

Americas' Evolving View of Death: *Historical Changes in Gravestone Iconography*

Overview

The purpose of this lesson is to develop students' understanding of American cultural attitudes towards death as seen through historical changes in gravestone iconography in cemeteries. This will be accomplished through hands-on activities and end of lesson assessment.

Objectives

- Students will know the meaning of certain gravestone motifs.
- Students will understand how attitudes towards death are revealed through gravestone motifs.
- Students will be able to identify the sections of a gravestone e.g., the inscription, motif, epitaph, and morphology.

Time Duration

60 to 90 Minutes

Virginia Standards of Learning (VSOL)

Virginia Studies (VS.1): The student will develop skills for historical and geographical analysis including the ability to

- a) identify and interpret artifacts and primary and secondary source documents to understand events in history;
- b) determine cause and effect relationships;
- d) draw conclusions and make generalizations, and;
- e) make connections between past and present.

National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) Thematic Strands

- Culture;
- Time, Continuity, and Change;
- People, Places, and Environments, and;
- Individual Development and Identity

Materials

Scissors (Class set)

Glue sticks (Class set)

Student Handout 1A- Drawing a Gravestone

Student Handout 1B- Gravestone Venn Diagram

Student Handout 1C- Visual Discovery: Gravestone Motifs

Transparency 1C- Visual Discovery: Gravestone Motifs

Student Handout 1D- Six Gravestone Motifs

Student Handout 1E- Gravestone Cutouts (Cut into fourths, one strip for each student)

Student Handout 1F- Gravestone Timeline

Teacher Presentation 1F- Gravestone Timeline

Student Handout 1G- Evaluation

Procedures

Preview Activity: *Drawing and Comparing Gravestones*

- 1) Create student groups of four.
- 2) Pass out *Student Handout 1A- Drawing a Gravestone* to each student.
- 3) Instruct students to use *Student Handout 1A- Drawing a Gravestone* to draw their understanding of a gravestone.
- 4) When the students have completed their gravestone drawing, pass out *Student Handout 1B- Gravestone Venn Diagram*.
- 5) When they have completed their drawing, students are to compare it to a partner's drawing using *Student Handout 1B- Gravestone Venn Diagram*.
- 6) When the group of four students has completed *Student Handout 1B- Gravestone Venn Diagram*, they are to compare their sheet with the other pair in their group.
- 7) Ask the groups to be prepared to discuss their sheets with the class.
- 8) Lead a class discussion. Ask:
 - a. What similarities were there in your drawings?
 - b. What differences were there in your drawings?
 - c. What information do you think is on most gravestones?
 - d. What "extras" do you think are added to gravestones? Why?
 - e. How do you think this may have changed over time?
 - f. What do you think it can tell us about history?

Modeling Activity: *Visual Discovery of Gravestones*

- 1) Inform students that we can learn about how American's have viewed death through the evolution and changes in gravestone motifs throughout history.
- 2) Define "motif" for students. "A motif is a design or figure that consists of recurring shapes or colors like in architecture or decoration. We talk about gravestone motifs we are talking about the designs on the gravestones that represent how people viewed death at that time."
- 3) Pass out *Student Handout 1C- Visual Discovery: Gravestone Motifs* to each student.
- 4) Read the introduction to the students.
 - a. A gravestone motif is a design or figure that consists of recurring shapes or symbols. When looking at gravestone motifs we are talking about the designs on the gravestones that represent how people viewed death at that time. See example above. To make sense of this gravestone motif, we are going to complete a visual discovery. This is a way systematic way to gather evidence, interpret it and create hypotheses to make sense of information.
- 5) Instruct students to use the photograph at the top of the page to follow the three levels.
 - a. The purpose of "Level 1: Gathering Evidence" is to just collect details and make observations. Students should not make any assumptions.
 - b. The purpose of "Level 2: Interpreting Evidence" is to use the information you gathered in Level 1 to make sense of what we are looking at. Try to figure out what the icon means.
 - c. The purpose of "Level 3: Making Hypotheses from Evidence" is to make a prediction or generalizations about that is happening using details from Levels 1 and 2 to help you.

- 6) To help students analyze the photograph project *Transparency IC- Visual Discovery: Gravestone Motif* on the overhead screen.
- 7) Instruct students to complete *Student Handout IC- Visual Discovery: Gravestone Motif* and to discuss it with their group when all members have completed it.
- 8) As a class, walkthrough students' answers:
 - a. Level 1: Gathering Evidence
 - i. What symbols do you see?
 - *Potential answers: skull, death, death angel, wings, flowers, swirls*
 - ii. What words do you see?
 - *Potential answers: "here lyes buried" or "here lies buried"*
 - iii. What materials do you think were used?
 - *Potential answers: rock, stone, marble*
 - b. Level 2: Interpreting Evidence
 - i. What do you think these symbols mean together?
 - *Potential answers: the skull of the deceased is represented with wings so that it can ascend to heaven. The flowers emphasize rebirth.*
 - ii. What do you think the approximate year of this gravestone is? How do you know?
 - *Potential answers: the death's head was popular in the 18th century; flowers are popular throughout the 19th century.*
 - c. Level 3: Making Hypotheses from Evidence
 - i. What does this gravestone icon tell us about America's view of death at the time it was made?
 - *Potential answers: the people who viewed this stone were comfortable with imagining the dead as skeletons; they believed in an afterlife*
 - ii. What would you title this gravestone icon?
 - *Potential answers: A Bird's Eye View of Death; Winged Skull; A bird-like skeleton's head ascending to heaven*

Application Activity: Manipulative Gravestone Timeline

Now that students have taken a look at how to analyze a photograph they are going to apply this skill to make a time line. There are six main changes in gravestone motifs: Plain Style, Death's Head, Cherub, Urn and Willow, Monument and Garden Style Marker.

- 1) Inform students that they will now be looking at six different gravestone motifs.
- 2) Pass the *Student Handout ID- Six Gravestone Motifs*, one set per group.
- 3) As groups, instruct students to try to use their new visual discovery skills to analyze each gravestone motif.
- 4) After looking at each gravestone motif students are to create a timeline on a desk- the oldest gravestone on the left to the newest on the right. It is important for the groups have a reasoning for their order.
- 5) Pass out a strip of the *Student Handout IE- Gravestone Cutouts* to each student.
- 6) Instruct students to cut out the six gravestones from the *Student Handout IE- Gravestone Cutouts* and place them on the desk in front of them in the same order as their groups.
- 7) Ask each group to present their timeline order and reasoning to the class. Compare orders.
- 8) Lead a class discussion. Ask:
 - a. What similarities were there in their orders?

- b. What differences were there in their orders?
- 9) Inform students that you will present to them the order in a presentation.

Teacher Presentation: *Gravestone Timeline with Graphic Organizer*

- 1) Pass out the *Student Handout 1F- Gravestone Timeline* to each student.
- 2) Inform students that they will now be walked through a presentation about the accurate order of the gravestone timeline.
- 3) Instruct students to glue the correct motif to the *Student Handout 1F- Gravestone Timeline* motif picture section.
- 4) Inform students that they are to copy down the motif's information in the correct section of the *Student Handout 1F- Gravestone Timeline*- Time period, Characteristics, Attitude, and Reason.
- 5) Present *Teacher Presentation 1F- Gravestone Timeline* to students.

Evaluation:

- 1) Pass out the *Student Handout 1G- Evaluation* to each student.
- 2) Collect evaluations.