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**Taming the Frontier**

**Writer:** Zoe Voigt, Humanities Teacher

**Grade Level:** 9–12

**Related Big Picture Concepts:** Place, Perspective, Environment

**Subject Areas:** American History, Social Studies, Visual Arts

**Essential Question:** How were the American landscape and Native Americans depicted at the end of westward expansion?

**Abstract:** Through an analysis of American frontier life, students will examine the relationship between humans and the wilderness, and how Native Americans were portrayed by artists during the 19th century. Students will discuss, write, and draw their interpretations of salient issues facing frontier Americans.

**Duration:** 2-4 class periods

**Focus Works of Art:**

[](http://68.169.57.134/sites/default/files/COLE,%20Romantic%20Landscape,%2052_9_7.jpg)

Thomas Cole (American, born Great Britain 1801-1848)

***Romantic Landscape,*** circa 1826

Oil on wood panel

16 1/16 x 21 15/16 in. (40.8 x 55.8 cm)

[www.artnc.org/node/292](http://www.artnc.org/node/292)

[](http://68.169.57.134/sites/default/files/CROPSEY,%20Eagle%20Cliff,%20Franconia%20Notch,%20New%20Hampshire,%2052_9_9.jpg)

Jasper Francis Cropsey (American, 1823-1900)

***Eagle Cliff, Franconia Notch, New Hampshire*, 1858**

Oil on canvas, mounted on panel

23 15/16 x 38 7/8 in. (60.8 x 98.8 cm)  
[www.artnc.org/node/294](http://www.artnc.org/node/294)

**North Carolina Standards Correlations:**

Visual Arts: I.V.1, I.V.2, I.V.3, I.CX.1, I.CX.2, I.CR.1, P.V.1, P.V.2, P.V.2, P.CX.1, P.CR.1, A.V.1, A.CX.1, A.CX.2, A.CR.1

United States History: USH.H.1.2, USH.H.1.4

**Student Learning Objectives:**

* Students will investigate symbolism related to the American frontier through an analysis of visual sources and a historical passage.
* Students will interpret composition and symbolism in the visual medium of American painting and in the written words of Frederick Jackson Turner.

**Activities:**

1. Have the class look closely at *Romantic Landscape* and brainstorm a list of adjectives to describe the painting. List these on the board. Ask them:

*What details or qualities of the painting made you think of that particular adjective?*

*Where are the people in this picture? Who might they be?*

*Why don't the people have a larger presence in this painting?*

*What might Thomas Cole be suggesting by limiting the portrayal of people in the painting?  
What time period in American history is the artist portraying? Before or after European colonization? Why?*

*What kinds of symbols has the artist included and why? (dead tree in the foreground, the mountains, the threatening sky)*

1. Provide a brief overview explaining the major points in [Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis](http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/TURNER/) (under Chapter I.) Use the material in the biographical sketch ["Frederick Jackson Turner; 1861-1932)"](http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/people/s_z/turner.htm" \t "_blank) to prepare.
2. Assign each student to read the excerpt from Frederick Jackson Turner's essay ["The Significance of the Frontier in American History."](http://www.learner.org/channel/workshops/primarysources/corporations/docs/turner.html" \t "_blank)  
   Hold a class discussion focused on the following questions:
   * *What does Frederick Jackson Turner's essay assert happened to both the wilderness and the Native American in Cole's painting?*
   * *Why does Turner believe this happened?*
   * *What is the result?*
3. Assign each student to draw a picture depicting one scene as he or she envisions it, based on information contained in the excerpt from Frederick Jackson Turner's essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." The students should write a caption to describe the event(s) in the picture. Have several students share their work and explain their compositional choices.
4. Have the students examine *Eagle Cliff, Franconia Notch, New Hampshire*.

Assign each student to write an essay responding to the following prompt:   
Assess Jasper Cropsey and Frederick Jackson Turner’s visions for the role of Native Americans in the development of the United States. Consider why Turner’s understanding of the Native Americans’ role in American history might be problematic.

**Assessments:**

* The teacher will use the list of adjectives, class discussion, and essay to assess the students’ analysis of the composition of the painting and their understanding of the symbolism of the American frontier.
* The class discussion, drawing, and essay may be used to assess the students’ understanding of Frederick Jackson Turner’s essay and the symbolism of the American frontier.
* The teacher will use the essay to assess the students’ ability to construct an analysis using historical evidence to support arguments.

**Resources:**

Vocabulary:

Americanization

biographical

Cherokee

foreground

frontier

glaciations

Iroquois

moccasin

moraines

palisade

symbolism

tabula rasa

Materials: paper and markers, pencils, or paints.

Links:

A biographical sketch of Frederick Jackson Turner titled ["Frederick Jackson Turner: (1861-1932)"](http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/people/s_z/turner.htm" \t "_blank)

<http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/people/s_z/turner.htm>

Excerpt of Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 thesis ["The Significance of the Frontier in American History"](http://www.learner.org/channel/workshops/primarysources/corporations/docs/turner.html" \t "_blank)

<http://www.learner.org/workshops/primarysources/corporations/docs/turner.html>

Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 essay ["The Significance of the Frontier in American History"](http://xroads.virginia.edu/%7EHYPER/TURNER/" \t "_blank) (in Chapter I.)

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