

PICTURING AMERICA LESSON

Conflict: Man Versus Nature

Mankind's struggle for dominance over nature is a universal theme that has resonated with people throughout history. Whether linked to a specific belief system, geographic area, or culture, views about this relationship are ever-changing, and have often been addressed by American artists. This lesson explores the complex relationship of man in the natural world. Students will discover those details in artistic composition that reveal the artist's views and compel the viewer to consider greater truths.



A Huntsman and Dogs, 1891
Winslow Homer, American
Oil on canvas
28 1/8 x 48 inches (71.4 x 121.9 cm); framed: 37 x 57 inches
(94 x 144.8 cm)
The William L. Elkins Collection, 1924
E1924-3-8

Grade Level

For grades 6–12

Common Core Academic Standards:

SOCIAL STUDIES, LANGUAGE ARTS

- Reading Informational Text: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media #7
 - Writing: Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources #8; Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis #9
 - Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence #4
- English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences #3

Art Images Required

Click on the Museum object titles below to view high-resolution photographs on the Philadelphia Museum of Art website. Click on the Picturing America object title to view that resource on the National Endowment for the Humanities website. Images that are also available in the ARTstor Digital Library are indicated by an ID number or search phrase. Entering that number or phrase into the ARTstor search bar will direct you to the corresponding image in that database.

PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART

RELATED PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART OBJECTS:

- [The Life Line](#), 1884, by Winslow Homer
ARTstor search: E1924-4-15
- [A Huntsman and Dogs](#), 1891, by Winslow Homer
ARTstor search: E1924-3-8

RELATED PICTURING AMERICA OBJECT:

- [View from Mount Holyoke \(The Oxbow\)](#), 1836, by Thomas Cole
ARTstor search: cole, 10844

Lesson Process

1. Take some time, either as a class or in small groups, to look closely at each work, reading the background information provided online. (Be sure to review the “Teacher Resources” on the Museum website.) Discuss what you have discovered, including any questions you may still have about the paintings.
2. One overarching theme that each of these paintings share is the relationship between people and nature. Look first at *The Huntsman and Dogs* (1891) by Winslow Homer. What evidence do you see of nature’s power? What evidence of the power of people? Which seems dominant?
3. Now look at *The Life Line* (1884), also by Homer. Ask yourself the same questions: What evidence is there of the power of nature and of mankind? Which seems dominant in this painting? Discuss your opinions regarding this last question.
4. Observe *View from Mount Holyoke (The Oxbow)* (1836) by Thomas Cole. How are the worlds of nature and of man separated in this painting? There is also a storm in this painting. How is it different from the storm in *The Life Line*? Why might the artist choose to separate these two realms?
5. These paintings also carry an emotional tone. What words would you use to describe the emotions you feel from each of these three works? List these words in three columns on the board.
6. Notice that Cole’s painting was completed approximately fifty years before Homer’s works. How had the nation changed in those intervening years? How do you think the perception of man’s relationship with nature had changed? What evidence from these paintings can you cite to support your ideas?

Assessment

1. In what ways do you feel people are currently in conflict with nature? Can you think of local issues in which people and nature are at odds? What do you think about that issue, and why do you feel that way? Present your findings for the class, either in the form of a PowerPoint-type presentation, or as a poster/collage.
2. Who got it right? In your opinion, which of these two famous artists had the most accurate idea of mankind’s place in nature? In a persuasive essay, include details that show your preference for one artist’s viewpoint as well as reasons which reveal why you didn’t favor the other artist’s viewpoint.

Enrichment

1. Select one of the three works of art listed above, and look at that image closely for a few minutes. If this image were the middle of the story, what would the beginning and end of the story be?

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2. Create your own short story or poem around this painting. Consider using descriptive details that can be observed in the image (for example, clothing, setting, and action).
3. In a small group, compile a scrapbook of news articles, advertisements, and other visual components that show the complex relationship between people and nature. Arrange your scrapbook according to the themes you see emerging.