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ABSTRACT

An elective course in Concord authors enables students to study the major writings of the mid-nineteenth century American Renaissance in literature and see how the development of American thought, major literature, philosophy, and historical background relate to the literature of the Concord-Boston-Cambridge group. Course content includes works by such major Concord authors as Hawthorne, Thoreau, Emerson, the Alcotts, Channing, and such minor authors as Sanborn, Peabody, and Fuller. The course focuses on genre, content, and theme and includes readings, discussions, lectures, and compositions. The objectives, which are sometimes stated behaviorally, try to meet the needs of all students whether they are lovers of prose or poetry. For example, in a study of Hawthorne's short fiction, the students develop an understanding of the author's style, literary devices, theme, Gothic Romanticism, and creative use of language. They then write and revise a short story by trying to use Hawthorne's techniques. A similar approach is taken to the other Concord authors. (SW)

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On Teaching Concord Authors: May I Have This Dance?

Here is a poem by a student of American literature:

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Young Hawthorne played nursey at length

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No city or town is without its poets and its prose writers. Therefore, no place is without its radicals, who sing where they list. Similarly, no high school or college teacher is, today when elective courses have pre-empted the "recommended course of study," without the problem of relating any specialized English course to a comprehensive view of all literature. Does the teacher wonder at the progression of shibboleths in the teaching of English? At how the watchwords have moved from the post-World War I "education for life adjustment," to the "correlate" of the fifties, to the "be creative" of the sixties, and now in the seventies to "behavioral goals, behaviorally stated"? Through the life-adjustment lock-step, the correlated two-step, the creative waltz, and the behavioral fox trot of these shibboleths piped by the dreamers to the doers of universal public education in the United States, the same old problem of foot work has always shuffled: the problem of the dancer and the dance; that is, of the student and the literature which he is asked to consider.

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Must the student master the sailor's horn pipe of all literature when he really wishes to be a dentist? Should he step to the recurrent themes of other disciplines found in literature he studies when he desires only to be a poet? Or be allowed to do the rock and roll of his own impluses, justifying his solo performances by saying, "It matters only what it means to me. I just want to study what I'm interested in," when creative dance really requires discipline and hard work? And, if the shoes pinch, should he have to perform in the ball room of composition? Or, should he be asked at all to clear the wax from his ears before he steps to the music that he hears? These never were easy questions for the dancer, the dance, or for the instructor, fiddling on the roof. No city or town, however, is without its poets, its prose writers--past, present, and future. So, what music shall we have, and how can it be orchestrated?

One viable arrangement of an elective course merely asks the student to begin by considering all that is possible in the literature closest home. Or, some of what is possible. Does the student in Pittsburgh's North Side read My Antonia without connecting Antonia with the prairie, or Willa Cather with her five years' teaching stint at Allegheny High School? Does he analyze "Paul's Case" without reflecting upon his own problems and wondering what created the author's interest in the psychology of all young Pauls? Does he read "Roan Stallion" without contemplating the allegorical legend of pantheism in conjunction with Robinson Jeffers' early life in the city? Can he read Hugh Henry Breckinridge's Modern Chivalry without tilting at Don Quixote or the Man of La Mancha, or vice versa?

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Does the student in Terre Haute read Eugene Debs or Theodore Dreiser without relating their works to other social realism? These few examples obviate the necessity for trips to Hannibal, Manhattan, Chapel Hill, Cooperstown, and points west. The point is that local travel agencies can provide tickets for literary excursions, or perhaps favors for the dance.

One such agency is in Concord, Massachusetts. Perhaps an examination of its brochure may provide an idea for other fiddlers to tune in some thanksgivable "turkey in the straw." It may be argued that Concord's turkey farm is more prolific in writers, and therefore that the pickins' are better and the gravy thicker. However, no area is without its poets and prose writers. For other communities, what are the possibilities that can be extrapolated from an elective course in Concord Authors? Some shuffling for about three years has produced the following choreography.

Students who elect the one-semester course encounter some of the major writings of the mid-nineteenth century American Renaissance in literature. Here they can consider the development of American thought, key literature, philosophy, and historical backgrounds associated with the literature of the Concord-Boston-Cambridge group. Course content includes some of the writings of Hawthorne, Thoreau, Emerson, the Alcotts, Channing (of Concord), Sanborn, Peabody, Fuller, and other minor transcendental "owls" (as Thoreau and Hawthorne called them). Because of the breadth of the literature available in the brochure, the course can focus upon genre as well as upon content and theme. The dance moves through the eurythmics

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of readings, discussion, lectures, and compositions. The grapevine steps of the behavioral objectives and comments upon some of the high kicks follow, stated sometimes behaviorally objectively.

1. In a study of selections from Hawthorne's short fiction, the student recognizes the author's style, literary devices, theme, Gothic Romanticism, and creative use of language. The light and dark of Hawthorne's allegorical symbolism is a composite black light against which the pharos towers erected by transcendentalism can be silhouetted, showing by contrast a truer view of the human condition, the new Adam and the new Eve reacting to the machine rumbling through the garden of the American Dream. The klieg light of Hawthorne's dark romanticism backlights the self-consciousness in the artists of times transcendental, and discloses in his writings an unvalidated ticket for the celestial railroad as well as an affirmation of a fortunate fall of the American Adam, who may well be enroute to apotheosis only after some tragic tampering with materialism.

2. Perhaps following suggestions in Hawthorne's American Notebooks, the student will write and revise a short story, trying to use Hawthorne's techniques. The elements of fiction, and conflict, symbols, tone, unifying elements, and narrative voice, although creatively used, are not facilely melded in the writer's alembic. The student may learn that there is no easy magic dust or elixir of life to sprinkle on the gim-crack butterflies of short stories.

3. In a study of Walden, the student recognizes the central "core" of the work, symbolic levels of meaning, Thoreau's use of the language of paradox, his statement of the human condition, romantic idealism, fictive constructs, and Thoreau's place in

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world literarure. A view from "the shores of America' within sounds of the Boston and Maine Railroad demands that the "sleepers" arise from the mere physical existence and see through the "I" of self and the "eye" of nature before casting their "ayes" over the railway embankment. The account of such a radical excursion reported in the "extravagant" language of paradox requires that the student read on varying levels of meaning, and be aware of subtle transitions and paronomasia. If he comes to know some "beans" about the shifting lights of Walden, he may in the future have some deeper reflections of his own about where he "lived" and what he "lived for."

4. In the study of Walden, the student will discover for himself (with the fiddler's aid) some of the ramifications of the "Beanfield." Why not, if a ten-minute walk will bring the student to the unexpected, even if perhaps silly, delight of standing on a boulder that Thoreau rolled into place for the foundation of his house or on the stump of a tamarack that Thoreau set out among his bean rows? And while there, why not pull out a copy of the appropriate Thoreau Journal and read what he had to say on the same day one hundred and thirty years ago, and try to see what he saw? Why not use the l cal technicolor channel to dive into the phenomenology of seeing Thoreau watching Thoreau observe himself?

5. The student will write a Journal (of four days) in the style of Thoreau to demonstrate his understanding of Thoreau's fictive devices, narrative stance, and persona. If the student complains "How can I do that? How can I possibly be honest in a journal if I know that someone else is going to read it?

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How do I even know when I am being honest with myself?" the assignment is probably successful, of course. Besides, who knows when an insect egg may be deposited in some old apple tree to emerge much later as a gim-crack butterfly when the wood has been fashioned into a table? Here is an entry for Saturday, November 18, 1972:

"Yeah! Whose woods these are I think I know. They belong to the Now generation as well as to the "former inhabitants' and the unborn generations. That skull that was discovered nine days ago dates man on earth a billion years or so--former inhabitants indeed. We are fifty million generations old, not just fifty million years! That really makes us ancient in this atmosphere, pollution and all. Tough beans for old Cro Magnon waiting for the judgment day. What is man's errand into the wilderness anyway? We move on, after fifty million generations without knowing where. Think of Eden being created anew each time some human baby brat is born in the Emerson Hospital in Concord. Staggering!"[2]

This bit of observation is followed by Sunday's for November 19, 1972. It reveals a fey humor, as it dabbles in symbolism.

"Today in church by the pulpit from which Emerson and Thoreau sometimes spoke, there were four huge wooden bowls of school-colored apples with green bottoms. These the little kids distributed to the congregation. What apt apples to share a thanksgiving thought from the fortune of Adam and Eve, who took the bit in their mouths and ran the race out of Eden for us by discovering the distinction between good and evil, according to the legend. I think that Adam really ate Huckleberries."

[2]Quoted with permission of Teddy Tamm

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Every place has its prose writers. They seem to begin at home.

6. The student will create a project to focus upon some facet of Thoreau's idea that "every fact will flower into a truth."

Projects, smojects! But they sometimes work. Here is another one:

A strong sea surges
    Past all soundings
    Of the rock I stand on.
Closeby you ebb.

Awash almost, I watch
    The tide now turned,
    And seek a softer strand
    Nearer your sound and flow,
    Move toward more closeness,
    More toward the source.

You quite withdraw, return to universal self.

I splash a bit along the brink, not merging.
The sea commands no sailor, no craft from my headland,
Notes no promontory.

Yet, oceanic longings
Urge and season
One, late wandering the shifting shore.

The watcher without craft to launch
A maiden voyage to chase the sea
Waits the spring tide now,
And listens quiet for the rush,
While dim November merges mind and mist.
And I, apace, count ninth waves,
    Fog-held, unmerged, and float along the shore. [3]

Every place has its poets, too. They have to begin somewhere.

7. In a study of Louisa May Alcott's Hospital Sketches, the student will compare the quasi-novel and Walden, describe the structure of the book, recognize American Victorianism, the shifting stance of the narrative voice, the distillation of the book from L.M. Alcott's journal. The self-conscious artist of "Apple Slump" provides a good breather after the "heavies" and huckleberries of Thoreau, a good contrast to the literary devices of Hawthorne's short fiction, and a good opportunity to gossip once more about the local people and "owls" mentioned by Thoreau. The much

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neglected Hospital Sketches serves also to vivify some specific humanitarian concerns of the transcendentalists and provides an entry to Hawthorne's views on humanitarian reform portrayed in the Blithedale Romance, the last major work considered in the course.

8. In a study of some of Emerson's works and selections from his Journals, the student will recognize the impact of Nature on American thought and on the shift in religious tenor; and in a close reading of this difficult work will discover Emerson's literary technique of shifting his own view throughout the essay as he defines his own thought to himself. Noting the triple-distillation process in much of the transcendental writings--for instance, journal entries distilled into a lecture which is later distilled into a long essay or a book--is important in seeing that creative writing does require discipline and hard work; and perhaps the student will discover with Thoreau that "not all books are as dull as their readers."

9. In a study of Emerson's "The American Scholar" and "The Divinity School Address," the student will recognize the declaration of intellectual freedom which encouraged, as it helped to create, the age of Romanticism, and will see the tone of optimistic idealism in some American letters. The student may be able now to look more objectively upon his own educational goals and objectives (more shibboleths!) and to focus these in a serious personal essay.

10. The student will compare the nay-saying of Hawthorne (and perhaps Melville) with the yea-saying of Thoreau and Emerson. Here, the fiddler may discover whether the "yeas" have it.

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11. In studying Bronson Alcott's "Orphic Sayings" and accounts of his creative schools, and selections from his journals, the students will distinguish reform in education and in expression of Alcott's time, perhaps identifying in Alcott the zenith of transcendentalism. (Here the student need not write any orphic sayings of his own or write parodies of those of Alcott. One report on Odell Shepard's Pedlar's Progress will serve.)

12. After studying Margaret Fuller's "The Great Lawsuit," the student will prepare a brief, pro or con, in the case of women's rights, and present it. After studying Margaret Fuller's dialectical "The Poet and the Critic," the student will review the various kinds of literary criticism used in the course, critical theories which will probably be more evident to the student, in retrospect. He will write a paper in which he presents what to him are the merits of each and will suggest his own idea for a critical theory.

13 In studying the poetry of the period, the student will see that the poets influenced each other in theme and in thought, that some of the poetry of transcendentalism is not great poetry, that the charges of "Emerson's tin-ear" are unfounded, for the most part, and that transcendentalism was a vital thrust in shaping American thought. In a poetry workshop in which the students will present some of their own poetry, they will apply some of the various critical theories presented in the previous composition assignment.

14. In the last major work studied, the student returns to the fiction of Hawthorne, the Blithedale Romance, to identify

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the author's view of some of the weaknesses inherent in certain humanitarian reform impulses. By now, he should be more ept in analyzing the qualities of the narrative voice, the structure and the core of a writing. He should see the differences that Hawthorne ascribes to the novel and the romance, and in the prototypes of Hawthorne's characters find anti-types in the everyday world.

15. Having encountered the course content and discovered that among the common denominators of the American Renaissance are romanticism, democracy, and humanitarian reform, the student may compare those movements with counterparts in his own time. So, having read Booth's "Letter from a Distant Land" (a poem), and White's open letter to Henry Thoreau, the student will write his own "Open Letter to a Former Inhabitant, H.D.T," as a serious essay and the final paper for the course.

No town or city is without its poets and writers of prose. Why not hire a hall and hold a dance? Invite all of the local writers to begin with; then the "former inhabitants"; encourage them to change partners. Let everybody do the lock-step, the two-step, the waltz, and the fox trot. One wag said it this way:

Students who seek a relation
Of their "Mes" and "Not-mes" to the "Now"
May look back with unearthly elation
To the transcendent world of the "How"
When at Walden the drummer was dancing,
And his piper was paid and could pass
Over waters where answers were glancing
Through an eyeball transparent as glass.
And the fiddler's roof was the greenery,
And he tuned his strings to a "yea"
While the railroad ran through the beanery;
And almost no one said, "Nay."

A new shibboleth: "May I have this dance?"

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