

Study Guide *for the*  
2009 Terra Foundation for American  
Art Lecturer Jennifer Greenhill

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### GETTING TO THE CORE:

Excerpt from Jennifer Greenhill’s

“Winslow Homer and the Mechanics of Visual Deadpan”

From an essay in the *Association of American Historians*, April 2009.

“All fashions change, and nothing more wholly or quickly than the fashion of fun; as any one may see by turning back to what amused people in the last generation; that stuff is terrible.” <sup>1</sup>

“His words were often open to an ironical interpretation, and one could not always make sure whether he was speaking seriously or, as the pithy slang phrase has it, ‘through his hat’.” <sup>2</sup>

“He loved gags . . . that fitted in with his sense of the dramatic.” <sup>3</sup>

Winslow Homer’s ‘sense of the dramatic’, his feeling for grave and often tragic situations, has made him a titanic figure in the history of American painting. His work, which, especially in the late period, revolves around the major themes of man versus nature and life versus death, has inspired some of the most nuanced argumentation on nineteenth-century American painting. In *Inventing the Modern Artist: Art and Culture in the Gilded Age* (1996), for example, Sarah Burns investigates how Homer’s paintings of men at sea spoke to American businessmen riding the perilous wave of an unpredictable stock market and purchasing Homer’s paintings as heroic testament to their manly struggles.<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Johns, in her biography, *Winslow Homer: The Nature of Observation* (2002), accounts for the grave scenarios of Homer’s imagery by turning the focus away from the patrons and back to the artist himself. She sees Homer’s artistic production as a form of spiritual self-reflection. He is an ‘observer’ in a period when ‘observation meant using God’s gifts of mind in the most reverent way’, that is, ‘to study and draw conclusions about a world in ongoing creation’.<sup>5</sup>

This essay moves in another direction. Taking a cue from two of Homer’s earlier biographers, Downes and Beam, quoted above, I attempt to recover the central importance of the ‘gag’ for Homer’s dramatic sensibility. If Homer was engaged in a spiritual quest, if his art can be seen to speak to embattled Gilded Age manhood, how did he arrive at a painterly idiom that encapsulated such heady concerns? Homer began to cultivate a reputation for seriousness only after a brief attempt to make the gags of his illustrated work play in the realm of oil painting, a medium he first explored in the early 1860s during the tragic circumstances of the American Civil War. To stress this should not diminish the artist’s stature but, rather, nuance our understanding of his art’s complexity. For what Homer creates in these years as his entrée

into the New York art world is a form of visual deadpan, which resonated with the developing methods of the period's controversial platform comedians and answered the critical call for a 'higher sort of humor' that departed from the antebellum comic mode, dubbed derisively by one critic the 'funny school of the fifties'.<sup>6</sup>

If we can understand much of this work produced before the war according to Roland Barthes's conception of 'semantic prattle' – a discourse compelled 'by the excessive fear of failing to communicate meaning' to signpost and almost compulsively restate – Homer's paintings do not offer their punch lines so easily.<sup>7</sup> In Homer, the joke is 'told gravely', to borrow a phrase used by Mark Twain in his explanation of the mechanics of verbal deadpan.<sup>8</sup> In this way they present an interpretive quandary, as utterances poised halfway between levity and gravity. Indeed, we could say that Homer's paintings withhold the conspiratorial wink and nudge to frame the joke in more understated, and perhaps even ambivalent terms.

The art historian Roger B. Stein has pointed to the ironic and subversive undercurrent present in Homer, and my reading of the artist owes much to Stein's example.<sup>9</sup> These qualities are most palpable in the works made during the war, which many commentators considered a 'ludicrous' and 'grotesque' spectacle.<sup>10</sup> In 1863 indeed the novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne asked whether the war, as a play 'too long drawn out', could be classed as 'tragedy or comedy'.<sup>11</sup> In this atmosphere, people paired the 'comical and the coffinly' or spoke of levity and gravity, terms that describe the structural dynamics of Homer's camp scenes (plate 1).<sup>12</sup> These works often incorporate some latent, almost imperceptible light note, which can seem to grate against the dominant dark – or, perhaps better, heavy – tone established by the images. Scholars generally make sense of these works by arguing that they picture the mundane and unremarkable moments in the soldier's experience – the dark truth behind the idealist vision of battlefield valour.<sup>13</sup> But what place does levity have in the construction of this mundane view? In these early works, Homer explores the uneasy relationship between levity and gravity as a means of meditating not only on the experience of war, but also on the principles of humour and of painting itself. If the hilarity of the joke is fleeting and humour difficult if not impossible to translate once its immediate context vanishes – as William Dean Howells suggested in his criticism of the 'terrible stuff' of the antebellum period – Homer builds this very condition into his imagery. Acknowledging painting's powerlessness to record the fleeting, Homer makes this into a virtue, a meditation on what painting achieves as an investigative, rather than a reportorial or taxonomic medium. If Homer, by the war's end, seems to expunge levity from his art, the early works are driven by an extended negotiation of its potential to serve and inform ambitious painting.

## **PAINTERLY CONTROL**

In his early paintings dedicated to life in the Union army camps, Homer investigates what his brand of ambitious painting might look like by weaving the levity so integral to his illustrative work into his painting. He does this, however, by shutting levity down to the point of near-extinction. In this way, he explores a kind of humour that is subtler than Beard or Brown offered and closer to the work of the platform comedians. A consideration of the structural dynamics of one painting in particular will, I hope, demonstrate how this works. I should add here that by focusing closely on *Playing Old Soldier* (1863), a work rarely addressed in Homer scholarship, I am implicitly underscoring the evidential value of the visual, which, in this case at least, tells us as much as, if not more than, any other sort of period source (see plate 1).<sup>40</sup> Because I am concerned with Homer's exploration of the mechanics of visual deadpan, the painting itself has to be the primary guide.

The work depicts a young soldier pretending to be sick – 'playing old soldier', as 1860s slang put it – in an attempt to get out of duty.<sup>41</sup> Because the 'appearance of the tongue' was a 'standard criterion

of condition',<sup>42</sup> men commonly attempted to appear sick by coating their tongues with liquorice and coffee (producing the 'brown tongue of typhoid fever'<sup>43</sup>) or other substances that would produce a sickly whitish film.<sup>44</sup> Essays in medical journals addressed the phenomenon of such 'malingerers' with stern and utter seriousness, sympathizing with the plight of the surgeon faced with the difficult task of discerning the truly ill from those who lied about their symptoms.<sup>45</sup> To expose the lie, surgeons would at times force the shirker into absurd and dangerous situations, by putting a man faking blindness on a precipice, for example, or monitoring a man's heart rate while telling him some terrible news to reveal that he had indeed heard and understood what was said and was therefore neither deaf nor dumb as he had pretended to be.<sup>46</sup> It became a challenge to see who would outsmart whom, and both surgeons and shirkers became ever more creative in their efforts. 'These malingerers are often very ingenious', wrote the author of 'Rough Notes of an Army Surgeon's Experience, during the Great Rebellion' in 1863. 'They understand very well what diseases can be "played", (as they term it,) and what cannot.'<sup>47</sup> One man, against all the odds, 'played' insanity – instead of something a bit easier, like rheumatism, for example – by sitting for hours in camp 'with a pole, and [imagined] himself fishing'. The ruse worked: 'He was at length discharged, and when leaving his camp, one of his old company said to him: "Bill, what did you make such a d – d fool of yourself as to sit out in the sun all day pretending to be fishing." Pulling out his discharge papers he replied, with a quiet smile, "I was fishing for these papers."<sup>48</sup> Although a serious problem, these attempts to evade duty held comic potential. The malingerer was accordingly a popular subject of the humorous anecdote, poem, and satirical sketch.<sup>49</sup>

Homer's painting, which is dedicated to this kind of trickster figure, is, it would seem, meant to be funny – this was Homer looking at the 'laughing side' of the conflict.<sup>50</sup> The painting's focus on the opened mouth boosts its comic potential by participating in a tradition of humorous medical imagery. In seventeenth-century Dutch tooth-pulling scenes, for example, the opened mouth, twisted in pain, is pictured as an inherently interesting and amusing subject, with figures smiling and leaning in to get a better view. *Playing Old Soldier*, with its open-mouthed figure, is part of this tradition but not quite. The painting isn't funny, exactly. The doleful expression of the man's eyes – the expression of a figure whose 'whole appearance', one critic wrote, 'denotes an entire willingness to be considered ill' – is calculated to draw some measure of pity and imbues the figure with a kind of heaviness, strikingly conveyed by his slumped posture.<sup>51</sup> Homer's painting alludes to this tradition of visual humour but it does not cue the viewer's response through the kinds of figures the Dutch genre painter often employs, figures who laugh and sometimes point at the locus of the works' humour. These cues – what the Jan Steen scholar Mariet Westermann calls 'laughing prompts' – are absent in Homer's painting, which more subtly guides the viewer's attention through vectors that point to the man's opened mouth.<sup>52</sup> The composition does this through the surgeon's eye-line and outstretched arm; through the thin branch above and to the left of the soldier's head that leads diagonally down to the area around his mouth; and through the ledger held by the standing recorder, which falls loosely from his hand at the level of the seated soldier's upper lip. This focus on the tongue, a part of the body not customarily revealed in public, might have seemed transgressive in different circumstances, not only in oil painting, as the Cook-Beard-Curtis exchange suggests, but also in life. At a time when etiquette books advised middle-class readers not to spit, smoke, yawn, cough, sneeze, laugh too loudly, or register any strong emotion on their faces, sticking out one's tongue signalled a loss of control or, at the very least, a lack of decorum.<sup>53</sup> Neither offence, however, seems to be at issue here, where the narrative of medical examination normalizes the gesture and diffuses its potential vulgarity.

Even as it focuses on a tongue sticking out of the mouth, then, Homer's painting renders nearly extinct the over-the-top antics of this kind of physical humour. Although one period critic said that the tongue was 'thrust' out of the figure's mouth – a term suggesting that the gesture appeared transgressive – it is really quite controlled, tempered by the disconsolate look in the man's eyes.<sup>54</sup>



This was not the case when, in 1864, Homer translated the composition to a lithographic card for the Prang series, *Life in Camp* (plate 7). If the title of the card, 'Surgeon's Call', might seem to distance it from the comic connotations of the painting, with its title derived from period slang, the figures are marked by caricatural distortion. With cheeks sunken, eyes bulging, and tongue extending a bit further than it should, the seated soldier overdoes the posture of illness. Behind him, a man waits for his turn with the surgeon with cheek swelled up like a balloon. This exaggerating idiom is extended in 'Hard Tack', another *Life in Camp* card, through another seated, open-mouthed figure. Here an outsized head is plonked atop a diminutive body almost overwhelmed by a monstrously big cracker (plate 8). This rhetoric is muted, managed, in the painting where the figure again appears.<sup>55</sup> The soldier in *Playing Old Soldier* is, after all, an obedient figure, pinned in and contained by his examiners. His tongue is a mark of compliance: obeying the surgeon's orders, he shows his tongue. Concentrated or qualified here are the exaggerating energies of the period's popular humour, which Homer courts in the Prang cards; that controlled, protruding tongue is what this brand of comic expression has been reduced to.

## REFLECTION:

### "The Sluggard" from *Divine Songs for Children* by Isaac Watts

'Tis the voice of the sluggard; I heard him complain,  
"You have wak'd me too soon, I must slumber again."  
As the door on its hinges, so he on his bed,  
Turns his sides and his shoulders and his heavy head.

"A little more sleep, and a little more slumber;"  
Thus he wastes half his days, and his hours without number,  
And when he gets up, he sits folding his hands,  
Or walks about sauntering, or trifling he stands.

I pass'd by his garden, and saw the wild brier,  
The thorn and the thistle grow broader and higher;  
The clothes that hang on him are turning to rags;  
And his money still wastes till he starves or he begs.

I made him a visit, still hoping to find  
That he took better care for improving his mind:  
He told me his dreams, talked of eating and drinking;  
But scarce reads his Bible, and never loves thinking.

Said I then to my heart, "Here's a lesson for me,"  
This man's but a picture of what I might be:  
But thanks to my friends for their care in my breeding,  
Who taught me betimes to love working and reading.



## LESSON PLAN:

“Malingerer in the Modern World” by Bill Yarrow, Joliet Junior College, Joliet, IL

This lesson is most suitable for English/Language Arts classes and history classes

In “Winslow Homer and The Mechanics of Visual Deadpan,” Jennifer Greenhill discusses Winslow Homer’s 1863 painting “Playing Old Soldier” which “depicts a young soldier pretending to be sick ...in an attempt to get out of duty.” She tells us that “the malingerer” was “a popular subject of the humorous anecdote, poem, and satirical sketch” of that time period. Of course, “the malingerer” is still popular today but the malingerer has taken on other names.

**Essential Questions:** Where can malingererers be found today? How have they been presented in art, literature, and other media?

### Goals:

- To consider discrimination in language and character assessment.
- To examine the evolution of a familiar archetype throughout history
- Utilize research skills across mediums and history

**Objectives:** Students will utilize discrimination, research, analysis, and oral and written communication skills.

**Materials:** Computer with Internet access.

**Timeframe:** This lesson will take 1-2 days to complete.

### PROCESS AND PROCEDURE:

1. Have class, either individually or in groups, look up the terms “idler,” “sluggard,” “malingerer,” “goldbrick” and “loafer.” What are the differences among the meanings of the terms? What commonality can be found among the terms?
2. Have class as a whole define the term “slacker.” Put student definitions on the board. Have the class discuss the relationship of the term “slacker” to “idler,” “sluggard,” “malingerer,” “goldbrick” and “loafer.” Is a slacker a modern version of the idler, sluggard, malingerer, goldbrick and loafer? Discuss.
3. Have the class, either individually or in groups, find cultural representations of individuals to whom these terms refer. Look for artistic representations (as in Winslow Homer), literary representations (e.g. Yossarian in Joseph Heller’s *Catch 22* or Phillip Roth’s *Grossbart* in “Defender of the Faith” in *Goodbye, Columbus*), television characters (e.g. Maynard G. Krebs in *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis* or Max Klinger in *M.A.S.H.*), cartoon characters (e.g. Jughead in the *Archie* comic series), film characters (e.g. Richard Linklater’s *Slacker*), songs, etc.
4. Have individuals or groups present results of the research to the class. (This could be posted to a content management system if the class has access to one.)
5. Have class watch the Frank Tashlin cartoon “Private Snafu: The Goldbrick” on YouTube (either at home or in class) and analyze the cartoon in terms of the previous class discussion. Note: Alert the class to the racist portrayal of Asians in this WWII cartoon. Have students specifically address the message of the cartoon. Have them compare the message to the moral of Isaac Watt’s poem “The Sluggard.” [Reflection] Have students write up and hand in their analyses. [Length to be determined by teacher.]



**[Optional]** Class discussion of individual analyses under direction of teacher.

*Private Snafu: The Goldbrick*

Directed by Frank Tashlin

Written by Dr. Seuss

Voice: Mel Blanc

You Tube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uCMVpFUWXq4>

Alternative (or Supplementary) Assignment:

"The Slacker in Me"

<http://allpoetry.com/poem/212228>

**Assessment:** Evaluation of participation in class discussion, individual or group research results, and written analysis paper.

### **ABOUT THE CHICAGO HUMANITIES FESTIVAL**

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