

Illinois State Museum – MuseumLink Art
A Matter of Style: 19th Century Furniture: Language
Activity: The Story of an Old Piano



Purpose: students will practice writing from different points of view; that of an inanimate object.

Objective: After reading the excerpts from The Story of an Old Piano and going through the information and images about the Classical Revival style piano and its owner, the students will choose a personal object important in their lives and write a paragraph or more from the point of view of that object and its relationship to its owner.

Grade Level: 5-8

Time Required: one to two class periods

Materials: pencil, writing paper
print out of The Story of a Piano (excerpts)

Illinois State Museum Web site used:

http://www.museum.state.il.us/muslink/art/htmls/ms_classic.html for information about piano

Motivation: Read aloud the excerpts from The Story of a Piano, discussing the topics and ideas involved, and the literary concept of “point-of-view.” In material culture, researchers want to know the physical use of an object, and also want to know about the personal, social, economic, cultural and psychological functions. Discuss what the piano may have meant to Helen:

- an opportunity to learn a musical skill to use all her life
- a memory of her schooling in New York
- the status of being the first piano in her Illinois county
- the prestige of the expensive-looking piano
- an opportunity to show off her talent
- a way to entertain at family and friends at parties
- a tool for teaching her children to play piano
- a role in the expansion of musical culture in Illinois

Then explain that the student should choose an object that has a lot of meaning to him/her, list the feelings and topics s/he could tell about in writing.

Procedure: Using The Story of an Old Piano as a model, students will write an outline and then a long paragraph (or very short story) of their relationship with their object from the point of view of the object. They should include a description of the object, a description of themselves using the object, and hints as to the meaning of the object in their lives.

Publication and Closure: Students can volunteer to read their stories aloud. Stories can be posted or bound for the class library.

Assessment: It should be clear that the object is telling the story. Descriptions and relationships should be included.

Illinois State Board of Education Standards and Goals addressed:

Language Arts: Goal 3.B: Compose well-organized and coherent writing for specific purposes.

Story of an Old Piano (excerpts) written by Mrs. Charles Ferris, 1900.

It has been said that my first years were spent in the City of New York in a music house kept by J. Thurston, a dealer in musical instruments. I was too young, however, to remember anything of this portion of my existence. My recollection dates from the time the sunlight flashed across my ivory keys in a large apartment in a "Select Boarding and Day School for Young Ladies." I soon found my mistress – Helen Gilchrist; a slender girl, only fourteen, whose big black eyes often grew misty from homesickness for the Illinois home so far away in the Western Wilderness. Two years passed away, when, one day, I was boxed for shipping. I heard talk of a log cabin, and wondered much what a log cabin might be. I was put aboard a sailing vessel at the port of New York, and after weeks of voyaging was landed at the wharf of a city called New Orleans. Here I was stowed away on the deck of a big steam boat, and was soon steaming up the Mississippi River, landing at a trading post called Warsaw. Transferred from the boat to a farmer's wagon, I began my journey from Warsaw to Tennessee Township, McDonough County . . . I was overjoyed to meet my mistress once more and to see her happiness with her father, mother, and four younger brothers. . . . People came from miles to see me, the first piano in McDonough County, and the first which many a grown person had ever seen – to admire my polished case, two convenient drawers to hold sheet music, and hand-carved legs. My sweet tones astonished and delighted them, when the fingers of my owner drew forth such melodies as "Bonaparte Crossing the Alps," "Haste to the Wedding," and "Flow Gently, Sweet Afton." Soon to the western farm house suitors flocked. The favored one was a dignified, scholarly doctor. . . (her) senior by fifteen years. I felt so glad when she, with all the impetuosity of eighteen, gave her life into his keeping. Once more, in 1850, an overland trip was made. Only twelve miles this time, and it is hoped this journey will be my last! I was brought to Fountain Green, here to this house which has been my house ever since. The young bride soon made many friends in the new home. Lonely she often was when the Doctor was absent for days and nights at a time, riding with saddle bags behind him, miles over country roads, to carry comfort and healing to the sick. . . . For a while my honors were shared with a new sewing machine. As people came to see me, so they came now from far and near to see this great wonder — a machine that could stitch and hem. I was quite neglected and felt decidedly 'flat.' My keys have been thumped to quiet babies' cries. Baby fingers have pounded them. They have been sticky with jam. They have been wet with tears. they have softly resounded to the funeral music as three little forms have been borne, amid sorrow and tears, across the threshold. They have gleefully peeled forth at weddings. Today, as I gaze into that dear face, I realize, for the first time that it has altered. I never thought of her as having changed -- but the girlish figure broadened into most matronly proportions, with thinned and faded hair; with hands broadened and worn with tireless, unselfish toil for others. When my last note is silenced, may it be silenced by her beloved touch! When, for the last time, my lid is closed, may it be shut by her gentle clasp!