

“Sound Recordings: Useful Tools for Teaching Loons in *Walden*”

By Christina Katopodis

This lesson (approximately 20-30 minutes of class time) is best applied to the loon passage in “Brute Neighbors,” excerpted below. Thoreau talks frequently about the loon’s laugh throughout *Walden* and about the loon’s call. In this lesson, we first read the passage to understand all the words and the logistics of what occurs between Thoreau and the loon. Then, we listen to different sound recordings of loons to try to discern the loon’s voice through Thoreau’s mediated portrayal of the loon. There are many recordings online, and I generally use these two.

- This, to me, represents the loon’s call/howl/prayer: <https://youtu.be/4ENNZjy8QjU>
- And the sounds in the first minute of this video, again to my ear, represent the loon’s laugh (it also includes beautiful videography of loons diving and some brief calls, too): <https://youtu.be/yvd5nwebMjw>
- In this video, loon parents defend their chick from a swimming racoon, also making a sound that sounds distressed, or almost like laughing: <https://youtu.be/gznz-z-w-44>

In general, when students listen to these sounds and then we return to the passage to read it again, we hear the distress in the loon’s laughter and most students point out that Thoreau is, in fact, harassing the loon in this passage. It isn’t until he leaves the loon alone and gives it enough space that it begins to howl. There are, of course, close readings of the passage in literary scholarship that you can bring into the conversation. See citations at the end of this lesson plan for examples of close readings of sounds in *Walden*.

From “Brute Neighbors”:

In the fall the loon (*Colymbus glacialis*) came, as usual, to moult and bathe in the pond, making the woods ring with his wild laughter before I had risen. At rumor of his arrival all the Mill-dam sportsmen are on the alert, in gigs and on foot, two by two and three by three, with patent rifles and conical balls and spy-glasses. They come rustling through the woods like autumn leaves, at least ten men to one loon. Some station themselves on this side of the pond, some on that, for the poor bird cannot be omnipresent; if he dive here he must come up there. But now the kind October wind rises, rustling the leaves and rippling the surface of the water, so that no loon can be heard or seen, though his foes sweep the pond with spy-glasses, and make the woods resound with their discharges. The waves generously rise and dash angrily, taking sides with all water-fowl, and our sportsmen must beat a retreat to town and shop and unfinished jobs. But they were too often successful. When I went to get a pail of water early in the morning I frequently saw this stately bird sailing out of my cove within a few rods. If I endeavored to overtake him in a boat, in order to see how he would manœuvre, he would dive and be completely lost, so that I did not discover him again, sometimes, till the latter part of the day. But I was more than a match for him on the surface. He commonly went off in a rain.

As I was paddling along the north shore one very calm October afternoon, for such days especially they settle on to the lakes, like the milkweed down, having looked in vain over the pond for a loon, suddenly one, sailing out from the shore toward the middle a few rods in front of me, set up his wild laugh and betrayed himself. I pursued with a paddle and he dived, but when he came up I was nearer than before. He dived again, but I miscalculated the direction he would take, and we were fifty rods apart when he came to the surface this time, for I had helped to widen the interval; and again he laughed long and loud, and with more reason than before. He manœuvred so cunningly that I could not get within half a dozen rods of him. Each time, when he came to the surface, turning his head this way and that, he coolly surveyed the water and the land, and apparently chose his course so that he might come up where there was the widest expanse of water and at the greatest distance from the boat. It was surprising how quickly he made up his mind and put his resolve into execution. He led me at once to the widest part of the pond, and could not be driven from it. While he was thinking one thing in his brain, I was endeavoring to divine his thought in mine. It was a pretty game, played on the smooth surface of the pond, a man against a loon. Suddenly your adversary's checker disappears beneath the board, and the problem is to place yours nearest to where his will appear again. Sometimes he would come up unexpectedly on the opposite side of me, having apparently passed directly under the boat. So long-winded was he and so unwearable, that when he had swum farthest he would immediately plunge again, nevertheless; and then no wit could divine where in the deep pond, beneath the smooth surface, he might be speeding his way like a fish, for he had time and ability to visit the bottom of the pond in its deepest part. It is said that loons have been caught in the New York lakes eighty feet beneath the surface, with hooks set for trout,—though Walden is deeper than that. How surprised must the fishes be to see this ungainly visitor from another sphere speeding his way amid their schools! Yet he appeared to know his course as surely under water as on the surface, and swam much faster there. Once or twice I saw a ripple where he approached the surface, just put his head out to reconnoitre, and instantly dived again. I found that it was as well for me to rest on my oars and wait his reappearing as to endeavor to calculate where he would rise; for again and again, when I was straining my eyes over the surface one way, I would suddenly be startled by his unearthly laugh behind me. But why, after displaying so much cunning, did he invariably betray himself the moment he came up by that loud laugh? Did not his white breast enough betray him? He was indeed a silly loon, I thought. I could commonly hear the splash of the water when he came up, and so also detected him. But after an hour he seemed as fresh as ever, dived as willingly and swam yet farther than at first. It was surprising to see how serenely he sailed off with unruffled breast when he came to the surface, doing all the work with his webbed feet beneath. His usual note was this demoniac laughter, yet somewhat like that of a water-fowl; but occasionally, when he had balked me most successfully and come up a long way off, he uttered a long-drawn unearthly howl, probably more like that of a wolf than any bird; as when a beast puts his muzzle to the ground and deliberately howls. This was his looning,—perhaps the wildest sound that is ever heard here, making the woods ring far and wide. I concluded that he laughed in derision of my efforts, confident of his own resources. Though the sky was by this time overcast, the pond was so smooth that I could see where he broke the surface when I did not hear him. His white breast, the stillness of the air, and the smoothness of the water were all against him. At length, having come

up fifty rods off, he uttered one of those prolonged howls, as if calling on the god of loons to aid him, and immediately there came a wind from the east and rippled the surface, and filled the whole air with misty rain, and I was impressed as if it were the prayer of the loon answered, and his god was angry with me; and so I left him disappearing far away on the tumultuous surface.

Secondary Sources:

Cavell, Stanley. *The Senses of Walden: An Expanded Edition* (University of Chicago Press, 1992), 42-47.

Katopodis, Christina. "[Vibrational Epistemology in the Nineteenth-Century American Soundscape: Music and Noise in Walden.](#)" *ESQ: A Journal of Nineteenth-Century American Literature and Culture* vol. 65, no. 3 (Fall 2019): 382-423.

Noson, Dennis. "[Thoreau's Wild Acoustics: \(Re\)sounding in the Concord Landscape.](#)" In *Thoreau in an Age of Crisis: Uses and Abuses of an American Icon*, edited by Kristen Case, Rochelle Johnson, and Henrik Otterberg (Brill, 2021), 41-66.