

Mr. Francis
American Studies

Synthesis Exercise†: the American Romantics

Prompt:

To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust. It is to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically. (Walden)

While Emerson's rhetoric must at times seem to focus exclusively on the theoretical, Thoreau suggests that his works demonstrate a practical effort to solve the problems of life.

For this exercise, you will write about one text by Henry David Thoreau: Walden (1854) or Resistance to Civil Government (1848, 1849). You will support, refute, or qualify the claim that Thoreau is—by his own definition—a philosopher.

Response: You will follow the procedure below twice in completing this assignment. The second time, you must use a different Emerson text from the first.

Choose a passage from one of the following works by Ralph Waldo Emerson: "Nature" (1836), "The American Scholar" (1836), "Divinity School Address" (1836), "Self-Reliance" (1841), "The Over-Soul" (1841), or "Circles" (1841). It should express a significant Transcendentalist notion. Reproduce the passage as a heading for the discussion to follow.

Following the passage, describe how the experiment conducted by Henry David Thoreau in Walden (1854) or Resistance to Civil Government (1848, 1849) attempts to demonstrate a practical application of the abstract notion discussed by Emerson. Use concrete examples and quoted text from Thoreau to support your analysis.

Formatting: Please use standard MLA-style. The exercise must be double-spaced, with one-inch margins all around. Please use a 12-point, Times New Roman font. Your final drafts must be uploaded at Turnitin.com. Length guideline: 2-3 pages. No coversheets.

† The College Board's synthesis question "asks students to synthesize information from a variety of sources to inform their own discussion of a topic" (collegeboard.com).