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“The Girl I Left Behind Me”

In 1872 American artist Eastman Johnson painted “The Girl I Left Behind Me” which can be found at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in the Renwick Gallery in Washington, D.C. The painting depicts a young girl with fair skin and light hair looking into the distance while clutching onto two books and bearing a heavy cloak and garments. The painting itself is done in very dark colours with the sky painted very cloudy, grey, and gloomy and only a few cracks of light in the sky. The brightest colour that stands out is the inside of her cloak which appears to be a bright ruby red - a stark contrast to her dark brown overcoat. The gallery label reads:

“A young girl stands on a promontory, her hair streaming in the wind. The path before her ends, so she must either retrace her steps or try to find a different way forward. Johnson called this painting *The Girl I Left Behind Me*, invoking an Irish ballad that was popular with both the Union and Confederate armies during the Civil War. In doing so, the artist opens the possibility that this young girl is doing more than waiting for the return of her husband. Her wedding ring, glinting in the light, speaks of commitment to her union, but is Johnson referring to her personal life or to the nation? The split-rail fence below her divides the landscape, and the fog surrounding her suggests a world

fraught with ambivalence. She appears to wait for a sign of what will come next.”

(Smithsonian American Art Museum and its Renwick Gallery)

Eastman Johnson was born in August of 1824 in Lovell, Maine. Johnson moved around quite a lot in his younger years and left Boston to move to Europe to study his craft where he shortly returned back to America and lived amongst the Anishinaabe native people until 1859 (2021). Eastman Johnson lived during the American Civil War, thus a lot of the subject matter in his paintings surrounded slavery and African Americans fleeing slavery as seen in “The House of Old Kentucky” painted in 1859 and “The Runaway Slaves” painted in 1862 (2021). In 1872, Johnson painted “The Girl I Left Behind Me” to which art historian Elizabeth Broun describes this work to be “the most passionate portrait of all nineteenth-century American art” because it “combines the majesty of a classical statue with the mood of a tragic heroine” (2021). Museum Curator Eleanor Jones Harvey argues that “Johnson has succeeded in summing up the fear, longing, hope and anxiety of this young woman and, through her, of the nation itself. It’s a remarkable piece of postwar painting that reminds us that fine arts carry allegorical and literal layers of meaning as a way of understanding who we are as a culture and as individuals” (2021).

According to the publication label at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, it discusses just how impactful the Civil War era was on American art, “American artists of this era could not depict the conflict using the conventions of European history painting which glamourize the hero on the battlefield. Instead, America’s finest painters captured the transformative impact of the war. Through landscapes and genre paintings, these artists gave voice to the nation’s highest

ideals and deepest concerns - illustrating a time that has been described as the second American Revolution” (Smithsonian American Art Museum).

During the very first lecture of our class, we discussed the historical context of the period for which the poems we read about were in. The 17th and 18th century were a period of Enlightenment; a philosophical and scientific revolution that rejected tradition and closed mindedness and embraced reason, progress, and liberty. The period of enlightenment sought to inspire artists and poets alike and channel their romantic imagination that would reflect in their work. The themes that I think about when I look at this painting are imagination, landscape, romanticism, and the picturesque. “The Girl I Left Behind Me” is a beautiful painting that is very open for interpretation and to use one's imagination for why Eastman Johnson chose to paint it the way he did. There is also an abundance of ways that this painting can be interpreted imaginatively especially when knowing the historical context of Eastman Johnson and the time period in which it was painted in.

“The Girl I Left Behind Me” was painted after the Civil War which was arguably one of the most important periods in American history. Initially I was quick to jump on the offense and wonder why (if this is an homage to optimism) would Eastman Johnson choose a young white girl as the centerpiece of this painting when Johnson has painted African Americans before but I digress. Perhaps the painting is a symbolism of optimism and a refreshing restart in more ways than one. The young girl is walking down a path and either staring off into the distance of a new start or something that once was. The sky is gloomy and cloudy but there are a few blue cracks that suggest it will clear up (thus also symbolizing better days are coming). After such a tragic and heavy period of time, perhaps society can move forward and be more civil and return to the

romanticization of arts and literature (as the young girl clutches two books close to her heart).

The romanticization of a very harsh reality and with so many people left traumatized by the Civil War, it does put individuals in the position of the girl in the painting - to either accept what happened and move forward to hopefully a better future or to dwell in the destruction. No one is left the same.

The most impactful component of the painting itself is the way that the landscape is portrayed. It is clear that the young girl is standing on higher ground and overlooking the land before her. The colours that are used are very dark, neutral, and earthy tones with the light and dark contrast especially seen in the clouds in the sky (dark greys and white) and the young girl's dark coat (brown and bright red on the inside). Despite the painting being oil on canvas, Johnson does a phenomenal job of painting textures. The way that Johnson painted the young girl's coat I can imagine it to feel almost velvet like. "The Girl I Left Behind Me" truly is a picturesque painting. The horizon that she is looking on to is something of promising beauty and new beginnings. The storm is over and the sky is clearing up.

In conclusion, "The Girl I Left Behind Me" by Eastman Johnson is an amazing painting that evokes themes of imagination, landscape, romanticism, and the picturesque. It is such a beautiful piece of art that has so much powerful history behind it. It's truly amazing how freely analyzing an object or piece of art can bring out so many thoughts, ideas, and emotions.

Abstract



“The Girl I Left Behind Me” by Eastman Johnson

In 1872, American artist Eastman Johnson painted “The Girl I Left Behind Me”. It is an oil on canvas painting that depicts a young fair skinned girl standing on top of high ground as she somberly stares off into the distance. The sky is grey and cloudy with a few light breaks in the sky. The painting is done in very dark, neutral, and earthy tones with the brightest colour used being a ruby red on the inside of her dark brown overcoat. Eastman Johnson does a fantastic job in painting textures in which you can vividly imagine the texture of her coat to be velvet like. The title originates from a popular Irish ballad that was sung by Union and Confederate armies during the Civil War. “The Girl I Left Behind Me” evokes themes of imagination, romanticism,

landscape, and the picturesque. The painting is perhaps an homage to optimism that the world will return to better and brighter days - the young girl is walking down a path and overlooking what once was and what is yet to come.

Works Cited

Translated by ContentEngine, L. L. C. "The Beauty of the Day: "The Girl I Left Behind" by Eastman Johnson." *CE Noticias Financieras*, English ed. ed., Jul 01 2021, *ProQuest*. Web. 18 Nov. 2021 .

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