

A Walk in the Woods* and *Moby Dick
Summer Assignment
AP Language and Composition

The instructors of AP Language have selected a fiction and a nonfiction piece that address important universal themes on self-discovery and the quest. You will be required to engage in a **close reading** of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* and Bill Bryson's *A Walk in the Woods*. As part of your assessment, you will need to consider these texts separately and comparatively.

- For both *Moby Dick* and *A Walk in the Woods*, you will begin considering rhetorical strategies and important resources of language for nonfiction writing, such as: connotation, metaphor, irony, syntax, diction, and tone, all of which illuminate the author's style and purpose. You may be wondering, "What exactly is close reading?" Well, it involves getting to know the text through annotation. For those of you who are unfamiliar with the process, **annotating involves metacognition, or consciously thinking about thinking. You will be reading contemplatively and purposefully, as a scholar, with a pen in hand, marking passages or making notations about whatever you feel is striking or important.** Most importantly, annotation facilitates understanding, but it is also a practical referencing tool. When you return in the fall and need to refresh your memory to write an essay or to prepare for a Socratic seminar, your notations will prove invaluable.

As a brief introductory activity on the annotation process, read the following excerpt from Henry David Thoreau's essay, "Walking" and consider why the highlighted words are important in relation to theme, style and purpose. Note: This piece was selected based upon its striking connection (though written over 150 years earlier) to Bryson's work, to the belief that man ultimately thrives in nature.

Living much out of doors, in the sun and wind, will no doubt produce a certain roughness of character—will cause a thicker cuticle to grow over some of the finer qualities of our nature, as on the face and hands, or as severe manual labor robs the hands of some of their delicacy of touch. So staying in the house, on the other hand, may produce a softness and smoothness, not to say thinness of skin, accompanied by an increased sensibility to certain impressions. Perhaps we should be more susceptible to some influences important to our intellectual and moral growth, if the sun had shone and the wind blown on us a little less; and no doubt it is a nice matter to proportion rightly the thick and thin skin. But methinks that is a scurf that will fall off fast enough—that the natural remedy is to be found in the proportion which the night bears to the day, the winter to the summer, thought to experience. There will be so much the more air and sunshine in our thoughts. The callous palms of the laborer are conversant with finer tissues of self-respect and heroism, whose touch thrills the heart, than the languid fingers of idleness. That is mere sentimentality that lies abed by day and thinks itself white, far from the tan and callus of experience.

Explanations for some of the annotations:

1. "thicker cuticle"—Thoreau begins with this metaphor and continues to weave this thread throughout the paragraph, building upon it with detail and imagery. A cuticle is an outer layer or a shell, and the author is suggesting, by depicting the theme of initiation and self-discovery, that one will essentially become tougher as a result of experiencing the outdoors.

2. “robs”—Diction, connotation, and irony are important here. The word “robs” bears a negative connotation, suggesting violence and the likely possibility that gain accompanies loss. Ironically, Thoreau implies that the robbing of the hands of the “delicacy” of youth is actually a positive, a gateway to self-discovery, because it leaves one open to more meaningful experiences, rather than “sensibility to certain impressions.”
3. “night bears to day, the winter to the summer, thought to experience”—Thoreau uses syntax parallel to create an analogy to show the delicate balance between intellectual growth and rugged experience. Ironically, the fruits of one’s labor doesn’t involve labor exclusively, but employing the senses as one exerts himself physically. Syntax parallel is used to emphasize the theme of civilization vs. wilderness.

In this excerpt by Thoreau, passages have been marked that reveal the author’s use of important resources of language, such as: connotation, metaphor, irony, syntax, diction, and tone, to convey an important theme about man’s growth through his experiences in nature. Man’s desire to thrive in the ruggedness of nature is age-old. From an American scope, you will find this idea in the classic works of Henry David Thoreau and Herman Melville, as well as in newer works by contemporary writers, such as Bill Bryson.

Because annotation is subjective, when you return in the fall, you may find that your peers have marked some words or entire passages that you did not. That’s okay. You will likely find that you are noting similar overarching ideas.

For this part of the assignment, you are required to consider the six themes listed below that are depicted in Bryson’s piece. You are to draw a bridge between theme, style, and purpose by providing two passages for each theme and by briefly discussing those passages (in two or three sentences), explaining how the author uses connotation, metaphor, irony, syntax, diction, or tone to create a distinctive style and/or to reflect social commentary. Your responses should be typed, identifying the theme(s) you have selected with a concise explanation (see examples above with the Thoreau passage).

- *The Frontier*
- *Fear/Moral Struggle*
- *The American Dream/Nightmare*
- *Individualism*
- *The Journey*
- *Initiation/Self-discovery*
- *Conformity vs. Rebellion*
- *The Search for a Voice*

AP Language will focus heavily on nonfiction works by American authors, but we will also study several classic fiction pieces, such as *Moby Dick*, using rhetorical strategies as our guide.

Read and annotate the scholarly article by E.L. Doctorow, and use it to inform your annotations of *Moby Dick*. Focus your reading on how Melville uses poetic devices, particularly the metaphor, to evoke a tone of uncertainty, to add irony, and to reflect commentary about man’s struggle against forces more powerful than himself. Consider Melville’s style as compared to Bryson’s. Do you note any overlapping techniques or similarities in style that relate to purpose? Both works are rooted in the authors’

personal knowledge and experience, but where do you think the clear delineation between the fictional and nonfictional narrative occurs?

You can find Doctorow's "Composing Moby-Dick: What Might Have Happened" (*The Kenyon Review*) on the web: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4338613>

Read and annotate the article by James Wood while considering the three assertions outlined in this packet.

Finally, read the Nathaniel Philbrick interview and come ready to discuss on the first day of class.

The AP Language instructors encourage you to be self-directed, but, of course, you are welcome to email Mrs. Williams, Mrs. Boswell, or Mr. Piersol if you have questions.