

Lesson Plans: Grades 9-12

Material Culture: What can objects tell us about people, cultures, and history?

Introduction

Look around—we are surrounded by objects. How often do we think about the origin of everyday objects? What objects are essential to life? What objects make life enjoyable? What can we learn about people, cultures, and history through objects?

This lesson provides students with an opportunity to observe both everyday and unfamiliar objects and contemplate the meanings of those objects. Students will explore the form, function, and history of objects. Students will also read literary texts that examine the important roles of material objects.

Essential Questions

1. What can objects tell us about the past?
2. What kinds of relationships exist between human beings and the objects they possess?
3. How do objects and belongings shape personal identities, both positively and negatively?
4. Why do some things become valuable while others become disposable?

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

Work collaboratively to make observations about an object and hypothesize about the object's form, function, and history.

Read examples of literary works that examine material objects and the meanings they hold for people and make connections between the readings and students' own lives.

Lesson Activities

Activity 1: Round Table: Hypothesizing about objects—their form, function, and history.

1. Students will work collaboratively in small groups (based on class size and skill level).
2. Students will make predictions based on prior experience; students will work to construct meaning from their observations and discussions.
3. Place an unknown object, or an older version of a common object in the middle of the group for all to see. Depending upon the object, students may pick it up.
4. Provide the group with one piece of paper and a pen, which will travel around the group.
5. Students will take turns making and then writing down observations about the form and function of the object.
 - a. Observations can begin with a basic description of the object’s size, color, texture, and materials. Ask students to describe item to a person who can’t see the object.
 - b. If the object is an older version of a modern object, students can describe how the object’s form and function has changed over time.
 - c. If students are not familiar with the object, they can make predictions about its function.
6. Students will research the object to determine the correct function, name, and history of the object. Have a class discussion to help your students generate resources to research their item.

Activity 2: Close Reading: How do objects and possessions shape our identities?

Note: The short stories listed below are available on the WHM Website.

Guy de Maupassant, “The Necklace”

Chang-Rae Lee, “Coming Home Again”

Amy Tan, “A Pair of Tickets”

Alice Walker, “Everyday Use”

1. Students read two or more of the stories listed above and identify the most important object or objects in the story. Alternatively, students could be provided with pre-selected passages that address objects (see pages 4-7). Ask your students to identify common objects or themes in the readings.
2. Students answer the following questions about the objects they have identified:
 - What meaning or meanings does each object seem to hold for the characters in the story? For instance, does the object reveal something about the character’s cultural, racial, or ethnic heritage? Does it have sentimental value? Is it a status symbol? Does it have symbolic meaning?
 - How does the object seem to affect the identities of the story’s characters?

- What similarities and/or differences do you notice between objects represented in the different stories you read?
- If you were to write a story about your childhood, what material objects might you include? What meaning do these objects hold for you?

Guy de Maupassant “The Necklace”

de Maupassant, Paragraph 2

She suffered endlessly, feeling herself born for every delicacy and luxury. She suffered from the poorness of her house, from its mean walls, worn chairs, and ugly curtains. All these things, of which other women of her class would not even have been aware, tormented and insulted her. The sight of the little Breton girl who came to do the work in her little house aroused heart-broken regrets and hopeless dreams in her mind. She imagined silent antechambers, heavy with Oriental tapestries, lit by torches in lofty bronze sockets, with two tall footmen in knee-breeches sleeping in large arm-chairs, overcome by the heavy warmth of the stove. She imagined vast saloons hung with antique silks, exquisite pieces of furniture supporting priceless ornaments, and small, charming, perfumed rooms, created just for little parties of intimate friends, men who were famous and sought after, whose homage roused every other woman's envious longings.

de Maupassant, Paragraph 3

When she sat down for dinner at the round table covered with a three-days-old cloth, opposite her husband, who took the cover off the soup-tureen, exclaiming delightedly: "Aha! Scotch broth! What could be better?" she imagined delicate meals, gleaming silver, tapestries peopling the walls with folk of a past age and strange birds in faery forests; she imagined delicate food served in marvelous dishes, murmured gallantries, listened to with an inscrutable smile as one trifled with the rosy flesh of trout or wings of asparagus chicken.

de Maupassant, Paragraph 4-5

She had no clothes, no jewels, nothing. And these were the only things she loved; she felt that she was made for them. She had longed so eagerly to charm, to be desired, to be wildly attractive and sought after.

She had a rich friend, an old school friend whom she refused to visit, because she suffered so keenly when she returned home. She would weep whole days, with grief, regret, despair, and misery.

de Maupassant, pages 4-5

She flung herself on her friend's breast, embraced her frenziedly, and went away with her treasure. The day of the party arrived. Madame Loisel was a success. She was the prettiest woman present, elegant, graceful, smiling, and quite above herself with happiness. All the men stared at her, inquired her name, and asked to be introduced to her. All the Under-Secretaries of State were eager to waltz with her. The Minister noticed her.

She danced madly, ecstatically, drunk with pleasure, with no thought for anything, in the triumph of her beauty, in the pride of her success, in a cloud of happiness made up of this universal homage and admiration, of the desires she had aroused, of the completeness of a victory so dear to her feminine heart.

Chang-Rae Lee’s “Coming Home Again”

Lee, paragraph 9

Whenever I cook, I find myself working just as she would, readying the ingredients— a mash of garlic, a julienne of red peppers, fantails of shrimp—and piling them in little mounds about the cutting surface. My mother never left me any recipes, but this is how I learned to make her food, each dish coming not from a list or a card but from the aromatic spread of a board.

Lee, Paragraphs 18-19

After a few steps she turned around, and from where the professional three-point line must be now, she effortlessly flipped the ball up in a two-handed set shot, its flight truer and higher than I’d witnessed from any boy or man. The ball arced cleanly into the hoop, stiffly popping the chain-link net. All afternoon, she rained in shot after shot, as my father and I scrambled after her.

When we got home from the playground, my mother showed me the photograph album of her team’s championship run. For years, I kept it in my room, on the same shelf that housed the scrapbooks I made of basketball stars, with magazine clippings of slick players like Bubbles Hawkins and Pistol Pete and George (the Iceman) Gervin.

Lee, page 5

From that day, my mother prepared a certain meal to welcome me home. It was always the same. Even as I rode the school’s shuttle bus from Exeter to Logan airport, I could already see the exact arrangement of my mother’s table.

I knew that we would eat in the kitchen, the table brimming with plates. There was the kalbi, of course, broiled or grilled depending on the season. Leaf lettuce, to wrap the meat with. Bowls of garlicky clam broth with miso and tofu and fresh spinach. Shavings of cod dusted in flour and then dipped in egg wash and fried. Glass noodles with onions and shiitake. Scallion-and-hot-pepper pancakes. Chilled steamed shrimp. Seasoned salads of bean sprouts, spinach, and white radish. Crispy squares of seaweed. Steamed rice with barley and red beans. Homemade kimchi. It was all there—the old flavors I knew, the beautiful salt, the sweet, the excellent taste.

Amy Tan, “A Pair of Tickets”

Tan, Paragraph 11

So my father had been the first one to open the letter, a long letter it turned out. And they did call her Mama. They said they always revered her as their true mother. They kept a framed picture of her. They told her about their life, from the time my mother last saw them on the road leaving Kweilin to when they were finally found.

Tan, Paragraph 40

"Cannot be," said my mother, this time almost angrily. And then her frown was washed over by a puzzled blank look, and she began to talk as if she were trying to remember where she had misplaced something. "I went back to that house. I kept looking up to where the house used to be. And it wasn't a house, just the sky. And below, underneath my feet, were four stories of burnt bricks and wood, all the life of our house. Then off to the side I saw things blown into the yard, nothing valuable. There was a bed someone used to sleep in, really just a metal frame twisted up at one corner. And a book, I don't know what kind, because every page had turned black. And I saw a teacup which was unbroken but filled with ashes. And then I found my doll, with her hands and legs broken, her hair burned off. . . . When I was a little girl, I had cried for that doll, seeing it all alone in the store window, and my mother had bought it for me. It was an American doll with yellow hair. It could turn its legs and arms. The eyes moved up and down. And when I married and left my family home, I gave the doll to my youngest niece, because she was like me. She cried if that doll was not with her always. Do you see? If she was in the house with that doll, her parents were there, and so everybody was there, waiting together, because that's how our family was."

Tan, paragraphs 48-49

It is only then that I remember the camera I had meant to take a picture of my father and his aunt the moment they met. It's not too late.

"Here, stand together over here," I say, holding up the Polaroid. The camera flashes and I hand them the snapshot. Aiyi and my father still stand close together, each of them holding a corner of the picture, watching as their images begin to form. They are almost reverentially quiet. Aiyi is only five years older than my father, which makes her around seventy-seven. But she looks ancient, shrunken, a mummified relic. Her thin hair is pure white, her teeth are brown with decay. So much for stories of Chinese women looking young forever, I think to myself.

Tan, paragraphs 67- 69

"What about dinner?" I ask. I have been envisioning my first real Chinese feast for many days already, a big banquet with one of those soups steaming out of a carved winter melon, chicken wrapped in clay, Peking duck, the works.

My father walks over and picks up a room service book next to a *Travel & Leisure* magazine. He flips through the pages quickly and then points to the menu. "This is what they want," says my father.

So it's decided: We are going to dine tonight in our rooms, with our family, sharing hamburgers, french fries, and apple pie la mode.

Alice Walker, “Everyday Use”

Walker, paragraphs 14 and 22

I have deliberately turned my back on the house. It is three rooms, just like the one that burned, except the roof is tin; they don't make shingle roofs anymore. There are no real windows, just some holes cut in the sides, like the portholes in a ship, but not round and not square, with rawhide holding the shutters up on the outside. This house is in a pasture, too, like the other one. No doubt when Dee sees it she will want to tear it down. She wrote me once that no matter where we “choose” to live, she will manage to come see us.

“Don't get up,” says Dee. Since I am stout, it takes something of a push. You can see me trying to move a second or two before I make it. She turns, showing white heels through her sandals, and goes back to the car. Out she peeks next with a Polaroid. She stoops down quickly and lines up picture after picture of me sitting there in front of the house with Maggie cowering behind me. She never takes a shot without making sure the house is included. When a cow comes nibbling around in the edge of the yard, she snaps it and me and Maggie and the house. Then she puts the Polaroid in the back seat of the car and comes up and kisses me on the forehead.

Walker, paragraph 45

We sat down to eat and right away he said he didn't eat collards, and pork was unclean. Wangero, though, went on through the chitlins and corn bread, the greens, and everything else. She talked a blue streak over the sweet potatoes. Everything delighted her. Even the fact that we still used the benches her daddy made for the table when we couldn't afford to buy chairs.

Walker, paragraph 46

“Oh, Mama!” she cried. Then turned to Hakim-a-barber. “I never knew how lovely these benches are. You can feel the rump prints,” she said, running her hands underneath her and along the bench. Then she gave a sigh, and her hand closed over Grandma Dee's butter dish. “That's it!” she said. “I knew there was something I wanted to ask you if I could have.” She jumped up from the table and went over in the corner where the churn stood, the milk in it clabber by now. She looked at the churn and looked at it.

Common Core State Standards

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2

Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1

Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.4

Present information, findings, and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed, and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and a range of formal and informal tasks.