

English 121/Mourning/EMU Research Exploration #4: The Value of Trash and Treasure

Length/Format: 1-2 pages (450-500 words), English 121/MLA Final Draft Handout (See Handout/Example on site under Course Home); Images/Pictures do not count towards length

* If turning in more than one page, please staple your pages prior to class.

Purpose: For this exploration, you are to embody the mindset of a curious explorer, an observer—an ethnographer!. You will select two objects – one trash and one treasure. Your treasure is an object you hold dear of personal value while your “trash” is something you “pick up” somewhere throughout your day – on campus, walking down the street near shop fronts, at work, in the dorms, in a parking lot of a grocery store, etc. (NOTE: you do not have to bring the trash item to class). It could even be a first artifact you discover at your field site while conducting your first observation for your community. **Keep in mind that, we’re not using “trash” as usual, negative meaning; we’re using it in reference to an object/artifact, which belongs or belonged to someone else and might otherwise be overlooked, and can tell us more about who he/she/they are as people.**

Focus: The focus here is observation—noticing and focusing on what we see/“see” and making the “familiar strange and the strange familiar” AND perspective—the point of view you have when you interact with an idea or object and responding to our environment

Task: For each OBJECT (trash AND treasure) you will perform the following actions:

- **Make a small sketch or insert a photograph of each object:** try to get the detail you describe in your observation notes. It’s okay if you’re “not an artist.” Please be reasonable/modest with size and layout when inserting your photographs or images. Their size should not “overtake” the page and do not count towards your length.
- **Describe the object using sensory imagery, rich details, evidence, etc.:** these should just be things you notice (its size, shape, color, location, etc.) – i.e. not value judgments, but things you can see/taste/touch/feel/hear—the skills of observation.
- **Write a story of significance for (putting value now in your observation) each object.**
 - **Describe why your treasure matters to you** – where did it come from? Why does it have meaning? What association does it have with who you are as a person?
 - **For the trash, create a backstory for why this object matters/did matter to its owner(s) based on the evidence you observed—infer and make claims. In other words, try to come to some justified conclusions using the evidence available** – how did it get to where you found it? Who owned it/made it? What is the purpose or meaning of the object? Be creative: use your observations about the object to infer and draw some conclusions to create an interesting narrative or backstory for the “life” of this object and the person/people who used it. Consider the space, place, and function of the object.

Check out these websites/blogs for examples of how others have explored, observed, and documented everyday objects and value personal possessions:

- **The Burning House** <http://www.brainpickings.org/index.php/2012/07/19/the-burning-house-foster-huntington/>
- **Things** <http://www.brainpickings.org/index.php/2009/07/09/andrzej-kramarz-things/>
- **Found Magazine** <http://foundmagazine.com/>

Hints/Reminders:

- Make sure that you take the time to review and format your draft using the **English 121/MLA Final Draft handout**. Also, please take time to revise and proofread/edit your drafts before turning them for submission.
- Also, read over the **RE #4 Student Example-Model**, posted under **Unit 1**. This will give you some sense for the expectations for the assignment and how another student observed and reported her findings.
- Remember to write in complete thoughts, sentences, and paragraphs. Also, as the writer/artist, think about how to structure and organize your work on the page.

Grading Criteria

Consider the quality of your exploration, analysis, creativity, and writing

What does an exceptional exploration reflect? This draft...

1. meets the deadline, is completed in English 121 Final Draft Format, and is 1-2 full pages in length
2. includes a picture, vivid, rich description of a treasured object and a complete, and thoughtful narrative about its background
3. includes a picture, vivid, rich description of a trash artifact and a complete, creative narrative about its background based on inference and supported evidence.

✓ + (5): Exceptional. The writer has applied the criterion with distinction.

✓ (3): Meets some expectations. The writer has applied the criterion to a satisfactory degree but may be missing one or more components.

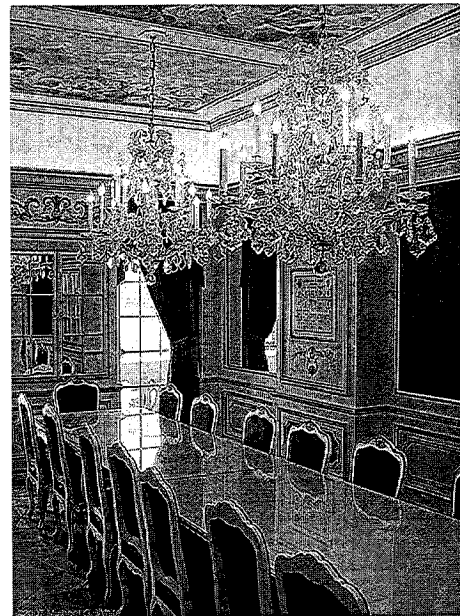
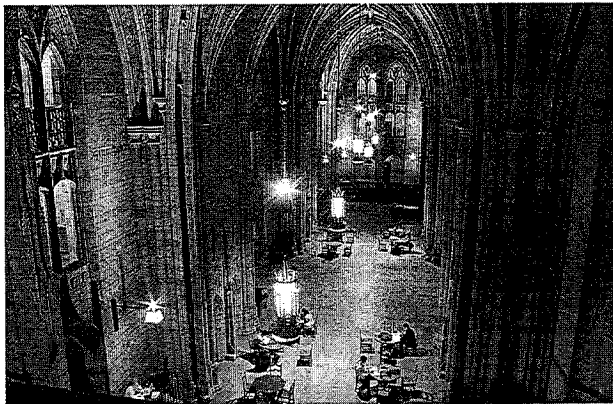
✓ - (1): Needs improvement. The writer has minimally applied the criterion in the exploration or is missing significant components.

0 Not applied. The writer has not applied the criterion in the exploration/has not created the exploration.

"Deconstructing Pray-Harrod" Class Exercise

1). We read several pages of the Practical Exercise from the chapter "The Street" in Georges Perec's *Species of Spaces*. Tiny excerpt: "Observe the Street, from time to time, with some concern for system perhaps... Force yourself to write down what is of no interest, what is most obvious, most common, most colorless... Don't say, don't write 'etc.' Make an effort to exhaust the subject, even if that seems grotesque, pointless, or stupid." I ask the students what is strange or nontraditional about this advice and how it might be beneficial to us as writers. Basically, the goal is "Make the strange familiar, and (especially) make the familiar strange.

2). I project various images from the University of Pittsburgh's Cathedral of Learning academic building. Below are The Common Room, and one of the Nationality Rooms (Austria). We discuss how this academic space projects different messages about education than does, say, Pray-Harrod. How would our 121 experience be different if it took place in one of these spaces? I ask them to think about this on a *practical*, day-to-day level, examining the positives and negatives.



3). We examine our current classroom, notice how it directs the gaze to the front of the room. Why did we swap our white boards with chalkboards? Why are drop ceilings so pervasive in contemporary architecture? (Yes, I stand on my desk and look above the drop ceiling.) What do our classrooms show we value? In short, technology's now inextricable ties to education + the low-cost construction ideally making education accessible to a wider population + no distractions.

4). I turn them loose in Pray-Harrod on a scavenger hunt to note down all the things they might not have taken the time to notice before today's lessons. The subliminal eco-consciousness of the bamboo particleboard in the Eagle café. The grass glass. The way the grips on the steps are less worn down the higher you go up the staircase. The green wall versus the blue wall. The devaluing of the word IMPORTANT on the hand dryers in the bathroom. Construction flaws. Etc.

Purpose: This activity builds observational skills and note-taking methods that will be helpful for community-based observational fieldwork.