



# HOW TO READ A MONUMENT: LITERARY SOURCES

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## UNIT: CONTESTED HERITAGE AND PUBLIC MEMORY

**TARGET LEVEL:** Higher Education (ages 18-22)

**FORMAT:** Online or in-person

**MATERIALS:** computer, internet connection

**SKILLS PROMOTED:** critical thinking, historical research, thinking through writing, close reading



This lesson introduces students to some of the ways in which commemorative objects and monumental materials feature in literary responses to the problem of remembering the dead. Memory objects and formal monuments alike often provided starting points for larger meditations about battlefield death, individual responsibility, and how honour and gratitude might work on a national scale after the war; literary texts also offer us an insight into how monuments were first conceived and received by different public groups -- as objects which gave rise to personal feelings, as well as public or political ones. This lesson can be paired with the **How to Read a Monument: Design, Form, and Intent** lesson plan on the Commemorative Cultures website.

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Students will interrogate the relationship between memory sites/objects and literary responses to those sites/objects, thinking through how literature both reflects and shapes historical memory.
2. Students will examine the relationship between gender and memory as evidenced in literature of the Civil War period.

## RESOURCES

1. Emily Dickinson, "[He gave away his Life –](#) " (c. 1862); "[They dropped like Flakes](#)" (c. 1862); "[My Portion is Defeat – today –](#) " (c. 1862).
2. Henry Timrod, "[The Unknown Dead.](#)"
3. Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, "[Annie Laurie,](#)" Harper's Monthly (December 1887), 122-138.
4. Brander Matthews, "[A Decoration-Day Revery,](#)" The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine (May 1890), 102-105.

## ACTIVITY

1. Divide students into three groups. Ask each group to read aloud and discuss one of the poems by Emily Dickinson. Look up any words you may not know. Note the meter and the rhyme patterns. Try to summarize in your own words the main idea of the poem. Then, discuss how the poem deals with the idea of the Civil War dead. How are they presented by Dickinson? What feelings are attached to them?

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2. As a class, compare what you've noticed in small groups about the Dickinson poems with the poem "The Unknown Dead" by Henry Timrod. How do Timrod's characterizations of the Civil War dead resemble or differ from Dickinson's? What feelings are attached to the dead in Timrod's poem? What significance do they hold for individuals, and for the nation more broadly?
3. Before class, ask students to read the two short stories by Phelps and Matthews. These stories represent some of the hundreds of stories relating to Civil War loss and grief that appeared in U.S. periodicals in the decades following the conflict. In class, lead a discussion of the following questions:
  - a. What do these texts reveal about the gendered dynamics of Civil War memory?
  - b. What part do women play in determining the workings of public commemoration?
  - c. Do different memory objects mean different things to women than they do to men?
  - d. How might we use these texts to begin to characterise the relationship between Northern women and the Civil War dead?

### ASSESSMENT

1. Write a **literary analysis essay** that examines the gendered dynamics of Civil War memory in one or more of the following texts:
  - a. Constance Fenimore Woolson, "[Rodman the Keeper](#)" (1877)
  - b. Walt Whitman, [Drum-Taps](#) (1865)
  - c. Louisa May Alcott, "[The Brothers](#)" (1863)
2. You may wish to have students read some of the letters that Dickinson wrote about Frazar Stearns, a young soldier from her hometown of Amherst, Massachusetts ([letter to Samuel Bowles](#), [letter to the Norcross cousins](#)). Have students write poems in the style of Emily Dickinson about the loss of Frazar Stearns.

