

Activity: Observe and Interpret

William H. Johnson began painting scenes of World War II in 1942. His paintings capture the experiences of black soldiers: leaving home, marching to camp, training for battle, and performing army chores. Johnson also painted a series of works illustrating the important contributions made by African Americans to the American Red Cross during the war.

A young woman sits reading a letter by the light of a lamp. Behind her, a farmed landscape stretches below a stormy sky. How are this woman and her letter typical of the American experience during the Second World War? What clues has Thomas Hart Benton given us to how she and the nation are feeling?

Observation: What do you see?

Off to War

A young man says goodbye to his family before boarding a bus leaving to go off to war. Clutching a duffel bag, he smiles brightly as he strides forward. His crisp uniform and black boots contrast with his father's work pants, suspenders, and bare feet. The family is turned away from us, yet we see the father's arm around his younger child. Johnson elongates the arms of the parents and the soldier, and exaggerates the size of their hands to emphasize their farewell wave. How does the young man feel about his departure? Does William H. Johnson feel the same way?



The family is wearing clothes of white and blue. The child holds an American flag. The many strong vertical lines of the house, the flag, the chimney, the crops in the field, and the family's posture suggest an ordered rhythm. In contrast, the horizon is a pale yellow, with a blazing orange sun surrounded by purple clouds. The soldier is moving toward a future less certain and more perilous than the home he is leaving behind.



[Off to War](#), 1942-1944, William H. Johnson



[Letter from Overseas](#), 1943, Thomas Hart Benton

The strong lines of the telephone poles serve as crucifixion symbols, suggesting the sacrifice that soldiers and families were making during the war.

Americans felt a surge of patriotism after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941. The attack on American soil prompted America's direct participation in the war and people felt compelled to lend their support. The flag gives the soldier's departure a defined purpose. He is leaving to become part of the force defending the nation.

Letter from Overseas



A woman sits on a fence as she reads a letter by the warm glow of a lantern. A mailbox left ajar, and her straw hat flung carelessly at her feet, suggest the urgency with which the letter was received. During World War II, letter writing was the only way that American families could communicate with soldiers fighting overseas. The arrival of a letter was a highly anticipated event. It could take months for a letter from a loved-one to arrive, and when it did, it might be missing large portions that had

been censored by the military. A mail truck in the distance delivers another note, perhaps to a neighboring family.

The sky above the woman, with its menacing swirl of clouds, suggests the turbulence of a nation at war. The moon emerges dramatically from the clouds to shed light on a lonely expanse of agricultural land. The young men who went to fight in World War II left a shortage of farm and factory labor. Perhaps the woman reading the letter was one of the many housewives who stepped up to take on the additional role of household provider in order to both fill this demand and provide for their family. The roles of women and traditional farming systems had to adapt to supply the nation with food.

Interpretation: What does it mean?

Off to War and *Letter from Overseas* highlight the bond between soldiers and their families as well as the social changes that World War II prompted. The pain of danger and distance are present in each work, but they are outweighed by the love and the pride that their subjects feel.

Over a million African American men and women served in World War II, two decades before the 15th Amendment secured their right to vote. The discrimination faced by black soldiers

during their service was a catalyst for the 1960s civil rights movement. Many of William H. Johnson's paintings celebrate the contributions that African Americans made to the war effort. His work addresses segregation in the military at that time and makes the experience of these men and women real to the viewer. In *Off to War*, he has captured a complicated moment. While *Off to War* can be called a hopeful and patriotic painting, it is not without menace. The soldier and his family are proud that he is leaving to serve his country, but the forbidding background, with its yellow sky and dark crosses, point to danger in the soldier's future.

A letter from overseas would have been a comfort in troubling times. News of the war with its victories and losses placed families in a state of anxiety. It was difficult or impossible for them to obtain specific information about the soldier they loved without a letter from him. As men left for Europe and the Pacific in huge numbers, life changed quickly for women. It became necessary for them to aid the war effort and take up the jobs left vacant by soldiers in addition to performing the duties traditionally marked out for women.