

A Sense Of Things The Object Matter Of American Literature

A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature

American literature, from its nascent beginnings to its contemporary expressions, grapples consistently with a profound sense of things – a tangible, often material, understanding of the world that shapes its characters, narratives, and thematic concerns. This "sense of things," encompassing **material culture**, **landscape**, **the body**, and the **constructed environment**, serves as a crucial object of study, revealing deeper truths about the nation's identity, its anxieties, and its aspirations. Understanding this interplay between the physical and the literary is key to unlocking the rich tapestry of American storytelling. We'll explore how this material world acts as a vital component in understanding American Identity, through the lens of **American exceptionalism**.

The Material World as Character: Landscape and the American Identity

American literature frequently utilizes landscape as a powerful character in itself. Think of the vast, untamed wilderness in the works of Nathaniel Hawthorne and James Fenimore Cooper; these landscapes, far from being mere backdrops, actively shape the destinies and identities of their characters. The frontier, a recurring motif, becomes a crucible where individual character is tested, forged, and ultimately defined by its interaction with the physical world. This engagement with the physical environment reflects the nation's ongoing negotiation with its own identity – the constant

struggle between civilization and wilderness, progress and preservation, freedom and constraint. This exploration of the **American Dream** is deeply intertwined with the tangible realities of the land. For example, John Steinbeck's **The Grapes of Wrath** vividly portrays the Dust Bowl's devastating impact on migrant workers, illustrating how the material conditions of their lives directly influence their hopes, struggles, and relationships. The land, in this instance, is not a passive observer but an active participant in their human drama.

Material Culture and the Shaping of Identity

Beyond landscape, the objects that populate the lives of characters play a pivotal role in American literature. Clothing, tools, houses, and even food become significant markers of social class, cultural identity, and personal history. In novels like Edith Wharton's **The Age of Innocence**, the opulent possessions of the New York elite reveal their social standing and their carefully constructed world. Conversely, the sparse belongings of characters in works portraying poverty, like those by Upton Sinclair, highlight the harsh realities of economic inequality and social injustice. This focus on **material culture** provides a tangible lens through which to examine social hierarchies and power dynamics. Analyzing the objects that surround a character helps us understand their aspirations, anxieties, and place within the broader social context. This analysis forms a powerful methodology for unpacking the complexities of American experience.

The Body and the Constructed Environment: Embodiment and Experience

American literature also explores the relationship between the physical body and the constructed environment. The body, often subjected to physical hardship, emotional trauma, or social limitations, becomes a site of resistance, resilience, and self-discovery. In works exploring the realities of slavery, like Frederick Douglass's autobiography, the physicality of suffering and the limitations imposed on the body become central to the narrative of oppression and ultimately, freedom. The built environment, too, holds symbolic weight. The crowded tenements of the urban poor, contrasted with the spacious mansions of the wealthy, reveal social disparities. The architecture of a community, its roads, its public spaces, all

speaking volumes about the underlying social structures and power dynamics. The interaction between the human body and the physical surroundings serves to reveal the complexities of American society and its inherent inequalities.

American Exceptionalism and the Sense of Things

The concept of "American exceptionalism" – the belief in the unique destiny and moral superiority of the United States – finds powerful expression through the "sense of things" in American literature. The vast landscape, the promise of opportunity, the material achievements, and the constant struggle for freedom and equality are all intertwined within the narrative. However, American literature also critically examines the dark side of this exceptionalism – the exploitation of natural resources, the legacy of slavery and colonialism, and the ongoing struggle for social justice. The material world, in its various forms, becomes a crucial site for exploring the contradictions and complexities inherent in the American experience. This constant tension between idealism and reality is reflected in the way authors depict the tangible aspects of American life.

Conclusion

The "sense of things," encompassing the material world, landscape, the body, and the constructed environment, acts as a vital component of American literature. By analyzing the tangible elements of American stories, we gain a deeper understanding of the nation's evolving identity, its social and political struggles, and its enduring quest for meaning. This material lens allows for a richer and more nuanced exploration of the complexities of the American experience, revealing the profound interconnectedness between the physical world and the human condition. Further research into this area could investigate how contemporary authors are using this approach to address contemporary concerns.

FAQ

Q1: How does the "sense of things" differ in early American literature compared to modern American literature?

A1: Early American literature often emphasized the vastness and untamed nature of the American landscape, focusing on themes of exploration, frontier life, and the struggle to establish civilization. Modern American literature tends to explore more nuanced aspects of the material world, including the impact of industrialization, urbanization, and technology on the human experience. It also frequently confronts the legacy of social inequalities and injustices reflected in the material conditions of different groups.

Q2: Can you provide more examples of how food is used as a symbol in American literature?

A2: Food is frequently laden with symbolism. In **The Great Gatsby**, lavish parties featuring extravagant food symbolize the superficiality and excess of the Roaring Twenties. In contrast, the meager meals described in John Steinbeck's **The Grapes of Wrath** highlight the hardship and poverty faced by migrant workers. The food itself becomes a reflection of the social and economic standing of the characters.

Q3: How does the concept of "home" relate to the "sense of things"?

A3: The concept of "home" is intimately linked to materiality. The physical space of a home – its architecture, furnishings, and overall condition – becomes a powerful symbol of belonging, stability, or conversely, displacement and alienation. The character's relationship with their home often reveals much about their emotional state and their social standing.

Q4: What role does technology play in the contemporary "sense of things" in American literature?

A4: Contemporary American literature increasingly explores the impact of technology on our experience of the material world. The internet, social media, and ubiquitous technology are often examined for their effect on human relationships, identity, and our sense of place. The digital landscape and its tangible manifestations in smartphones and other devices are becoming increasingly important objects of study in modern literature.

Q5: How can understanding the "sense of things" enhance our appreciation of American

literature?

A5: Recognizing the significance of the material world in American literature enhances our understanding of the characters' motivations, the historical context, and the underlying themes. It allows for a more profound engagement with the text and a richer appreciation of its overall meaning and artistic merit.

Q6: Are there specific literary movements that particularly emphasize the "sense of things"?

A6: Realism and Naturalism particularly emphasized the depiction of the material world and its influence on characters' lives. These movements sought to portray life accurately and objectively, often focusing on the impact of social and economic factors on the everyday lives of individuals. Contemporary authors working in genres like eco-fiction and magical realism also utilize this concept in highly creative ways.

Q7: How might this concept be applied to the study of other national literatures?

A7: The concept of a "sense of things" can be applied to other national literatures to analyze how material culture shapes narratives and identities. Examining the specific material objects, landscapes, and built environments prevalent in a given literature reveals much about the culture's values, anxieties, and historical experiences.

Q8: What are some future directions for research on the "sense of things" in American literature?

A8: Future research could explore the intersection of the "sense of things" with issues of race, gender, and sexuality; investigate the evolving representation of the material world in digital media and virtual environments; and examine how different literary genres approach the relationship between the material world and the human experience.

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American literature, a expansive tapestry woven from myriad threads, finds its power not just in its

narratives but also in its meticulous focus to the "sense of things"—the material reality that surrounds its characters and molds their fates. This article will examine how the tangible, the visceral, the materially specific forms a crucial aspect of American literary production, impacting topics of identity, nature, and the American dream.

From the earliest colonial chronicles to contemporary works, American authors have consistently engaged with the material world. This isn't simply a matter of setting, but rather a deeper interaction where objects become symbols imbued with significance. Early narratives, often infused with a puritan worldview, frequently used descriptions of the harsh landscape – the unforgiving wilderness, the dense woods – to stand for both the obstacles and the opportunities of the New World. The "sense of things" in this context was intimately tied to the struggle for survival and spiritual regeneration.

Consider, for example, the detailed descriptions of nature in the writings of Henry David Thoreau. In **Walden**, Thoreau's meticulous observations of flora and fauna are not merely aesthetic; they are integral to his project of self-reliance and his analysis of societal materialism. The water reflects the personal landscape of the author, mirroring his odyssey of self-discovery. Similarly, in Nathaniel Hawthorne's novels, ordinary objects – a scarlet letter, a custom house, a decaying mansion – become powerful signs that reveal the hidden wrongdoings and hypocrisies of Puritan society. The "sense of things" here operates as a mirror reflecting the moral state of the characters and the nation itself.

The rise of realism and naturalism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries saw an even greater focus on the material world. Authors like Kate Chopin and Stephen Crane concentrated on the concrete details of ordinary life, highlighting the impact of poverty, class, and cultural inequities on individuals. In Chopin's **The Awakening**, the sea, a strong natural force, embodies Edna Pontellier's yearning for independence and ultimately becomes a symbol of her tragic demise. The "sense of things" here is not just descriptive; it's fundamental to the narrative's emotional and thematic impact.

The 20th and 21st centuries witness a continued examination of the "sense of things," albeit often through a more complicated lens. Modernist and postmodernist authors question the very nature of representation, exploring the relationship between objects, language, and significance. Consider the work of writers like Gertrude Stein and Ernest Hemingway, both of whom used a sparse style that nonetheless conveys a powerful sense of the material reality. Hemingway's minimalist descriptions of

landscapes and objects are often powerfully evocative, suggesting a deeper mental depth that underlies the outside.

The "sense of things" in American literature remains a abundant area of study, offering significant insights into the evolution of American identity, its changing cultural landscape, and its enduring relationship with the material world. Understanding how authors utilize objects and descriptions to express themes, develop characters, and create atmosphere is crucial to a deeper understanding of American literature. Future studies could further explore the intersection of materialism, consumerism, and the "sense of things" in contemporary American fiction, examining how the surplus of material goods impacts the depiction of human relationships and aspirations.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

Q1: How does the "sense of things" differ in different literary periods?

A1: The emphasis and function of the "sense of things" vary considerably across different literary movements. Early American literature often used objects to symbolize religious or moral themes. Realism and Naturalism focused on the impact of the material world on individuals' lives. Modernism and Postmodernism questioned the very nature of representation, often using objects in fragmented or ambiguous ways.

Q2: Can you provide an example of how an object becomes a symbol in American literature?

A2: In **The Great Gatsby**, Jay Gatsby's lavish parties and extravagant possessions ultimately symbolize his desperate attempt to recapture the past and win back Daisy Buchanan. His wealth, represented through his material possessions, is ultimately revealed as superficial and unable to buy him happiness.

Q3: What are the practical benefits of studying the "sense of things" in American literature?

A3: Studying how authors use the material world enhances our critical reading skills and deepens our understanding of the texts' themes and characters. It also provides insights into the historical and social contexts in which these works were created. It cultivates a closer attention to detail and improves

analytical skills.

Q4: How can this concept be applied in teaching American literature?

A4: Instructors can use close reading exercises to analyze how specific objects function in a literary work, encouraging students to identify symbolic meanings and connections to broader themes. They can also incorporate visual analysis and discussions about the significance of setting and description.

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