

Activity: Observe and Interpret

“The Girl I Left Behind Me” was the title of a ballad popular among soldiers during the Civil War. The regimental ballad came from an old Irish song, whose lyrics read:

My mind her full image retains
Whether asleep or awaken’d
Hope to see my jewel again
For her my heart is breaking.

Eastman Johnson, painted this work in 1872, seven years after the Civil War had ended, and during the height of Reconstruction. What can we learn about the spirit of the country in 1872 from this image? What clues does Johnson give us? Observing details and analyzing components of the painting, then putting them in historical context, enables the viewer to interpret the overall message of the work of art.



[The Girl I Left Behind Me](#), ca. 1872,
Eastman Johnson

Observation: What do you see?

Eastman Johnson painted a lone young woman, her clothes and hair blown back by a harsh wind. Though her torso faces the viewer, she turns her head and plants her left foot towards a point beyond the picture frame as though she is determined to go forward in spite of the wind and weather. The girl wears a wedding ring that seems framed by the books she carries. Thinking of the ring, and the title of the work, who do you think may have left her behind?

Where is she going?

What do you notice about the landscape and the girl’s path? How might you forecast the weather? It’s hard to tell where the girl’s path leads. It narrows just a few steps ahead of her. Sunlight breaks through the dark clouds to frame the girl’s face and echo the outline of her windswept hair, but the sky as a whole is dark and foggy.

What's puzzling about this picture?

Taking a look at this picture, it's hard to know exactly what's going on. This girl seems too young to be married, yet she wears a wedding ring. She is out for a walk with books in her hand, but the weather is less than ideal. Also, it is hard to tell where she is; only a few split-rail fences mark the landscape below her and her path narrows before it reaches the edge of the picture.

Interpretation: What does it mean?

Like all artists, Eastman Johnson included meaningful details in his works. Qualities that may or may not make sense to us literally as 21st century viewers could have had symbolic meaning much clearer to 19th century audiences. Imagine that the girl in this work isn't just a young bride, but that she represents a young country. What union might her wedding ring represent? Why might her path be unclear at this time? Why is the sky surrounding her so foggy? Johnson's painting shows all of the uncertainty that faced the United States in the aftermath of the Civil War and Lincoln's assassination. With no clear path and a heavy fog, Johnson's setting is as bleak as the country's future seemed without a strong leader for it to follow. While the title of the work refers to an ideal image of a sweetheart left at home by a soldier caught up in war, this girl may symbolize the mourning nation as it strove to move forward after the war. Though young, and in spite of what she may have lost along the way, this girl, like the nation, calmly steps ahead, resolutely facing the headwinds before her.