

Teacher: Vanessa Vega from Irving High School, Irving, Texas

Date(s): Spring 2010 ****This lesson is based on a 50 minute class period****

Subject area / course / grade level: Humanities/ 11th and 12th grade Honors level English courses

Materials: (1) a copy of The Hudson River School by Louise Minks (for teacher reference); copies of Cole's "View from Mount Holyoke (The Oxbow)"; background information on Romanticism; background information about the US in the 1800s, and if not already covered, basic art terminology

State objectives: vary by state

Lesson objective(s): By carefully examining Cole's work, "View from Mount Holyoke", students can better understand the mentality, fears and hopes of Americans during the 1800s.

Students will analyze symbolic elements of this piece.

Students will apply their knowledge of Romanticism and identify elements within this work.

Students will put piece into a larger historical context and draw conclusions about what Cole might be "warning" Americans about with regards to westward expansion.

Students will make a connection between Cole's personal beliefs about nature and how nature is reflected in this work.

Instructional strategies:

1. **Day One:** As an introduction, the teacher will explain that there are many ways to look at and analyze art. In order to fully appreciate the work, the observer needs some foundational knowledge about who created it, why they created it, when it was made and an understanding of the stylistic elements traditionally used by that artist. *(I approach teaching art like I do a holistic literature unit. I look for a variety of sources to illustrate the concepts I am trying to get the kids to understand. Rarely will I find one thing to exemplify what I want them to see. Instead, I try to pull from all genres so the kids get a well-rounded sense of what we're going to be looking for. If the kids understand Romanticism in literature for example, it will be easier for them to understand it in art.*

Depending on the level of students I am working with and their knowledge base, I may spend a day, more than a day or just a few minutes reviewing the basics before we move on to our primary objectives.)

Sample passages I have used to make connections with this art piece:

Question: How does this sentiment by Emerson reflect the American mentality of the 1800s? *(Individuals who were settling the land had only their two hands to ensure survival. For many, they were tasked with doing things for the first time: building a home, clearing the land, planting new crops, establishing a livestock base, trading with Indians, protecting their property from unknown wildlife attackers, etc. No one knew if they were going to be successful or not. All anyone could do was try.)*

“...no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him to till. The power which resides in him is new in nature, and none but he knows what that is which he can do, nor does he know until he has tried.”

- Emerson

Question: How does this idea reflect on the attitude of early settlers? *(There was no one to tell newcomers what to expect or assure them of success. Most had to just try it for themselves and then decide if the sacrifices and hard work had been worth it.)*

“He who would gather immortal palms must not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be goodness. Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind.” - Emerson

Question: As an early settler, you would be faced daily with nature in its rawest sense. If the land was to be tamed, it would be so under your hands. In order to flourish, man and beast had to learn how to live side by side. Sometimes this resulted in deadly interactions. And yet, Emerson believed that being in nature and surrounding oneself with all that it has to offer, was a basic requirement for authentic living. How are the images expressed here glorified to a certain extent? How is nature personified here? *(Nurturing, soul supporting, life giving, etc. The true gravity of the situation isn't reflected, leading one to believe that there many not be as many obstacles and challenges as there really are.)*

“The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other; who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood. His intercourse with heaven and earth, becomes part of his daily food. In the presence of nature, a wild delight runs through the man, in spite of real sorrows.”

- Emerson

Question: How might early Americans relate to Whitman’s feelings here? *(They too are alone and finding food for themselves and/or their family will bring contentment and validation of efforts.)*

“Alone far in the wilds and mountains I hunt,
Wandering amazed at my own lightness and glee...” - Whitman

Question: How does this sentiment reflect the attitude of many headed west? Was it “glamorous” to die doing something courageous? *(Those that died were seen as dying for their dreams. Their deaths were idolized because they didn’t play it safe. There is glory in following one’s dream, even if death is the result.)* What killed many of the early settlers? *(Indian raids, disease, starvation, the elements)* Did the beauty of the landscape reveal hidden dangers that many early settlers were unprepared for? *(Absolutely. Because this was unchartered territory, no one really knew what to expect with regards to predators, deadly snakes, insects, pestilence and other hidden dangers (including Indians sometimes!)).*

“I died for beauty...” - Dickinson

2. Prior to looking at Cole’s piece, the teacher will have introduced the concept of Romanticism and will illustrate these concepts by looking at other works of art by Hudson River School painters. By exploring other pieces first, students will have a chance to see how Romantic elements are presented and get a sense of how these elements influence how the observer “feels” when viewing these works. How are these elements used to influence the viewer? What might these elements “mean” in a work of art? Are they persuasive? Are they influential in raising awareness of a cause or potential problem? *(Yes. Many of the pictures, real or not, have a “reality with human influence” versus a “reality without influence” message. There is a cautionary tale in many of these pieces about mindlessly destroying the land.)*

3. Through a class discussion and analysis, students will gain a better understanding of these elements, and students should be able, through practice, to identify them with confidence.
4. **Day Two:** Introduce Thomas Cole as a painter. Give students background information about Cole and his belief that nature was “perfect” and no matter what, would ultimately prevail in a “war” with man. Ask students what “war” he might be referring to. (*Westward expansion, development, railroad development, etc.*).\
5. Show other works by Cole. (*I recommend the “Voyage of Life” series*). Discuss how, according to Cole, God is reflected in nature and no matter how much man tries to interfere, will always be able to correct itself and go back to its natural state. (*You might mention here the concept of free range lands. Help students to see what going back to its natural state means. What is absent on lands that are “natural”? Raise the question. Is it possible for man to have a presence in nature without causing harm to the environment, the land or the animals that live there? How is this damage justified?*)
6. **Day Three:** Introduce Cole’s “Oxbow” painting. Define what an oxbow is and discuss how it is used in this painting. (*water will create its own path, just as man will; nature is resilient and overcomes obstacles just as man does*)
7. Break students into small groups of 2 or 3. Give each student a color copy of the artwork. (*These can be destroyed after your activity, but you may want to have the kids make notes, circle or in other ways “mark” the picture as their understanding increases*). Give each group a list of things to find: Cole himself, the lightning, the Hebrew word carved on the hillside, the man on a barge, birds, the men on the shore, and homesteads. Ask students to identify what “progress” they see in this picture. (*Man making a living off the land, roads are being built, the land is being “tamed” for man’s use, etc.*)
8. Ask students to split (*not physically*) the picture into two pieces. How does the left side differ from the right? (*wilderness versus civilization*) Is there a symbolic caution that exists between these two sides of the painting? (*Tamed versus untamed land...man equals destruction, etc.*) How do the colors and use of light in the right side of the picture influence how the observer “feels” about what is happening? Is the tearing down of nature really progress? Can

the re-shaping of the land be seen as beautiful? (*Cole believed that there was beauty in pastoral life as well as untamed nature.*) How does the weather differ on both sides of the picture? Is the storm coming or going? (*This is important. If the storm is coming, nature is supreme. If the storm is going, man has “won”. What else might the storm symbolize? (The awesome and uncontrollable power of nature.)*)

9. Ask students about Cole being in his own painting. What might this represent? He is such a small figure. Is there symbolism in this as well? (*In the presence of nature, man is small and insignificant. Or, in order to “see” things as they are, man should be a silent observer, being as unobtrusive as possible.*)
10. **Day Four:** Ask students to consider what was going on in American at the time this painting was done. This painting was done thirty years after the Lewis and Clark expedition. How had America changed in that time? What are Americans wanting? What are they doing? (*Heading west...homesteading...looking to start a new life, make some money, take advantage of the resources this untamed land has to offer, etc.*)
11. Historically speaking, we know the California Gold Rush is about 15 years away. What will this event mean for the wild, untamed west? How might Cole's painting act as a cautionary tale to people in the future? (*Nature will always win. Nature is wild, unpredictable. MANY will lose their lives trying to get to California for the gold rush. Few were prepared for the vastness of the American west and died on the way.*) What might Cole have warned people about? What concerns do you think he might have had about man's impact on the land? (*Where man leads, destruction usually follows...trees cut down, rivers dammed, animals hunted to extinction, pollution, etc. Development must be carefully planned in order to preserve the integrity of the environment and to reduce interference with nature and her life cycles.*)

Differentiation strategies to meet diverse learner needs:

1. Lower-level students should be in a group with two stronger students
2. ESL students can be given pictographs of items to find in the picture
3. If students are having a hard time with the Romanticism concept incorporate a poem or two from that period to help students understand what “romanticized” means. Ask students to identify songs, movies or other works of literature that offer romanticized views of life.
4. For the most advanced and knowledgeable students, ask them to research

Claude Lorrain. The tree on the left side of the picture is a stylistic influence Cole directly borrowed from him. Ask them why this would have been such an honor. (*Imitation really is the highest form of flattery. Many artists "borrowed" from each other as a way of paying tribute to other artists who influenced or inspired them.*)

Evaluation of student learning:

1. As a follow-up, ask students to look at and analyze other Cole works. (*If you have a projection system, this works well so everyone in the class can see the pictures at the same time. If you don't, give each small group books with Cole works in them, ask students to view specific images on-line, etc. I like to use "Schroon Mountains", "Sunny Morning on the Hudson River"*) What elements do they see that are the same? How do these elements help to give an artist their style?
2. Once students seem confident in identifying these stylistic elements, give groups the names of other Romantic painters. Students usually find works by Church, Bierstadt, Durand and Inness very interesting and easy to discuss. Ask them to find works from these artists that they like and analyze them for similar themes as that of the Cole painting. Ask each group to pick their favorite artist and work and present it to the class. Let them lead a class-wide analysis!
3. Ask students how this romanticized view of the American West impacted people migrating to the west and influenced what they thought they might find.