

Lesson Plans: Grades 6-8

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Edward Hopper's House by the Railroad: From Painting to Poem

A PICTURING AMERICA RESOURCE

Introduction



16-A Edward Hopper (1882–1967), *House by the Railroad*, 1925. Oil on canvas. 24 x 29 in. (61 x 73.7 cm.). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Given anonymously (3.1930).

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... the utterly naked look of someone / being stared at"

—Edward Hirsch, "Edward Hopper and the House by the Railroad (1925)," from *Wild Gratitude*, 1986

Critics tend to see in Edward Hopper's painting and Edward Hirsch's poem two despairing views of a particular time and place in American history—the tail end of the main industrial movement in the United States—when the traffic of industry aggressively reconfigured the American landscape. Even as that traffic brought work and culture to parts of the country that either welcomed or needed them, it ravished or compelled the abandonment of others. What for some was progress, for others was decline, and what remained after the storm, so to speak, was a truly forsaken structure: Hopper's Victorian house is closed, isolated, enthroned in a seemingly permanent shadow; Hirsch imagines there "someone who is about to be left alone / Again, and can no longer stand it."

Both the painter and the writer, implicitly and explicitly, take on the artist as an additional subject in these works. Hopper does so largely through his interpretation of the scene; Hirsch includes the painter—"the man behind the easel . . . brutal as sunlight"—more explicitly; both men explore the artist's role in making the historical moment meaningful. And perhaps both succeed by offering consolation in the beauty of their forms.

This lesson invites a close reading of Hopper's painting and Hirsch's poem to explore the types of emotion generated by each work in the viewer or reader, and how the painter and poet each achieved these responses.

Guiding Questions

What does the visual evidence in Hopper's painting tell us and how has Hirsch interpreted the painting in his poem?

How does each artist interpret this moment in American history?

Learning Objectives

Observe and discuss how the forms in Hopper's painting establish tone and meaning

Analyze and discuss how Hirsch's use of diction and imagery establish tone and meaning

Place Hopper and Hirsch in some historical context

Consider how the painting and poem comment on at least one aspect of life in America

Employ both visual and verbal arts as vehicles for the student's own expression

Background

On the Picturing America website, go to the gallery section and click on the image (16a. You will need to pan over to find it) of *House by the Railroad* (1925) to get basic biographical and contextual information about Edward Hopper and his painting. A link on the page for educators will take you to the Picturing America *Teachers Resource Book* with a two-page chapter on Hopper, one page of which will be invaluable to Activity 1 below in its instructions on how to look at the painting and what kinds of questions to ask of it. For more information, you can also follow EDSITEment's Picturing America Website Links.

The Picturing America website can provide you with comparative material on other artworks. You might consider Hopper's realism in tandem with Winslow Homer's *The Veteran in a New Field* (1865) and Thomas Eakins' *John Biglin in a Single Scull* (1873). Following leads from the *Teachers Resource Book's* index, you might also want to look at Walker Evan's photograph of Brooklyn Bridge (1929) and Joseph Stella's painting *Brooklyn Bridge* (c. 1919-1920), as well as Charles Sheeler's *American Landscape* (1930) for other depictions of industrialization in America. Sheeler's painting, like Hopper's, looks at the railroad's place in the landscape. The nature and evolution of the American landscape provide the subjects for many of the works on this site, including Albert Bierstadt's dramatic and magnificent image of the frontier in *Looking Down from Yosemite Valley, California* (1865); Thomas Cole's *View from Mount Holyoke, North Hampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm—The Oxbow* (1836), which looks at the landscape as settlement was altering the wilderness. Romare Beardon's *The Dove* (1964) and Richard Diebenkorn's *Cityscape 1* (1963) pursue the notion of cityscape as landscape.

For some information about the beginning of the industrial revolution in the United States, see the EDSITEment lesson plans "Was There an Industrial Revolution? Americans at Work Before the Civil War" and "Was There an Industrial Revolution? New Workplace, New Technology, New Consumers." A look at the impact of industrialism at the turn of the century can be found in the EDSITEment lesson "Carl Sandburg's 'Chicago': Bringing a Great City Alive." For background on some of the effects of the transcontinental railroad, look at "I Hear the Locomotives: The Impact of the Transcontinental Railroad." The EDSITEment-reviewed Smithsonian Museum of American History offers a timeline through the "History Explorer" link; you can click on the era you want to look more closely at (in this case, select the green area for the Development of the Industrial US and follow their leads for succinct description of the period.)

Edward Hirsch is a contemporary poet who writes in a range of genres and addresses many themes, making him difficult to classify; he has published free verse and formal odes; and his primary preoccupations include emotional life, history, and politics, and most recently, the "divine." His second collection of poems, *Wild*

Gratitude, in which "Edward Hopper's House by the Railroad (1925)" appeared, won the National Book Critics Circle Award for 1986. (The poem, published earlier in *Poetry Magazine* [Volume 140, July 1982], also appears in *The Poetry of Solitude: A Tribute to Edward Hopper*, an anthology collected and introduced by Gail Levin [New York: Universe Publishing, 1995].) Biographical and bibliographical information on Edward Hirsch, as well as samples of his prose and poetry and a recording of him reciting his poem "Cotton Candy," is available on the EDSITEment-reviewed Academy of American Poets website. More information and more links to Hirsch's work can also be found at the EDSITEment-reviewed Poetry Foundation website.

EDSITEment's Literary Glossary can provide help with basic poetic terms and devices. Also see Edward Hirsch's brief essay "How to Read a Poem" at the Academy of American Poets site.

Preparation Instructions

Review the lesson plan and the websites used throughout. Locate and bookmark suggested materials and websites. Download and print out documents you will use and duplicate copies as necessary for student viewing.

Lesson Activities

Activity 1. Feel

Activity 2. Look

Activity 3. Think

Activity 4. Write

Activity 5. Read

Activity 6. Compare

Activity 7. Look some more

Activity 1. Feel

Before students read anything about Hopper's painting, ask them simply to look at it for a few minutes and then to describe how the painting makes them feel. To flesh out their responses, let them use Worksheet 1—where they can list pertinent words that come to mind as they examine the painting, describe their emotional responses to the painting, and register their associations (e.g. memories evoked, other paintings, art, literature, or music brought to mind, etc.). Use the Worksheet as the basis for discussion.

Activity 2. Look

Begin a thorough description of the painting with students by using Worksheet 2 to note all they see. Try to keep them focused on the visual evidence, to see the subtlest of physical details. As the worksheet suggests, you can stimulate discussion by asking:

What objects are depicted in the painting (i.e., the train tracks, windows)?

How many rooms do you think are in this house?

Which objects are man-made? What natural landscape forms are depicted?

Point out areas of light and dark. Where are the lightest lights? Where are the darkest darks?

Where is the sun?

What kind of shapes do you see? What kind of shape predominates?

What colors are used in the painting? What color predominates? Where is the brightest color?

What kinds of lines are used in the painting? What kind of line predominates? Where do lines create stillness or movement?

Point out areas of pattern or repetition in the painting. What kind of rhythms do the patterns or repetitions create?

List the different kinds of contrast (light/shade, lines, shapes, etc.)

Describe the space. How deep is it? Is it crowded? Open? Where?

For every observation they have made above, ask "why?" or "with what consequence or result?" Explore the effects of the details to which their descriptions point.

Activity 3. Think

For this activity ask students to consider questions such as those in the "Describe and Analyze" section of the Teaching Activities in the *Picturing America Teachers Resource Book* for Edward Hopper's *House by the Railroad*.

What kind of people do you think originally lived in this house?

In an era before air conditioning houses were kept cool in different ways: shade trees, large windows for cross-ventilation, shades that could be pulled down to block the heat of the sun, roofed porches. What kinds of sounds might the original inhabitants have heard? What kind of sounds might you hear there now?

What time of day is it? What visual evidence suggests this? What temperature is it? What visual evidence suggests this? Why might the artist chose this time and this kind of day?

Where are the darkest shadows on the house? Ask what these dark shadows suggest about the house? Is it welcoming?

Ask students to talk about the mood of this painting. Ask them to explain why it evokes this mood. (Students should point to specific evidence from the painting.)

Activity 4. Write

Now invite students to write a poem about the painting. In the spirit of true creativity, you may not want to offer more guidance than that.

Activity 5. Read

Next, read Hirsch's "Edward Hopper and the House by the Railroad (1925)." Using Worksheet 3, asks students to make a list of all the subjects they can discern in Hirsch's poem. Once you have given them some time to do so (singly or in pairs), let them share their lists with the class, creating a master list on the board. Presumably a few students will offer some implicit subjects to include with the more evident explicit subjects, but if not, you can coax them there by drawing their attention to some of the more abstract diction: "strange," "ashamed," "relentless" or "horrible," for example, and then phrasing that list as nouns: "shame" and "horror," for example.

Also with the aid of Worksheet 3, ask students to choose a few of the subjects they think either especially important or most evocative of the subjects in Hopper's painting. Then ask them to use the second column of this part of the worksheet to note words or images from the poem that are relevant to those subjects.

Activity 6. Compare

Using Worksheet 4, ask students to note similarities and differences in Hirsch's and their own responses to the painting. Let them compare mood and tone and provide examples from both poems. They should also write a list of subjects, both implicit and explicit, in both poems, and write a list of images that stand out for them. Once they have done these worksheets, discuss their content; addressing the strengths and weaknesses of Hirsch's and their own imagery might be especially productive.

Activity 7. Look some more

Return to Hopper's painting. This would be a good time to turn to the "Interpret" section of the Teaching Activities in the *Picturing America Teachers Resource Book* for Edward Hopper's *House by the Railroad*. You can use the questions there as a departure for discussion:

Ask students to imagine how this scene would change if a train went by on this track.

Ask students what they think was built first, the house or the railroad track. Ask them to explain why they think this.

Have students think of a building in their community that seems old, outdated, and ugly, but not so old that it is a treasured antique. Explain that this is how Hopper probably felt about this house. Its Victorian architecture was dated and out of style in 1925, but today that style has regained some of its popularity.

Point out visual examples of how this painting conveys a sense of loneliness. Why might many people come near this house each day? What might they think about the house and its inhabitants? Will they probably ever meet the people who live in this house? Why or why not?

To prepare students to write, discuss both Hopper's painting and Hirsch's poem as commentaries on America in terms of encroaching industrialism, the impact of the railroad, and the changing landscape. Be sure to clarify for students that Hirsch's poem was written in 1982, almost sixty years after Hopper's painting, and ask them to

look for evidence of this different perspective. Ask them what details from each work can be read as addressing the subject of America. You can put those three categories (industrialism, the railroad, the landscape) on the board and list those aspects of each work that can fall under each.

Assessment

An initial writing project can be the accumulation of all student work here to date in the shape of a brief essay comparing the Hopper and the Hirsch.

Alternatively, or in addition, students might write a comparison of two (or more) of the artworks from Picturing America mentioned in this lesson plan (excluding the Hopper) for their approach to one the artists' representation of some aspect of America. Perusal of the site and its index can help you and the students find different themes to focus on if those of industrialism no longer suit you. In any case, it would be beneficial for students to go through versions of Activities 1, 2, 3, and 6 before getting to the essay-writing stage.

Extending The Lesson

Students can write a poem inspired by an image provided by student—a photo of someplace important to them, a painting they've always loved, etc. You may want to urge them to include both explicit and implicit subjects and to carefully consider mood, tone, and imagery.

Look at other poetry inspired by Hopper in *The Poetry of Solitude: A Tribute to Edward Hopper*, collected and introduced by Gail Levin (New York: Universe Publishing, 1995).

Look at other works of landscape/cityscape art, on Picturing America or elsewhere, that might inspire a poem with a similar/opposing view.

Listen to Hirsch at poets.org

Record students' performance of their own poems (i.e., provide the option to make music or performance the other art).

Students can create a work of graphic art based on their reading of a poem. If you want to stick with the historic themes touched on in this lesson plan, students might consider these poets at the Academy of American Poets or the Poetry Foundation: the quintessential American poet, Walt Whitman; Hart Crane, who in the Academy of American Poet's term, "used the landscape of the modern, industrialized city to create a powerful new symbolic literature"; or Hopper's contemporary (and one much concerned with the concept of industry), Robert Frost.

Picturing America Website Links

Picturing America

Picturing America Resource Guide to Edward Hopper, House by the Railroad, 1925

Artist/Artwork

The Museum of Modern Art's web page on Hopper's House by the Railroad has a further link to six other paintings by Hopper held by the museum.

The Smithsonian American Art Museum Website, An Edward Hopper Scrapbook, has links to pages detailing his art, friends, shows, and other areas of interest. For information on House by the Railroad go to the Featured Art page through the art link.

The Tate Modern, London, Website's 2004 exhibit, Edward Hopper, has pages featuring an artist chronology, an illustrated timeline of Hopper's works, and an online viewer of the artist's sketchbook, begun in the 1940s, which can be scrolled through.

First comprehensive exhibit of the works of Edward Hopper in America in more than twenty-five years. At the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (May 6–August 7, 2007); the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., (September 16, 2007–January 21, 2008); and the Art Institute of Chicago (February 16–May 11, 2008). The show and online venues include works from the exhibit and a biography, and other special features. The National Gallery has produced a special documentary film on the artist narrated by Steve Martin. (Information on its online availability is unknown at this time.)

Art/Geography/History/Social Studies/Language Arts/Literature

Interactive Website developed by ReadWriteThink.org, Great Depression and the Dust Bowl Web Exploration, engages students in an overview, painting (Thomas Hart Benton, Edward Hopper included), photography (Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother*), primary documents, and music from this period. A virtual notepad is provided and an opportunity to print out the activities. Links to other Websites, such as the PBS American Experience series film *Surviving the Dust Bowl*, and numerous links to Library of Congress material are available.

Art/History/Social Studies/Literature

University of Virginia, American Studies Program Website, The 1930s on Display, has hyperlinks to a series of online projects open a window into Depression-age culture through art, architecture, cinema, advertising, and commerce. Includes projects on the Chrysler Building, Charles Sheeler, and the Farm Security Administration (*Migrant Mother* is included). A further link to the site index features opens additional links to film, print, and radio pages and Websites. Links to pages featuring James Agee and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, and Evans's method of photography are included under the "Documentary" listings.

Art/Language Arts/Literature (Teachers' Guide)

ReadWriteThink.org. web page, Designing Museum Exhibits for *The Grapes of Wrath*: A Multigenre Project involves Grade 9–12 students in a research project of one topic or event from Steinbeck's novel, using fiction, non-fiction, and art.

History/Social Studies

University of Houston collaborative project, Digital History Website with online textbook chapter links to topics in the 1930s, including hyperlinked pages, Why it Happened, The Human Toll, The Dispossessed, The National Recovery Administration, and African Americans and the New Deal.

History/Social Studies (Teachers' Guide)

ReadWriteThink's web page, The U.S. Transcontinental Railroad was completed in 1870 has links to lesson plans and other sites that deal with the effect the railroad had on American life.

History/Social Studies (Teachers' Guide)

The National Council on Economic Education's Website, EconEdlink, has a lesson plan page for Grades 9-12, Where Did All the Money Go? The Great Depression Mystery, asks students to consider the conditions that led up to the Great Depression; key economic concepts include interdependence, savings, and supply.

Selected EDSITEment Websites

Museum of Fine Arts in Boston

Edward Hopper: The Artist

National Gallery of Art

Edward Hopper

Art Institute of Chicago

Edward Hopper Exhibition

Smithsonian American Art Museum

An Edward Hopper Scrapbook

Smithsonian Museum of American History

History Explorer: Timeline

Academy of American Poets

Edward Hirsch

Edward Hirsch, "The Widening Sky" (audio clip)

Edward Hirsch, "How to Read a Poem"

Poetry Foundation

Edward Hirsch

Time Required

3-6 class periods

Subject Areas

- Literature and Language Arts > Place > American
- Art and Culture > Subject Matter > Art History
- Art and Culture > Medium > Visual Arts
- History and Social Studies > U.S. > The Great Depression and World War II (1929-1945)
- Literature and Language Arts > Genre > Poetry

Skills

- Compare and contrast
- Gathering, classifying and interpreting written, oral and visual information
- Internet skills
- Interpretation
- Making inferences and drawing conclusions
- Poetry analysis
- Poetry writing
- Representing ideas and information orally, graphically and in writing
- Textual analysis
- Visual art analysis

Authors

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Activity Worksheets

Edward Hopper's House by the Railroad: Worksheet 1

Edward Hopper's House by the Railroad: Worksheet 2

Edward Hopper's House by the Railroad: Worksheet 3

Edward Hopper's House by the Railroad: Worksheet 4

Media



16-A Edward Hopper (1882–1967), *House by the Railroad*, 1925. Oil on canvas, 24 x 29 in. (61 x 73.7 cm.). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Given anonymously (3.1930).

Credit: Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, New York.

Worksheet 2: Hopper's *House by the Railroad*

Student Name _____ Date _____

Note everything you see and, where you can or where you think it is important to the work to do so, note the effects of those details

What objects are depicted in the painting (i.e., the train tracks, windows)?

How many rooms do you think are in this house?

Which objects are man-made? What natural landscape forms are depicted?

Point out areas of light and dark. Where are the lightest lights? Where are the darkest darks?

Where is the sun?

What kind of shapes do you see? What kind of shape predominates?

What colors are used in the painting:

What colors predominate?

Where is the brightest color?

What kinds of lines are used in the painting: [e.g. straight, curved, etc.]

What kind of line predominates in the painting?

Where do lines create stillness? Movement?

Point out areas of pattern or repetition in the painting:

What kinds of rhythms do the patterns or repetitions create?

Find the different kinds of contrast (light/shade, lines, shape, etc.) that exist in the painting:

Describe the space in the painting:

How deep is it?

Is it crowded?

Open?

Where?

Worksheet 4: Hopper's *House by the Railroad*

Student Name _____ Date _____

How does your poem differ from and resemble Hirsch's in your response to Hopper's painting?

Hirsch's poem

Your poem

<u>Dominant moods and tones in Hirsch's poem:</u>	<u>Dominant moods and tones in your poem:</u>
<u>Explicit subjects:</u>	<u>Explicit subjects:</u>
<u>Implied subjects:</u>	<u>Implied subjects:</u>
<u>Noteworthy images:</u>	<u>Noteworthy images:</u>
<u>Other:</u>	<u>Other:</u>