

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail

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Notes on Henry David Thoreau

The main character of this play, Henry David Thoreau, was a real person and famous author who was born in Concord, Massachusetts, in the early 1800's. He graduated near the top of his class at Harvard; however, he spent most of his life supporting himself doing chores and other menial tasks. It was at Harvard that Thoreau met Ralph Waldo Emerson when Emerson delivered the now-famous address, "The American Scholar." Thoreau became a follower of Emerson's and actually lived with his mentor, who was fourteen years his senior, working as a tutor and handyman for the Emerson family.

Thoreau believed in the tenets of Transcendentalism along with Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and many other important writers and philosophers of the time. It was Thoreau, however, who went further than just discussing Transcendentalism; he put it into practice. Thoreau "went to the woods because [he] wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if [he] could not learn what it had to teach..." This is the way he described his own form of Transcendentalism in his book *Walden*. Thoreau helped runaway slaves escape to Canada, spoke in defense of abolitionist John Brown, and was against the war with Mexico. When he refused to pay the poll tax that supported the war efforts, he was put in jail. Emerson visited Thoreau while he was imprisoned, and the record has it that Emerson asked, "Henry, why are you here?" Thoreau responded, "Waldo, why are you *not* here?" You will recognize this idea, if not those exact words, when you reach that part in this play.

As in this play, Thoreau did have a brother named John, was a teacher, and wrote several works that carry important messages into present day. His civil protest *Civil Disobedience* and *Walden*, a book written from his twenty-six-month experiment living in a cabin on Walden Pond, remain readable and noteworthy.

Thoreau died in 1862 from tuberculosis.

All page references come from the Bantam Books edition of *The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail*, copyright 1970.

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Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. define literary terms associated with drama and be able to cite examples of each term from this play.
2. define important vocabulary words used in the play and be able to use them correctly in context.
3. recognize examples of foreshadowing; speculate on what each example might be foreshadowing.
4. recognize examples of dialect and be able to explain why the author would choose to use dialect.
5. explain the importance of word choice; cite several examples where the author uses a particular word or way of phrasing something to create a particular effect.
6. pick out significant events, scenes, or speeches and explain their significance to the play as a whole.
7. cite several instances of irony and explain why each is ironic.
8. recognize crucial events in the play including important conflicts which lead (rising action) to the climax.
9. explain how the author resolves (or does not resolve) the various conflicts brought up during the course of the plot.
10. discuss how the staging influences the way in which the action can occur.
11. recognize several important quotes and explain their importance to the general understanding of the play.
12. discuss the importance of several of the minor characters to the success of the plot.
13. make inferences from information implied by the author rather than directly stated.
14. interpret stage directions and explain what the playwrights intended by using those directions.
15. cite several facts about Thoreau learned through reading the play.

The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Discuss the title the playwrights have chosen for this play. Explain why this is or is not an appropriate name for the story contained within its pages.
2. Discuss the time period during which this play takes place. How long a period does the action in the play really cover? How do the playwrights convey the passage of time?
3. Thoreau's mother and brother are very important characters, both in Henry's life and to the play as a whole. Briefly describe each character and discuss their influences on Henry personally and on the play in general.
4. Each character in this story plays an important role in developing the plot as well as helping the audience view Henry. Choose one male and one female character (not including his mother or brother) and show how each one is influential in the play's development and in revealing aspects of Henry's character.
5. The concept of Transcendentalism plays an active role in the play. Choose one or two situations or characters that reveal information about Transcendentalism and briefly describe what you have learned about this philosophy.
6. Describe the interactions between Henry and Ellen. What does each character seem to want from the other?
7. Bailey is an interesting character. Pick out two or three significant scenes where Bailey says or does something important to the course of the play.
8. There are many times in this play when Henry believes people are being treated unfairly. Focusing on three instances where there is injustice, explain the situation briefly and state why Henry believes this situation to be unjust. Explain why you agree or disagree with him.
9. The Thoreau brothers seem to have a good relationship with each other. Find several examples where it is evident that they think highly of each other. How does their relationship compare to the one each has with their mother?
10. Compare how people in town relate to Henry to how they relate to John. What is it about each of these brothers that people like or dislike?
11. This play is entitled *The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail*, although much of its action takes place at times other than the one night Thoreau actually was incarcerated. Discuss the use of flashbacks, the technique of dividing the stage and having several things going on at the same time, and any other device you think the playwrights have used to tamper with the constraints of time and the stage in order to suit their purpose.

The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail

Activity and Discussion Questions

1. Make a rough sketch of each member of Thoreau's family, including himself, using the information given directly in the play. Attach a list of personality traits for each drawing from both directly stated and implied information.
2. Draw a diagram or make a model of the stage, including as many details from the play as possible.
3. Create a timeline of the major events in the drama.
4. List all the important supporting characters, and in a sentence or two, outline the role or importance they play in the story.
5. Cite four or five of the most important stage directions and explain why they are crucial to the understanding of the story.
6. Compare the characters of Thoreau and Emerson, including their ages, their "fame," their ideals, and the women in their lives.
7. List the three most important female characters. Choose a present day actress to take the role of each of these women. Explain why you would make these casting decisions and base your answer on the words and actions of each of the characters in the play.
8. List the three most important male characters. Choose a present day actor to take the role of each of these men. Explain why you would make these casting decisions based on the words and actions of each of the characters in the play.
9. Choose one of the scenes in the play. How would you rewrite it to bring out the ideas more clearly? What would need to be changed, added, or deleted? How could it be made more modern?
10. Choose a scene in the play and rewrite it in your own dialect, using as many idioms and slang terms as might fit the content. You might also want to change things about the type of jail Thoreau is in, the personality of his bunkmate, etc.
11. Do a little extra research on Transcendentalism and explain what the concepts are and the roles both Emerson and Thoreau played in its development.
12. Using information from the play, describe what it would be like to be in Thoreau's school, with him as the teacher and the world as your classroom. Would you enjoy this type of educational approach? Explain why or why not.
13. Consider the character of Henry David Thoreau as sketched out in this play. What do you like about him as a person? What do you dislike? If you had been one of the townspeople that knew him, what might you have thought of him? Explain thoroughly.

The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail

Suggested Small Group Discussion Topics

1. conformity/nonconformity
2. speaking out for your rights/taking a stand
3. prejudice
4. parent and child/sibling relationships
5. dreams
6. Transcendentalism
7. word choice
8. expectations
9. importance and style of education
10. friendship
11. respectability and acceptability
12. use of dialect
13. justice/injustice
14. religion/spirituality/faith
15. death
16. love
17. breaking an unjust law
18. slavery – of many types and on many levels

The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail

Act I

(Pages 1 – 9)

Vocabulary

abides – lives, resides
amiable – friendly, sociable, agreeable
atheism – disbelief in God, skepticism
brandishes – wields, flourishes, flaunts
cantankerous – irritable, unreasonable, bad-tempered
condescended – patronized, lowered oneself, stooped
conformity – conventionality, traditionalism
conniption – temper tantrum, fit
conviction – strong belief
crescendo – swelling, build-up, climax
croup – respiratory illness involving deep coughing
devastating – overwhelming
ethic – example of morality, justice, fairness
inalienable – undeniable, indisputable, unchallengeable
individuality – uniqueness, distinctness, independence
indomitably – stubbornly, resolutely, unswervingly
ineptitude – incompetence, ineffectiveness, uselessness
pantomimes – acts out without using words or sounds
paroxysm – convulsion, spasm, outburst
patrician – aristocratic, noble, upper class
pompously – arrogantly, pretentiously, snobbishly
radiance – sparkle, glow, vivacity
saunters – strolls, walks
sonnet – poem composed of fourteen lines with a set rhythm and rhyme pattern
Transcendentalism – belief that one can go beyond the senses, that people have a spark of divinity in them
transfixed – mesmerized, hypnotized, fascinated

1. The very first words you read in this play are stage directions—information given to the director and actors as to where things should be and how certain actions should take place. Choose two of the directions on page one and explain what the playwrights are trying to accomplish with each.

(Pages 26 – 41)

19. A new character is introduced on page twenty-six. Name and describe this character.

20. Why does Henry get upset with Ellen during the lesson about grass blades?

21. A major theme is revealed at this point in the play. What words are written in capital letters to emphasize their meaning and shouted at Ellen? What evidence do you have so far that Henry truly believes what he is saying?

22. How has Henry reversed himself about teaching Bailey to read and write?

23. Many of the conversations contain examples of irony. List a few and explain why each is ironic.

4. What unusual question does Edward inform his mother of?

5. In the beginning of the play, Waldo is busy trying to remember Henry's name, and refers to him as the boy "who put the gloves on the chickens." What is he talking about and when does the reader find this out?

6. The scene between Henry and Lydian continues with much talk of love and loneliness. What implications are there behind both Lydian's and Henry's words?
