Examining Symbolism in the Memorials at Pearl Harbor

Overview
Students will study the USS Arizona Memorial to identify and analyze features that hold symbolic significance. They will evaluate the importance of honoring the past through war memorials and examine why we use monuments to commemorate those who made the ultimate sacrifice. Students should consider why symbolism is used when designing these memorials and whether or not the artist's intention is relevant to interpreting meaning.

Recommended Grade Range
Grades 9-12

Prerequisites
This lesson should follow previous discussions and lessons on World War II and the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Objectives
- Students will examine images of the USS Arizona Memorial, making observations about what they see.
- Students will use observations and knowledge of World War II to make informed guesses about what symbolism might be included in the memorial and what that symbolism represents.
- Students will use resources on the artist’s designs to determine what symbolism was intended, if any.
- Groups should discuss the reasons behind using symbols in the memorial.
- Groups should consider why we use monuments and memorials to commemorate the dead.

Content Standards
Connections to Common Core:
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.9 Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.4 Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.

Connections to C3 Framework:
D2.His.3.9-12 Use questions generated about individuals and groups to assess how the significance of their actions changes over time and is shaped by the historical context.
D2.His.7.9-12 Explain how the perspectives of people in the present shape interpretations of the past.

Historical Context
On December 7th, 1941, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and six other military bases on Oahu, officially bringing the United States into World War II, changing Hawaii and America forever. The Japanese military sunk or damaged 21 U.S. Pacific Fleet vessels, destroyed 188 aircraft and damaged
Another 159. More than 2,390 Americans were killed in the raid, including 49 civilians, many of them killed by “friendly fire”.

Among the many ships that were sunk in the harbor that day was the USS Arizona. The USS Arizona Memorial was dedicated in 1962, honoring the 1,177 crewmen who died as a result of the attack.

There are a number of symbolic features present in the USS Arizona Memorial. There are seven windows on each side and on the top of the memorial, 21 in total, representing a 21-gun salute to those who died. Also evident on the Arizona memorial is the abstract sculpture of the tree of life, considered a symbol of eternal renewal. The shape of the memorial itself is symbolic – the dip in the middle is representative of a low point for the US, when the attack took place, and the raised sides are indicative of the eventual rise to victory.

Materials Required
- A variety of images of the memorial (can be found in photo gallery below)

Lesson Plan
Note: before starting the photo analysis, you may wish to review previously learned material on World War II and the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Introduce the lesson using the guided question: How do we use art and architecture to commemorate wars, battles, and fallen heroes?
- Encourage students to identify war memorials or battle monuments they may have seen in their community, at battlefields, or in museums.

Explain to students that they will be looking at photos of the USS Arizona Memorial at Pearl Harbor and analyzing them.
- Show the class a photo of a different monument or memorial and model an analysis of the photograph by clearly stating characteristics you observe.

Show students images of the USS Arizona Memorial – be sure to include images from all sides, an aerial image and images of the interior (all available in the gallery below).
- Split the class into small groups of 3-5 students. The group should list 4-6 unique characteristics/observations of the memorial.
- The teacher may model interpreting the symbolism in a memorial by identifying and explaining that there are seven windows on each side and on the top of the USS Arizona memorial, 21 in total, representing a 21-gun salute to those who died.
- Each group should select 2 characteristics of the USS Arizona Memorial from their list and make informed guesses about the symbols and meanings behind the monument based on knowledge of historical context.

Conclusion
- Ask each group to share their interpretations of the symbolism in the Arizona Memorial. Possibly record the results.
Discuss the differences and similarities between each group’s interpretations.

As a discussion or written assignment have students consider the following:
  - Why are interpretations of symbols in a work of art or monument subjective?
  - Does an artist’s or architect’s intention affect a viewer’s interpretation of the work?

**Extension Activities**

- Repeat the activity with images of the USS Oklahoma Memorial.
- Students can be tasked with designing their own memorial for a significant event in your community’s history that they think deserves to be recognized.
- Students can research similar WWII memorials around the world to compare how each country remembers the war.

**Recommended Reading**

Michael Slackman, *Remembering Pearl Harbor: The Story of the USS Arizona Memorial*
Honoring the Past,
Inspiring the Future

www.media.defense.gov
Honoring the Past,
Inspiring the Future

www.nps.gov
Honoring the Past, Inspiring the Future

www.research.archives.gov
Honoring the Past, Inspiring the Future

www.upload.wikimedia.org
Honoring the Past,
Inspiring the Future

www.navy.mil