

## ***The Persistence of Memory in Art, Literature, and Film***

**GRADES: 8-12**

**LESSON DURATION: 1-2 SESSIONS**

### **LESSON INTRODUCTION:**

After the war, Americans in the North and South began the difficult work of rebuilding a devastated nation. In the South, cities were in ruin. Farms and fields were overgrown. And in both regions, people faced the sad reality that a generation of young men was either dead or maimed from the War. How the American culture remembered the war describes in many ways the process of coming to terms with the tragic loss of life.



In this lesson, your class will examine two aspects of popular culture during the post Civil War/Reconstruction period. Two examples, one in art and the other in literature, illustrate how people expressed their grief and sorrow while also revealing how they chose to remember the war.

Your students will read, comprehend, analyze, and synthesize a painting by Gilbert Gaul entitled "Last Letter" (1890), a poem entitled "Marthy Virginia's Hand" by 19th century American poet George Parsons Lathrop, and a clip from "The Civil War: A Film by Ken Burns" (1990).

**GOAL:** To understand that humans choose different ways to remember historical events and that the way we remember things tells us a great deal about past society as well as our own.

### **OBJECTIVES:**

The students will [TSW] form a basic understanding of historical memory.

TSW analyze primary and secondary sources to determine how artistic expression shapes a certain memory of historical events.

TSW synthesize three forms of media and comprehend the message of each.

### **CURRICULUM STANDARDS:**

8.5.07 Use historical information acquired from a variety of sources to develop critical sensitivities such as skepticism regarding attitudes, values, and behaviors of people in different historical contexts.

a. Read and analyze a primary source document such as diaries, letters and contracts.

8.5.18 Recognize the causes, course, and consequences of the Civil War.

d. Weigh political, social, and economic impact of the Civil War on the different regions of the United States.

e. Understand that different scholars may describe the same event or situation in different ways.

8.5.spi.3. Differentiate between a primary and secondary source.

- 8.5.spi.11. Identify conclusions about historical events using primary and secondary sources.
- 8.5.spi.12. Differentiate between primary and secondary source documents.

**HOOK/SET:**

1.) First open a discussion on memory. Ask the students to share some memories: a trip, a special moment in school, a sporting event?. How do you choose to remember things? Some things we remember fondly, others we remember as sad or traumatic. Then ask: “Can a society have a memory of an event? What about people’s memory of a world event? What are memorials? What do memorials say about the way we remember things”

**PROCEDURES:**

2.) Ask students: “How do you think we as Americans remember the Civil War?” Explain that we will examine three forms of media, two of which came from the post-war era around 1890 and the other came nearly 100 years later in the Ken Burns documentary entitled *The Civil War*.

Visual Art

3.) Begin with the painting by Gilbert Gaul entitled *Last Letter*.



[http://content.mtsu.edu/cdm4/item\\_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/shades&CISOPTR=224&CISOBX=1&REC=1](http://content.mtsu.edu/cdm4/item_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/shades&CISOPTR=224&CISOBX=1&REC=1)

Give students time to quietly examine the painting. Hold a whole-class analysis discussion. Have students write down what they think is happening in this painting. What words would they use to describe its mood?

Questions for discussion:

What is happening in this painting?

What words did students use to describe the mood of the painting? Write answers on the board.

How is this an example of remembering the Civil War? In what way is the painter remembering it?

Read about the artist and commemorative works of art here:

<http://www.civilwarshades.org/the-persistence-of-memory/commemorative-works-of-art/>

<http://tennesseencyclopedia.net/entry.php?rec=534>

### Poetry

4.) Distribute and have your students read the poem “Marthy Virginia’s Hand.” Then read the poem out loud.

<http://www.readbookonline.net/readOnLine/33619/>

5.) Answer the questions on the graphic organizer provided.

6.) As a class, discuss the poem using the graphic organizer provided.

### Documentary

7) Play Ken Burns’ documentary “The Civil War”

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0wbt2IH4AGY&feature=related>

8.) Discuss with the class. How do your students feel after watching this? What does this focus on?

### **CONCLUSION:**

Understanding Memory Discussion

How does society remember events in our collective memory?

What do these three forms of memory have in common?

Possible responses: All three are about individual soldiers, their death, and a letter.

What does the letter remind us about this soldier? That he has family and loved ones he’ll never see again.

Is this type of memory emotional? What kind of emotions do these memories evoke?

How is the documentary different from the poem and the painting? Possible response: The documentary is a real letter that someone wrote. It is a primary source. The other two were created by someone who wasn’t really in the war.

How are they different?

Did any of these artists or authors actually fight in the Civil War? How are they promoting a memory? What kind of memory of the war do they suggest? What do they leave out?

Other questions to ponder with your class.

How did Americans choose to remember this war?

Did they remember the political events of secession, slavery, treason or did they choose to highlight personal loss and grief?

Why do you think Americans chose to reflect on the tragedy and loss of life?

Possible response: Americans on both sides experienced the loss of life and tragedy the war created. It was a unifying theme. Remembering politics would have been divisive in a time when the country wanted to reconcile.

### **SUGGESTED EVALUATIONS:**

Creative Writing & Analysis:

Have students write a poem or create a piece of artwork that memorializes a major event in their life (i.e. 9-11, Iraq/Afghanistan War or current events). Have a classmate analyze the poem and determine in what ways that student chose to remember the event.