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Historic Pathways to the American Dream

SUGGESTED LEARNING STRATEGIES: Double-Entry Journal, Graphic Organizer, Discussion Groups

After reflecting on the idea of the American Dream and those who came from distant lands to find their own pathways to the dream, you will next look at some historical groups and the imprint they have left on the American Dream through their philosophical underpinnings.

You will research a particular historical group and its philosophy in order to teach fellow students about your findings. You will then, in turn, learn from your peers regarding other philosophies that have permeated America's diverse belief systems so that you can make connections to the texts and ideas in this unit.

- 1. Read your assigned pieces (which are primary sources) in order to research the philosophy that has been assigned to you. For each source you analyze, record two to three quotations that grab your attention. Using a three-column journal, document the source and the quote in the left column of the paper. In the middle column, write your response to the quote in connection to the philosophy your group is studying. In the right column, note any modern connections.
- 2. Locate an additional primary source (or excerpt) that adequately reflects the philosophy's identified characteristics. You might have already done this in your initial research. While this is the individual portion of the assignment, check in with your group members to make sure you have a diverse set of primary sources so when you return to your groups, you will have a blend of voices and experiences to discuss. You will want to include quotes and responses from this source in your journal.
- 3. Use your research and journal entries to answer the questions listed on the following pages for your assigned historical group. Through this process, you should have a firm understanding of the core tenets associated with your philosophy.
- **4.** Using your research, your understanding of the assigned texts, your responses to the questions, and your individual primary sources, create a concept map on chart paper or poster board. Use pictures, symbols, and words to represent the information learned regarding the specific philosophy. It might also be wise to include a copy or a created image of the additional primary source you located. Include characteristics of the philosophy, major writings, historical and modern connections, and key people. Present the map to the entire class. Each group is responsible for giving the class a comprehensive overview of its assigned philosophy.

Group 1: Puritans

1. Research to answer the following questions regarding the Puritans:

What is their view of God?

What are their values?

How do they define truth?

Do they have an optimistic or pessimistic view of life? Cite evidence.

What are their views of work and worldly success?

What is their view of society?

Who is their authority?

What is their view of education?

Do they view man as inherently good, evil, or somewhere in between? Cite evidence.

- 2. Read the excerpt from *The New England Primer*. Discuss with your group the purpose of reading according to this book. How widespread was reading meant to be? What is the image of God and religion presented by the primer?
- **3.** Read "The Trial of Martha Carrier." What are the charges against Martha Carrier? What is the evidence against her? Discuss how the Puritan sense of justice and evidence is on trial in this presentation of the Salem witch trials of 1692.
- **4.** Research Puritans and find at least one primary source which gives further insight into and specific examples of their philosophy and how it translated into how they lived.
- **5.** Look back at the anticipation guide you completed in Activity 1.2. Identify any Puritan philosophy embedded in the questions.
- **6.** How would the Puritans have defined the American Dream?



Group 2: Revolutionaries

Research to answer the following questions regarding the Revolutionaries:

What is their view of God?

What are their values?

How do they define truth?

Do they have an optimistic or pessimistic view of life? Cite evidence.

What are their views of work and worldly success?

What is their view of society?

Who is their authority?

What is their view of education?

Do they view man as inherently good, evil, or somewhere in between? Cite evidence.

On your own paper define the term *perfection*. Define *moral*. Find both terms in a dictionary and compare the definitions. Do you believe it is possible for a person to achieve moral perfection? Write a paragraph in which you take a pro or con position. Support your thesis with examples from personal observation, reading, or experience. Share your paragraph with your group and discuss.

Read "Moral Perfection" from *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. Discuss the qualities that Franklin chose in his autobiography and compare them to the details you included in your paragraph and to details in the paragraphs of your group members. Do you think trying to arrive at moral perfection is a worthwhile goal? If it is, what does it show about a person who would try to do this?

Create your own list of virtues for yourself. State how you will try to achieve each virtue.

Read the "Sayings of Poor Richard," from Poor Richard's Almanack by Benjamin Franklin. Discuss these sayings in your group. Choose at least five and rewrite them for a modern audience.

Research the Revolutionaries and find at least one primary source that provides additional insight into and specific examples of their philosophy. How did that philosophy translate into how they lived?

Look back on the anticipation guide you completed in Activity 1.2. Identify Revolutionary ideas embedded in the questions.

How would you define the American Dream according to the Revolutionaries? Explain.

Group 3: Transcendentalists

Research to answer the following questions regarding the Transcendentalists:

What is their view of God?

What are their values?

How do they define truth?

Do they have an optimistic or pessimistic view of life? Cite evidence.

What are their views of work and worldly success?

What is their view of society?

Who is their authority?

What is their view of education?

Do they view man as inherently good, evil, or somewhere in between? Cite evidence.

Read the excerpt from "Self-Reliance." Pick two or three passages from the selection that state a strong opinion. Write a personal response to the passages.

Read the excerpt from Walden. As you read, underline or highlight specific examples of Transcendentalist philosophy. Write the connection in the margin. In your group, summarize Thoreau's criticisms of society. Identify a facet of modern society that Thoreau would object to and explain why he would find it objectionable.

Research Transcendentalists and find at least one primary source that provides additional insight into and specific examples of their philosophy. How did that philosophy translate into how they lived?

Look back on the anticipation guide you completed in Activity 1.2. Identify Transcendentalist ideas embedded in the questions.

The New England Primer

For more than a hundred years, Puritan children received their first schooling from *The New* England Primer. Since the chief purpose of education in Puritan times was to enable people to read the Bible, it was natural that the alphabet rhymes chanted by the children should be based on Bible stories. The *Primer* is believed to have been in existence by 1688. Several versions have been printed, often with different verses for the letters.

A	In Adam's Fall, We sinned all.
В	Heaven to find; The Bible Mind.
С	Christ crucify'd For sinners dy'd.
D	The Deluge drown'd The Earth around.
Е	ELIJAH hid, By Ravens fed.
F	The judgment made <i>Felix</i> afraid.



G	As runs the Glass, Our Life doth pass.
Н	My Book and Heart Must never part.
J	Joв feels the Rod, Yet blesses God.
K	Proud Korah's troop Was swallowed up
L	Lot fled to <i>Zoar</i> , Saw fiery Shower On <i>Sodom</i> pour.
M	Moses was he Who <i>Israel's</i> Host Led thro' the Sea.

N	Noah did view The old world & new.
O	Young Obadias, David, Josias, All were pious.
P	PETER deny'd His Lord and cry'd.
Q	Queen Esther sues And saves the Jews.
R	Young pious Ruтн, Left all for Truth.
S	Young SAM'L dear, The Lord did fear.

T	Young TIMOTHY Learnt sin to fly.
V	Vashti for Pride Was set aside.
W	Whales in the Sea, God's Voice obey.
X	XERXES did die, And so must I.
Y	While youth do chear Death may be near.
Z	ZACCHEUS he Did climb the Tree Our Lord to see.

ACTIVITY 1.5 continued

Historic Pathways to the American Dream

My Notes

Essay

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cotton Mather (1663–1728) entered Harvard University at the age of 12 and became an influential Puritan minister who wrote over 400 works. Some of his works describe the Puritan beliefs in the spiritual world and in the work of the devil in promoting witchcraft. He wrote reports to the judges of the Salem witch trials and then a history of the trials.

TRIAL of MARTHA CARRIER

by Cotton Mather

I. Martha Carrier was indicted for bewitching certain persons, according to the form usual in such cases, pleading *not guilty* to her indictment¹. There were first brought in a considerable number of the bewitched persons, who not only made the Court sensible of any horrid witchcraft committed upon them, but also deposed² that it was Martha Carrier, or her shape, that grievously tormented them by biting, pricking, pinching, and choking of them. It was further deposed that while this Carrier was on her examination before the Magistrates³, the poor people were so tortured that every one expected their death upon the very spot, but that upon the binding of Carrier they were eased. Moreover, the look of Carrier then laid the afflicted people for dead, and her touch, if her eye at the same time were off them, raised them again: which things were also now seen upon her trial. And it was testified that upon the mention of some having their necks twisted almost round, by the shape of this Carrier, she replied, *It's no matter though their necks had been twisted quite off.*

II. Before the trial of this prisoner, several of her own children had frankly and fully confessed not only that they were witches themselves, but that this mother had made them so. This confession they made with great shows of repentance, and with much demonstration of truth. They related place,

¹ **indictment**: accusation or blame

³ magistrate: a judge

GRAMMAR USAGE

Sentences usually begin or end with the main idea. When the main idea or the independent clause begins a sentence, it is a cumulative sentence: "Martha Carrier was indicted for bewitching certain persons, according to the form usual in such cases, pleading not quilty to her indictment." When the independent clause comes at the end, the sentence is periodic. Thoreau writes, "For my part, I could easily do without the post office."

² **deposed**: testified under oath

time, occasion; they gave an account of journeys, meetings, and mischiefs by them performed and were very credible in what they said. Nevertheless, this evidence was not produced against the prisoner at the bar, inasmuch as there was other evidence enough to proceed upon.

III. Benjamin Abbot gave his testimony that last March was a twelvemonth, this Carrier was very angry with him, upon laying out some land near her husband's. Her expressions in this anger were that she would stick as close to Abbot as the bark stuck to the tree, and that he should repent of it afore seven years came to an end, so as Doctor Prescot should never cure him. These words were heard by others besides Abbot himself, who also heard her say she would hold his nose as close to the grindstone as ever it was held since his name was Abbot. Presently after this he was taken with a swelling in his foot, and then with a pain in his side, and exceedingly tormented. It bred into a sore, which was lanced by Doctor Prescot, and several gallons of corruption ran out of it. For six weeks it continued very bad, and then another sore bred in the groin, which was also lanced by Doctor Prescot. Another sore then bred in his groin, which was likewise cut and put him to very great misery. He was brought until death's door and so remained until Carrier was taken and carried away by the Constable, from which very day he began to mend and so grew better every day and is well ever since.

Sarah Abbot, his wife, also testified that her husband was not only all this while afflicted in his body, but also that strange, extraordinary, and unaccountable calamities⁵ befell his cattle, their death being such as they could guess at no natural reason for.

IV. Allin Toothaker testified that Richard, the son of Martha Carrier, having some difference with him, pulled him down by the hair of the head. When he rose again, he was going to strike at Richard Carrier, but fell down flat on his back to the ground and had not power to stir hand or foot until he told Carrier he yielded: and then he saw the shape of Martha Carrier go off his breast.

This Toothaker had received a wound in the wars and now testified that Martha Carrier told him he should never be cured. Just afore the apprehending of Carrier, he could thrust a knitting needle into his wound, four inches deep; but presently, after her being seized, he was thoroughly healed.

He further testified that when Carrier and he sometimes were at variance, she would clap her hands at him, and say he should get nothing by it; whereupon he several times lost his cattle by strange deaths, whereof no natural causes could be given.

⁴ lanced: opened or cut through

⁵ calamity: great misfortune or disaster

WORD CONNECTIONS

Malicious comes from the Latin root -mal- meaning "ill will" or "spite." This root is also in malign, malfunction, and malady.

My Notes

V. John Rogger also testified that upon the threatening words of this malicious Carrier, his cattle would be strangely bewitched, as was more particularly then described.

VI. Samuel Preston testified that about two years ago, having some difference with Martha Carrier, he lost a cow in a strange preternatural⁶, unusual matter: and about a month after this, the said Carrier, having again some difference with him, she told him he had lately lost a cow and it should not be long before he lost another, which accordingly came to pass: for he had a thriving and well-kept cow, which without any known cause quickly fell down and died.



⁶ **preternatural**: unnatural

Moral Perfection

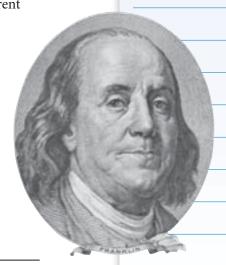
by Benjamin Franklin

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

One of seventeen children in a poor family, Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790) represents the classic American success story. Enormously talented and popular, Franklin succeeded as a scientist, statesman, inventor, publisher, and writer.

It was about this time I conceived the bold and arduous¹ project of arriving at moral perfection. I wished to live without committing any fault at any time; I would conquer all that either natural inclination, custom, or company might lead me into. As I knew, or thought I knew, what was right and wrong, I did not see why I might not always do the one and avoid the other. But I soon found I had undertaken a task of more difficulty than I had imagined. While my care was employed in guarding against one fault, I was often surprised by another, habit took the advantage of inattention; inclination was sometimes too strong for reason. I concluded, at length, that the mere speculative² conviction that it was our interest to be completely virtuous, was not sufficient to prevent our slipping, and that the contrary habits must be broken, and good ones acquired and established, before we can have any dependence on a steady, uniform rectitude³ of conduct. For this purpose I therefore contrived the following method.

In the various enumerations⁴ of the moral virtues I had met with in my reading, I found the catalog more or less numerous, as different writers included more or fewer ideas under the same name. Temperance, for example, was by some confined to eating and drinking, while by others it was extended to mean the moderating every other pleasure, appetite, inclination, or passion, bodily or mental, even to our avarice and ambition. I proposed to myself, for the sake of clearness, to use rather more names, with fewer ideas annexed to each, than a few names with more ideas; and I included under thirteen names of virtues all that at that time occurred to me as necessary or desirable, and annexed to each a short precept, which fully expressed the extent I gave to its meaning.



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My Notes

¹ arduous: requiring much energy; difficult

² speculative: based on conjecture or abstract reasoning

³ **rectitude**: moral virtue; rightness of principle

⁴ enumerations: lists, catalogues

My Notes



Order is a word that may have different meanings. It can mean a directive to do something or a sequence. Use connotation to determine Franklin's meaning for order.

These names of virtues, with their precepts, were:

1. Temperance

Eat not to dullness; drink not to elevation.

2. Silence

Speak not but what may benefit others or yourself; avoid trifling conversation.

3. Order

Let all your things have their places; let each part of your business have its time.

4. Resolution

Resolve to perform what you ought; perform without fail what you resolve.

5. Frugality

Make no expense but to do good to others or yourself; i.e., waste nothing.

6. Industry

Lose no time; be always employed in something useful; cut off all unnecessary actions.

7. Sincerity

Use no hurtful deceit; think innocently and justly, and, if you speak, speak accordingly.

8. Justice

Wrong none by doing injuries, or omitting the benefits that are your duty.

9. Moderation

Avoid extremes; forbear resenting injuries so much as you think they deserve.

10. Cleanliness

Tolerate no uncleanliness in body, clothes, or habitation.

11. Tranquility

Be not disturbed at trifles, or at accidents common or unavoidable.

12. Chastity

Rarely use venery but for health or offspring, never to dullness, weakness, or the injury of your own or another's peace or reputation.

13. Humility

Imitate Jesus and Socrates.7

⁷ **Socrates** (sok'rətēz'): 469 BC–399 BC, Greek philosopher who lived humbly

by Benjamin Franklin

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Benjamin Franklin published Poor Richard's Almanack which included advice and popular sayings, many of which are still common today. Franklin expanded and adapted sayings from common culture and other writers, but he also composed original sayings.

From Poor Richard's Almanack

Experience keeps a dear school, but a fool will learn in no other.

Hunger is the best pickle.

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Love your neighbor; yet don't pull down your hedge.

If a man empties his purse into his head, no man can take it away from him.

Three may keep a secret if two of them are dead.

A small leak will sink a great ship.

Silks and satins, scarlet and velvet, put out the kitchen fire.

If a man could have half his wishes, he would double his troubles.

A lie stands on one leg, truth on two.

He that is of the opinion that money will do everything may well be suspected of doing everything for money.

Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise.

God helps them that help themselves.

A word to the wise is enough.

Fish and visitors smell in three days.

My Notes

LITERARY TERMS

An aphorism is a short, clever saying about life.



My Notes

The used key is always bright.

Lost time is never found again.

The sleeping fox catches no poultry.

He that falls in love with himself has no rivals.

One today is worth two tomorrows.

Little strokes fell great oaks.

Since thou are not sure of a minute, throw not away an hour.

Beware of little expenses; a small leak will sink a great ship.

Fools make feasts and wise men eat them.

When the well's dry, they know the worth of water.

If you would know the worth of money, go and try to borrow some.

Make hay while the sun shines.

He that lieth down with dogs shall rise up with fleas.

'Tis hard for an empty bag to stand upright.

The worst wheel of the cart makes the most noise.

If you would have your business done, go; if not, send.



Self-Reliance

Excerpt, by Ralph Waldo Emerson

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Educated at Harvard University, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) founded a new American movement called Transcendentalism. Fueled by strong optimism and the belief in the importance of the individual, Emerson helped to inspire social reforms in education, slavery, and the rights of women and Native Americans.

There is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better, for worse, as his portion; that though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed¹ on that plot of ground which is given him to till. The power which resides in him is new in nature, and none but he knows what he can do, nor does he know until he has tried....

Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion.² It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs.

Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist. 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....

A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin³ of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. He may as well concern himself with his shadow on the wall. Speak what you think now in hard words, and tomorrow speak what tomorrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict everything you said today. "Ah, so you shall be sure to be misunderstood." Is it so bad, then, to be misunderstood? Pythogoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood....



Emerson's use of parallel infinitive phrases effectively creates a memorable line:

To be great is to be misunderstood.

Infinitive phrases may function as nouns, adjectives, or adverbs. In this sentence, Emerson uses infinitive phrases as the subject and as the predicate nominative in the sentence.

¹ **bestowed**: presented as a gift or an honor

² aversion: strong feeling of dislike

³ **hobgoblin**: something causing superstitious fear

ACTIVITY 1.5 continued

Historic Pathways to the American Dream

WORD CONNECTIONS

Analogies express relationships between meanings of words. When creating or analyzing analogies, pay attention to consistency in parts of speech. For example, if a set of words is noun: adjective, then the related set of words will be noun: adjective.

Determine whether this analogy is correct. Explain why or why not.

appoint : ambassador :: elect : President

My Notes

The civilized man has built a coach, but has lost the use of his feet. He is supported on crutches, but lacks so much support of muscle. He has got a fine Geneva watch, but he has lost the skill to tell the hour by the sun. A Greenwich nautical almanac he has, and so, being sure of the information when he wants it, the man in the street does not know a star in the sky. The solstice he does not observe; the equinox he knows as little; and the whole bright calendar of the year is without a dial in his mind. His notebooks impair his memory; his libraries overload his wit; the insurance office increases the number of accidents; and it may be a question whether machinery does not encumber⁴; whether we have not lost by refinement some energy, by a Christianity entrenched in establishments and forms some vigor of wild virtue. For every Stoic was a Stoic; but in Christendom, where is the Christian?



⁴ **encumber**: to impede or hinder

Where I lived and What I lived for

by Henry David Thoreau

From Walden

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Well-educated and brilliant, Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862) defied expectations to live an uncommon life of reflection and simplicity. As an experiment to reconnect with nature and discover the meaning of life, he lived for two years in a cabin in the woods of Concord, Massachusetts. He wrote about his experiences in *Walden*, one of the most well-known works in American literature.

When first I took up my abode in the woods, that is, began to spend my nights as well as days there, which by accident, was on Independence Day, or the Fourth of July, 1845, my house was not finished for winter, but was merely a defense against the rain, without plastering or chimney, the walls being of rough, weather-stained boards, with wide chinks, which made it cool at night. The upright white hewn studs and freshly planed door and window casings gave it a clean and airy look, especially in the morning, when its timbers were saturated with dew, so that I fancied that by noon some sweet gum would exude from them....

I was seated by the shore of a small pond, about a mile and a half south of the village of Concord and somewhat higher than it, in the midst of an extensive wood between that town and Lincoln,³ and about two miles south of our only field known to fame, Concord Battle Ground;⁴ but I was so low in the woods that the opposite shore, half a mile off, like the rest, covered with wood, was my most distant horizon....

Every morning was a cheerful invitation to make my life of equal simplicity, and I may say innocence, with Nature herself. I have been as sincere a worshiper of Aurora⁵ as the Greeks. I got up early and bathed in the pond; that was a religious exercise, and one of the best things which I did. They say that characters were engraven on the bathing tub of King Tching-thang to this effect: "Renew thyself completely each day; do it again, and again, and forever again." I can understand that. Morning brings back the heroic ages. I was as much affected by the faint hum of a mosquito making its invisible and unimaginable tour through my apartment at earliest dawn, when I was sitting





¹ **saturated**: soaked, full to capacity

² **exude**: to ooze or spread in all directions

³ **Lincoln**: Small town in Massachusetts between Concord and Sudbury, which is mentioned in the next paragraph.

⁴ Concord Battle Ground: A reference to Emerson's poem "Concord Hymn."

⁵ Aurora: Greek goddess of dawn

My Notes

WORD CONNECTIONS

Infinite comes from the Latin word meaning "unbounded" or "unlimited." The word is formed from the root -fini-, meaning "end" plus in, meaning "not." Other words based on -fini- include final, confine, definitive.

with door and windows open, as I could be by any trumpet that ever sang of fame. It was Homer's requiem⁶; itself an *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in the air, singing its own wrath and wanderings.7 There was something cosmical about it; a standing advertisement, till forbidden, of the everlasting vigor and fertility of the world. The morning, which is the most memorable season of the day, is the awakening hour. Then there is least somnolence8 in us; and for an hour, at least, some part of us awakes which slumbers all the rest of the day and night. After a partial cessation of his sensuous life, the soul of man, or its organs rather, are reinvigorated each day, and his Genius tries again what noble life it can make. All memorable events, I should say, transpire in morning time and in a morning atmosphere. The Vedas9 say, "All intelligences awake with the morning." Poetry and art, and the fairest and most memorable of the actions of men, date from such an hour. All poets and heroes, like Memnon, 10 are the children of Aurora, and emit their music at sunrise. To him whose elastic and vigorous thought keeps pace with the sun, the day is a perpetual morning. It matters not what the clocks say or the attitudes and labors of men. Morning is when I am awake and there is a dawn in me. Moral reform is the effort to throw off sleep. Why is it that men give so poor an account of their day if they have not been slumbering? They are not such poor calculators. If they had not been overcome with drowsiness, they would have performed something. The millions are awake enough for physical labor; but only one in a million is awake enough for effective intellectual exertion, only one in a hundred millions to a poetic or divine life. To be awake is to be alive. I have never yet met a man who was quite awake. How could I have looked him in the face?

We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep. I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor. It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue, and so to make a few objects beautiful; but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look, which morally we can do. To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts. Every man is tasked to make his life, even in its details, worthy of the contemplation of his most elevated and critical hour. If we refused, or rather used up, such paltry information as we get, the oracles would distinctly inform us how this might be done.

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live

⁶ requiem: a mass or a solemn ceremony for a deceased person

⁷ wrath and wanderings: Homer's *Iliad* concerns the "wrath" of Achilles, and the *Odyssey* tells of the "wanderings" of Odysseus

⁸ somnolence: sleepiness, drowsiness

⁹ Vedas: Collection of sacred Hindu literature

Memnon: In Greek mythology, the King of the Ethiopians whom Zeus made immortal. Memnon's statue at Thebes was supposed to emit musical notes at dawn.

so sturdily and Spartanlike¹¹ as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime,¹² to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. For most men, it appears to me, are in a strange uncertainty about it, whether it is of the devil or of God, and have *somewhat hastily* concluded that it is the chief end of man here to "glorify God and enjoy him forever."¹³

Still we live meanly, like ants; though the fable tells us that we were long ago changed into men; like pygmies we fight with cranes; it is error upon error, and clout upon clout, and our best virtue has for its occasion a superfluous and evitable¹⁴ wretchedness. Our life is frittered away by detail. An honest man has hardly need to count more than his ten fingers or in extreme cases he may add his ten toes, and lump the rest. Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumbnail. In the midst of this chopping sea of civilized life such are the clouds and storms and quicksands and thousand-and-one items to be allowed for, that a man has to live, if he would not founder and go to the bottom and not make his port at all, by dead reckoning,¹⁵ and he must be a great calculator indeed who succeeds. Simplify, simplify. Instead of three meals a day, if it be necessary eat but one; instead of a hundred dishes, five; and reduce other things in proportion. Our life is like a German Confederacy,16 made up of petty states, with its boundary forever fluctuating, so that even a German cannot tell you how it is bounded at any moment. The nation itself, with all its so-called internal improvements, which, by the way are all external and superficial, is just such an unwieldy and overgrown establishment, cluttered with furniture and tripped up by its own traps, ruined by luxury and heedless expense, by want of calculation and a worthy aim, as the million households in the land; and the only cure for it, as for them, is in a rigid economy, a stern and more than Spartan simplicity of life and elevation of purpose. It lives too fast. Men think that it is essential that the Nation have commerce, and export ice, and talk through a telegraph, and ride thirty miles an hour, without a doubt, whether they do or not; but whether we should live like baboons or like men, is a little uncertain. If we do not get out sleepers, ¹⁷ and forge rails and devote days and nights to the work, but go to tinkering upon our lives to improve them, who will build railroads? And if railroads are not built, how shall we get to heaven in season? But if we stay at home and mind our business, who will want railroads? We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us. Did you ever think what those sleepers are that underlie the railroad? Each

My Notes

GRAMMAR USAGE

Among the rhetorical devices Thoreau uses is **antithesis**—the use of contrasting balanced elements. Look at this example:

We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us.

The balanced sentence parts express contrasting ideas. The result is an effective and memorable statement.



¹¹ Spartanlike: like the inhabitants of the ancient Greek city-state of Sparta, who were famed for their courage, discipline, and frugality

¹² **sublime**: elevated or lofty in thought or language

¹³ "glorify...forever": from the Presbyterian book of beliefs, Westminister Shorter Catechism

¹⁴ **evitable**: avoidable

¹⁵ dead reckoning: nautical term for a method of positioning a ship without using the more reliable method of astronomical observation

¹⁶ German Confederacy: in 1815, the first ineffective alliance of German territories

¹⁷ **sleepers**: wooden beams to which railway tracks are riveted

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one is a man, an Irishman, or a Yankee man. The rails are laid on them, and they are covered with sand, and the cars run smoothly over them....

For my part, I could easily do without the post office. I think that there are very few important communications made through it. To speak critically, I never received more than one or two letters in my life — I wrote this some years ago — that were worth the postage. The penny post is, commonly, an institution through which you seriously offer a man that penny for his thoughts which is so often safely offered in jest. And I am sure that I never read any memorable news in the newspaper. If we read of one man robbed, or murdered, or killed by accident, or one house burned, or one vessel wrecked, or one steamboat blown up, or one cow run over on the Western Railroad, or one mad dog killed, or one lot of grasshoppers in the winter — we never need read of another. One is enough. If you are acquainted with the principle, what do you care for myriad instances and applications? To a philosopher all news as it is called, is gossip, and they who edit and read it are old women over their tea. Yet not a few are greedy after this gossip. There was such a rush, as I hear, the other day at one of the offices to learn the foreign news by the last arrival, that several large squares of plate glass belonging to the establishment were broken by the pressure — news which I seriously think a ready wit might write a twelvemonth, or twelve years, beforehand with sufficient accuracy....

Shams and delusions are esteemed for soundest truths, while reality is fabulous. If men would steadily observe realities only, and not allow themselves to be deluded, life, to compare it with such things as we know, would be like a fairy tale and the Arabian Nights' Entertainments. If we respected only what is inevitable and has a right to be, music and poetry would resound along the streets. When we are unhurried and wise, we perceive that only great and worthy things have any permanent and absolute existence, that petty fears and petty pleasures are but the shadow of the reality. This is always exhilarating and sublime. By closing the eyes and slumbering, and consenting to be deceived by shows, men establish and confirm their daily life of routine and habit everywhere, which still is built on purely illusory foundations. Children, who play life, discern its true law and relations more clearly than men, who fail to live it worthily, but who think that they are wiser by experience, that is, by failure....

Time is but the stream I go-a-fishing in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains. I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars. I cannot count one. I know not the first letter of the alphabet. I have always been regretting that I was not as wise as the day I was born. The intellect is a cleaver; it discerns and rifts its way into the secret of things. I do not wish to be any more busy with my hands than is necessary. My head is hands and feet. I feel all my best faculties concentrated in it. My instinct tells me that my head is an organ for burrowing, as some creatures use their snout and forepaws, and with it I would mine and burrow my way through these hills. I think that the richest vein is somewhere hereabouts; so by the divining rod and thin rising vapors I judge; and here I will begin to mine.