



Treasures of the Library

A LITERATURE OF DEMOCRACY



Grade 11 American Literature

The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens

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I. Introduction

The lesson *A Literature of Democracy* focuses on Ralph Waldo Emerson's "American Scholar" address at Harvard in 1837 in which he called for a distinctively American literature. Students will read an excerpt from Emerson's address and appraise how he would have responded to Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain) and Charles Dudley Warner's *The Gilded Age*, and Jack London's *Martin Eden* as unique American literature. The reading from each of these works can be taken from designated Web sites or from literature texts that may be easily accessed by students.

II. Objectives

- ◆ To explain Emerson's appeal for a unique American literature.
- ◆ To be able to illustrate how American literature reflects a variety of genres.
- ◆ To critically analyze passages from selected American literary works.

III. Language Arts Standards

Reading Comprehension

- 2.5 Analyze an author's implicit and explicit philosophical assumptions and beliefs about a subject

Literary Response and Analysis

- 3.5 Analyze recognized works of American literature representing a variety of genres and traditions. . . .
- 3.8 Analyze the clarity and consistency of political assumptions in a selection of literary works or essays on a topic

Writing Applications

- 2.2 Write responses to literature

Speaking Applications

- 2.3 Deliver oral responses to literature
- 2.5 Recite poems, selections from speeches, or dramatic soliloquies with attention to performance details to achieve clarity, force, and aesthetic effect and to demonstrate an understanding of the meaning. . . .

III. Background

Ralph Waldo Emerson, a Transcendentalist, was a popular lecturer in the American Lyceum Movement. The Lyceum Movement, named for Aristotle's lyceum where the philosopher lectured to Athenians, had its origins in the United States in the 1820s. Transcendentalists such as Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Nathaniel Hawthorne as well as Frederick Douglass and Susan B. Anthony were popular lecturers on the lyceum circuit. Emerson's transcendentalist philosophy of the sacredness of individual experience formed the basis of his Phi Beta Kappa address at Harvard College in 1837 entitled "The American Scholar."

Emerson spoke of a "literature of democracy" and advised American writers to break free from European literary traditions and produce a distinctively American literature. According to Emerson, American authors imitated rather than created a manifestly American literature: "Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close." He advised American writers to draw inspiration from their surroundings. "The American Scholar" address is considered to be a turning point in the development of a new genre of purely American literature.

For more on the Transcendentalists, visit (<http://www.transcendentalists.com>).

IV. Lesson Activities

1. Open the lesson with a discussion of three quotations that students will see as they view the exhibition. A black-line master for a transparency is provided as **Reading 1**. Project the quotes for students to read and discuss.
 - ◆ How does literature reflect society? To what extent does it guide our understanding of the past?
 - ◆ Does the study of literature help us gain a better sense of ourselves and our place in the world?
2. Distribute copies of **Reading 2**, an excerpt from Emerson’s “American Scholar” address, and ask students to analyze his address. Discuss the issues Emerson raises in his Phi Beta Kappa address at Harvard. You may wish to use the following questions to initiate class discussion.
 - ◆ What is the point Emerson is making?
 - ◆ Why does he feel it important to have a distinctly American literature?
 - ◆ According to Emerson, from where should American authors draw their inspiration?
 - ◆ How does the “American Scholar” address reflect Emerson’s transcendentalist philosophy?
3. Divide the class into five groups and have each read a chapter from the work of a different American author (**Readings 3-8**: Henry David Thoreau, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Samuel Clemens and Charles Dudley Warner, and Jack London). Depending on your class, you may wish to use three rather than five selections. Within groups discuss how the assigned reading reflects Emerson’s “American Scholar” address and in what way or ways it illuminates the quotations in **Reading 1**. Have each group prepare a short report to the class that includes the recitation of a selection from the reading. Discuss how the passage shows the clarity, force, and aesthetic effect of the literary work.
4. Conclude the lesson by having students assume the persona of Ralph Waldo Emerson and write a brief critique of the work they examined in their respective groups.

V. Extended Activity

Select from core literary works students have read and compare and contrast two works, one written before Emerson’s “American Scholar” address and one written after. Does the post-1837 work reflect a new genre? Explain.

VI. Vocabulary

- globule* a tiny ball or globe; a drop of liquid
- harp* Lyra, a northern constellation
- Lyceum* a grove in Athens where the philosopher Aristotle taught, named for the nearby temple of Apollon Lykeios; the Athenian gymnasium Aristotle used as a school or academy
- muses* Greek goddesses who presided over literature and the arts and sciences; the spirit that is thought to inspire a poet or artist
- Provençal minstrelsy*
literary language of the Troubadours or lyric poets of medieval Europe
- sere* dried up or withered
- Transcendentalism*
a philosophy popularized by New England writers that stressed the relationship between people and nature; a belief in the sacredness of individual conscience

Reading 1

Quotations from the Exhibition

On its most fundamental level, all literature considers the human dilemma, exploring the question of humankind's identity and its place in the world we inhabit. Authors working in every literary genre from novels to drama to poetry to essays have attempted to understand and explain for their readers some aspect—great or small—of the nature and meaning of human experience. . . . By looking at our literary heritage, we can better understand the development of thoughts and beliefs leading to our own, and thus gain a better sense of ourselves and our place in the world.

* * *

“ 'Tis the good reader that makes the good book; in every book he finds passages which seem confidences or asides hidden from all else and unmistakably meant for his ear; the profit of books is according to the sensibility of the reader; the profoundest thought or passion sleeps as in a mine, until it is discovered by an equal mind and heart.”

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

* * *

“We read books to find out who we are. What other people, real or imaginary, do and think and feel . . . is an essential guide to our understanding of what we ourselves are and may become.”

—Ursula K. Le Guin

Reading 2
“The American Scholar”¹

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882), Harvard College, 1836

. . . Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close. The millions, that around us are rushing into life, cannot always be fed on the sere remains of foreign harvests. Events, actions arise, that must be sung, that will sing themselves. Who can doubt, that poetry will revive and lead in a new age, as the star in the constellation Harp, which now flames in our zenith, astronomers announce, shall one day be the pole-star for a thousand years?

. . . The literature of the poor, the feelings of the child, the philosophy of the street, the meaning of household life, are the topics of the time. It is a great stride. It is a sign,—is it not? of new vigor, when the extremities are made active, when currents of warm life run into the hands and the feet. I ask not for the great, the remote, the romantic; what is doing in Italy or Arabia; what is Greek art, or Provencal minstrelsy; I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low. . . .

The scholar is that man who must take up into himself all the ability of the time, all the contributions of the past, all the hopes of the future. . . . If there be one lesson more than another, which should pierce his ear, it is, The world is nothing, the man is all; in yourself is the law of all nature, and you know not yet how a globule of sap ascends; in yourself slumbers the whole of Reason; it is for you to know all, it is for you to dare all. . . . We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe. . . . See already the tragic consequence. The mind of this country, taught to aim at low objects, eats upon itself. . . . What is the remedy? . . . We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds. The study of letters shall be no longer a name for pity, for doubt, and for sensual indulgence. The dread of man and the love of man shall be a wall of defense and a wreath of joy around all. A nation of men will for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men.

¹ For the complete address, see <http://ecoethics.net/ops/em-1837.htm>

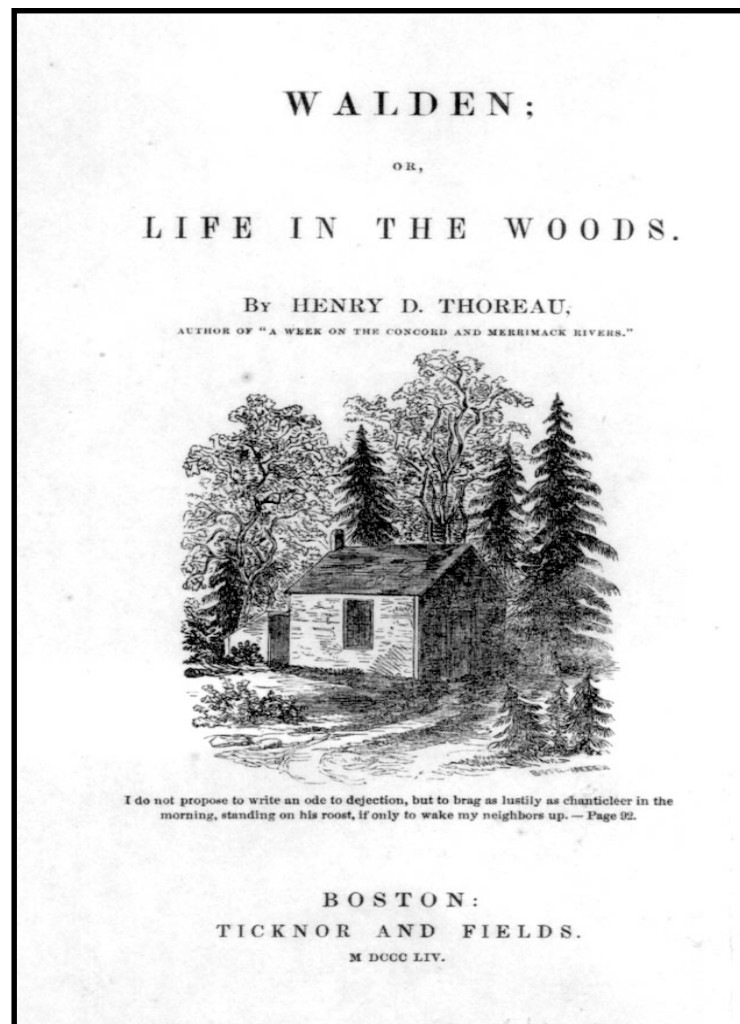
Reading 3

Walden, or, Life in the Woods

Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862)

Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau was born in Concord, Massachusetts, in 1817. After graduating from Harvard College he entered into a business venture with his brother. Although the business was successful, Thoreau became disillusioned with material things and sought a higher meaning in life. He was influenced by Ralph Waldo Emerson and moved to a crude cabin on Emerson's land at Walden Pond, two miles from Concord, where he pondered nature and the meaning of life.

Select and read one chapter from *Walden*, <http://eserver.org/thoreau/thoreau.html>. The Web site provides notes to help explain the text. Or, select edited readings from "The Walden Express," <http://eserver.org/thoreau/waldenxp.html>.



Reading 4

The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave

Frederick Douglass (1817–1895)

Frederick Douglass was born a slave in Maryland, c. 1817. At age eight he was sent to work as a house slave in Baltimore where he was taught to read and write by the mistress of the house even though Maryland law forbade teaching slaves to read. A few years later he was returned to the plantation to work as a field hand. He planned an escape with other field hands when he was eighteen, but the plot was uncovered and Douglass was jailed for a short time. In 1838 he escaped and went to New York City where he became a leading voice for the abolition of slavery. In 1845 he wrote the story of his life, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*.

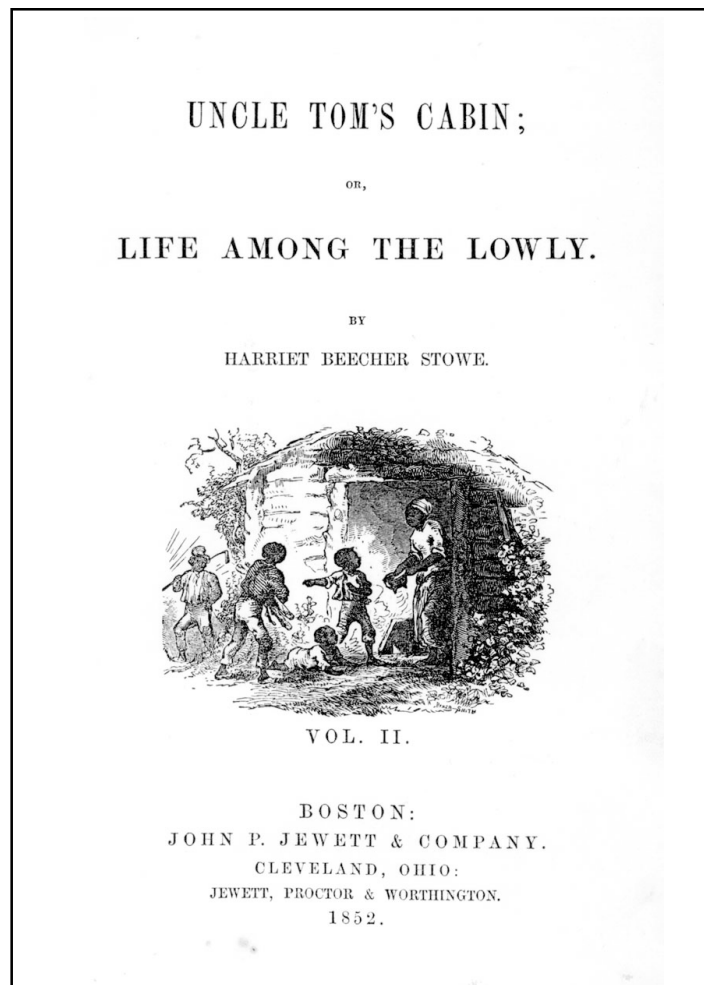
Search “Project Gutenberg” (<http://promo.net/pg/index.html>) for *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* by either title or author and read any one chapter of the autobiography.

Reading 5

Uncle Tom's Cabin, or Life Among the Lowly
Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811–1896)

Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* first appeared in 1851 as a serial in *National Era*, an Abolitionist journal. The following year it was published in book form and sold some 300,000 copies during the first year of publication. The novel was so popular that it was made into a traveling melodrama and played to audiences throughout the North. Southern journals denounced the novel, declaring that its portrayal of slavery was pure fabrication, an invention of the author's imagination.

Search "Project Gutenberg" (<http://promo.net/pg/index.html>) for Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by either title or author and read any one chapter of the novel.



The Gilded Age

Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain, 1835–1910) and Charles Dudley Warner (1829–1900)

The Gilded Age, published in 1873, exposes the unscrupulous speculation and corruption of the boom years after the Civil War. It was conceived at a dinner party where the Clemenses and their neighbors, the Warners, lamented the poor quality of recent works of fiction. After the wives challenged their husbands to see whether they could do better, Clemens and Warner agreed to collaborate. Clemens said facetiously of the resulting book: “I consider it one of the most astonishing novels that was ever written.”

Search “Project Gutenberg” (<http://promo.net/pg/index.html>) for *The Gilded Age* by either title or author (Mark Twain) and read Chapter 1.

Reading 7

Martin Eden

Jack London (1876–1916)

Jack London's central character in his 1909 novel, *Martin Eden*, was a sailor and laborer who, through determination, hard work and self-education, became a famous author, like London himself. London, however, repudiated the autobiographical interpretation customarily given the book, insisting that his portrayal of the independent, isolated, and ultimately despairing Martin Eden was instead an indictment of individualism and a statement of his faith in collective human society.

Read chapter 1 of *Martin Eden*

<http://www.literature.org/authors/london-jack/martin-eden/chapter-01.html>

