

## The Veteran in a New Field, 1865

After General Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox in April 1865, the Union and Confederate armies were peacefully disbanded. The soldiers who had survived the ordeal were free to go home and resume their pre-war occupations. *The Veteran in a New Field* depicts one of those Civil War veterans recently returned from the front, harvesting a field of grain in the midday sun. The wheat has grown high, and the field stretches all the way to the horizon; an unusually bountiful crop had, in fact, marked the end of the war. The farmer's military jacket and canteen (with an insignia that identifies him as a former Union soldier) lie discarded in the foreground, almost covered by fallen stalks of grain.

Winslow Homer completed *The Veteran in a New Field* in the autumn of 1865, only a few months after Appomattox. The artist was a sort of veteran himself, having served on the front as an illustrator for the New York periodical *Harper's Weekly*. In the sketches he made to accompany military reports, Homer tended to focus on the commonplace activities of a soldier's life rather than the climax of combat. When he returned to civilian life and began to paint in oil, Homer continued to favor themes from ordinary life, such as this image of a soldier resuming work in the fields.

The optimistic spirit of Homer's painting only makes its darker undertones more moving. The "new field" of the title can't mean this field of grain, which is obviously mature and ready to harvest. It must refer instead to the change in the veteran's occupation — which necessarily calls to mind his previous activity on the battlefield. Because some of the bloodiest battles of the Civil War had been fought in wheat fields, fields of grain, in popular consciousness, were associated with fields of fallen

soldiers. One particularly disturbing photograph of soldiers who had died in battle at Gettysburg was published with the title "A Harvest of Death."

In keeping with those undertones, Homer's veteran handles a single-bladed scythe. By 1865, that simple farming implement was already out of date; a farmer would have used the more efficient cradle to mow a field that size. In the original version of the painting, the veteran did work with a cradled scythe (its outline is faintly visible on the left side of the canvas), but Homer evidently decided to paint it out. He replaced an emblem of modern technology with the more archaic tool, and gave a picture of a farmer in his field an unsettling reference to the work of the grim reaper, the age-old personification of death.

*The Veteran in a New Field* refers both to the desolation caused by the war and the country's hope for the future. It summons up the conflicting emotions that took hold of Americans — relief that the Civil War was over, and grief for the many lives that had been lost. Nor did the loss of lives end on the battlefield; only days after Appomattox came the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, and the nation sank into a collective state of mourning. *The Veteran in a New Field* thus takes on another dimension, as an expression of despair over the senseless death of a great president.

The image of a soldier returning to his farm would have reassured Homer's audience that life went on. The veteran appears to have set aside his Army training along with what remained of his military uniform to harvest a field that once again yields the gift of golden wheat, which in Christianity is a symbol of salvation. Even in the aftermath of the worst disasters, the artist seems to say, life has the capacity to restore itself.



9-A Winslow Homer (1836–1910), *The Veteran in a New Field*, 1865. Oil on canvas, 24½ x 38½ in. (61.3 x 96.8 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Miss Adelaide Milton de Groot (1876–1967), 1967 (67.187.131). Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

## TEACHING ACTIVITIES

E = ELEMENTARY | M = MIDDLE | S = SECONDARY

Encourage students to study every aspect of this painting closely.

# teaching activities

### DESCRIBE AND ANALYZE

**E**

What is this man doing? *He is cutting wheat.*  
How do we know? *He holds a scythe and there is cut wheat around him.*

**E**

Call students' attention to the light and shadows on the man. Where is the sun?  
*It is high and to his right.*  
How do you think the man feels in this sun? *He probably is hot and tired.*  
How do we know? *He's working so hard in the sun that he has taken his jacket off and laid it on the ground in the right foreground.*

**E | M | S**

Describe how Homer divided the scene in this painting.  
*He divided it into three strips of color with a band of sky, a wider band of standing wheat, and another band of cut wheat in the foreground.*  
In what bands are the man's feet? *They are buried in cut wheat.*  
In what band is his body? *It is in the standing wheat.*  
Where is the top of his head? *It is in the sky.*

### INTERPRET

**M | S**

Of what war was this man a veteran?  
*He was a veteran of the Civil War.*  
How does Homer show us this?  
*His military uniform jacket and canteen lie in the lower right corner.*  
What might laying aside his uniform represent?  
*He has set aside soldiering and returned to regular life.*  
Why is this a new field for him?  
*It may be literally a new field of grain, but it is also a new field of work for him after fighting for years.*

**M | S**

If this man had been in a grain field the previous year, what would he probably have been doing?  
*Probably fighting a battle, since a number of Civil War battles were fought in grain fields.*  
What subjects had Winslow Homer been sketching for the past few years?  
*He had been sketching Civil War soldiers.*

**S**

What does a figure carrying a scythe usually symbolize?  
*He symbolizes the grim reaper or death.*  
Whose deaths might Homer be alluding to?  
*He is alluding to dead soldiers and/or President Lincoln, who had been assassinated earlier that year. Previously, the veteran cut down soldiers in a field; now he cuts wheat.*

**S**

What might a bountiful field of wheat represent?  
*It could symbolize hope, bounty, and the renewal of life.*  
Because a seemingly dead seed buried in the ground rises as a new plant, grain can be a symbol of rebirth or new beginnings. What might this suggest about the country after the Civil War?  
*It could suggest that the country will recover and flourish.*

### CONNECTIONS

**Historical Connections:** Civil War; Battle of Bull Run; Surrender at Appomattox (1865)  
**Historical Figures:** Abraham Lincoln; Jefferson Davis; Robert E. Lee; Ulysses S. Grant; Stonewall Jackson; William Tecumseh Sherman; George McClellan

**Geography:** Northern and Southern states; slave and free states

**Literary Connections and Primary Documents:** Lincoln's Gettysburg Address (elementary, middle); *Bull Run*, Paul Fleischman (middle); Bible—Isaiah 2:4; 40:6–8 (middle, secondary); *The Red Badge of Courage*, Stephen Crane (secondary); *Across Five Aprils*, Irene Hunt (secondary); "Come Up

from the Fields, Father," Walt Whitman (middle, secondary)  
**Music:** "The Battle Hymn of the Republic"; "Dixie"