

Miles Brengle
Brianna Lafoon
ES 460, DIS 305
October 13, 2020

Midterm Exam

4. Using Sanford Gifford's, "Hunter Mountain, Twilight, 1866" as the focus of your essay (you'll find a reproduction of this painting on the next page), identify 3 major themes of American environmental history that we've explored in class so far and discuss how they relate to elements visible (or perhaps not visible?) in this painting. Be sure to ground your analysis by connecting this painting to historical details and ideas drawn from our readings, lectures, and discussion sections to illustrate and support your arguments and to explain the historical significance of the themes you select.

At the beginning of our studies this semester, Cronon expressed that environmental history integrates three key perspectives of the past. They are as follows: ecology of people as organisms sharing the universe with other organisms; political economy of people as social beings reshaping nature and each other to produce collective life; and cultural values of people as self-reflective beings leading to discovered meaning of life in our world. Sanford Gifford's *Hunter Mountain, Twilight, 1866* connects to these three perspectives through a Romantic portrayal of the land that artistically touches upon European land use and its consequent effects.

European exploitation of the land for personal gain in the 18th and 19th centuries is arguably one of the most significant themes at hand when discussing the role that colonists played in America's early years. As explained in *Changes in the Land*, Europeans tended to view ecosystems and the organisms that belonged to them as purely extractable units for profit. This is a stark contrast against Indian notions of those very same lands; Indians saw themselves as a homogenous part of the environment and were committed to sustaining practices to preserve resources for future generations. A glance at the foreground of Gifford's painting reveals a prime example of the white man's destruction of America's wild places: deforestation. Gifford

contrasts the freshly cleared valley with a seemingly untouched mountainside in the background, illustrating how all but the most rugged terrain was fair game for colonists to get their hands on. White settlers had little interest in sustaining the land and countless examples prove this, including the Kennecott mining process and its subsequent bust into a ghost town once all that could be extracted was extracted. Instances of environmental degradation are scattered all across America's history and Gifford's work conceivably acts as a warning sign for Americans to show what can happen to pristine lands when sustainable practices do not occur within them. Through his art, Gifford voices concern for the preservation of nature in a time when so many endeavors of opposite ideology were taking place.

Upon further scrutiny of Gifford's painting, aspects of Romanticism begin to make themselves more apparent. Perhaps most notably, Gifford beautifully incorporates conceptions of the cyclical nature of history and eternal return into his work. Note the setting sun and the rising moon, the changing of leaves into autumn colors; their presence is no coincidence. Gifford implements these subtleties into the painting to express the Romantic view of America which, as Cronon argues in his lectures, is a primordial wilderness despite the encroaching threat of human settlement. Similarities arise between this painting and others of the Romantic era, specifically the canvases of Thomas Cole. Cole often depicted a distant mountain in the background of his work that served witness to the humanity below and symbolized a divine presence that remains constant through time. Artists like Cole and Gifford focused on the sublime: the terrifyingly beautiful surrogate that God found in nature. Reference the towering mountains in the background of Gifford's work; they reveal a place shrouded in dark, evoking a sense of uneasiness within the viewer. The valley careens into the hazy distance to allude to the daunting reality of what lay beyond nature's more familiar landscapes. Gifford successfully depicts the

dichotomy between the sublime and nature's more familiar places with his paintbrush just as Thoreau did with words in his piece *Ktaadn*, proving that nature is not solely beautiful, but induces pain and fear as well.

Along the edges of the cleared valley within Gifford's painting runs a string of fences, a piece of technology that Cronon regards as a powerful physical symbol of English land tenure and subsistence. Fences, although simple, help us begin to understand the complex matter of property in 18th and 19th century America, a theme that ties heavily into the study of environmental history. At first glance, the clearcut in this painting appears to be a single homestead in a vast forest, but a magnified look at the background reveals acres more of cleared agricultural land. Surely, more than one farmer would have access to a space of such scale. With increasing laws requiring colonists to maintain fences and impound their animals, further establishment of property boundaries brought about a new reason for conflict between Indians and European colonists as their respective lifestyles of mobility and fixity clashed. This implementation of fixity within colonial lifestyle further perpetuated the "extractivist" tendencies of the colonists. Not only were they unsustainably extracting from the land, as read about time and time again in *Changes in the Land*, but now the factor of doing so on a fixed plot of land was introduced, resulting in an environment that was evermore stressed.

Analyzing historical works of art can often lead viewers to question themselves as to whether or not they are making far-flung conclusions through circumstantial evidence. Sanford Gifford's *Hunter Mountain, Twilight, 1866*, however, provides an intriguing look into the eyes of a Romantic artist as he connects a number of artistic elements within his painting to themes of what we know today as environmental history. A scene of loss is painted with subdued lighting and a fallen forest. Painted in the year following the end of the Civil War, it is no rash

presumption to pin Gifford's painting as a display of the ends brought about by the war: ends of life and ends of once familiar livelihoods. With one ending, though, comes a new beginning. His art touches upon the fundamental Romantic value that nature revolves in an endless cycle. The painting conveys new beginnings through depiction of a farmer on a freshly cleared homestead, through a setting sun that will rise again the next day. The viewer begins to understand the significance of Gifford's self-reflection as he discovers meaning in the wake of such a calamitous time. Gifford paints a spectacular image of humanity learning where it fits within nature, challenging the viewer to contemplate man's relation with wilderness and how humanity coexists—or ceases to coexist—with our environment.

Outline

I. Introduction

- a. Cronon: Environmental history integrates 3 perspectives on past → ecology of people as organisms sharing universe with other organisms; political economy of people as social beings reshaping nature and each other to produce collective life; and cultural values of people as self-reflective beings trying to find meaning of lives in world*
- b. Sanford Gifford's "Hunter Mount, Twilight, 1866" connects to these three perspectives in his painting through a Romantic portrayal of the land that touches upon European land use and its resultant effects.*

II. European exploitation of the land for personal gain

III. Romantic lens of nature

IV. Bounding of the land and notions of property

V. Conclusion