

INDUSTRY AND ENVIRONMENT

Grade Level: 7–12

Estimated Time: 3–4 hours

Introduction:

Winslow Homer, one of the most acclaimed American painters of the 19th century, moved at the age of 48 to Prout’s Neck, a small town on the coast of Maine, where often portrayed the daily tasks of fishermen and their battles with the sea. Paintings like *The Herring Net* (see page 31) focus on the relationship between man and nature. In this painting, Homer depicted the heroic effort of two fishermen. Looming large against the mist on the horizon, they are shown at their daily work, struggling to pull a net of herring into their small boat. As one hauls in the glistening catch of fish, the other unloads the net. Several schooners are dimly visible in the background.

Homer indicates the physical exertion required by placing one of the figures on the side of the boat to counterbalance the weight of the fish being pulled up in the net. With teamwork so necessary for survival, both men strive to steady the precarious boat as it rides the incoming swells, suggesting the elemental conflict between man and the natural environment. Homer continued to explore this theme in his art until his death in 1910.

In this lesson, students will consider how the sea, part of the natural environment of the state of Maine and the setting of *The Herring Net*, was critical in making commercial fishing one of the state’s major industries. Students will then select another state—possibly their own—and identify an industry in that state that was shaped by or is directly related to the natural environment. They will then find a representation of that industry in the fine arts, literature, film, or television.

Lesson Objectives:

- Make observations by looking at a work of art.
- Conduct research on the industries and environment of an American state and its representation in the fine or popular arts.
- Identify ways in which reality is altered or exaggerated in portrayals in the fine or popular arts.
- Increase awareness of the impact of the natural environment on the economy.

Key Terms:

- industry
- labor
- environment
- composition

Instructional Materials:

- map of Maine
- paper and pens
- access to the Internet or library to conduct research

LESSON PLANS

Procedures:

Discussion:

- Start this activity by showing students the reproduction of *The Herring Net* (image 7 or the enclosed CD). Ask students questions about the work shown in the painting and its relationship to the environment of Maine. Ask:
 - Are the men are fishing for recreation or is it their job? What elements in the painting lead you to this conclusion?
 - How important is commercial fishing to Maine? (Use a map of the state to show its long coastline and discuss the role of the ocean as a habitat for fish and shellfish.)
 - Based on this portrayal, how does Homer expect the viewer to feel about the nature of the work and lives of these fishermen? (Stress the hard physical struggle of both men in bringing in the fish; their heroic stature because of their monumental placement in the composition; the potential vulnerability because of the rocky waters and their distance from the schooner.)
 - What environmental factors might threaten the fishing industry in Maine? (pollution, severe storms, hurricanes, etc.)

Activity

- Have students select a state (individually or in groups) and identify an industry that is linked to the state's natural environment. (Depending on the academic level of students, the teacher may give students a selection to choose from.)
- Have students research and write a one-page report describing the industry. Contents of reports may include description of the industry, information on its history, where in the state it is found, and its breadth (e.g., percentage of population employed by it). The industry chosen may be past, present-day, or both (for example, the industry in *The Herring Net* continues in the present.) Reports should include the relationship of the particular environment to the industry, including threats to the industry by environmental change.
- Have students locate an artwork, work of fiction, or example in the popular media that portrays the industry or workers engaged in it. Direct students to evaluate the accuracy the industry's portrayal in the work. To what might the inaccuracies be attributed? (e.g., adding drama; wish to idealize; use of the industry to symbolize broader, abstract themes)

LESSON PLANS

Examples:

State	Industry	Environmental Factor	Work of Art, Literature, etc.
Iowa	farming	Flat land, rich soil	Grant Wood, <i>American Gothic</i> (painting; see page 59)
Texas	oil	Underground oil deposits	Upton Sinclair, <i>Oil!</i> (novel)
Massachusetts	whaling	Seacoast	Herman Melville, <i>Moby Dick</i> (novel)
West Virginia	coal	Coal deposits in mountains	<i>Matewan</i> (film)

Evaluation:

Students should be evaluated on the number and quality of the observations they make and conclusions they draw in the preliminary discussion. Research on the industry and its relationship to environmental factors should be comprehensive and relevant. Comparison of the industry with its artistic or fictional portrayal should demonstrate effective critical thinking.

Illinois State Learning Standards:

English Language Arts: 3, 5

Fine Arts: 26, 27

Social Science: 15, 17, 18

For more detailed information on the Illinois Learning Standards, see <http://www.isbe.state.il.us/ils/>.