

CAPTURING THE ESSENCE OF HOPPER IN POETRY FORM

ART AND LANGUAGE ARTS
GRADES: 9-12

BASED ON

Edward Hopper (American, b.1882, d.1967)
Sun on Prospect Street (Gloucester, Massachusetts), 1934
The Edwin and Virginia Irwin Memorial, 1959.49

OBJECTIVES

- Students will explore terms *alienation, isolation, universality*
- Students will define *realism* and apply term to Hopper's work
- Students will compose a poem incorporating the phrase "sunlight on the side of a house"

CONCEPT/PROCEDURE

There is sort of elation about sunlight on the upper part of a house."
"Maybe I am not very human – what I wanted to do was paint sunlight on the side of a house."
"If you could say it in words there would be no reason to paint."

One of the primary themes in contemporary literature is alienation and isolation. Students in my class confront this idea in our first thematic unit "Who Am I?" through the novella *Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka and then continue to discuss what it means to be human in our modern world as we progress through the year. Although I teach 12th grade Advanced Placement English students, this is an activity that can be adapted to any grade level and in any unit (short stories, nonfiction, fiction, poetry, etc.)

We read Hopper's quotes; focusing on the 3rd one and talking about what makes a writer have a reason to write and a painter have a reason to paint. We talk about how a writer can create through words from what s/he sees visually, just as an artist creates visually on a canvas without using words.

We converse as a group about the stories behind his paintings [students see a Powerpoint of various works by Hopper], focusing on the reality of the world as Hopper conveys to us. We make inferences about the "universality" of the painting *Sun on Prospect Street*, considering things like *what if the cars are left out of the painting?* and *how is this street like those in our own community?* We make connections to literary "greats" we've read and discussed previously in class (Shakespeare, Bronte, Kafka, Conrad, etc.) who show great universal truths and themes through their works.

CLASS EXPERIENCE

Finally, using these three quotes from Hopper combined with a discussion of alienation, isolation, universality and realism, students compose a free verse poem incorporating Hopper's phrase "sunlight on the side of a house" and utilizing poetic devices we have previously covered in another unit.

BACKGROUND:

Edward Hopper

Born July 22, 1882, Nyack, N.Y., U.S.

Died May 15, 1967, New York City

U.S. painter whose realistic depictions of everyday urban scenes shock the viewer into recognition of the strangeness of familiar surroundings. He strongly influenced the Pop art and New Realist painters of the 1960s and 1970s.

Hopper was initially trained as an illustrator, but between 1901 and 1906 he studied painting under Robert Henri, a member of a group of painters called the Ashcan School. Hopper traveled to Europe three times between 1906 and 1910, but he remained untouched by the experimental work then blossoming in France and continued throughout his career to follow his own artistic course. Although he exhibited paintings in the Armory Show of 1913, he devoted most of his time to advertising art and illustrative etchings until 1924. He then began to do such watercolors as "Model Reading" (1925; Art Institute of Chicago), as well as oil paintings. Like the painters of the Ashcan School, Hopper painted the commonplaces of urban life. But, unlike their loosely organized, vivacious paintings, his "House by the Railroad" (1925; Museum of Modern Art, New York City) and "Room in Brooklyn" (1932; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) shows still, anonymous figures and stern geometric forms within snapshot-like compositions that create an inescapable sense of loneliness. This isolation of his subjects was heightened by Hopper's characteristic use of light to insulate persons and objects in space, whether in the harsh morning light ("Early Sunday Morning," 1930; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City) or the eerie light of an all-night coffee stand ("Nighthawks," 1942; Art Institute of Chicago).

Hopper's mature style was already formed by the mid-1920s. His subsequent development showed a constant refinement of his vision. Such late paintings as "Second-Story Sunlight" (1960; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City) are distinguished by extremely subtle spatial relationships and an even greater mastery of light than is seen in his work of the 1920s.

"Hopper, Edward." [Encyclopedia Britannica](http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9041037). 2007. Encyclopedia Britannica Online. 22 Jan. 2007 <<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9041037>>.

VOCABULARY

Alienation
Universality
Realism

Free Verse
Poetic Devices

MATERIALS

- Sun on Prospect Street
- Powerpoint (or other method) of viewing selected Hopper works
- Handout: Poetic Devices
- Handout: Poetry Guidelines
- Handout: Realism in Poetry
- Poetry scoring guide
- Powerpoint: Poetry Review

Additional Art from *An Edward Hopper Scrapbook*

(I focused on houses for this activity because of the quote selected. One could choose to "group" other subject matter, depending on your unit of study or themes.)

- *Bill Latham's House*
- *Cape Cod Afternoon*
- *House at Eastham*
- *House with Big Pine*
- *Marty Welch's House*

WEB RESOURCES

An Edward Hopper Scrapbook (excellent website – highly recommend)

<http://americanart.si.edu/collections/exhibits/hopper/>

Artcyclopedia (comprehensive source of information and paintings)

http://www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/hopper_edward.html

Art Institute of Chicago

http://www.artic.edu/artaccess/AA_Modern/pages/MOD_7.shtml

Edward Hopper

<http://www.mcs.csu Hayward.edu/~malek/Hopper.htm>

BOOK RESOURCES AND VIDEOGRAPHY

"American Voices," video series. PBS broadcast, 1997. ("Part 6: Streamlines and Breadlines" features Edward Hopper's paintings within the context of the Art Deco movement and the Great Depression.)

Anderson, Sherwood. *Winesburg, Ohio*. New York: Penquin Books, 1960.

(Short vignettes about lonely inhabitants of a small town at the turn of the century predate Hopper's concern with urban alienation, especially in "The Thinker" and "Loneliness.")
[American literature connection]

Hemingway, Ernest. *Ernest Hemingway: The Short Stories*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995.

(The Killers and "A Clean Well Lighted Place" are short stories that evoke desperation and loneliness so typical of Hopper's paintings.) [American literature connection]

Hinton, S. E. *The Outsiders*. New York: Bantam Doubleday, 1967. (This novella features a band of teenage misfits who attempt to find community in their shared alienation.)

Hughes, Robert. *American Vision: The Epic History of Art in America*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997. (A teacher resource for American artists and art which features a section on Edward Hopper in the chapter "Streamlines and Breadlines.")

Roberts, Brady, et al. *Grant Wood: An American Master Revealed*. Rohnert Park, CA: Pomegranate Books, 1995. (Excellent color reproductions of an American regionalist whose

romantic rural landscapes and stylized human figures can be contrasted with Hopper's paintings.)

Rolf, Gunter Renner. *Edward Hopper: Transformation of the Real*. Germany: Benedikt Taschen, 1993. (Excellent oversized color reproductions of Hopper's most important paintings follows a comprehensive bibliography of Hopper.)

Sullivan, Charles, ed. *America in Poetry*. U. S. A.: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1988. (This booklet matches famous American poems to famous American paintings and photographs from colonial to the contemporary times.)

HANDOUT: REALISM IN POETRY

Realism is an aesthetic attitude stressing the truthful treatment of material, the normal and everyday, life as it truly is.

These terms sometimes overlap. Classicism, Realism and Romanticism all deal with the outside world, but Realism shows the world as it is, Romanticism as the heart tells us it should be, and Classicism as it would be in some ideal but public incarnation. Contemporary literature, by contrast, is commonly a retreat into the writer's consciousness — to make autonomous creations that incorporate diverse aspects of modern life (Modernism), or free-wheeling creations constructed of a language that largely points to itself (Postmodernism).

FEATURES OF REALISM

In varying degrees, Realism or the realistic (and sometimes Naturalism) has these aims:

1. Faithfully represent life as it is:

- aims for a pleasing and convincing structure of reality
- presents a normal rather than intensified perceptions of reality
- emphasizes accurate, even photographic detail
- is objective: showing rather than telling
- mutes or removes the author's commentary
- reinforces the socially responsible view

2. Reject idealizing conventions and formulae:

- apparently represents direct, unmediated experience
- avoids artifice, the visionary and theatrical
- returns to simpler, past conventions
- employs images in preference to symbols
- simplifies or reduces rhetorical devices
- avoids epic themes, exercises in the pastoral tradition, etc.

3. Take subjects from contemporary life:

- emphasizes the experienced commonplace
- deals with social/political issues of the day
- focuses on the regional or local scene

4. Represent middle class attitudes:

- focuses on character more than events or plot
- avoids the sensational: plausible events
- employs a natural, everyday diction
- promotes morality without overt moralizing

5. Refer to work of a particular period

REALISTIC ATTITUDES

Though Realism would seem the easiest attitude to understand and maintain, it poses many philosophic problems. How can words properly represent reality? Doesn't any representation, with its tacit codes and conventions, distort the true picture, perhaps replace it all together? Realism is strongly marked in these poems:

Geoffrey Chaucer: *The Miller's Tale*
William Shakespeare: *My Mistress's Eyes*
Jonathan Swift: *A Description of the Morning*
George Crabbe: *Peter Grimes*
Robert Browning: *Porphyria's Lover*
John Drinkwater: *The Carver in Stone*
Thomas Hardy: *Friends Beyond*
Rudyard Kipling: *Danny Deaver*

NATIONAL STANDARDS

Art Connections

Standard 1. Understands connections among the various art forms and other disciplines.

Visual Arts

Standard 3. Knows a range of subject matter, symbols, and potential ideas in the visual arts.

Language Arts

Standard 9. Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.



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