

Everyday Objects as Carriers of Memory: An Interpretive Framework for Material Memory in Literary and Cultural Contexts

¹Dr. Ethina. V, ²Dr. Anand Selvakumar A

¹Associate Professor in English, ²Assistant Professor in Computer Science,

¹ Department of Science and Humanities (English),

¹ EASA College of Engineering and Technology, Navakkarai (PO), Coimbatore, India

¹ethinavincent@gmail.com, ²anandbhccs@gmail.com,

Abstract— Until recently, Memory Studies had mainly focused on collective memories carried out via monuments, archives, memorials, and narratives of history. Currently, memory has increasingly been defined as something carried by the mundane material objects that are part of people's daily routines. Notwithstanding the above developments in the area, little research has been done on how common possessions act as interpreters of personal, familial, and cultural memories. This is a theoretical paper that discusses the importance of everyday objects in carrying memory and puts forward an interpretive framework for analysis. Based on cultural, autobiographical memory, and material culture theories, the paper explores how everyday material things such as letters, pictures, clothes, books, jewelry, utensils, handwritten notes, and heirlooms carry experiences and emotions of individuals and communities. In developing the interpretive framework, memory is presented as a continuous process where objects enable the shift from experiences to emotions, memory construction, identity formation, and ultimately cultural continuity. This is not a theory but a practical model based on various perspectives in order to analyze literary texts and other cultural forms. Further, through some selected examples taken from literary texts, the paper shows how objects can help in creating the identity of the characters and aid in reconstructing identity and transmitting cultural memories. The study thus not only sheds light on the memory aspect of material culture but also makes an addition to contemporary Memory Studies by offering a new interdisciplinary perspective that will be useful to literary criticism, cultural studies, heritage studies, sociology, and anthropology among others.

Index Terms— (*Memory Studies; Material Culture; Everyday Objects; Cultural Memory; Autobiographical Memory; Identity Formation; Mnemonic Objects; Literary Memory*)

I. INTRODUCTION

I.i *Evolution of Memory Studies*

Memory Studies has evolved into an exciting discipline that analyzes how individuals and societies recall and understand their past. Initially, the theories in memory were mainly based on sociology and how memory can be viewed as a social process rather than just an individual one. Halbwachs (1992) proposed that remembering is a socially constructed act as it involves constant reconstructions of personal memory in society. This led other scholars to build upon the theory and explore further in other aspects of memory such as cultural, communicative, autobiographic, and postmemory studies (Assmann, 2011; Hirsch, 2012).

Over many years, research focused on memorial events which were large scale such as monuments, memorials, museums, archives, and sites of conflict, migration, and national identities. The notion of lieux de memoires (memory places) was articulated by Nora (1989) and showed how physical places store collective memory when lived memories start fading away. Similarly, memory studies paid attention to the ways society uses texts, rituals, signs, and institutionalized practices for connecting their present and past identities (Assmann, 2011).

Some later theoretical and practical advances in the field of Memory Studies focused on the shift from unique historic events to mundane everyday experiences. The researchers started paying more and more attention to the fact that memory does not exist only in commemorative spaces, but it can also be incorporated into domestic settings, individual things, family practices, and other everyday activities. This was motivated by an increasing awareness of the role played by ordinary experience in identity construction and cultural continuity.

I.ii Memory and Materiality

The study of the interplay between memory and materiality is one field of study that has taken prominence in the areas of cultural studies, anthropology, and literature. Objects of materiality are not just practical possessions, but are very often places where experience, emotion, and memory are stored. The memory of these objects lies in how they are used, what significance they have symbolically, and who and what these objects are associated with. This makes it likely that memory is formed during encounters with these artifacts.

According to studies on material culture, objects play an important role in the lives of people by mediating relations among individuals, communities, and their pasts (Appadurai, 1986; Miller, 2008). The objects used in daily life such as letters, photographs, books, clothes, jewelry, handwritten messages, schoolbags, and heirlooms can keep memories that go beyond their physical properties. For instance, a photograph from one's family can remind one of his/her childhood days, a family heirloom can be a token of the family tradition, and a handwritten letter can maintain the feeling of connection to loved ones across generations. These objects become mnemonic artifacts that help remember things while consolidating personal and cultural identities.

I.iii Research Gap

While Memory Studies has generated a lot of research on collective memory, trauma, commemoration, museums, archives and cultural heritage, relatively little consideration has been given to the importance of the interpretive capacity of mundane material items in the process of everyday remembering. Most of the existing literature focuses on places and artifacts of national importance; meanwhile, common items which come along with our daily lives have been much less researched. Furthermore, the material culture studies usually focus on the research of the objects within anthropological and museological frameworks, while few researchers try to combine materiality, autobiographical remembering, identity construction, and literary interpretation in one conceptual framework. The absence of this framework proves the necessity of the explanation of the process of gradual transformation of mundane objects into mnemonic carriers through the everyday experience.

I.iv Aim of the Study

In light of this, the current essay suggests an interpretive framework of analysis which is aimed at understanding the mechanism of the process by means of which ordinary objects become bearers of memory due to the interaction of experience, emotion, memory-making, identification and cultural continuity. It is not meant to introduce a completely new theory but to combine existing approaches to the issue suggested by Memory Studies and the field of material culture in order to suggest an analytic framework applicable for literary and cultural studies, heritage studies, sociology and anthropology among other disciplines.

II. Literature Review

II.i Memory Beyond Commemoration

In Memory Studies, there has been a major change in perspective from focusing only on the study of commemoration and remembrance as collective memory, to the study of the ways in which memory is involved in daily social practices and experiences. One of the basic concepts in this area has been brought out by Maurice Halbwachs, according to whom memory is essentially a

social construct rather than an individual one. In his book "On Collective Memory" (1992), he suggested that individual memories are reconstructed within the framework of society formed by the family, the community, religion, and culture.

Based on Halbwachs' contributions, Jan Assmann further developed the subject with the use of the term cultural memory. This term refers to cultural memory that is different from the idea of communicative memory. Communicative memory refers to everyday memories shared by people and passed from one generation to another within three generations; on the other hand, cultural memory refers to memories passed down from one generation to another for centuries through texts, rites, symbols, monuments, and culture (Assmann, 2011).

Further elaborating on this point of view, Aleida Assmann focused on the processual aspect of remembering and forgetting as intertwined phenomena. Instead of regarding memory as a static repository of the past, she regarded it as a dynamic cultural activity where there is constant selection, re-interpretation, and renegotiation. The concept of functional memory and storage memory shows how societies constantly select those memories that will be considered culturally relevant and others that will simply be stored (Assmann, 2011).

In total, these authors highlight the transformation of Memory Studies as an intellectual field moving from monuments, archives, and acts of commemoration to the practices of everyday life. Modern research in the area of memory studies understands that memory is created through continuous interaction with material surroundings.

II.ii Material Culture and Every Day Objects

Material culture studies have played a significant role in rethinking modern understanding of memory since the objects become active players in the development of relationships, human identities and social meanings in the process of constant communication with people.

One of the major contributors to the study of material culture, Daniel Miller, believes that objects make up an essential part of human life. As it is shown in his book *The Comfort of Things* (2008), the everyday objects such as furniture, domestic appliances, clothes, and personal possessions carry emotions, social relations, and individual identities. They do not have any value except for the fact that they become full of memories in the process of everyday use and collective experiences.

In his book, *The Social Life of Things* (1986), Arjun Appadurai gives another perspective on material objects, viewing them as participants of social and cultural processes. According to Appadurai, the meanings of the objects change in the course of their circulation in various cultural, economic, and historical environments. Thus, the objects get the possibility to contain many layers of memory through the process of exchange and possession.

Furthering this idea in the realm of digital and psychological studies, Sherry Turkle proposes the notion of evocative objects by which objects act as cognitive and emotional partners that evoke introspection and autobiographical recall. Objects of whatever sort, whether they be heirlooms, childhood toys, handwritten letters, or even digital devices, act as agents in helping people construct their memories and manage their identities (Turkle, 2007).

Collectively, these theorists redefine the notion of materiality as an active part of memory-making. Material objects, possessions, and artifacts are not only physical things but also mnemonic intermediaries for holding on to emotions and social connections spanning several generations.

2.3 Objects as Narrative Memory

In literature, common objects are used as mnemonics that link characters to their own past and culture. Instead of being decorative, these objects are used as narrative instruments that enable memory to unfold over time. Letters are used for saving intimate conversations and uncovering secret histories, emotional resolution, and broken ties. Photos are mnemonic tools for showing memories triggered by an image and its ability to select and interpret memory at the same time. Clothing is used as a symbol of identity, tradition, culture and family, and transition into another stage of life. Books serve as mnemonic and intellectual tools because they save knowledge, experience, and values transmitted through generations. Just like books, houses are also used

as physical reminders of memory, representing architecture, routines, familiar surroundings, sense of belonging, loss, nostalgia and family story.

Through repeated interaction with characters, these common objects become symbols of memory. Unlike material things, their mnemonic value comes from experiences and encounters that happen through time. Thus, memory becomes physically realized through these common objects.

III. PROPOSED INTERPRETIVE FRAMEWORK

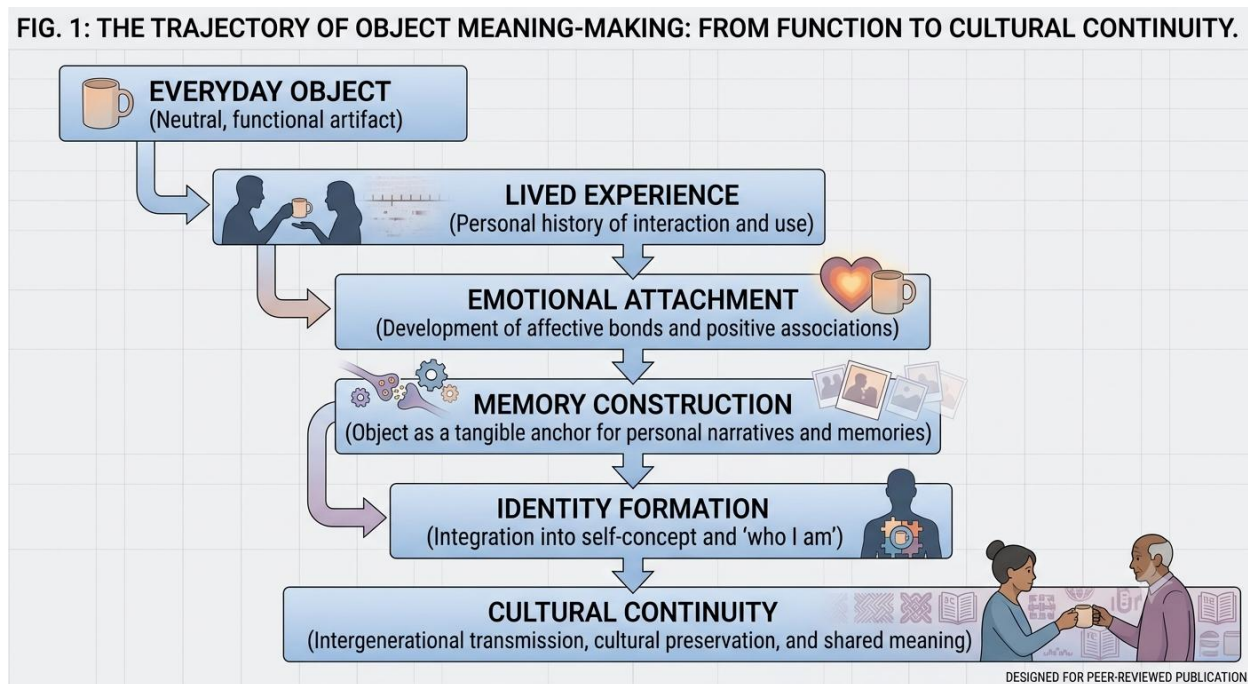
In the current research, the Material Memory Framework is introduced as a means of explaining the gradual acquisition of memory value of common objects through human experience. Instead of formulating a novel theory of memory, the framework attempts to use existing theories related to memory studies, material culture, and autobiographical memory in order to develop an interpretive tool for analyzing the interaction between material objects and memory. The literature has already proven the social and cultural nature of memory (Halbwachs, 1992; Assmann, 2011), and the research in the area of material culture has proven that material objects actively construct human experience (Appadurai, 1986; Miller, 2008).

III.i Conceptual Basis

Material things turn into mnemonic artifacts not due to their physical nature, but rather due to the meanings attached to them by individual people or entire communities based on their experiences. The thing gains meaning once it becomes linked to certain relationships, emotions, ritual actions, accomplishments, tragedies, or significant events in life. Interaction turns the simple possession into a symbolic object of memory of a person's history and common culture. Thus, recalling usually occurs after the encounter with a material thing.

This approach is consistent with contemporary Memory Studies that perceive the phenomenon of remembering to be an active interpretive process, not mere recall of the stored data. Similarly, material culture studies stress that objects become part of human experience through their mediation of the relations between humans, spaces, and events. It can thus be argued that the proposed theoretical framework perceives material objects as mediators connecting human experience, memory, and identity.

Figure 1. Material Memory Framework



III. iii Explanation of the Framework

The model starts with the object itself, acknowledging that memory is often embedded in common objects rather than in uncommon objects. Things like letters, photographs, books, clothes, jewelry, scribbled notes, cooking utensils, backpacks, and family objects initially serve as objects for practical use in everyday activities. Memory significance in these objects is established gradually through continuous use.

Individuals interact with these objects at various stages in their life. In the course of doing so, these interactions get imprinted on the object in the form of events such as family gatherings, education, migration, friendship, loss of someone close to them, and personal success.

Continuous involvement leads to an emotional bond that enhances the relationship between the object and the memory. Emotions like love, nostalgia, grief, feeling of belonging or pride enhance the symbolic value of material things and make them more likely to trigger memories. They are not just physical reminders of experiences but are also emotional triggers through which the past experiences are interpreted through the present.

This emotional connection is part of the memory formation where memories are constantly re-created through involvement with the object. Remembrance does not involve mere recall of experiences but a process where memory is formed through active interpretation depending on current conditions and situations.

As memories are constantly being restructured, they play a role in building identities by strengthening individual identities and affiliation with something. Material objects help individuals establish connections between the past and the present, and retain family stories, personal achievements, and culture, thus forming individual and collective identities. By means of these objects, people define who they are and where they belong, and how they perceive their experience.

Lastly, memories that are stored in objects make up for cultural continuity. Heirloom items, inherited books, cultural clothing, handwritten recipes, religious artifacts, and personal letters are often passed from one generation to the next, containing stories and histories of cultures. As a result, objects not only become tools for recalling individual experience but also become carriers of cultural memory from one generation to another. Therefore, it becomes clear that the Material Memory framework explains the

connections between remembering, identity formation, and cultural continuity in terms of common objects, which can be interpreted by literature, cultural, and heritage scholars.

IV.i Letters and Personal Memory: *The Shadow Lines*

Letters in literature perform as mnemonic entities, as literary storylines use letters to keep memories of emotions, associations, and experiences animated beyond the immediate know-how of events. Unlike historical documents and records of events, letters preserve personal moments of people's lives and allow memories to exist through the medium of writing irrespective of time and space. In the field of Memory Studies, letters act not only as documents of past events, but also as objects that help people reflect on, reconstruct, and reinterpret the past. This allows them to become sources of autobiographic and familial memory through which individual experience can be connected to the larger cultural history (Assmann, 2011; Hirsch, 2012).

The novel *The Shadow Lines* by Amitav Ghosh offers a good example in this case. Though the book is widely known for its discussions on memory, boundaries, and national identity, the book also contains personal stories, family memories, letters, and other objects that bind different generations that have been separated due to geographical and historical reasons. Letters, alongside with pictures and family tales, allow bridging temporal gaps and preserving the relationship despite the political boundaries imposed by Partition.. Thus, they serve as physical representations of missing persons and lost places and enable characters to recreate their fragmented histories through the encounter with the material rather than with history in the official sense.

The offered Material Memory Framework can help elucidate this process. The letter itself is a daily item which, at first, has a functional, communicational purpose. The mnemonics potential of this item is created through the living experiences of the writer and addressee, such as separation, movement, emotionality, and family life. Thus, the emotional bonding occurs when the value of the letter does not lie in its content but in its ability to stir nostalgic emotions and feeling of belonging to something bigger than one. The daily use and preservation of the letter help to construct memories and, therefore, re-interpret personal and family histories from new social perspectives. The reconstructed memories then help in identity building as well as reinforce individual and family connections. Finally, the preserved communication provides the continuity of culture by transmitting stories, emotions, and experience between generations.

Such an instance shows that the mnemonic meaning of letters is not only about the content they carry but also the physical reality of their existence as lasting tokens of memory. In the context of literary stories, letters operate on two levels, both as tools of storytelling and tangible tokens of real-life experiences. Therefore, the Material Memory approach provides a useful interpretive tool for making sense of how mundane things gain their mnemonic meaning in literature and the world.

IV.ii Photographs and Family Identity: *Beloved*

Photos serve as mnemonic objects since they record relationships, feelings, and memories that go beyond the span of lives of people. Unlike memories in words, photos bring life to the memories and allow revisiting them and giving new interpretations at the same time. In studies on memory, photos are seen as mediators between absence and presence that allow reconstructing family identity through visual memory (Hirsch, 2012).

The work *Beloved* by Toni Morrison presents the way that visual and material traces are used to construct family memory after experiencing the trauma of history. Even though the book centers on issues of slavery, trauma, and memory, photographs and other material traces act as symbols of family ties broken apart by displacement and death. Within the Material Memory Framework that I propose, the photograph serves as the object of everyday life that becomes imbued with experiences of family, separation, and survival. Those experiences form an emotional bond, turning the photograph into an object carrying memories of both love and loss. Through repetitive engagement, memory is constructed and allows the characters to reconstruct family stories and identities. In this sense, those experiences help in constructing identities and family memories to be passed onto future generations.

The domestic sphere becomes the place where memories are stored as it preserves daily routines, interpersonal relationships, and culture. Contrary to monuments and other memorials, homes become memory banks because they gradually collect memories through constant interaction. As a material environment, houses connect past experiences with the identity of a person, thus allowing a person to relive his memories through objects and space in it (Assmann, 2011; Bachelard, 1994).

The story *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy demonstrates the example of the home becoming the material repository of memory. Instead of just being a physical place, the home becomes a place full of childhood experience, familial relations, social hierarchies, and emotional losses. Applying the proposed Material Memory Framework, the home becomes an everyday object which becomes the object of memory due to the process of living. Interactions in the family, celebrations, conflicts, and separations create the feelings of attachment. The memories about these events can be recalled many years later while being interpreted through the process of memory construction. As such, the dwelling facilitates identity construction through maintaining ties among individuals, family, and place. Lastly, as tales and experiences related to the dwelling get passed from one generation to another, the domestic sphere ensures cultural continuity, thereby proving the notion that houses are not only spaces for shelter but are also sites of cultural memory and continuity.

V. Discussion

The suggested Material Memory Framework will be a contribution to Memory Studies in terms of broadening the range of investigation regarding mnemonic aspects of everyday objects rather than those of sites of memory like monuments, memorials, museums and archives. In spite of the fact that the concept of collective and cultural memory has already been proven to play a significant role (Assmann, 2011; Halbwachs, 1992; Nora, 1989), the suggested framework shows how mundane belongings like letters, pictures, clothes, books and house interiors serve as mnemonic mediators due to practical experiences and emotional connections. The suggested framework will combine these two perspectives into a convenient analytical framework for investigating the relation between materiality, memory and identity.

In addition, the suggested Material Memory Framework will be a contribution to Literary Studies since it provides a certain interpretive frame for investigating material objects as elements of literary works. Instead of treating material objects as mere symbols of something else, the framework views them as mnemonic artifacts used for memory building and maintenance of identity and cultural tradition. According to Material Culture Studies, the framework further strengthens the idea that material objects have social and cultural significance apart from their functional aspects (Appadurai, 1986; Miller, 2008). It shows how material items take on significance through constant engagement with people and society, thus proving that the material objects are actively involved in safeguarding cultural traditions and passing on memory.

This framework is more interpretive and conceptual in nature rather than empirical. The framework is designed to provide a theoretical basis for future studies rather than prove causality. Future researches can test and elaborate the framework using qualitative approaches such as interviews, object-based storytelling, life history research, ethnography, and archives of families and museums.

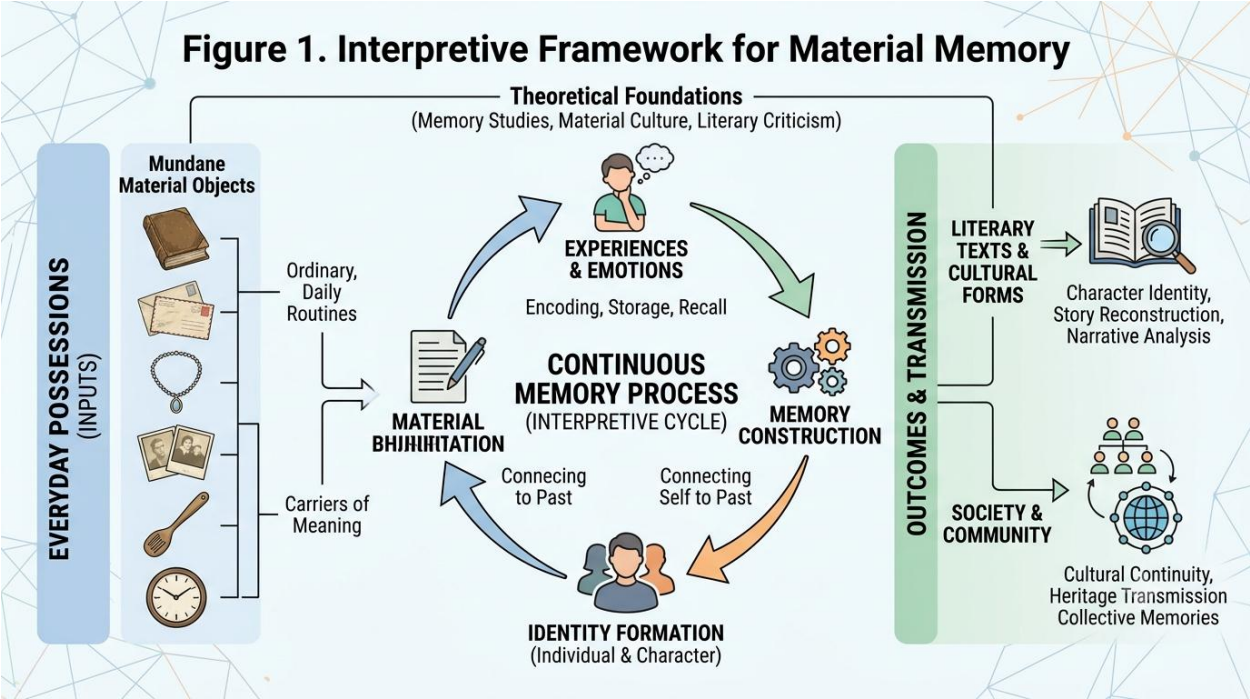
VI. Conclusion

In this paper, the mnemonic value of material artifacts in our daily lives has been explored within the context of Memory Studies. Whereas prior literature has made significant advances in the study of collective memory using monuments, memorials, museums, archives, and traumatic historical events, relatively little work has been done on the contribution of mundane material possessions to the preservation of personal and cultural memory. The lack of attention underscores the requirement of a theoretical approach that acknowledges the value of mundane artifacts in everyday remembering.

In this regard, the study put forward the concept of Material Memory Framework, an interpretative framework that helps understand how ordinary material artifacts become mnemonic by virtue of a series of interrelated processes including lived experience, emotional connection, memory-making, identity making, and cultural continuity. Instead of coming up with an entirely new theory, the framework combines various viewpoints from Memory Studies and material culture to explain the mnemonic value of ordinary possessions such as letters, photographs, books, clothes, familial relics, and homes. The literary examples provided also illustrated the usefulness of the framework in explaining how objects function in the process of recollection and help in sustaining personal and collective identities.

Also, by providing links between such academic fields as Memory Studies, literary studies, material culture studies, sociology, anthropology, and heritage studies, the framework emphasizes the interdisciplinary character of material memory. By emphasizing the importance of the mnemonic function of material things used in the everyday routine of individuals, the research promotes the concept of a wider meaning of memory that goes far beyond commemorative institutions and is rooted in people's daily life. In future, this framework can be applied in the research on literary texts, heritage, cultural anthropology, museums, and object-centered ethnography.

Figure 1: Interpretive framework for Material Memory



Everyday Object	Type of Memory	Illustrative Function
Letters	Personal memory	Emotional continuity
Photographs	Family memory	Identity preservation
Clothing	Cultural memory	Ritual and belonging
Jewellery	Intergenerational memory	Heritage transmission
Books	Intellectual memory	Knowledge continuity

Family heirlooms	Collective memory	Cultural inheritance
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Table 1. Examples of Everyday Objects and Their Mnemonic Functions

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