

The American Wilderness? How 19th Century American Artists Viewed The Separation Of Civilization And Nature

Lesson Plan

A resource developed through the *Longfellow and the Forging of American Identity* program

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Suggested Grade Level: 10th

While it's possible to try this unit with other grade levels, I've used it with high-school sophomores and enjoyed great success. There are enough varieties of source types to engage all students. I also feel as if it's merely a piece of a much larger, interdisciplinary unit on Americans' relationship with our environment. While this piece focuses on literature and art, it can be easily expanded. Adding the expertise of a social studies, art, and science teacher would make it that much more interesting. Doing research of past and present environmental policies can also be an exciting addition.

Subject Area: Literature and art

Maine Learning Results:

English Language Arts

Process of Reading: A2, A3, A9, A10

Literature and Culture: B3, B10, B11

Language and Images: C1

Visual and Performing Arts

Cultural Heritage: B1, B2, B3

Criticism and Aesthetics: C3

Time Required:

The art section takes approximately one class period.

The time required for the literature section varies, based on whether a teacher wishes to have students study all of the authors and works recommended.

Learning Objectives:

Students will learn to connect literature to the culture and historical context to which it belongs. They will also be able to recognize and explore the role that ethnocentrism played in relationships between American settlers and native peoples.

Materials and Resources Required:

Art:

- Thomas Cole's "The Savage State"
- Thomas Cole's "The Oxbow"
- Asher Durand's "Progress"
- John Gast's "American Progress"
- Background readings on the Hudson River School of art (readily available on the Internet)

- The modern movie version of *The Last of the Mohicans* (optional)

Literature:

- Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s *Evangeline: A Tale of Acadie*
- Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s “The Slave’s Dream
- Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s translation of Dante’s *Inferno*
- Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*
- Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown”

Supplemental Materials (optional):

- Henry David Thoreau’s *The Maine Woods*
- Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*
- Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “Nature”
- Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “The Snowstorm”
- Dr. Seuss’ *The Lorax*
- Joni Mitchells’s “Big Yellow Taxi”
- Edward Abbey’s *Desert Solitude*

Preparation Required/Preliminary Discussion:

In addition to the vocabulary that your students may need to look up while reading the texts, here is a list of suggested concept vocabulary that may help to focus your lessons.

Ethnocentrism	Victorian	Bias	Propaganda
Frontier	Threshold	Wilderness	Savage
Civil(ized)	Nature	Paradigm	Paradox

In addition, I’ve taught Greek mythology and bible stories to go along with this unit.

I tell my students about Pan and how “panic” comes from the feeling people – and nymphs – got when they thought Pan was coming from the forest to chase them.

I also tell them the stories of “The Tower of Babel” and Pentecost. These come in specifically when dealing with Longfellow and Hawthorne’s explanation of the forest. Both authors discuss the clarity of communication between Godly people and difficult communication between people and entities (through personification) who are not living proper, Godly lives or who exist in the forest, outside of the civilized town.

For the art portion of the lesson plan, prepare a slideshow or exhibit of the images as described in the “Lessons” section below.

Introduction:

When European settlers began coming to the wilderness of North America, they did not have a vision that included changing their lifestyle. The plan was to set up self-contained

communities where their version of European life could be lived. In the introduction to *The Crucible*, Arthur Miller even goes as far as saying that the Puritans believed the American forest to be the last stronghold of Satan on this Earth. When Roger Chillingworth shows up in *The Scarlet Letter's* second chapter, he is welcomed away from life with “the heathen folk” and into “a land where iniquity is searched out, and punished in the sight of rulers and people.” In fact, as history’s proven, they believed that the continent could be changed to accommodate their interests. Whether their plans were enacted in the name of God, the King, or commerce and economics, the changes always included – and still do to this day - the taming of the geographic, human, and animal environments that were here beforehand.

It seems that this has always been an issue that polarizes people. Some believe that the landscape should be left intact as much as possible while others believe that the world will inevitably move on in the name of progress for the benefit of mankind. In F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* – a book which many feel is one of the best portrayals of our American reality – the narrator, Nick Carraway, looks upon this progress with cynicism when he ends his narrative by pondering the transformation of “the fresh green breast of a new world” that the initial settlers found on the shores of the continent into a modern society that unsettlingly reminds him of something out of a “night scene by El Greco.”

Philosophically, the notions of progress, civilization, and scientific advancement are not only entirely subjective, but also rest upon the belief that things are not acceptable as they are. Europeans came here hoping for a better life, and it doesn’t seem like we’ve stopped looking. Again, to quote Fitzgerald, it’s the elusive green light and the “orgiastic future” that we’ve always hoped to find. Our problem has always been our stoic belief system. We cannot seem to find peace in the world either as we’ve found it or as someone else may have envisioned it. As an example, in Miller’s *The Crucible*, his Judge Danforth says that: “You’re either for this court or against this court.” He will not allow for alternative perspectives. George W. Bush, in 2002, said that: “You’re either for us or against us. There is no middle ground in the war on terror.” The frontier – be it a wilderness of physical, religious, or political nature – has always frightened Americans.

As it’s portrayed in the following bits of literature and artwork, the frontier is a doomed place waiting for white, cultured, Europeans to “fix” it. Anything outside of their society is not just different, but unacceptable. The lesson plan included will introduce a few examples of 19th century portrayal of the American forest as a wilderness that people feel needs to be hesitantly looked upon. Fortunately, though, the forest seems to turn no one away. Nature likes all of its creatures, whether or not the favor is returned.

While I am not providing actual activities and daily plans, the following information can serve as a rather detailed explanation of things which can combine in any fashion you’d like as a group of lessons.

The Lessons

Art:

I suggest starting with the artwork, as it is a finite, one-period event.

Introductory activities:

- Background readings on the Hudson River School of art certainly help and are abundantly available on the Internet. As Thomas Cole is the central figure of that movement, you could easily focus on his life and interests.
- You may even consider showing some of the scenic vistas of the Hudson River Valley given to us in the modern movie version of *The Last of the Mohicans*. It's a great movie throughout, but the cinematography is especially wonderful.
- I found all of the paintings within image searches on the Internet and cut-and-paste them into a PowerPoint presentation to show my class through an LCD projector. If your school does not have such a device handy, there are many books that focus on Hudson River School.

Class discussion:

Personally, I like to show the paintings – without their titles - to my students and ask them – before I add my observations:

- what they see
- if there is any bias in the portrayal
- if they think the painter is trying to tell us something – theme - as well as show us something – plot.
- what they think the title is or should be

Thomas Cole influenced Asher Durand, so their imagery is very similar. Look for:

- The lighting. Anything with a European influence will be in the sunlight while American natives and the forest are placed in relative darkness. This obviously portrays the Judeo-Christian God's influence and praise of the Europeans.
- The weather seems nicer over the Europeans and their belongings. Storm clouds seem to hover over the forests and natives.
- The placement and depiction of the natives. They seem to be lurking and hiding in interest while the Europeans go on with their days. There is always a connection between the forest and the natives. Although "The Savage State" contains an Indian village, it seems like only a minor portion of the image.
- The titles. "The Savage State" and "Progress" are especially interesting in regards to bias against American natives and the American forest.

John Gast "American Progress" is a classic of pro-American, manifest-destiny era propaganda.

- Lead on by an angel of light, Americans head west across what was – in the mid 1800's declared "our" continent to settle and civilize. President Polk himself talked about our God-given right to settle from ocean to ocean. This is a great opportunity for interdisciplinary studies.

- Everything dealing with white American men is again portrayed in the light while everything unsettled and native is dark and even “on the run.”

The Literature

Both Hawthorne and Longfellow see nature – the forest specifically – as a force that is more accepting and wise towards humanity, and all of creation, than we are towards it.

Nathaniel Hawthorne:

The Scarlet Letter

- Chapter one gives us the symbol of the rose, which manifests the “deep heart of nature” and reminds us that there are layers within everything and that some of those layers include thorns. Even if we aren’t happy with these thorns, they exist. Only when we learn to accept everything for what it is will we stop persecuting people like Ann Hutchinson, ridiculing women like Hester Prynne, or living in fear of the forest.
- The first three chapters are ripe with descriptions of the town and its people,
 - They feel self-righteous enough to condemn Hester Prynne for her adultery.
 - They feel as if their whole town is a beacon of God-fearing hope within the savage region of New England.
 - If it’s read with a careful lens for irony and sarcasm, however, Hawthorne is clearly writing a scathing critique of their hypocrisy and ethnocentrism.
- Hester, the town’s outcast, goes and lives alone on the shore by the forest, where an outcast would be welcome.
- Chapters 16-20 describe a period of time that Hester spends in the forest. During these chapters, spend time with your students looking for:
 - The way sinful characters act in the forest as opposed to the way they are in town.
 - Pearl
 - Hester
 - Arthur Dimmesdale
 - The theme of communication
 - This is where the stories of the Tower of Babel and Pentecost really come in.
 - The forest has secrets to tell, but the brook only “babbles” about them as it approaches the town, and the trees are upset by its eagerness to tell too much to the people of the town.
 - These chapters clearly show us how sin and goodness are all relative and factors of perspective instead of hard truth, the way Judeo-Christian perception would have us think.

“Young Goodman Brown”

- Young Goodman Brown’s trip into the forest is the clearest example of the distinctly different perceptions held for the atmosphere in town and that in the forest. They holiest of people during the day meet in the center of the woods to

praise the devil and admit to their other half's presence in unholy communion. Brown even leaves his wife, "Faith," behind as he heads into the forest.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Evangeline: A Tale of Acadie

- His most famous reference to the forest comes in the first line of "Evangeline," one of his most famous poems. This, of course, is his reference to "the forest primeval" that speaks "with voices sad and prophetic."
 - His forest is as wise as Hawthorne's rose.
 - It is sad because the people who lived in the "wilderness" of Acadie were forced out of the forest for being unwilling to fight for the king in the war against the colonies. They were too far outside of what the British decided was acceptable.

"The Slave's Dream"

- Another very interesting reference to the forest is in his "The Slave's Dream"
 - In it, a dying slave dreams of a free life. Where else would he be welcomed but in the forest?
 - Longfellow speaks of "The forests, with their myriad tongues" shouting "of liberty."
 - These forests speak the language of nature's acceptance.
 - He who was a slave in civilized society, would be freely welcomed in the forest.