rising vapors I judge; and here I will begin to mine.

After Reading

Writing Prompt: Summarize Thoreau's criticisms of society. Consider especially paragraphs 6 and 7. Then identify a facet of modern society that Thoreau would object to, and explain why he would find it objectionable. Be sure to:

- Focus on Thoreau's general ideas, not his specific details, by using a few key quotes to capture his voice and major claims.
 - Present his ideas with an objective tone.
 - Include one infinitive phrase in your writing.

Language and Writer's Craft: Antithesis

Thoreau uses **syntax** for rhetorical impact. Among the syntactical rhetorical devices Thoreau uses is **antithesis**—the use of parallel, contrasting elements.

Example: "We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us."

The parts of the parallel sentence express contrasting ideas. The result is an effective and memorable statement. Other famous examples include these:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way.

A Tale of Two Cities, by Charles Dickens

We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools.

—1964 speech by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.

—The Gettysburg Address, by Abraham Lincoln

Using antithesis can help you vary syntax and engage your reader. Write your own sentence or passage comparing two of the three authors (Emerson, Thoreau, McCandless) you have been studying. Use antithesis to express your comparison.

KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

Thoreau uses several key metaphors in paragraph 9. What does each of these metaphors suggest about the importance of living a reflective life? How does this type of life contrast to the one described in the paragraph above?

My Notes

Searching for Meaning

4. Use the 3-column log below to note and compare inferences from the three texts you have examined relative to the meaning of Transcendentalism and the pursuit of happiness. Then mark the log to show connections between ideas expressed in the texts.

McCandless	Emerson	Thoreau

Check Your Understanding

Work collaboratively with your peers to generate a working definition of Transcendentalism and a preliminary list of its key beliefs. Review the notes from each of the texts and explain how the characteristics of Transcendentalism are reflected in each text.