

Common Core Unit:

A Close Reading of Learned Hand's "I am an American Day Address" (1944)

Unit Summary

This unit has been developed to guide students and instructors in a close reading of Learned Hand's "I am an American Day Address" from Appendix B of the Common Core Standards. The activities and actions described below follow a carefully developed set of steps that assist students in increasing their familiarity and understanding of Hand's speech through a series of text-dependent tasks and questions that ultimately develop college and career ready skills identified in the Common Core standards. This unit is recommended as an activity for a "Great Conversation" Module and can be taught in two days of study and reflection on the part of students and their teachers. A third day or more could be added if the time is needed or extension activities are desired.

Day One: Faith in Freedom

Activities

- Students silently read Hand's address and then the teacher reads the text aloud while students follow along. Teachers should reverse the order here if they feel their students need the benefit of hearing the text *while following along* first.
- Students answer guiding questions and perform activities in order to grasp the first paragraph of Hand's Address.

Standards Covered

- The following CCS standards are the focus of Day One: RI.11-12.1-6 & 8-9; W.11-12.1 & 4.

Homework

- Students create an outline of the first paragraph of Hand's Address and reread the second paragraph.

Day Two: The Spirit of Liberty

Activities

- Students answer guiding questions and perform activities regarding the second paragraph of Hand's address.

Standards Covered

- The following CCS standards are the focus of Day Two: RI.11-12.1-6 & 8-9.

Rationale for Day One and Day Two Activities

Learned Hand's text provides students with an excellent opportunity to closely read a text and unpack its rich meaning. The process articulated below leads students through a careful analysis of the address while fostering critical thinking and independence. The questions asked and activities performed task students with analyzing Hand's meaning while uncovering the structure of his address.

Cumulative Assessment

Students write a comparative essay using Hand's address and another text.

Appendix A: Norman Rockwell's "Four Freedoms"

The Text: Hand, Learned. "I am an American Day Address" (1944)

We have gathered here to affirm a faith, a faith in a common purpose, a common conviction, a common devotion. Some of us have chosen America as the land of our adoption; the rest have come from those who did the same. For this reason we have some right to consider ourselves a picked group, a group of those who had the courage to break from the past and brave the dangers and the loneliness of a strange land. What was the object that nerved us, or those who went before us, to this choice? We sought liberty; freedom from oppression, freedom from wants, freedom to be ourselves. This we then sought; this we now believe that we are by way of winning. What do we mean when we say that first of all we seek liberty? I often wonder whether we do not rest our hopes too much upon constitutions, upon laws and upon courts. These are false hopes; believe me, these are false hopes. Liberty lies in the hearts of men and women; when it dies there, no constitution, no law, no court can even do much to help it. While it lies there it needs no constitution, no law, no court to save it. And what is this liberty which must lie in the hearts of men and women? It is not the ruthless, the unbridled will; it is not freedom to do as one likes. That is the denial of liberty, and leads straight to its overthrow. A society in which men recognize no check upon their freedom soon becomes a society where freedom is the possession of only a savage few; as we have learned to our sorrow.

*Show
strength
or
courage*

*Unrestr
ained*

What then is the spirit of liberty? I cannot define it; I can only tell you my own faith. The spirit of liberty is the spirit which is not too sure that it is right; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which seeks to understand the mind of other men and women; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which weighs their interests alongside its own without bias; the spirit of liberty remembers that not even a sparrow falls to earth unheeded; the spirit of liberty is the spirit of Him who, near two thousand years ago, taught mankind that lesson it has never learned but never quite forgotten; that there may be a kingdom where the least shall be heard and considered side by side with the greatest. And now in that spirit, that spirit of an America which has never been, and which may never be; nay, which never will be except as the conscience and courage of Americans create it; yet in the spirit of that America which lies hidden in some form in the aspirations of us all; in the spirit of that America for which our young men are at this moment fighting and dying; in that spirit of liberty and of America I ask you to rise and with me pledge our faith in the glorious destiny of our beloved country.

*To not
pay
attention
to*

Day One: Faith in Freedom

Summary of Activities: As noted in the introduction, these activities could take longer than one day.

- Teacher introduces the text with minimal commentary and students read it independently.
- Teacher or a skillful reader then reads the passage out loud to the class as students follow along. The order, here, can reversed if teachers feel students would benefit more from hearing the text read first.
- Teacher guides the students through a series of text-dependent questions and activities that analyze Hand’s argument in the opening paragraph (which has been divided into four sections).

Passage under Discussion	Guiding Questions and Activities/Instructional Commentary	
<p>First ¶, First Section</p> <p>We have gathered here to affirm a faith, a faith in a common purpose, a common conviction, a common devotion. Some of us have chosen America as the land of our adoption; the rest have come from those who did the same. For this reason we have some right to consider ourselves a picked group, a group of those who had the courage to break from the past and brave the dangers and the loneliness of a strange land. What was the object that <u>nerved</u> us, or those who went before us, to this choice?</p>	<p><i>Show strength or courage</i></p>	<p>Other than giving the brief definitions offered to words students would likely not be able to define from context (underlined in the text), avoid giving any background context or instructional guidance at the outset of the lesson.</p> <p>Asking students to listen while following along to “I am an American Day Address” exposes students a second time to the content and structure of his argument before they begin their close reading of the text. At this point, it should be pointed out to students that texts of this complexity cannot be understood in one reading and require multiple readings as well as rereading portions of the text to address questions. The teacher should not attempt to “deliver” Hand’s address, but rather read aloud slowly and methodically. This will support weaker readers and help all students to follow the shape of Hand’s argument.</p> <p>(1) Hand uses his opening sentence to emphasize the importance of the event. How does his word choice in the first sentence reflect this?</p> <p>The teacher begins questioning the class regarding their comprehension of the text with the aim of confirming and deepening their understanding of Hand’s argument. This first text-dependent question asks students to look at the first sentence and locate critical words that create a sense of gravity and occasion. “Affirm,” “faith,” “purpose,” “conviction,” and “devotion” all stress the quasi-religious nature of the event and the importance Hand attaches to what they are about to do.</p>

Passage under Discussion	Guiding Questions and Activities/Instructional Commentary
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First ¶, First Section

We have gathered here to affirm a faith, a faith in a common purpose, a common conviction, a common devotion. Some of us have chosen America as the land of our adoption; the rest have come from those who did the same. For this reason we have some right to consider ourselves a picked group, a group of those who had the courage to break from the past and brave the dangers and the loneliness of a strange land. What was the object that nerved us, or those who went before us, to this choice?

Show
strength
or
courage

(1a) Hand creates a growing sense of the importance of the occasion by asserting that those gathered have a common “purpose,” then a shared “conviction,” and finally a joint “devotion.” What do these words mean, and how does the progression of them emphasize the gravity of the event?

This is an alternative question that focuses on three specific words and the progression reflected in them from sharing a common goal to sharing a mutual belief in a transcendent principle.

(2) How does Hand create a sense of camaraderie and shared experience in the second sentence?

Hand does this in two ways: first, by emphasizing that everyone he is speaking to is an immigrant or the descendant of an immigrant, and second, by stressing that this was a choice.

(3) What qualities make the “picked group” so special in Hand’s eyes?

It is important to have students capture the sense of Hand’s third sentence, as it sets up the context for understanding “nerved” in the fourth sentence; specifically, he praises those gathered as courageous to brave the solitude of a strange and unfamiliar place.

(3a) What qualities does Hand imply the “picked group” possesses when he says they “had the courage to break from the past”?

This alternative brings inference to the forefront of the question and relies on students stitching together the sentences so far to arrive at the insight that the past experience was both comforting and bred complacency, and that they are better for having “braved” the solitude that comes with being an immigrant.

(4) Put Hand’s fourth and final sentence into your own words.

The final sentence of this section gets to the heart of the matter by posing the question of what drove men to choose to come to America—faith in what principle was the cause for immigrating to a “strange land”? Students need to be able to render this question into their own words without robbing it of its depth.

Hand’s use of “object” might throw students off. If this is the case, teachers could note how Hand is using this word somewhat differently than they would usually see it.

Passage under Discussion	Guiding Questions and Activities/Instructional Commentary
<p>First ¶, Second Section</p> <p>We sought liberty; freedom from oppression, freedom from want, freedom to be ourselves. This we then sought; this we now believe that we are by way of winning.</p>	<p>(5) What is Hand’s initial answer to the question he posed at the end of section one (what motivated immigrants to come to America)? Hand’s initial answer is “liberty” which he subdivides into three sub-categories: freedom from oppression, freedom from want, freedom to be ourselves.</p> <p>(5a) Hand says that immigrants “sought liberty” in coming to this country. How do the kinds of freedoms he mentions compare to another contemporary’s conception of freedom—Norman Rockwell’s pictorial representation of FDR’s “Four Freedoms”? See Appendix A for images. This activity is useful if students are a little stumped by what Hand means when he says liberty is “freedom to be ourselves”, as FDR unpacks that to mean freedom of speech and freedom of worship—two values that Hand’s address implicitly relies on. There are also interesting correspondences (“freedom from want”) and slight discrepancies (“freedom from oppression” versus “freedom from fear”) in the remaining liberties Hand and FDR cite.</p> <p>Inferring what might have prompted both texts to include “freedom from want” (i.e. The Great Depression) and the broader historical context of Hand’s speech (delivered at the height of WWII; “our young men are at this moment fighting and dying” in the second paragraph) may prove fruitful at this juncture (especially if a student asks what Hand means when he says “by way of winning”).</p>

Passage under Discussion	Guiding Questions and Activities/Instructional Commentary
<p>First ¶, Third Section</p> <p>What do we mean when we say that first of all we seek liberty? I often wonder whether we do not rest our hopes too much upon constitutions, upon laws and upon courts. These are false hopes; believe me, these are false hopes. Liberty lies in the hearts of men and women; when it dies there, no constitution, no law, no court can even do much to help it. While it lies there it needs no constitution, no law, no court to save it.</p> <p>First ¶, Fourth Section</p> <p>And what is this liberty which must lie in the hearts of men and women? It is not the ruthless, the <u>unbridled</u> will; it is not freedom to do as one likes. That is the denial of liberty, and leads straight to its overthrow. A society in which men recognize no check upon their freedom soon becomes a society where freedom is the possession of only a savage few; as we have learned to our sorrow.</p>	<p>(6) Does Hand think we ought to reject seeking liberty through the legal system? Write a two sentence explanation that captures the essence of Hand's viewpoint.</p> <p>This section of the text is relatively straightforward and may not require a discussion before students write their answers. Once students complete their sentences, teachers should “pair, then square” students into groups so that they can hear different approaches to answering the question, and if time allows, ask the group to read the best explanation to the whole class. This activity foreshadows the outlining homework assignment and can be applied to the fourth section as well if teachers find it particularly successful at conveying the meaning of the passage to students.</p> <p>Successful explanations will cite Hand's belief that the hope for liberty—the faith that he mentions in the opening sentence—requires first and foremost conviction and passion “in the hearts of men and women.” A belief that the courts and the constitution will suffice to ensure liberty for all is in his view an idle and false hope.</p> <p>(7a) What is the problem Hand sees with granting people “unbridled will”?</p> <p>Hand sees this as the “denial of liberty”, producing a society where few are free, “freedom is the possession of a savage few”. This section is of course a reference to the war. Teachers should inquire as to who the “savage few” might be, and if necessary refer students to the date.</p> <p>(8) How has the definition of liberty evolved over the course of this first paragraph?</p> <p>Hand begins with the notion that liberty does not come from “constitutions and laws” but rather the “hearts of men”. He then goes on to state that this liberty in the, “hearts of men” is <i>not</i> “unbridled will . . . to do as one likes”. He ends the paragraph with the consequence of liberty as “unbridled will”: “. . . a society where freedom is the possession of only a savage few”. The positive account of freedom is only briefly sketched in this first paragraph, but is linked to the hearts of men and women. The limited substance here as to what liberty actually is sets up the next paragraph, the focus of which is to address this.</p>

Day One: Homework

Based on the close reading performed on Day One, students should feel confident in generating a basic outline of Hand's analysis of the concept of liberty in the first paragraph of his address. They should also use the time allotted for homework to review the second paragraph in preparation for next class.

A successful outline of the first paragraph might look like the following:

Liberty in Hand's First Paragraph

1. Highly valued by immigrants to America
 - a. choice of embracing liberty unique
 - b. required courage to leave homeland
2. Sought by immigrants
 - a. freedom from oppression
 - b. freedom from want
 - c. freedom to be ourselves
3. Not guaranteed by the judicial system
4. Lives in the hearts of the people
 - a. not the freedom to do anything
 - b. *but instead... explained in second paragraph* (This last part will be difficult for many students to catch though it might arise in the discussion around question 8 above.)

Day Two: The Spirit of Liberty

Summary of Activities: *As noted in the introduction, these activities could take longer than one day.*

- Students begin by analyzing the first section of the second paragraph culminating in a paraphrase

- Students then read the second section of Hand’s address and answer questions about it

Passage under Discussion	Guiding Questions and Activities/Instructional Commentary	
<p>Second ¶, First Section</p> <p>What then is the spirit of liberty? I cannot define it; I can only tell you my own faith. The spirit of liberty is the spirit which is not too sure that it is right; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which seeks to understand the mind of other men and women; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which weighs their interests alongside its own without bias; the spirit of liberty remembers that not even a sparrow falls to earth <u>unheeded</u>; the spirit of liberty is the spirit of Him who, near two thousand years ago, taught mankind that lesson it has never learned but never quite forgotten; that there may be a kingdom where the least shall be heard and considered side by side with the greatest.</p>	<p><i>To not pay attention to</i></p>	<p>(9) How does Hand’s explication of his vision of the spirit of liberty explain why he could not define the spirit of liberty? Hand’s aversion to asserting a final and definitive definition of the spirit of liberty reflects his ideas of what the spirit of liberty entails. It is “not too sure that it is right” and “seeks to understand the mind of other men and women”. His toleration of alternative explanations means that he “is not too sure” that his conception of liberty “is right”. In “seek[ing] to understand” the perspective of others, Hand asserts a healthy skepticism regarding his own opinion on matters.</p> <p>(10) Why does Hand shift from describing a commonly held faith (“we”) in the first paragraph to describing his “own faith” in the second paragraph? Hand’s tolerance for the views of others is so deep that he cannot in good conscience assert a definition of the spirit of liberty that might exclude someone’s perspective. He therefore resorts to constraining himself to self-reportage which cannot fall afoul of dogmatically asserting a definition of the spirit of liberty that isn’t true for everyone.</p> <p>(11) Who is Hand referring to when he speaks of “the spirit of Him”? What “lesson” did he teach that has neither been learned nor forgotten? This question asks students to recognize that Hand is trying to promote the Christian moral message (the last shall be first and the first shall be last) for a secular world (“mankind”). “Him” in capitals should signal to students that the reference is biblical or referring to religion.</p> <p>(12) Paraphrase Hand’s views on the spirit of liberty and the values embodied within that perspective. Important elements that would appear in successful paraphrases include a lack of dogmatism (“not too sure that it is right”), inquisitiveness (“seeks to understand”), objectivity (“without bias”), and compassionate awareness (“not even a sparrow falls to earth unheeded”; “the least shall be heard”).</p>

Passage under Discussion	Guiding Questions and Activities/Instructional Commentary
<p>Second ¶, Second Section</p> <p>And now in that spirit, that spirit of an America which has never been, and which may never be; nay, which never will be except as the conscience and courage of Americans create it; yet in the spirit of that America which lies hidden in some form in the aspirations of us all; in the spirit of that America for which our young men are at this moment fighting and dying; in that spirit of liberty and of America I ask you to rise and with me pledge our faith in the glorious destiny of our beloved country.</p>	<p>(13) Why does Hand employ the phrase “And now in that spirit”? Hand is segueing back to his audience and is about to ask them to do something <u>in the spirit</u> he’s just finished describing—namely “pledge our faith in the glorious destiny of our beloved country”, as noted in the last sentence of this section.</p> <p>(14) Explain the effect of progressing from “has never been” to “may never be” to “never will be” on Hand’s argument. Hand progressively generates increasing tension by ruling out the possibility of his vision of the spirit of liberty taking hold unless “the conscience and courage of Americans create it”. He is building up to the idea that the spirit of liberty can only come when the “conscious and courage of Americans create it”.</p> <p>(15) Midway through this section (second paragraph) Hand shifts from talking about the spirit of liberty to the spirit of America. Why does he do this? By invoking the “conscience and courage of Americans” as necessary to make his vision of the spirit of liberty a reality, Hand ties his conception to the success of America as a whole. Hence, the shift embodies Hand’s return to focusing on the principles of the opening paragraph—“faith in a common purpose”—the spirit of liberty—that those gathered together all seek.</p> <p>(16) Does invoking the notion of a “glorious <u>destiny</u>” for America contradict the skeptical vision of the spirit of liberty he articulated earlier in the paragraph? The possible contradiction here lies in in Hand’s invoking the notion of fate with regard to America’s destiny, especially given his (1) skepticism regarding certain knowledge in his exploration of the spirit of liberty, (2) his claim that that spirit will only live on if Americans have the courage to follow their “conscience,” and even (3) at the end of the first paragraph where he notes that history has embraced evil outcomes and the future is not one of guaranteed progress (“as we have learned to our sorrow”). This is somewhat countered by his claim that America is the land of the “picked” or chosen few who seek liberty, but still the notion of “glorious destiny” stands out in contrast to much that preceded it.</p>

Day Three: Cumulative Writing Assessment

Based on the close reading performed on Day Two, students could respond to an essay prompt regarding Hand’s Address. A third day could be added for in-class revision and editing after peer-to-peer critique or another in-class exercise. Once again, these time suggestions are an estimate.

Essay Prompt	Instructional Commentary
<p>Hand considers a variety of ideas regarding what is meant by the term liberty. Write a comparative essay, where you compare and contrast Hand’s thoughts with another author’s writings regarding liberty. One possible text is Langston Hughes’ poem, “Let America be America Again”.</p>	<p>Hughes’s poem addresses much of what Hand does but with differences that are ripe for contrast. Though not as difficult as the Hand piece, it still requires a similarly careful approach.</p>

Appendix A: Norman Rockwell's "Four Freedoms" and "Freedom From Want" Illustrations



Appendix B: Langston Hughes, "Let America Be America Again"

Let America be America again.
Let it be the dream it used to be.
Let it be the pioneer on the plain
Seeking a home where he himself is free.
(America never was America to me.)

Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed-
Let it be that great strong land of love
Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme
That any man be crushed by one above.

(It never was America to me.)

O, let my land be a land where Liberty
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,
But opportunity is real, and life is free,
Equality is in the air we breathe.

(There's never been equality for me,
Nor freedom in this "homeland of the free.")

*Say, who are you that mumbles in the dark?
And who are you that draws your veil across the
stars?*

I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,
I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars.
I am the red man driven from the land,
I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek--
And finding only the same old stupid plan
Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak.

I am the young man, full of strength and hope,
Tangled in that ancient endless chain
Of profit, power, gain, of grab the land!

Of grab the gold! Of grab the ways of satisfying
need!
Of work the men! Of take the pay!
Of owning everything for one's own greed!

I am the farmer, bondsman to the soil.
I am the worker sold to the machine.
I am the Negro, servant to you all.
I am the people, humble, hungry, mean--
Hungry yet today despite the dream.
Beaten yet today--O, Pioneers!
I am the man who never got ahead,
The poorest worker bartered through the years.

Yet I'm the one who dreamt our basic dream
In the Old World while still a serf of kings,
Who dreamt a dream so strong, so brave, so true,
That even yet its mighty daring sings
In every brick and stone, in every furrow turned
That's made America the land it has become.
O, I'm the man who sailed those early seas
In search of what I meant to be my home--
For I'm the one who left dark Ireland's shore,
And Poland's plain, and England's grassy lea,
And torn from Black Africa's strand I came
To build a "homeland of the free."

The free?

Who said the free? Not me?
Surely not me? The millions on relief today?
The millions shot down when we strike?
The millions who have nothing for our pay?
For all the dreams we've dreamed
And all the songs we've sung

And all the hopes we've held
And all the flags we've hung,
The millions who have nothing for our pay--
Except the dream that's almost dead today.

O, let America be America again--
The land that never has been yet--
And yet must be--the land where *every* man is free.
The land that's mine--the poor man's, Indian's,
Negro's, ME--
Who made America,
Whose sweat and blood, whose faith and pain,
Whose hand at the foundry, whose plow in the rain,
Must bring back our mighty dream again.

Sure, call me any ugly name you choose--
The steel of freedom does not stain.
From those who live like leeches on the people's lives,
We must take back our land again,
America!

O, yes,
I say it plain,
America never was America to me,
And yet I swear this oath--
America will be!

Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster death,
The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies,
We, the people, must redeem
The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers.
The mountains and the endless plain--
All, all the stretch of these great green states--
And make America again!