

Workshop 2: “Walking” with Henry David Thoreau¹

From: Writing and Walking, Pilgrimage and Process:
Working with the Essays of Linda Hogan and Henry David Thoreau

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Time: 1.5 hours, or two fifty-minute sessions

The focus of this workshop is on a close analysis and reading of Thoreau's essay. This document details a second student-centered in-class conceptual workshop. This time, by comparing and contrasting the essays of Hogan and Thoreau, students begin to understand elements of the essay and to contrast their identities and purposes as writers, working within a particular social and historical context. They also begin to develop a more complex understanding of their own identity and sense of place, the historical and cultural context around issues of sustainability and environmental ethics today, and a sense of writing and walking as a process, not simply a destination.

As an alternate activity, instructor can use the Mid-Term Exam Question, which involves writing for 30 minutes. See activities and resources listed in the appendix.

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What is it that makes it so hard sometimes to determine whither we will walk? I believe that there is a subtle magnetism in Nature, which, if we unconsciously yield to it, will direct us aright.

--Henry David Thoreau, “Walking”

In wildness is the preservation of the world.

--Henry David Thoreau, “Walking”

During this semester we have been looking at ways that writers construct arguments and try to convince their readers of a particular point of view. For example, some arguments are implicit, embedded within a narrative. Other arguments are explicitly stated, and are presented in a

¹I developed the following workshop for my classes at The Evergreen State College, and have continued to use in a number of interdisciplinary programs in literature, humanities, and environmental studies for both graduate and undergraduate students. I have also developed it for Writing 101 and Writing 102 courses at St. Martin’s University, and 101 courses at Northwest Indian College that use writing, argumentation, and research to explore themes of sustainability and the common good from global and local perspectives. I have adapted it for class sessions last anywhere from four-hours to 50 - 90 minutes.

I usually give this workshop early in a quarter or semester. Students read a variety personal and argumentative essays and are engaged in doing research as well as writing and editing personal essays about “place.” (See syllabi for details.) This workshop gives them a new perspective on their writing, program themes, and helps them prepare for a mid-term examination. This workshop follows their discussion of Linda Hogan’s essay “Walking,” and students are required to bring their notes and responses to her essay so they can compare and contrast the two works.

straightforward manner. As we have discussed, writers draw on various techniques to explore their personal experiences, or to argue for a particular point of view. Today, we will be working with Henry David Thoreau's essay, "Walking."

Get your notes and responses to Linda Hogan's essay out. Keep your ideas about her essay in mind, and include them your discussion. Be prepared to compare and contrast the two essays throughout your discussion.

At the end of the workshop,

- 1) Put your notes in your class-materials folder for review.
- 2) Evaluate yourself, using the seminar assessment form, on how you interacted in the workshops, took notes, and expressed your ideas in small groups and to the class.

Part 1: (60 min.) READING AND DISCUSSION

Get into small groups of three or four people. Choose one person to be a time-keeper so that you move through these activities in the allotted time. Choose another person to read each question orally when the last section is completed. Select another person to be a scribe and take notes about your discussion. Take turns reading passages or interesting selections aloud Thoreau's essay, "Walking." What stands out to you? What patterns do you see? What are the overall themes or ideas? Briefly respond to the following questions as we discuss Thoreau's writing.

A: Take turns reading aloud selections from "Walking," by Henry David Thoreau. (15 min.)

B: Discussion (45 min.)

- How does his essay begin?
- How does it end?
- What does Thoreau believe that observers and walkers can learn from nature?
- Why is Thoreau's essay entitled "Walking"? Discuss several different ways that walking is a meaningful activity in this essay. Who or what is "walking?"
- What is the significance of the direction that Thoreau prefers to travel in? Why?

Theme and Thesis:

- These is an essay, so where is the thesis?
- How does Thoreau develop his theme or thesis?
- Is there a turning point in his essay? If so, where is it, and how does it carry his argument forward?
- How does he explore the concept of nature? What is wild?
- How does Thoreau compare/contrast nature and human society?
- How do Thoreau's descriptions of the natural world compare to Hogan's descriptions of nature?
- As you will recall, Hogan describes herself as an outsider or observer. How does Thoreau relate to nature?
- What kind of conflicts does he set-up in his work? Why?

- What is it about Thoreau’s writing that might appeal to modern readers? What does he anticipate about the environmental conditions today? Find examples or descriptions that apply to issues of environmental awareness and sustainability in both his time and ours?

Language and writing style:

- What sentences or phrases stand out to you? How does he create memorable phrases?
- How does Thoreau include or exclude his reader from his message? Does Thoreau’s style draw his reader into his point of view? How is this different from Hogan?
- What kind of language does Thoreau use? How does this compare or contrast to Hogan?
- How might Thoreau and Hogan be writing different kinds of essays? How are they similar? How are they different?
- What are some of the other techniques that Thoreau uses? How many can you list? For example, see if you can find examples of dialogue, metaphor, image, repetition, questions, answers, quotes, a variety of sentence types (i.e. short, terse sentences, simple, compound or complex sentences), etc. Where does he give detailed descriptions, make universal summary statements, tell a story of personal experience? Give an example for each technique you find.

Appealing to logos, pathos, or ethos?

- How does Thoreau appeal to logic?
- How does Thoreau appeal to emotion?
- How does Thoreau appeal to ethics or ethos?
- Who are his “authorities?” Who does he discount?
- How does Thoreau draw conclusions, give meaning to, and make sense of things? What are his “overall” conclusions?
- How is this similar to different from the way that Hogan draws her conclusions?

C: Conclusion: (30 min.)

Return to the large group and take turns reporting on what you discovered from/about Thoreau’s and Hogan’s essays. Conclude in a large group seminar by discussing the questions from the introduction of the Hogan workshop.

- Compare and contrast the two works. Why kinds of essays are they?
- What is their theme or thesis?
- What are they trying to communicate or trying to convince their readers of?
- What kinds of arguments do they use?
- When and how are the essays written?
- Who is their audience?

- How are the experiences of the two essayists different? How are they similar?
- How do the essays differ in form and style?
- How does each of the writers make their individual experience universal?
- What do these writers and essays mean to you?
- How might 21st Century readers reflect on these two works, and what do we learn from them?
- How do they help us understand our own connection to nature?
- How do they inspire, challenge, or encourage us to deal with the local/global challenges that face us?