

***The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail* by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee**
(Published by Bantam Classic Books)

Approved for use in Advanced Placement Communication Arts III and Communication Arts III

Summary

The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail dramatizes the historical incident in which Henry David Thoreau, protesting the Mexican-American War of 1846-48, went to jail for refusing to pay his taxes. Lawrence and Lee's text utilizes a fluid structure, with characters and events portraying patterns around the central figure of Thoreau, in jail throughout the play. Each of the flashback scenes and those set in the jail itself reveal aspects of Thoreau's character and philosophy, constructing, by the end of the play, a composite portrait explaining his actions. Present in the play is evidence of Thoreau's theme of transcendentalism, reinforced by Thoreau's renaming of himself and his rejection of conformity.

Connection to the Curriculum

One of the cornerstones of American literature is the understanding of transcendentalism and its impact both on writers and our society's norms. Written in 1971 during the Vietnam War, *The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail* employs several motifs and themes that require closer inspection by the reader. Finding these underlying messages and ideas is an imperative part of a student's experience with literature. Throughout the play Thoreau remains a logical product of the high-minded idealism of Emersonian transcendentalism. The playwrights use some conventional theatrical devices – potential romance, personal tragedy – to connect with the central idea driving the play. Lawrence and Lee's use of poetic language and advanced rhetorical statements places the play in a category for higher-level readers and evaluators of literature. Deciphering the main character's philosophy and connecting that to reality in the story line develops a stronger reader and critical thinker.

Standards

Course Objectives (Benchmarks)

Reading: 1.2- The students read fluently. 1.3- The students expand vocabulary. 1.4- The students comprehend a variety of texts.

Literature: 2.1-The students use literary concepts to interpret and respond to text.

Writing: 3.9- The students use a variety of modes of writing for different purposes and audiences.

Possible Skills Taught (Indicators)

Reading:

1.4.7- The student identifies characteristics of narrative texts.

1.4.9- The student uses prior knowledge, content, and text type features to make, revise, and confirm predictions.

1.4.10- The student generates and responds logically to literal, inferential, evaluative, and critical thinking questions before, during, and after reading the text.

1.4.17- The student analyzes and evaluates how an author's style and use of literary devices work together to achieve his or her purpose for writing text.

Literature:

2.1.1- The student identifies and describes different types of characters and analyzes their development.

2.1.2- The student analyzes the historical, social, and cultural contextual aspects of the setting and its influence on characters and events in the story.

2.1.5- The student identifies, analyzes, and evaluates the use of literary devices in a text.

Writing:

3.9- The student writes effectively for a variety of audiences, purposes, and contexts.

A Note on the Text: (The best way to evaluate and understand a novel is to personally read the book in its entirety.)

This text depicts, in play form, the events in the life of Henry David Thoreau when he was put in jail for not paying his taxes. It does include Thoreau's specific political views concerning war and government. The understanding of these Transcendentalist views helps students examine the Transcendentalist's writings. There is a death (Henry's brother) referenced in the play.

AP Connections

This play provides a link to the canon of classics that incorporates high level, critical-thought questions. Close reading of the text provides insight into the rhetorical strategies/style (irony, imagery, tone, syntax, diction) of the play.

Additional Unit Design Connections

Coming soon:

To be completed during future curriculum development activities