

Literature and Visual Art of the Urban Experience

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Overview:

Much has been made of the grimness of America's urban concrete jungles. From the advent of our national being, epitomized in the Jacksonian/Jeffersonian struggle over American identity, there has been a philosophical debate over whether Americans would be better off embracing the bucolic peace of nature or the modern bustle of the city. This struggle continues today with the lingering effects of the white flight from major urban centers to newly made, often tacitly segregated suburban communities. As Steven Conn writes in *Metropolitan Philadelphia*, "we see, generally speaking, our cities pitted in an antagonistic, largely racial struggle with their surrounding suburbs. In this view, white suburbs have proliferated since the end of World War II like parasites feeding off the shrinking, increasingly black body of de-industrializing cities" (3). A dichotomy has emerged wherein the non-urban, nature-filled existence is understood as beautiful while the urban center is marred by poverty, grit, and a distinct lack of kindness. This is a false dichotomy. This unit will allow students to understand the early American voices that embraced nature and shunned the urban and contrast those voices against more modern authors who see within the city a unique vibrancy and beauty.

This unit will demand a significant amount of classroom time ranging between two and three months. Due time must be spent introducing the unit's central themes, reading and analyzing key texts, assessing student mastery of themes and writing techniques, as well as the successful completion of student projects.

Rationale:

In a country supposedly dedicated to equality, there is a stark lack of it in today's education. When school district coffers are directly tied into a community's property tax intake, the inherent results are wealthy school districts providing state of the art education to the wealthy while the struggling districts offer sub-par education to the working poor. Such disparities in turn create a distorted sense of one's community value. The city, whose public education systems belie the struggle of the vast majority of the city's residents, begins to take on an underserved cloud of pessimism. As students walk through their crumbling schools and back out into their crumbling neighborhoods, their city loses any sense of worth and beauty.

This unit will help to bring such realities into productive classroom discussions and academic work. Students will not only develop their academic prowess, but begin to look at their city in a new, more empowered light.

Background:

To prepare for teaching this unit, teachers should reread writings by Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, Colson Whitehead, Jonathan Lethem, James Agee, and Truman Capote. In addition, teachers should research American paintings of the mid-19th century, including those by Thomas Cole, Asher Durand, and Frederic Church as well modern urban visual artists including Jean-Michel Basquiat, and graffiti artists REVS and ESPO.

In addition, teachers should research the development of American urban centers, specifically Philadelphia, focusing on the white flight to sub-urban communities, the nadir of the American urban experience, and the project of urban renewal, specifically Philadelphia's Mural Arts Program.

19th Century Outlooks on the Urban Experience

It would be impossible to discuss 19th Century American notions of just about anything without discussing Ralph Waldo Emerson. In the discussion of the urban versus rural experience, it is quite clear that Emerson's choice would be the latter. It is not a coincidence that one of his most recognized works is entitled, *Nature*. What follows is hardly a conclusive tract of Emerson's work. Instead, I have attempted to sort out key pieces of Emerson's thought as it regards the urban/rural experience as a means for juxtaposition against later American authors.

Emerson opens his discussion on nature with an experience a city dweller can only rarely, and if then only if he/she is lucky, experience; solitude. "To go into solitude," writes Emerson, "a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society" (Emerson, 493). Immediately, Emerson has created an impassable trough between the urban and the rural. It can be assumed that to be solitary is an enviable state. Therefore, it stands to reason, reaching that enviable state requires withdrawing from society. In one line, Emerson has created a hierarchy of human experience with rural on the top, and the urban below.

Connection with the natural world is paramount to Emerson. It is that connection which Emerson extols, and it is that connection which can, apparently, exist only in the quite confines of the forest. "The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister, is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and vegetable. I am not alone and unacknowledged. They nod to me and I to them...Its effect is like that of a higher thought or a better emotion coming over me, when I deemed I was thinking justly or doing right" (Emerson, 495), Interestingly enough, what Emerson enjoys most of his solitude in nature is the knowledge that he is not alone. The personifications Emerson bestows upon the natural world here echo the urban experience. The vegetables nod to him. The boughs wave. These are the movements and greetings of passersby on city streets. What Emerson seems to imply here is that he is less alone when solitary in the woods than he is when surrounded by people in the city. This is a theme that any

newcomer to a large city can readily understand; the feeling of being totally alone when being surrounded by strangers.

A visual example of Emerson's anti-urban ideology is Thomas Cole's *Home in the Wilderness*. The scene is a bucolic paradise, an Eden of calm solitude. The life is simple. The man, or husband one presumes, walks home carrying his catch of the day, reaping the benefits of his physical toil. The home to which he returns is a simple, if perfect, log cabin, each cord of wood placed just right. Wife and child greet the returning husband, while other children play in the open yard. Just to the left of the cabin is a simple cross. The family, one almost imagines the holy family, resides in perfect natural harmony. The scene, more for its ideals than its specifics, rings with familiar tones to the suburban ideal of today. The painting shows the perfect blend of humanism within the natural world. There is no steam engine, power line, or plume of soot. Man is allowed a peaceful, indulgent existence within the bosom of nature. Cole here has beautifully, and intoxicatingly, captured the blissful ideal of the rural existence.

Whitman as Transition

Walt Whitman, perhaps unsurprisingly, marks the transition from 19th century rejection of the urban to the 20th century embrace of the city. Whitman understands the city as a lively jumble of humanity that provided the quintessential essence of the new American character. His poem, *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*, epitomizes this transition.

Whitman's city transcends time. The city is that which connects Americans of all times. Their footprints remain within the streets, the shared vistas creating shared lives. Whitman's city is the scene of the new sociological experiment. "I loved well those cities, loved well the stately and rapid river, / The men and women I saw were all near to me, / Others the same - others who looked back on me because I look'd / forward to them... / What is it between us? / What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us" (Whitman, 1059). The city, because its existence is larger than any one individual, necessarily includes all individuals into one essence. The streets he walked are the streets people walk today. The crowds in which he roamed are the crowds that make up today's afternoon gridlock.

There is a beauty in this understanding of the city. "I too walk'd the streets of Manhattan island, and bathed in the waters around it, / I too felt the curious abrupt questionings stir within me, / In the day among crowds of people sometimes they came upon me, / In my walks home late at night or as I lay in my bed they came upon me... / What thought you have of me now, I had as much of you - I laid my / stores in advance, / I consider'd long and seriously of you before you were born... / Who knows, for all the distance, but I am as good as looking at you now, / for all you cannot see me" Whitman, 1060). As will be seen below, Whitman's sense of the city is picked up by another author more than one hundred years later. Whitman's embrace of the city is impressively modern. The city is not the harbinger of evil and industry. The city is not the place we seek refuge from. Rather, the city is alive, its own unique organism that invites all to partake in its chaotic sense of order. It is a place that defines and is defined by those who inhabit it. The city, perhaps, is the most American of institutions.

20th Century Outlooks on the Urban Experience

Colson Whitehead is a lover of the city. Born in Brooklyn, New York, Whitehead's works are filled with a dynamic urbanism, a multi-hued visage that tints the way his characters look at the world. Whitehead's literature does not posit the city as a good juxtaposed against the evil of nature. Such an approach is not only simplistic, but absurd. Instead, Whitehead's work provides a nuanced outlook on the city; a place at once welcoming and cold, human and alien, but always home.

Whitehead's work, *The Colossus of New York*, breaks the city into twelve distinct parts. The opening chapter, "City Limits" introduces the reader into the urban world. For the purposes of this unit, to the inevitable howls of offended New Yorkers, New York City exists not as the unique city, but as the exemplary city, a stand in for the urban experience as a whole.

What is immediately discernible is that the city is an organism all its own. Despite earlier assertions that the city was an unnatural symbol of human arrogance, akin to the Biblical city of Babel, Whitehead's city is organically alive, given an ever-beating pulse of its inhabitants who not only define the city, but are defined as well. "You start

building your own private New York the first time you lay your eyes on it," writes Whitehead. "Maybe you were in a cab leaving the airport when the skyline first raised itself into view...Look: there's the Empire State Building, over there are the Twin Towers. Somewhere in that fantastic, glorious mess was the address on the piece of paper, your first home here" (Whitehead, 4). The city is a mess, there is no getting around that. The city may indeed lack the so-called orderliness of the bucolic. However, this does not imply any sort of sterility. In fact, the mess is a glorious one, one in which lives are played out.

Indeed, the mess of the urban experience is perhaps the greatest examples of America's democratic spirit. The mess of the urban is the mess of the public sphere wherein all are endowed with the rights of equality and expression. As such, there is no one city, but millions of valid interpretations of the same city. As Whitehead writes, "There are eight million naked cities in this naked city – they dispute and disagree. The New York City you live in is not my New York City; how could it be? This place multiplies when you're not looking...your favorite newsstands, restaurants, movie theatres, subway stations, and barbershops are replaced by your next neighborhood's favorites. It gets to be quite a sum. Before you know it, you have your own personal skyline" (Whitehead, 6). The urban experience disallows the arrogance of an exact reading. Just as it is un-American to prescribe an exact, definite, and unalterable reading of the Constitution, so is it unacceptable to define the urban existence, or the rural existence for that matter, based upon one's own ideology. The urban life, with its mess of disputes, contradictions, and cacophony of opinions, is therefore the penultimate American lifestyle. The urban lifestyle encapsulates the higher American ideal of inclusion and equality for, as Whitehead writes, his book, "contains your neighborhoods. Or doesn't. We overlap. Or don't. Maybe you've walked these avenues, maybe it's all Jersey to you. I'm not sure what to say. Expect that probably we're neighbors. That we walk past each other every day, and never knew it until now" (Whitehead, 11).

Graffiti is often understood as the stereotypical image of urban grime. The mark of the seedy neighborhood, graffiti epitomizes that which suburbanites flee. Indeed, graffiti is the visual symbol of a crime, the evidence of vandalism. Such a view would

coincide with the 19th century outlook on the urban experience. However, just as Whitehead understands the city as being an organism that creates, and is created by its inhabitants, modern urban street artists look at the city as a massive, interactive easel. As Conn notes, "while all cities and their regions constitute real places, with measurable populations...they also exist imaginatively. Cities and their surroundings are defined through the production of cultural material" (205). Street art constitutes a vibrant example of such material.

Two of the most famous New York graffiti artists are REVS and ESPO. REVS' art transforms the city into a visual diary. Whereas the brick and metal physical facades hint at a certain alien quality, REVS' art injects a sense of humanity into the city's lifeblood.

The most profound example of REVS' work is also the least accessible. Located deep within the subway tunnels of the F train is REVS' graffiti diary. Using spray paint, REVS transforms a section of tunnel wall into a yellow legal writing pad upon which REVS free writes his diary entries. REVS' work, illegal though it may be, injects the human experience directly onto the facade of what could otherwise be called the inhuman city. The city, to artists such as REVS, is not an impediment to human expression, but an inspiration.

ESPO's work creates a similar humanism by adorning the city's nighttime facade with an enlivened sense of identity. As stores close up for the night, they become literally shuttered. Large iron walls are unfurled and locked into place to deter even the remotely curious. What is created is a city that has retreated into its shell. Only the most forgiving city lover could refer to such a nighttime appearance as becoming. ESPO's work, however, refashions this mundane night image. ESPO's tag is simple, it is simply, 'espo.' But the depth and size of his tag is transfixing. The scale and the meticulous attention to form capture one's eye. It is not the message, as it is in REVS' work, but the idea that is captivating. ESPO has focused our eyes on the most mundane aspect of the urban experience, and refashioned it into something new and exciting. ESPO has transformed the city, but as with REVS, only for those lucky enough to see it. REVS' most revealing work can only be seen by the attentive within the tunnels, while ESPO's can only be seen by night owls.

What REVS and ESPO have in common, however, is their understanding of the city not as a stifling impediment to the human condition, but as an opportunity for inspiration. Just as Whitehead understood the city as that which defines the existence of millions of urbanites, so do these urban visual artists see the city as a malleable medium of art. In their hands, and under their paint, the city morphs from a lifeless jungle of concrete and steel, into a colossal, open air museum.

The idea of the open air museum is perfected here in Philadelphia. The Mural Arts Program has turned "blighted" sections of the city into vibrant artistic oases. Participants in the Mural Arts Program see the city much the same way the other moderns do. According to Conn, public art, "can turn the city spaces and streetscapes into whimsical stage sets, creating juxtapositions that make us see both the art and the city in different ways" (218). Just as the city can define its space, the city itself can also be defined. Just as the natural world was transformed to welcome the family in Thomas Cole's painting, so does The Mural Arts Program transform the cityscape by transforming brick facades into glowing urban frescoes.

The modern view of the city is one of opportunity, not dejection. While the 19th century viewed the city for the most part as symbols of society's waywardness, the moderns, beginning with Whitman, see the city as a new American identity, one that can define as well as be defined. What we now ask our students to do, is to take part in this modern discussion, to explore how they have been defined by their city, and attempt to define the urban sphere they call home.

Objectives:

This unit is intended for upper high school students, ideally in grades 11 and/or 12. As young adults, they are increasingly aware of the world around them. These students are perched upon the doorstep of adulthood and are set to enter the working world. They must know how to observe and analyze their surroundings, be able to make informed decisions, and translate those decisions into well-expressed thought. This unit will simultaneously prepare students for college level work and prepare them for interaction in the adult world of business.

The objectives of this unit will include the following:

- The reading, analysis, and discussion of American art and literature.
- Consistent completion of homework in order to build responsibility.
- Regular short response writing to prepare students for the PSSA and SAT.
- Successful collaboration with peers to present and teach the class.- -

Mastery of vocabulary.

- The creation of a multi-paged analytical essay.
- A creative writing piece complemented by a visual presentation of their city.

Strategies:

Comparative Essay

Students will choose either two pieces of literature or two pieces of artwork, one modern one 19th century, and write a multi-page comparative analytical essay with complementing research done on the appropriate artists. Students will write a two paragraph proposal that sets out the artists they have chosen, what point they will try to make, and what sources they will use to find support for that thesis. Students will need to research the life and works of the artists they choose, select a specific piece of work to analyze, and create a unique thesis that can be supported. Papers will be at least five pages in length and must abide by all MLA standards.

Walking Tour Project

Students will create a walking tour of their city or neighborhood. Using digital photography, PowerPoint, and music programs, students will take the class on a tour of a particular part of their city, highlighting what they want others to see and understand. This presentation will go hand in hand with a written element that allows students to either creatively or analytically discuss their city or neighborhood.

Students will use Colson Whitehead's approach to using specific places within a city to investigate larger ideas of the urban experience. Students will prove a proposal before beginning their project that states the physical location they have chosen, why they have chosen it, and what they use the location to express about the city and its inhabitants.

Upon approval of the proposal, students will use digital photography to visually capture the physical location. Students will then create a PowerPoint presentation of these images to go along with a presentation for the class. Students will follow a rubric on how to successfully deliver an oral presentation as well as to use visuals in their presentations.

Classroom Activities:

Students will read literature independently for homework and complete short comprehension class starters to prove their completion of assigned work. These class starters, taking the form of Do-Nows, will not only ensure completion of homework, but ignite student imaginations on the key topic of the day.

In addition, students will actively participate in group discussion/analysis of key points of the assigned literature and craft individually written constructed responses. Students will engage in class debates that build upon in-class writings that respond to prompts that will require students to develop opinions of the literary or visual work, and defend those opinions with examples from the text. These constructed responses will prepare students not only for PSSA examinations, but for SAT's and will develop students into budding academics with the power of clear, concise written expression.

Finally, students will work in groups to create presentations of artwork for the rest of the class. Assigned groups will be given selected pieces of visual art, either from the 19th or 20th centuries. Students will introduce the artist, the time period in which the art was created, and what underlying themes or meanings are present within the piece. These group presentations will develop students' abilities to work together, develop engaging presentations, and speak confidently in front of a group.

Annotated Bibliography:

Thoreau, Henry David. Walden. Concord: Beacon Press, 2004.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. Nature and Selected Essays. New York: Penguin Classics, 2003.

Whitman, Walt. The Complete Poems. New York: Penguin Classics, 2005.

Whitehead, Colson. The Colossus of New York. New York: Doubleday, 2003.

Capote, Truman. A House on the Heights. New York: Little Bookroom, 2002.

Agee, James. Brooklyn Is, New York: Fordham University Press, 1968.

Powers, Stephen. The Art of Getting Over. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999.

Golden, Jane. Philadelphia Murals and the Stories They Tell. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002.

Bissinger, Buzz. A Prayer for the City. New York: Random House, 1997.

Appendices:

Standards:

This unit will comply with the following Pennsylvania Academic Standards:

- 1.1 - Learning to read independently
- 1.2 - Reading, analyzing, and interpreting text.
- 1.3 - Reading, analyzing, and interpreting literature.
- 1.4 - Types of writing.
- 1.5 - Quality of writing.
- 1.6 - Speaking and listening.
- 1.7 - Characteristics and functions of English language.
- 1.8 - Research
- 1.9 - Technological literacy.

Links to Images:

Thomas Cole, "Life in the Woods" -

http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Thomas_Cole_Home_in_the_Woods.jpg

REVS street art -

http://3.bp.blogspot.com/_sCbbvCG1iag/SpQEdU7TjNI/AAAAAAAAACVc/1h5MAkbFvi0/s400/revs.jpg

http://1.bp.blogspot.com/_wkMSc5DjQ18/R6ZXDrLmnOI/AAAAAAAAAC48/0pejhC9WMZY/s320/Revs_diary_3.jpg

ESPO street art -

<http://www.robotswillkill.com/graffiti/09202006194723espo1.jpg>

<http://www.robotswillkill.com/graffiti/09202006202452espo3.jpg>

Mural Arts Program -

http://explorepahistory.com/cms/pbfiles/Project1/Scheme34/ExplorePAHistory-a0b2b8-a_349.jpg

