**Steinbeck Institute, 2016**

**Final Project: Steinbeck and Thoreau: extending *Walden* by way of *Sea of Cortez***

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**Texts:** Steinbeck, *Log From the Sea of Cortez*

Thoreau, *Walden: Or, A Life In The Woods*

Optional: Emerson, “Self-Reliance,”; Emerson, “Nature”; other essays by writers of place—Rachel Carson, Terry Tempest Williams, Edward Abbey, Annie Dillard, Wallace Stegner, Aldo Leopold, others

Steinbeck, *Cannery Row*

Optional: poems of place—Robinson Jeffers, Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, Jorie Graham, Gary Snyder, and others.

**Objectives**: Students will be able to see parallels in Thoreau’s opening of *Walden* and Steinbeck’s opening of *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*.

Students will be able to see how writers gather materials and language for a journey.

Students will be able to see how language, vocabulary, and metaphor work to structure a text.

Students will be able to see Thoreau as an influence on Steinbeck.

Students will write their own metaphor/vocabulary/observations.

Students will be able to see parallels in the Emerson/Thoreau friendship and influence to that of Ricketts/Steinbeck.

Students will be able to see the influence and connection from these authors to other environmental writers.

**Plans:**

1)Students should read Thoreau’s *Walden*; in particular, the opening, “Economy” section. They should annotate, paying particular attention to: how he uses the idea of economy, how the metaphor is structured, what he is gathering for his journey, and how he is using concrete detail to establish his endeavor.

Class discussion should focus on unpacking and understanding the ideas above.

2)At this point, one could read more of *Walden*—“Where I Lived and What I Lived For” and the “Conclusion,” in particular—and, in addition to other questions, trace the above ideas around language and metaphor.

3) This assumes prior knowledge of Ralph Waldo Emerson and his influence on Thoreau’s ideas. If students have not read Emerson’s essays—perhaps “Self-Reliance” and/or “Nature,” that may work well here. Then, have students trace connections of ideas, and look at the ways that Emerson as speaker and philosopher influence Thoreau as naturalist and writer. Be sure to discuss the importance of their friendship and coterie of the Transcendentalists.

4) Introduce the friendship of Steinbeck and Ricketts, in the context, too, of Joseph Campbell. It might be useful for students to read the beginning of *Cannery Row* here, for context.

5) Ask students to read Introduction and Chapter 1 from *The Log From the Sea of Cortez*. In class, discuss the text, looking closely at the opening paragraph. Ask students to consider: how are we creating a frame? What do we need this frame? What language is working to set the scene? What vocabulary is present? What do we know of our narrator? Goals for the journey?

You might also ask students to: a)pick a passage of particular interest and write about the language of it; b)write about what they might take on a journey; c)connect passages from this to Thoreau’s “Economy”

Work with students, then, to create connections between “Economy” and this Introduction. Students might work in groups— narrator/speaker/persona; vocabulary; physical structures and objects; images of the natural world; statements of ideas—to gather evidence and comparison between the two texts. Then, students could jigsaw into new groups to report on their small group findings.

6) Have students work, in groups, to map or chart these connections, using snippets and phrases from the text. Each group should have an idea (they can be those in part 5) or question they hope to answer in juxtaposing these two texts. Students should work through their ideas and connections, with examples, and present them to the class.

7) If there’s time, students could also read ch. 8-9 of *Log from the Sea of Cortez* in relation to Thoreau’s “Where I Lived and What I Lived For” and his essay, “Walking” ([http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1862/06/walking/304674/)](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1862/06/walking/304674/%29) and could build a similar series of connections, or build upon the framework created above.

8) Additionally, students could read “About Ed Ricketts” and discuss how Steinbeck portrays his friend. In particular, discussion might focus upon the ways that Steinbeck’s construction of a person is similar to, and different from, his construction of place. How do these ideas work together and how are they at odds?

9) OPTIONAL EXTENSIONS:

a) You could extend the unit to look at essays from other writers of place, as above, to compare and contrast how they detail the journey and the observing.

b) You could extend cross-genre to think about how poems, and the structure of poems, create a different expectation/interaction with place.

**Assessment Ideas**:

1)Students should write in response to one of the following prompts:

a)Describe your preparations for a journey. What will you bring? Why? Where are you going? As you explore, create a vocabulary/metaphor that will frame your journey. Please annotate/write an explanatory note as needed for clarity.

b)Create a portrait (in words) of someone whom you hold near. Consider how you frame and structure your narrative, and, be sure to consider what of your persona, as narrator, is included and excluded. Please annotate/write an explanatory note as needed for clarity.

c)Write a piece of place. Take take to observe, inventory, catalogue. Be specific in detail and consider your framing. Please annotate/write an explanatory note as needed for clarity.

2)Students could be expected to share/publish their work in some way, after peer review and revision.

3)You could ask students to map/illustrate a connection between their writing and that of Steinbeck or Thoreau. You could also give students passages from texts you’ve read and ask them to explore/analyze/find patterns in the language at work here.

4)Students could be expected to write a close reading essay, looking at sentences or a paragraph by each author—Thoreau and Steinbeck—in relation to each other.

**Additional Thoughts**:

While this could easily be a part of an American Literature course, it could also be in a course devoted to writing of place or environment; or, with a different angle, in a course on Environmental Studies. You could extend this across genre to poetry, to more contemporary authors, or, in asking students to read more of Thoreau and Steinbeck texts than the excerpts suggested above.