

Renate Cristiano  
Walter Payton College Prep  
Chicago, Illinois

### **The 19<sup>th</sup> c. American Social and Cultural Imagination and Thomas Cole's View from Mount Holyoke (The Oxbow)**

Objective and Brief Background: During the course of the year, my American Literature students study a variety of texts through the thematic lens of the American Dream. The two sub-themes of our year-long inquiry are “The City on the Hill” and “The Artist in the Marketplace”. The City theme refers to the social and cultural ideals of the country's founders and the resulting emphasis on urbanization, industry and technology within the culture. The Artist theme refers to the values of creativity and individuality inherent in American society. I would use *The Oxbow* to first illustrate the American social and cultural imagination during the early nineteenth century—the influence of the American Romantic movement and the tenets of Transcendentalism. In addition, I would use the painting to show the economic and social trends of the country at the time, including the opening of the frontier and the tension that exists between wilderness and urbanization as well as the contrast, as shown in the work, between the role of the individual (and specifically the artist) and the influence of nature and society.

Guiding question: How does Thomas Cole's *The Oxbow* reflect the cultural and social values of the time in which it was produced?

#### Procedure:

Students should have an understanding of Romanticism, and specifically the American Romantic movement, as well as Transcendentalism. Background reading could include excerpts from Thoreau's *Walden*, for example.

Using either printed reproductions or a projected copy, students examine the painting and take notes on as many visual details and physical aspects of the work as possible.

With a partner, students compare notes to see what they might have missed.

In the same pairs, students answer the following questions: What details of the painting seem the most significant and why? How does the painting reflect or augment the social and cultural assumptions/narrative of its era? What question(s) do(es) the painting raise for you?

Whole-group discussion of pair work: Discussion/debate can center on the existence of competing/multiple interpretations of the work. Are the interpretations mutually exclusive or illustrative of greater cultural/social truths? What is an oxbow and does it signify any metaphorical meanings ?

HW/Assessment: Using your initial notes and our class discussion as pre-writing, write a brief analysis (1-2 pages) of how Thomas Cole's *The Oxbow* reflects the cultural and social values of the time in which it was produced.