



## **How to be an Individual: Analyzing Society's Influence on Us through Art and Literature**

Curriculum Unit 04.03.05  
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### **Introduction**

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"Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?"

- Ralph Waldo Emerson

This unit will interweave skills used to understand art and literature with the concept of taking charge of oneself and becoming aware of choices one can make to be an individual.

### **Logic**

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In the classroom, teachers are increasingly met with the challenge of getting the material to relate to the students on a personal level. For most, growing up is a very social occupation, made more so by the pressures that society seems to place on each of us to become a consumer. Therefore, around the later grades in middle school and in all of high school, when students are becoming more affected by these pressures, it is important for them to become cognizant of it. What could possibly relate to a students' life more than the study of the themes and tones in our very society? I decided to design a unit that focuses mainly on the analysis and interpretation of society's impact on the individual. This unit will intertwine pieces of art and literature to allow students to begin to look critically at our society.

Adolescents are among one of the most susceptible groups to this sort of societal pressure. The hormones running rampant in their bodies already have them confused as to what sort of individual they want to be. In addition, companies recognize that around this age, teens become a large portion of the market. They are just beginning to have cash of their own to spend. They have easier access to magazines and malls; therefore there is a huge push to design advertising campaigns around the wants of the younger generation of shopper. All we have to do is take a look at all the visual representations of society around us to confirm this.

According to Howard Gardner (1983) there are several different kinds of intelligences. The idea of multiple intelligences presents a unique problem to a teacher of any subject, but specifically to a subject as textually grounded as English. Gardner believes that there are several basic intelligences, which can then be supplemented with other types as a function of culture and upbringing. The several main types are: linguistic, logical-mathematical, intrapersonal, interpersonal, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, and spatial. It becomes a challenge to attempt to incorporate all of these in a curriculum that is borne mostly out of books. However as a teacher, it is necessary to ensure that all the different kinds are being covered in the classroom. Every student must learn the fundamentals of language and communication, and we, as teachers, must be able to play on all types of intelligences to maximize my ability to reach all my students.

## Methods

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I am not striving to have my students focus on simple grammar mechanics and the fundamentals of reading. Instead, I want my students to focus on interpreting difficult texts and analyzing the impact these texts can have on their own lives. This unit is about getting your students to think more about who they want to be as individuals, and allowing them to realize some of the constraints we have due to the real or imagined presence of society. Some of the questions asked in this unit will be: What is the difference between society and community? When a certain outlook on life is marketed to us how can we expect to develop individuality? What is the importance of choice?

We will first spend time reading and analyzing the literature of the mid-1800's. Then we will focus on studying paintings in three different categories: those that depict the individual; those that demonstrate society as a conformist realm; and those that depict society as a group made up of individuals acting on their own. The paintings that I have chosen for this unit are not constrained by either time period or location. Also, please keep in mind that although this unit contains art, it is being used as a vehicle for studying and understanding the world at large. This unit does not make any claims to being an in-depth study of art. Therefore, the paintings will be presented to the students without background information on the artists or their body of work, unless it becomes dire to the lesson. We will compare them to both prior beliefs, and themes we see in our reading. Every student must learn the fundamentals of language and communication, which is why English is a requirement for every year in high school. Text on a page can be something very transient for a student to grasp and internalize. After surpassing the original goal of getting the students to comprehend the basics of the material, the real work of inviting them to understand it in the context of their own lives begins.

One of the areas that I feel aids a lot of students in the classroom is visuals. Visualizing things on their own is something that I've found my students struggle with a great deal; however, they can work with tangible visuals very well. Aside from diagramming essays and parts of thought, it can be very difficult to incorporate this level of intelligence into a unit so dense with philosophical thought. I plan on bringing together the skills that students use to read and understand text with visual pieces that can mirror some of the topics that we are dealing with in the writing, and thus further their understanding and analysis of both. The ability for students to view and analyze a piece of art as well as they can a piece of literature will prove invaluable both now, in my class, and in the future.

## Objectives

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This unit will focus on using various methods to aid students in understanding the concepts of individuality and conformity as presented by art and literature.

Students will:

- Build an arsenal of knowledge about various Transcendental writers and apply their theories to looking at today's society
- Learn to look at pieces of art and dissect them for meaning
- Compare and contrast pieces of art against other pieces of art, and art to literature. This will aid the student in the journey toward understanding the gargantuan idea of 'society in America' and what it means to artists and writers, as well as individuals.
- Apply this knowledge to look objectively at the progression of society through the years to modern times
- Research an aspect of today's society- looking into the origins of a societal set such as: goth, punk, preppie, urban, etc. Basing their argument on Emerson and Thoreau's philosophies they will create a multimedia presentation for the class which explores the connections between their origins and how they are now viewed by society
- Compose an original piece that represents them as an individual, apart from society and their views.

The students must be able to connect to these ideas on a personal level. The philosophical ideas that are introduced to them through Transcendentalism can be hard to grasp and comprehend. Students always work better when they can find a way to relate to the material that's in front of them. Simultaneously, it is imperative that these students begin to view society and the world that is being presented to them with a critical eye. Hence, the main goal of this unit will be to allow students to view the differences between society and the individual through both exploring other writers and artists and exploring their fellow students and their beliefs.

Note

These lessons are designed to be taught in a ninety-minute block; however, I have planned for these lessons to take about seventy minutes, leaving some time for journal writing, vocab building, or just 'business' to be taken care of as well.

Notes on where and when this unit will be taught

This unit is being designed for teaching sophomores at Hill Regional Career High School in New Haven. The students will be in Honors English. Since sophomore English is a survey course, the students are required to move chronologically from Puritan times to the Civil War. Career's curriculum focuses on Business and Medical tracks. All of the students who attend hope to find an occupation in one of these fields. As a result, they do not have the opportunity to take any art classes. Since interpretation of both art and literature can go hand and hand, and does concur, I feel that this is an irrepressible opportunity to combine them and expose students to a skill they may not otherwise learn. Classes at Career operate on a rotating block schedule. Each class is ninety-two minutes long, but you only have your class every other day. This leaves a lot of room for intensive study within the class period, but also proves a challenge for sustainability. It can be difficult to ensure that the breakthroughs you make during one class will be recallable for the next lesson.

Although the majority of the literature in this unit will focus on the mid 1800's, we will seek to surpass this era and look at the idea of conformity in a few modern respects. Upon arriving at our Transcendental unit, we will have already covered 'The Birth of America', Puritans, the Revolution, and some poetry. Most of the material will have focused on the good of America as a whole. Many early writers chose to concern themselves with the idea of developing our nation into a functioning country, as well as a place for supposed religious freedom. In our previous units, we will have discussed the idea of these two beliefs functioning as a mechanism for conformity. For instance: although religious freedom was proposed and believed to be the main reason for traversing to America, once here, the Puritans quickly founded their colonies on the constraint of practicing the 'right' religion. We will study, through both Arthur Miller and Nathaniel Hawthorne's writings, how the 'whole' reacted to this view and what was done to change it. *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller and either *The Scarlet Letter* or various short stories of Hawthorne's, are really the best representations of the Puritan times even though both wrote long after this time had come to an end. That almost makes their writing more valid, because they are able to write about the times with a spin from the future. The same will go for the Revolutionary period- we will briefly discuss what was done to those who were believed to be 'unpatriotic' enough to agree with British parliament. Therefore, when we begin our unit on societal vanity we will be able to draw on these base suggestions and ideas about conformity that we have already discussed.

This unit will deal mostly with Transcendentalist writings, and will focus heavily on the idea of society functioning as the opinion of the majority. We will discuss the differences between individuals acting as such, and individuals acting as an extension of the idea of 'society'. We will have just finished reading the entirety of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, which deals chiefly with the idea of a Puritanical woman living with a sinners mistake. *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester Prynne is a married woman with an absent husband in a small New England settlement that becomes pregnant by a Reverend. She chooses to bear her ignominy alone rather than disclose her lover for a sinner. Therefore, the students will be comfortable with the themes of 'society' and 'individuality', but will not have discussed the fundamental ideas behind them. We will begin this unit by reading Emerson and then branch out into other texts.

## Background

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*"There is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide..."-Ralph Waldo Emerson*

The literature that we will focus on in this unit is part of a movement called Transcendentalism. This

movement began in the mid-1800's with the writer Ralph Waldo Emerson and continued with his student Henry David Thoreau (see biographical information below). Walt Whitman, a famous poet and activist, also wrote during this time, and his ideas coincide with theirs. Transcendentalism is essentially a bigger word for individuality. The idea that these men had was to express to the public that it was very important to always retain individuality. They stressed doing things away from society, to ensure that the manner in which you were living and acting was actually your 'true' self.

### **I. Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)**

Emerson attended Harvard as per the wishes of his father, who died when he was eight. At that time, Harvard was only a divinity school, and despite his being a bit of a weak student, Emerson graduated in 1829. He married Ellen Tucker this same year, and she died of Tuberculosis soon after. On the outside, Emerson appeared to be the perfect, respectable, average American man. However, inside him resided a well of philosophical knowledge which seemed to be unlocked by his marriage to his second wife, Lydia Jackson, in 1834. He published his first work, *Nature*, 1836, to little acclaim; however, a small group of intellectuals did begin to take notice. The Transcendentalist movement began to gain speed around 1836, largely in part because of this influential essay. After this, Emerson continued to write essays and give speeches (including his famous *American Scholar* speech at Phi Beta Kappa at Harvard in 1837) on his unique, individualistic ideas. Many of his essays are revered today for their heavily stressed themes of individuality and personal choice.

### **II. Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862)**

Thoreau also attended and graduated from Harvard. Through the university he met his friend and mentor Ralph Waldo Emerson. Thoreau spent a great deal of time reading Emerson's work and writing his own discourses on nature. In 1842 he moved in with Emerson to lessen his living expenses so that he could write and publish his own works. Between the years 1845-1847, Thoreau attempted an interesting social experiment. He moved to Walden Pond in Massachusetts and attempted to live completely separate from society. He wanted to live as simply as possible and bring himself closer to the natural world. When he returned to civilization he published his masterpiece *Walden* which chronicled his life at the pond. He then continued to write political and social discourse, including his essay of protest against tax and the Mexican-American war. *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience* was published after Thoreau was jailed for a single night for refusing to pay his poll tax (in 1846) because he spurned supporting the war. Thoreau proves that although he was not able to change the course of the war, he was able to make a lasting impression on the world through his writing.

### **III. Walt Whitman (1819-1892)**

Whitman, most famous for his collection of poetry called *Leaves of Grass*, was a very influential poet during the mid 1800's, and continues to be so today. Whitman created new poetic forms and worked at finding new ways to express himself and his emotions. He worked at capturing the minds and imaginations of everyday men by discussing controversial topics. Whitman spent most of his young life traveling around and experiencing the world around him. His poems can be used quite effectively to help students understand that choosing individuality over society is not always cut and dry it is a gray area that everyone has to work through.

## Exploring and Defining Individuality

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Before anything else can commence, the students must understand the literature that is being placed before them. By this point the students should be well versed in the process of close reading and note-taking. They will also have been introduced to a full list of literary vocabulary which will be used to discuss these pieces of literature. Through making a visual comparison between what is 'society' and what is an 'individual' the students will begin to form their own opinion of such. As they are doing so, they will become better equipped to understand Emerson's ideas. However, although we are choosing to aid the understanding of this literature with artistic representations, this is fundamentally an English class. Each and every activity must in some way apply to this field, and one of the goals which has been reiterated here is to ensure that the students comprehend the ideas behind the literature. Therefore, in an effort to simplify and clarify their readings, we will go through all of the literature before we get to working with the art. In this way, the students will be well versed in different ways to approach the paintings and the themes associated with them.

After a short discussion on the goals of this unit (I am a firm believer that students work better and more efficiently when they know what it is they are working toward), the students will receive some background notes on Emerson and his work. Then the students will begin reading various excerpts from Emerson's work. The most accessible excerpts seem to be from the following essays: *Self-Reliance*, *Nature*, *Fate*, and *The American Scholar*. You will have to do some work to pick out choice selections from these essays to give to your students, but in the end it will be worth it. They will glean much more information out of a choice page or two that you have chosen, than expecting them to read twenty-five pages of thick prose. The goal is for the students to read closely these excerpts and understand the basic philosophical ideas that Emerson is putting forth. All four of these essays center around the idea of acting on individuality, but sharing a respect for the world around you. If the students can engage with the text in various ways they will be more likely to fully comprehend the reading. Therefore have them paraphrase certain excerpts and present them to the class. 'Decoding' the text before they even receive the art will aid them in understanding the nuances of a piece. After this exercise the students will begin to build vocabulary and knowledge so that they can discuss the art the way we do the literature. This should take about one, or two ninety minute block classes.

It is imperative to have a discussion with your students around this time about what 'society' is. For this unit, a definition of society as simple as 'popular opinion' should do. The goal here is to facilitate the students in understanding that majority opinion and personal opinion do not always mesh, and do not have to. This is where a lot of discussion work must come in. We are attempting to get the students to both connect to the idea of individuality and the idea of society, and then aid them in understanding that they are part of both. Therefore these paintings will depict people in settings where they are reacting to society in some way. For this week of lessons, we will be focusing on reading excerpts from Henry David Thoreau. Being Emerson's disciple, the students will recognize that while Emerson philosophized about these ideas, Thoreau attempted to embody them. The students should be given an excerpted version of '*Civil Disobedience*' and some parts from *Walden*. Selections from Thoreau can be a very effective way to let students realize the power they can attain from just paying attention to their internal desires and ignoring outside influences, even for a short time. Once again the first lesson should be devoted to doing some close reading of Thoreau and going over his ideas. You can either replicate reading and presenting, like with the Emerson, or do a close reading in class. I find this method very effective with either of these pieces. Essentially you have the students sit in a circle with the essay on their desks. You then read a paragraph at a time, asking key questions as you go, and checking for comprehension from all students. This may take a while, but allow it time to run its course, because you

will usually find that this sort of discussion group is really quite effective. I usually like to give them a follow up reading for homework, and possibly give them a short quiz the next class to both ensure that they have done the reading and check and see if they have gotten the main ideas Thoreau is writing about.

Now the students may begin to feel a bit amiss about these two men who proclaimed to be living the 'individual' life. They may have questions about why the paths that Emerson and Thoreau chose to take are more individual than the path they may currently be taking. Spend a good deal of time discussing these questions. Do not be afraid to go off on tangents, because this is often when the best class discussions concerning this issue develop. The students will only begin to really understand making individual choices and the ideas that we are juggling with if they feel safe in their classroom environment. Although each day we suppose the students are relatively comfortable speaking aloud, volunteering, etc., it is discussions like these where it becomes painfully obvious that students do not feel like they are in a safe environment to share their true views. Ensure that the classroom climate is as respectful and non-judgmental as you can before proceeding with these discussions.

## Individuals

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Over the next two lessons, the students should be shown several paintings that deal with the idea of individuality. The goal here is to get them to recognize different ways that artists depict 'the individual'. The paintings that I have chosen will be: *Traveler Overlooking a Sea of Fog* (by Caspar David Friedrich, 1818), *The Young Wife: First Stew* (by Lilly Martin Spencer, 1854), *Veteran in a New Field* (by Winslow Homer, 1865), and *Girl in a Big Hat* (by Thomas Eakins, 1888). These paintings can be changed or supplemented, as long as the idea is kept of a single person in the frame, who looks contemplative and individualistic in dress, expression, or action.

It will be most effective to show these paintings in an ascending order, moving through history. That way, in addition to how the paintings relate to each other compositionally you can discuss with your students how the passage of time effects the representations of these individuals. The students should keep an ongoing chart of the art we look at. The left side will be devoted to 'society', the right side to 'individuality'. For each painting they will record the name and artist of the work. Then they will keep notes on each painting for future reference. The idea here is that they will be chronicling how the views of society change or do not change according to different settings and representations. Finally we will look at how the individual is viewed and represented. This will aid the students in digging deeper into the context that the paintings have been created out of. Ultimately we are uncovering stereotypes that we have of the omniscient opinion of society. What activities are acceptable? What manner of dress? What occupation or dream for the future? What emotions?

## Conforming to Society

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To bridge the ideas between the Individual and Conformist sections we will begin by looking at *The New Necklace* (by William MacGregor Paxton, 1908). Here is a perfect chance for you to test your students and their ability to deign between 'society' and individuals. This painting is of a young woman in a very decadent setting holding up a pearl necklace. The most striking part of the painting is the look of rapt attention and ecstasy on her face. She looks like this is the happiest she has ever, and will ever, be. This is a painting of an individual, but at the same time it is a painting of someone who appears to be embracing many of the

trappings of society. Ask the students some questions like: What is this woman doing? Why is she so happy? Is she wealthy? Why or why not? What does her surroundings tell you about her? What can you assume about this woman from this painting? What is Paxton saying about society? Is this a positive or negative painting about individuality?

At this point the students must begin looking critically at society. Here we will try to uncover this idea within the classroom ourselves using the Object Judgment Activity (see attached sample lesson 1). The paintings that I have chosen for this section are: *The Subway* (by George Tooker, 1950), and *Essie, Ruby, And Ferdinand, Children of Asher Wertheimer* (by John Singer Sargent, 1902).

After that, the students will begin experimenting with ways that they can remove themselves from society. The students will each be assigned a spot outside measuring three feet by three feet. (The classroom can be used pursuant on weather or inability to go outside.) The students will be asked to first just 'be' in their space: to try to experience everything that is naturally occurring around them. The idea here is for the students to live out their own mini *Walden*. After they have spent a significant amount of time observing (ideally 15-30 minutes), then they will be asked to write about their world in detail. After they complete this, they will be asked to describe how they could effectively remove themselves from an aspect of society. (These should both be half page assignments, you are not striving to beat essays out of the students, rather you are trying to get them to honestly respond to this activity.)

Then we will begin to dissect the idea of complete removal from society. Was Thoreau even successful at his attempt? Why or why not? What evidence can you find for this within his writing? Is it better to attempt this very idealistic approach to being yourself, or does it make more sense to learn how to be yourself within the context of the world that most of us have to live in? It is imperative to make sure that your students are carrying over the knowledge and ideas that you are generating about these topics. This is why the chart is so important. However, before you move on to the third and final section, you may want to review Emerson, Thoreau, and the paintings that you have seen. Either using the board or an overhead review key concepts. Check that each student has been filling in their individuality vs. conformity chart. It may even be time to quiz them on some of these ideas before moving on, because the students will only understand the next section if they are able to understand the basis for it, which is fundamentally the difference between individuals and conformists.

## **A Functioning Society**

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This section will focus on analyzing individuals acting as such in society. Our goal now is to move the students into the realm where they can look at paintings of group scenes and distinguish the differences between these scenes where society is functioning as a group made of individuals, rather than the former paintings where the society has a negative effect on the individual. Here we will move our students away from just analyzing the paintings and move them into interpreting and connecting to them. It is important to begin leading the students into understanding the differences between community and society. The paintings I have chosen for this section mostly portray groups of people doing something together. In some way, mostly in their actions, or the activity that they are taking part in, they are connected. This connection, however, does not negate their individual identities, but in fact, enhances it.



My favorite painting, and the one that I believe to be most effective with the students, is *The Belated Party, Mt. Mansfield* (Jerome Thompson, 1858). This painting represents those who have wholly devoted themselves to society, and those that are interested in being individuals in their own right. The three on the bottom are impatient with what is going on. Their dress and their demeanor shows us that they are ready to go, ready to take on a new, more exciting activity. These figures are divided from the others by many things: mainly the rock they are leaning on. Lead your students through a discussion of the 'objects' in the painting. Then draw attention to the two women at the top of the screen. What are they doing? What are they interested in? After you have fully analyzed these two sections, move on to the visual pinnacle: the man at the top of the outcropping who is standing on his own. This figure is a visual embodiment of the individual. He is standing on his own, facing away from the 'society' below. He has essentially rejected all that is known to ponder the unknown. He is an artist, or philosopher, looking out at the mountains, contemplating. He is not checking his watch, he is not concerned with the women behind him (who may or may not be interacting with him), but he is happy acting as himself. Now ask the students to relate the readings you've been doing to this painting what might have Thoreau said about these figures? Who aligns with Emerson's philosophies?

The rest of the paintings I have chosen for this section are: *The Night Watch* (Rembrandt, 1642), *Experiment on a Bird with an Air Pump* (Joseph Wright, 1768), and *The Bully of the Neighborhood* (by John George Brown, 1866). All three of these are community scenes depicting individuals working together toward a cause. After interpreting the painting, it will be advantageous to have the students connect to one of the paintings. Your goal here is to facilitate understanding of community: the idea of working toward a common good. The students must begin to empathize, asking questions like: Which figure do you connect to most? Why? Which figure do you connect to least? Why? At this point, you may even want to switch up the format of the class. Save one of the paintings and don't discuss it in the open class forum, like you have the others. Instead, give a copy of the painting to each student. Ask them to look at it and analyze as you would in class. Then have them either answer questions or do a short writing assignment on it. They can tell a story about the people: who do they seem to be? Remember, the key ideas here are that every person in that picture is an individual. As such, this painting cannot be looked at as a 'mob scene' might be. Rather than seeing eight figures that are all dressed alike, all shouting in a similar fashion, wearing clothes that can easily be recognized as belonging to a certain group, they are seeing eight people, acting and reacting to the situation that is before them as individuals. At this point I would probably even try to give them a picture that is similar to this 'mob' scenario I have put before you. A photo, maybe from a magazine, of a scene that looks like the very picture of conformity. People, maybe not acting as they want, but rather as they see fit for that time and place. By the same token, it would be interesting to show them another sort of group picture: maybe a team photo, or something that you might find in the yearbook. Now you have another whole facet of this idea to toy with. Are the people in this photo conformists or individuals? How do you know? Does your opinion change because you know these people, or because it is tradition to wear a sports uniform? Why do sports teams and employers alike expect their members to dress the same? This will get at a lot of the themes and ideas that you want the students to be pondering, especially for their final project.

## Breaking Barriers and Researching Stereotypes

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It is imperative that the students begin to draw comparisons. It is one of my goals for this unit to play on as wide a range of knowledge as possible. The students must begin to be aware of their surroundings and the society that they operate as a part of. At this age they are becoming consumers. They are developing personalities and working on the sensibilities that will carry them into maturity and adulthood. Therefore, they must recognize that they operate as a part of society on a daily basis. They must acknowledge through the years there has always been a 'correct' way to act and react. However, there have always been those who choose to take the individual path. Here is where sample lesson 2 will be located (see attached). In addition to Lesson 2, several readings of Walt Whitman will come in handy here to allow them to see that your ability to be an individual is not an easy choice, and it is not always a clear cut path. Whitman struggled with his ideas and beliefs about breaking conformity. Although I am striving to make the students aware of this manifest idea of society, I do not want to frighten them into believing they must be radically individualist and completely separate from everyone in order to be themselves. Instead, my goal is for them to recognize that everything is a choice. I have noticed that sometimes the students are completely blinded by peer pressure. Just the other day one of my students confided in me on the issue of sex. They told me they lie about having actually had sex, because it can be 'uncool' to be a virgin. This type of belief is what can rapidly cause deterioration in our society. At fifteen these students are beginning to make choices that can and will be life-altering. Therefore, what better time for them to ruminate on the sometimes unattainable beliefs of Emerson and Thoreau than now when they might make a difference in their view and position on the world. For everyone, and for students especially, it can be easy to get caught up in believing that the small world you gravitate in is all there is out there. These students need to have the ability to both learn from society's mistakes and to see that there is life outside the fishbowl they are operating in.

Now it is time for the students to begin putting into practice this new ability to objectively look at society. The students will be assigned to small groups and given an advertisement to look at (from the fifties). We will discuss stereotypes that we have of the 1950's. Since Emerson and Thoreau lived and wrote in the 1850's, what changed in the hundred years? How is life in the 1950's represented? Go home and ask your parents or grandparents. Think about what was going on in the world during that time and bring in that knowledge: WWII just ended, segregation still strong, women have the vote but many are still homemakers, etc.

After the students have learned and practiced in class reading the paintings they will apply this knowledge to looking at the advertisements from the '50's. They will answer a worksheet of questions on it. When this is complete they will receive an advertisement from today's time and 'read' this. What are the differences and similarities between these two societies? What would you say or think about the society that these advertisements came out of? What would Thoreau say about this process of commercializing a product? We will begin to discuss the process of something becoming commercial.

After this it will come time to begin to wrap up the unit. To bridge the gap between discussing these ideas and having the students actively begin to uncover stereotypes for themselves, they will be assigned a research and presentation project. As specified in my objectives, the students will be put in small groups and will be given a label to research, i.e. preppy, jock, punk, gothic, etc. They will be asked to research this label, to find out what sort of stereotypes people have of this label, and if in fact they are true or not. It may be advantageous to do a warm-up activity to aid you in breaking them into their groups. Maybe putting up a photo for each label (i.e. a photo of a sports star, one of a group of preppie-looking students, etc) and asking

them which one they connect to the most, which one the least, and why. That way you can break them into groups by who they have the most stereotypes against. The goal here is to get the class to diversify, rather than allowing the same students to work together you are attempting to aid their learning process by assigning them the topic that will be hardest for them. This is the time when it may be advantageous to push their comfort barrier. By this point, you will have been working on this idea of individuality for between eight and ten classes. Since this is the culminating activity, and your goal at the outset was to get the students to recognize their choices and their ability to be individuals, now is the best time to really give it a test run. This is the time for you to find out what they have really learned.

Each group will prepare a presentation, including a visual, for the class. The visual may be anything from a collage, to a skit. However, the point here is to give students freedom to express their discoveries freely. You are striving to see that they have learned that the clothes and labels do not always make up the person. Before the students give their final presentations on society and their connection to it, I will bring in some literature that takes place more in the modern era and we will discuss, alongside the art, whether or not these pieces are individualist. I'm thinking that an excerpt from either *A Handmaid's Tale* or *The Stepford Wives* would be ideal. Both of these pieces discuss society and our individuality; therefore, the author must understand the desire to rise above it. This will be the final piece in seeing if the students have fully grasped the concepts we have been working so hard on. If they are able to look at both the art and the literature objectively, then they should be able to argue for it both ways (meaning as a piece that promotes individuality and a piece that pushes conformity). Remember, you are choosing the excerpt, so make sure it is one that has enough evidence for either side. Through our discussion we will explore exactly what it is that makes you a part of 'society'. Is it possible to define? It may work best to set the class up in a debate format, with students facing one another. Make sure you have given them some class time to prepare their arguments, but not too long. You really want to see what will just come out of them while they are on the spot, with only the piece of literature in front of them and your previous conversations to use as evidence.

## Sample Lesson 1

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### Society's Baggage: An Object-Identifying Activity

At this point the students have been introduced to the ideas and readings of both Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. We will have touched minimally on the ideas presented therein, and have begun to read into paintings. It is imperative that the students begin to uncover their own beliefs about things, coming from within themselves and from society's accepted views. The paintings that we have already viewed will serve as a good base for the realization that attitudes and emotions can be presented very clearly by everyday objects.

Objectives:

*Students Will:*

Demonstrate connections between the literature and the outcome of this activity

Provide judgments on their assigned objects

Assessment:

Participation, Written Response

*Activity:*

Directly at the beginning of class each student will be asked to take his/her seat and wait quietly. They will be given a folded slip of paper with an object printed on it that they will be directed not to open until instructed. I will explain to them the nature of this assignment: You each, in turn, will be asked to open your slip of paper. Upon opening it you will see the name of an object printed inside. Give your immediate first impressions of that object. What do you think of when you see that word? For instance: thick eyeglasses. Responses that the student will generate will be: nerdy, intelligent, reads a lot, not fun. These responses will be listed on an overhead alongside a list of the original objects. Another example will be: throwback jersey. The student will give responses like: cool, expensive, interesting, someone you want to be friends with, etc. After the student who holds the object has given at least three words or phrases to describe their object, others may add to the list.

This will get at the heart of stereotyping and assist the students in understanding what kind of baggage comes along with owning a simple object. From this the students will be better equipped to understand the concept of society and how it works on the individual. This activity will also facilitate in drawing a personal connection between the students and the transcendental ideas we are studying. The objects will run the gamut from everyday, mundane things to items that obviously carry a societal stigma. Through this, the students will begin to understand that even simple objects can carry double meanings in society, and this is the exact concept that Emerson warned of and Thoreau attempted to avoid. From this the students will be asked to generate a short response, addressing the following questions: Were you surprised by the descriptions that were produced? Why or why not? What would Emerson say about this? What do you think you learned during this activity?

## Sample Lesson 2

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Whitman versus Tooker-Who Lives in Magical Reality?

Presently we will already be very familiar with the opinions of Thoreau and Emerson, and we will have delved deeply into our ideas of society's effect on us. It is time to take a look at two artists who make their views about society apparent and both look at it in a negative light (at least in the pieces we will be studying here). The students can be given short backgrounds on Whitman and Tooker, or not, but in any case they must be informed that they created their art during different time periods.

Objectives:

*Students Will:*

Demonstrate the ability to paraphrase

Apply knowledge of literary and artistic devices to discuss both the poem and the painting

Make connections between the two pieces

*Assessment:*

Participation, Paraphrasing (which will be checked for completion and understanding of basic ideas), essay

*Activity:*

The students will be asked to break into pairs. After this is done, they will be given the poem 'I Sit and Look Out' by Walt Whitman. They will be asked to paraphrase the poem line by line. (Essentially, they are being asked to put the poem into their own words, to ensure that they both understand the literal, figurative and abstract meanings that the artist has intended.) During this time, it is important that the teacher circulate to aid in comprehension, and to check that each pair is working. After they complete the paraphrasing, the group will come together as a whole and discuss the discoveries they made during reading in pairs. This will give all the students a chance to level out their understanding before they are asked to apply it to a more abstract form, which is viewing the painting *The Subway* by George Tooker. The class will then 'read' the painting, essentially paraphrasing it and attempting to understand what the artist was attempting to convey. After discussing how the two pieces relate, the students will be assigned a two-page, formal essay in which they answer the following questions: Is society a good or bad thing? Refer specifically to these two pieces of art, or anything we've read by Emerson (*Nature, Self-Reliance, American Scholar, Fate*) or Thoreau (*Civil Disobedience, Walden*) in your defense of yourself. Hopefully the students will get that the connection between Tooker and Whitman is their critical view on society. They both present works of art that comment on the confusion and loneliness that individuals may feel when swallowed up by society.

Breaking the students into pairs at first will allow them to get comfortable working with the piece because they are not being asked to formulate a view on their own. Coming back together and discussing the discoveries that they have made will ensure that everyone understands the concepts that Whitman was attempting to convey. Bringing in the painting now is ideal because it mirrors a lot of the same sentiment in a more basic way. This will allow the students to see how two different media convey the same message, in two completely different time periods. The hope is that this will allow the students to view conformist society in a negative light, only because of the problems it is often apt to cause. The assignment of the essay will allow the students to choose their perspective to argue, while staying grounded in the work, so that they can feel supported no matter what. It is my hope that fairly equal numbers of students will choose to write for and against, therefore I can see that they are keeping an open mind and looking at both sides of the coin. Hopefully, if the turnout is good and the quality of the papers is high, I would like the students to share them with one another at a later class.

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