The Hudson School Painters: Attitudes of Nature as a Reflection of Art

Lesson Description
Many art historians have argued that the Hudson River helped give rise to a nascent environmental ethic in our nation during the early 1800's. Due to the works of mid-nineteenth century writers like Washington Irving, Henry David Thoreau, and painters such as Thomas Cole and Frederick Church, many Americans became familiar with the enchanting nature of the Hudson valley and the Northeast. It wasn't much later that individuals like John Muir, Gifford Pinchot, and Theodore Roosevelt began to articulate an environmental vision that embraced conservation and preservation. How much of an influence did the beauties of the Hudson have on these influential individuals who did much to stake out an American environmental movement during the early 1900's?

This lesson provides students with the opportunity to examine aesthetic perspectives of the Hudson River painters and writers, and to compare their visions of how humans could interact with the landscape to the current attitudes held by preservationists and conservationists. Students are divided in groups, and are provided with various scenes as portrayed by famous Hudson painters. Four distinct paintings are used in this exercise, each presenting a different aesthetic perspective of the river, varying from one of untamed wilderness, to one of a tamed and cultivated valley. All capture the beauty of the river, but illustrate different interpretations of how humans relate to it. In addition, the paintings give us an idea of how life on the Hudson has changed and how it has remained the same over the years.

Global Studies Concepts Introduced
• Cultural and Intellectual Life (examination of values, artifacts, and ways of thinking)
• Environment and Society (the natural elements and how elements are modified by human activities)

American History Concepts Involved
• Westward Expansion, conservation ethic, urbanization and industrialization
Process Skills Emphasized
• Interpretation, Discussion, Analysis, and Group Process Skills

Technology Used
• Color Copiers, Websites (Optional)

Learning Outcomes
Students will be able to:
• Analyze and reach conclusions as to how people thought about their surroundings and what their values were;
• Identify the various ways in which humans have made use of rivers as a resource;
• Compare and contrast various pieces of art, using assessment and other evaluative techniques;
• Analyze and reach conclusions as to how one writer thought about his surroundings and what his values were; and
• Analyze how an author uses words to capture the essence of the natural world in a story.

Time Requirement
• Students will need 40 minutes to divide into groups, analyze, and discuss the four paintings.
• Students will need an additional 40 minutes to share their conclusions and allow for teacher-directed discussion.

Total time needed: two class periods, or about 1 hour, twenty minutes.

Instructional Strategies
With each class session, students will be broken into groups of three to four. Each group will receive four different paintings that depict the Hudson River at various places and times. Students will be encouraged to really “read” into the paintings, to look for clues that indicate the objective of the painter, and hopefully, to gain a general outlook or value of that time period. Working with worksheets, the students will be guided through their examinations of these paintings, and as a result, will come to the discussion the next day with a set of ideas that will aid the discussion.
Questions

• Does each student have a responsibility in the group? Using the standard cooperative group work strategies, there should be a reader, writer, checker, and reporter.

• Are the students effectively passing around the paintings? Often, one student tends to hang on to one painting, making it difficult for others to properly address the questions.

• It is also important to move around the class, and to ask leading questions, in order to assist the students in the "reading" into the paintings.

Activity 1

Homework: First, students need to prepare for the observational lesson by completing a homework assignment involving the reading of an excerpt of Rip Van Winkle. Students are to write a 1/2 to one-page essay based on the Washington Irving reading: *The Sketch Book: A Posthumous Writing of Diedrich Knickerbocker* by Rip Van Winkle.

The teacher should first give a brief overview of Washington Irving, and describe how he was considered one of the premier American writers. It would also help to provide students with some of the story’s context. Second, students should underline all the descriptive words used to capture the essence of the natural world in the story (e.g., fair mountains). Using these words, students should be able to write a short essay on how Washington Irving perceived the natural world of the Hudson River valley, and write about the kind of "face" nature is given in the story.

Activity 2

To motivate students, the teacher should pose the following question: If you were to buy a landscape painting for your home, what kind of an image would you want to hang in your living room? Have students discuss various landscape features they would like to see in their home such as: mountains, meadows, forests, rivers, oceans, sunsets, storms, the inclusion or absence of humans to name a few examples. The teacher should then let the students be aware that landscape paintings have been an important part of world cultures for centuries (China, being an excellent case in point), and have helped historians better understand what areas used to look like, what species of plants and trees were present, and what effects humans have made on the landscape.

After a brief description of the upcoming activity by the teacher, students are divided into groups of 3-4. Each group is given color copies of the four
paintings and a worksheet. Students will have most of the period to look at the paintings and complete the worksheets.

At the end of the period, students should have completed their worksheets, and should be ready to discuss their findings the next day.

**Activity 3**

Students can refer to their homework and answer sheets in making contributions to the discussion.

**Target Question:**
- Why were Hudson River School paintings all the rage in the mid 1800's?

  **A. Motivator:**
  - What do you think is the central focus of the paintings? Why?

  Discussion should focus on various perspectives: realism, mood, colors, objects of interest, details, and of course, what landscape is the most beautiful.

  Questions to ask the students to get the discussion on its feet:
  - Which painting would best suit Rip Van Winkle? Why?
  - Which painting could you see yourself in? Why?
  - What kinds of features appear to be most beautiful to these artists?

  **B. Why were paintings like these so popular in the mid 1800's?**

  Discussion that follows looks into the growing industrialization / urbanization of the U.S. and the modern world in this era, and the growing distance people had from the natural environment.

  **C. What are the basic differences between paintings #1 and #3, from #2 and #4?**

  Students should see that the first pair represent wilderness, and the second pair represent a human influenced landscape. There should be some discussion as to what a wilderness is, and the types of features in paintings #1/3 that could be characterized as wilderness.

  **D. In the mid 1800's, which kind of landscape do you think most people favored, #1/3 or #2/4?**

  Students could discuss how many were active in taming landscapes in this period, as people were moving westward in the U.S., or colonizing other areas of the world. Tamed landscapes, it could be argued,
represented an ideal held by many looking to civilize the world and make it a hospitable place for growing populations.

E. **What would people see in landscapes #1/3 during the 1800’s, if those were the kind of landscapes that many were trying to eliminate during the 1800’s?**

   There is no pat answer to this question, but it is here that we may be witnessing a growing awareness of the value of wilderness and the increasing fascination with places that are truly wild and unpopulated.

F. **Summary question:**

   *Go back to the Target question.* The students could articulate how two paintings may represent an ideal, controlled landscape in which humans are interacting peacefully in a tranquil, cultivated environment. The other represents something entirely different and new: a wilderness aesthetic in which beauty is seen in the primeval, dark, rugged, and wild. If there is time, there could be follow up discussion as to how we would look at such paintings differently today, with the hindsight of overpopulation and destruction of wilderness.

**Assessment**

The teacher will assess the returned homework, worksheets, and the classroom discussion.

Options for assessing the classroom discussion:

- Use part of the class for open-ended discussion and use the other part of the class period to randomly pick 4-5 students to address some of the main questions and points of discussion for part of their class participation grade. Grading of individual students can be based on factors such as the student’s ability to use his or her knowledge to support his or her answers, as well as the quality of the student’s speaking skills.

- Give the students who performed strongest in the discussion bonus points (maybe 3-5 students). The bonus points could be added to the scores on the written work in this lesson or to the student’s class participation grade. The number of bonus points awarded could be based on factors such as the student’s ability to use their knowledge to support their answers as well as the quality of the student’s speaking skills.

- Give the students an essay assignment to either review the major concepts of the class discussion or to concentrate on writing an essay about one of the main questions addressed on the student discussion sheet.
• Use a combination of methods 1-3.
• No assessment.

Extension / Options
• Students could write a research paper on one of the persons mentioned in the lesson and the roles that they played in the conservation and preservation movements. Students could pick from the following list: Washington Irving, Henry David Thoreau, Thomas Cole, Frederick Church, John Muir, Gifford Pinchot, and Theodore Roosevelt.
• Students could compare and contrast additional paintings available on the websites listed in the Reference section.
• Students could write a report on the major points of the class discussion or one of the main questions addressed in the student handout.
• Students could do a research paper that describes the general lifestyles of the majority of Americans living in the Hudson Valley during the period of American history in which the four paintings were created.

Key Terms and People
Environmental ethic, environmental movement, conservation, preservation, Washington Irving, Henry David Thoreau, Thomas Cole, Frederick Church, Diedrich Knickerbocker, Rip Van Winkle.

Pre-Requisite Knowledge
• Location of the Hudson River Valley
• History of the Expansion of Civilization in New York State during the 1800’s
• Early History of the American Environmental Movement

Materials
• Eight sets of color copies of paintings
• Eight copies of Rip Van Winkle
• Worksheets to accompany the observation activity
• Optional: transparencies of the painting (if an overhead is available)
References

Books:


Excerpts from Rip Van Winkle are reproduced with permission from the New American Library.

Hudson River School Paintings 1-4 are reproduced with permission from Dover Publications.

Internet:

- General information on the Hudson River school
  - www.hermus.com/hudson.htm

- Sites that provide additional paintings from the Hudson River School that can be downloaded:
  - www.dfl.highlands.com/DFL_Painters/Index.html
  - www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint
  - www.artchives.com
  - www.butlerart.com/

Handouts

- W2-1 Homework Reading Assignment: Rip Van Winkle excerpt
- W2-2 Worksheet to go with the art observation work in class
- Worksheet W2-1
- The Sketch Book: A Posthumous Writing of Diedrich Knickerbocker
- Tale of Rip Van Winkle
The Hudson River as Reflected by Washington Irving

Introduction
A nation’s literature is believed to play a major role in the development of both the culture and general outlook of its people. Many historians have argued that the beauty of the Hudson River helped give rise to a nascent environmental ethic in the United States during the early 1800's. Washington Irving’s book, *The Sketch Book: A Posthumous Writing of Diedrich Knickerbocker by Rip Van Winkle*, takes place in the Hudson River Valley during the early years of European settlement. Irving’s vivid descriptions of the Hudson River region helped to paint a picture of nature in the American consciousness that had a great influence on the development of an American environmental ethic. You will also gain an understanding of how the Hudson has changed over the years.

Learning Outcomes
When you are finished you will be able to:

- Analyze and reach conclusions as to how one writer thought about his surroundings and what his values were;
- Analyze how an author uses words capture the essence of the natural world in a story;

Skills Required
- Interpretation and Analysis Skills

New Terms and People
Environmental ethic, Washington Irving, Henry David Thoreau, Thomas Cole, Diedrich Knickerbocker, Rip Van Winkle

Quest
Imagine that you are going to write an article for a newspaper about an area of natural wilderness that is endangered by land developers. How would you describe this area of land in your article? What types of words would you use? Why? Consider how these questions might form a connection between the writings of Washington Irving and the rise of the American environmental ethic.

Materials
- One copy of Rip Van Winkle
• W2-1 Homework Reading Assignment: Rip Van Winkle excerpt

Procedure

Homework
Prepare for the next class period by completing a homework assignment, which involves the reading of an excerpt of Rip Van Winkle. Write a 1/2 to one page essay based on the Washington Irving reading: *The Sketch Book: A Posthumous Writing of Diedrich Knickerbocker by Rip Van Winkle*. First, underline all the descriptive words used in the reading to capture the essence of the natural world in the story (e.g., fair mountains). Using these words, you should be able to write a short essay on how Washington Irving perceived the natural world of the Hudson River valley, and write about the kind of "face" nature is given in the story. In addition, explain how the Hudson River region was different in the time the reading took place.

Assessment
Your teacher will grade your homework.
W2-1  Homework Reading Assignment

Excerpts from Rip Van Winkle, by Washington Irving

Excerpt 1

Whoever has made a voyage up the Hudson must remember the Kaatskill Mountains. They are a dismembered branch of the great Appalachian family, and are seen away to the west of the river, swelling up to a noble height, and lording over the surrounding country. Every change of season, every change of weather, indeed, every hour of the day, produces some change in the magical hues and shapes of these mountains, and are regarded by all the good wives, far and near, as perfect barometers. When the weather is fair and settled, they are clothed in blue and purple, and print their bold outlines on the clear evening sky: but, sometimes, when the rest of the landscape is cloudless, they will gather a hood of gray vapors about their summits, which, in the last rays of the setting sun, will glow and light up like a crown of glory.

At the foot of these fair mountains, the voyager may have descried the light smoke curling up from a village, whose single-roofs gleam among the trees, just where the blue tints of the upland melt away into the fresh green of the nearer landscape. It is a little village, of great antiquity, having been founded by some of the Dutch colonists, in the early times of the province, just about the beginning of the government of the good Peter Stuyvesant, (may he rest in peace!) and there were some of the houses of the original settlers standing within a few years, but of small yellow brick bought from Holland, having latticed windows and gable fronts, surmounted with weather-cocks.
Excerpt 2

In a long ramble of the kind on a fine autumnal day, Rip had unconsciously scrambled to one of the highest parts of the Kaatskill mountains. He was after his favorite sport of squirrel shooting, and the still solitudes had echoed and re-echoed with the reports of his gun. Panting and fatigued, he threw himself, late in the afternoon, on a green knoll, covered with mountain herbage, crowned the brow of a precipice. From an opening between the trees he could overlook all the lower country for many a mile of rich woodland. He saw at a distance the lordly Hudson, far, far below him, moving on its silent but majestic course, with the reflection of a purple cloud, or the sail of a lagging bark, here and there sleeping on its glassy bottom, and at last losing itself in the blue highlands.

On the other side he looked down into a deep mountain glen, wild, lonely, and shagged, the bottom filled with fragments from the impending cliffs, and scarcely lighted by the reflected rays of the setting sun. For some time Rip lay musing on this scene; evening was gradually advancing; the mountains began to throw their long blue shadows over the valleys; he saw that it would be dark long before he could reach the village, and he heaved sigh when he thought of encountering the terrors of Dame Van Winkle.
Introduction
Many art historians have argued that the Hudson River helped give rise to a nascent environmental ethic in our nation during the early 1800's. Due to the works of mid-nineteenth century writers like Washington Irving, Henry David Thoreau and painters such as Thomas Cole and Frederick Church, many Americans became familiar with the enchanting nature of the Hudson valley and the northeast. It wasn't much later, that individuals like John Muir, Gifford Pinchot, and Theodore Roosevelt began to articulate an environmental vision that embraced conservation and preservation. How much of an influence did the beauties of the Hudson have on these influential individuals who did much to stake out an American environmental movement during the early 1900's?

Learning Outcomes
When you are finished you will be able to:

• Analyze and reach conclusions as to how people thought about their surroundings and what their values were
• Compare your ideas about the Hudson with those of the painters
• Identify the various ways in which humans have made use of rivers as a resource
• Compare and contrast various pieces of art, using assessment and other evaluative techniques

Skills Required
• Interpretation, Analysis, and Group Process Skills

New Terms and People
Environmental ethic, environmental movement, conservation, preservation, Washington Irving, Henry David Thoreau, Thomas Cole, Frederick Church, Diedrich Knickerbocker, Rip Van Winkle

Quest
All art is a form of expression in which the artist attempts to transmit some type of message or messages to the observer. What types of messages do you think each of the painters in the lesson was trying to convey?
Materials
• One set of color copies of paintings
• W2-2 Worksheet to go with the art observation work in class
• Worksheet W2-1

Instructional Strategies
Divide up into groups of 3 to 4 students. Each group will receive four different paintings that depict the Hudson River at various places and times. Assign a job to each member of your group. There should be a reader, writer, checker, and reporter. Look for clues in each painting that indicate the objective of the painter, and hopefully, a general outlook or value of that time period. Don’t be afraid to really “read” into the paintings. Answer the questions on the worksheets. Make a copy of your answers. Your answers will help you in a discussion activity during next class period.

Assessment
Your teacher will grade your worksheets.
The Hudson River as Reflected by Washington Irving

Worksheet  W2-2:  Analysis of Hudson River School Paintings

Student Names

_________________________  ________________________
_________________________  ________________________

In the following exercise, you will analyze the following four paintings, all representatives of an American artistic movement that existed from about 1825 to 1875. This movement, often called the Hudson River School, consisted of a group of artists that looked to the natural landscape for creative inspiration. These painters often made use of the Hudson River for their canvasses. Due to the recently completed railways up the valley, the artists took advantage of this easy access, often choosing the Hudson Highlands or the Catskills as destinations. The following paintings are from these two areas, and represent different viewpoints of the river.

Painting #1:
  Frederic Edwin Church: Twilight in the Wilderness (1860)

Painting #2:
  John Frederick Kensett: View on the Hudson (1865)

Painting #3:
  Thomas Cole: Sunny Morning on the Hudson River (1827)

Painting #4:
  Thomas Chambers: View from West Point (1860)
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Student Names _________________________  _______________________
_________________________ _______________________

Additional Extension Activities

1. Your group has been asked to make the cover for a new edition of the story Rip Van Winkle. You are going to select one of the four paintings to grace the cover. Which illustration would you select? Why?

2. Which one of the four paintings portrays the wildest looking landscape? How so? What features are used to accentuate the wilderness feel of the painting?
3. Which one of the paintings portrays the most civilized landscape? How so? What features are used to make the landscape more comforting and habitable?

4. Identify the two paintings that have a human presence in them. Is the landscape and river in these two paintings any different than what is seen in the paintings absent of a human presence?

5. To these painters, what is a civilized landscape supposed to be like?
6. To these painters, what is a wilderness landscape supposed to be like?

7. Which one of the following paintings would members of your group most prefer to visit? Why?

8. How has life on the Hudson changed since the paintings were created?
The Hudson School Painters: Attitudes of Nature as a Reflection of Art

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Frederic Edwin Church: Twilight in the Wilderness (1860)
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Painting #3:
Thomas Cole: Sunny Morning on the Hudson River (1827)
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Painting #4
Thomas Chambers: View from West Point (1860)
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• Analyze and reach conclusions as to how people thought about their surroundings and what their values were
• Identify the various ways in which humans have made use of rivers as a resource
• Compare and contrast various pieces of art, using assessment and other evaluative techniques

Skills Required
• Interpretation, Discussion, Analysis, and Group Process Skills

New Terms and People
Environmental ethic, environmental movement, conservation, preservation, Washington Irving, Henry David Thoreau Thomas Cole, Frederick Church, Diedrich Knickerbocker, Rip Van Winkle

Quest
Consider how the works of the Hudson River artists might have had an impact on the evolution of American culture and values. How might this have occurred?
Materials
• One set of color copies of paintings
• One copy of Rip Van Winkle
• W2-1 Homework Reading Assignment: Rip Van Winkle excerpt
• Your completed W2-2 Worksheet to go with the art observation work in class

Procedure

Activity 3
We will have a discussion regarding the paintings that you worked with during the last class period. Divide into the same groups that you had during last class period. You may refer to your homework and answer sheets in making contributions to the discussion.

The following list of questions will be covered during the class discussion. Read through the questions and think about how you might want to answer them.

1. Why were Hudson River School paintings all the rage in the mid 1800's?
2. Which painting would best suit Rip Van Winkle? Why?
3. Which painting could you see yourself in? Why?
4. What do you think is the central focus of the paintings? Why?
5. What kinds of features appear to be most beautiful to these artists?
6. Why were paintings like these so popular in the mid 1800's?
7. What are the basic difference between paintings #1 and #3, from #2 and #4?
8. In the mid 1800's, which kind of landscape do you think most people favored, #1/3 or #2/4?
9. What would people see in landscapes #1/3 during the 1800's, if those were the kind of landscapes that many were trying to eliminate during the 1800's?

Assessment
Your teacher will inform you on how you will be assessed.