

Winslow Homer's Civil War Art

An Online Professional Development Seminar



Kirk Savage

Associate Professor of Art History
University of Pittsburgh

AMERICA *in* **CLASS**[®]

from the National Humanities Center

We will begin promptly on the hour.

The silence you hear is normal.

If you do not hear anything when the images change, e-mail Caryn Koplik ckoplik@nationalhumanitiescenter.org for assistance.

COMMON CORE GOALS

- Advance the goal of the **Common Core State Standards** in English Language Arts and literacy in history and social studies: “To help ensure that all students are college and career ready in literacy”
- Promote close attentive reading
- Foster deep and thoughtful engagement with high-quality literary and informational texts
- Evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visual images

GOALS

- To give you a better sense of the challenges Americans faced in understanding and picturing the Civil War – a new kind of war with unprecedented losses and far-reaching social consequences.
- To learn how to use visual images not as illustrations of history but as documents with their own history – their own purposes, audiences, agendas, and mixed meanings.

FROM THE FORUM

Challenges, Issues, Questions

- How did Homer choose his subjects?
- Did Homer seek to influence public opinion on the War, or were his works simply intended to be illustrations of the conflict?
- Did he draw both northern and southern subjects?
- How did the public respond to Homer's depictions of camp life and the battlefield?
- How did public response to Homer's images compare to that accorded to Matthew Brady's battlefield photographs?
- Are there similar works that depict the War from a Southern point of view?
- How can we incorporate art into history lessons?



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*Monument Wars: Washington, D.C., the National
Mall, and the Transformation of the Memorial
Landscape*
(2011)

*Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and
Monument in Nineteenth-Century America*
(1999)

<http://www.kirksavage.pitt.edu>

- Winslow Homer began his career in the 1850s as an illustrator for the popular news magazine Harper's Weekly, published in New York.
- His illustrations functioned much as photographs do today. They were meant to be timely and documentary. The technology for reproducing photographs on a printing press did not exist, so these illustrations were the news images of the era. His subject matter ran the gamut from comic to serious, from leisure-time pursuits to warfare.
- On assignment from Harper's he was "embedded" with the Union army.
- During the Civil War he started making a career transition to a fine artist and painter. Some of his earliest paintings were of Civil War scenes.
- He later became famous for his pictures of rural New England life, coastal storms, fishing and hunting scenes, but in the mid-1870s he also painted a series of unusually observant pictures of African Americans at the end of Reconstruction.

**Part I:
The Civil War Battlefield**

**Part II:
The Home Front**

**Part III:
The African American Experience**

**Part IV:
The Aftermath**

Part I: The Civil War Battlefield

War for the Union - Bayonet Charge

Harper's, July 12, 1862



Discussion Questions

- When we look at this scene, where do we seem to be standing?
- Could Homer have actually witnessed this scene from this vantage point?
- What does the text in Harper's claim about the image?
- How is the image organized?
- What does it seem to say about the Union troops?
- What is missing from the image that you might have expected to see?

Caption: "The War for the Union, 1862—a Bayonet Charge"

War for the Union - Bayonet Charge

Harper's, July 12, 1862



Surgeon at Work, Harper's, July 12, 1862



Caption:
“The Surgeon at
Work at the Rear
During an
Engagement”

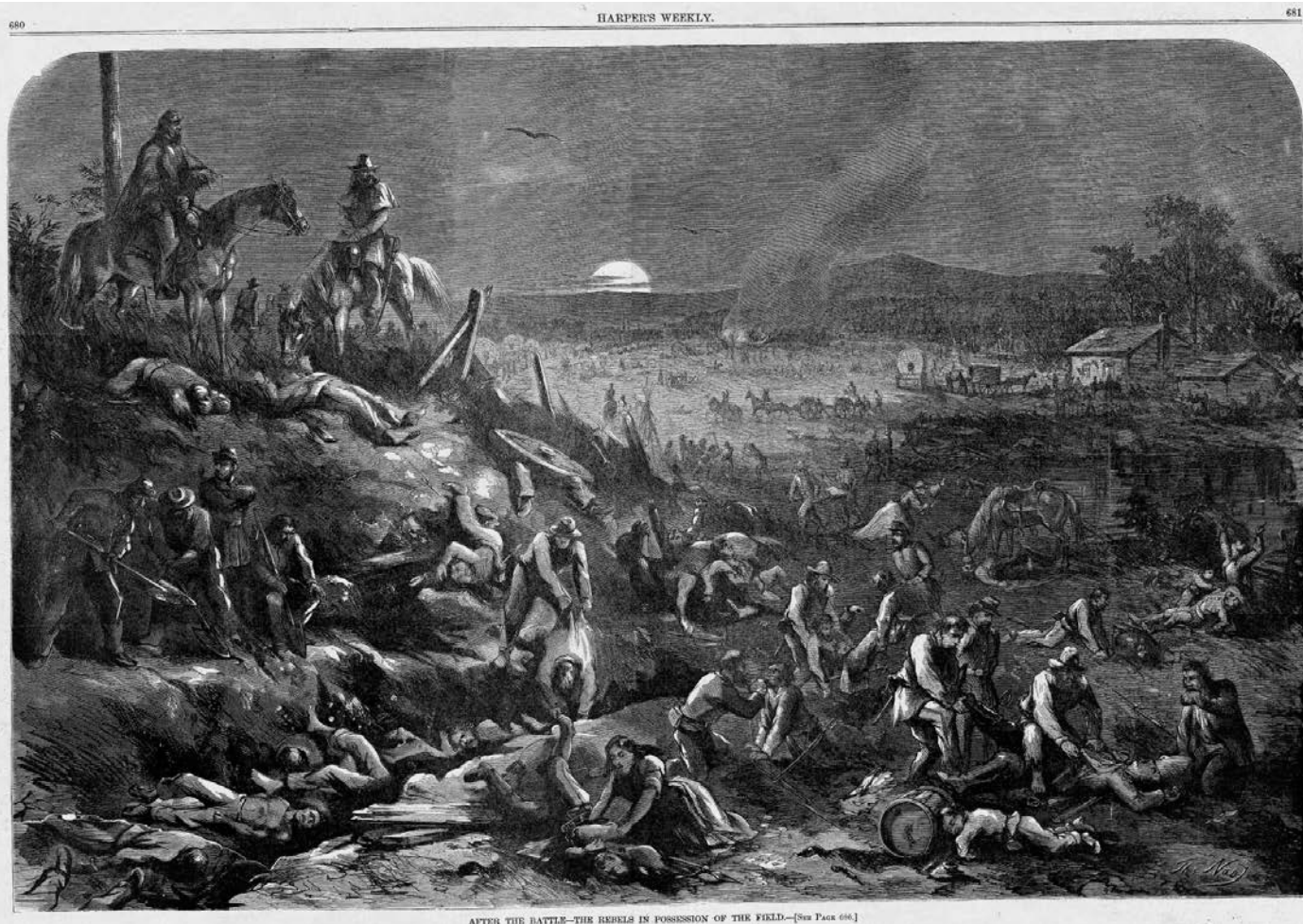
Discussion Questions

- Could Homer have witnessed this scene?
- What does it seem to say about the Union army’s medical organization?
- What is missing from the image that you might have expected to see?

Surgeon at Work, Harper's, July 12, 1862



After the Battle, by Thomas Nast, Harper's, October 25, 1862



680 HARPER'S WEEKLY. 681
AFTER THE BATTLE—THE REBELS IN POSSESSION OF THE FIELD.—[See Page 686.]

Discussion Question

How does this image by Thomas Nast of Confederates burying Union dead compare to Homer's image of Union medical care for its soldiers?

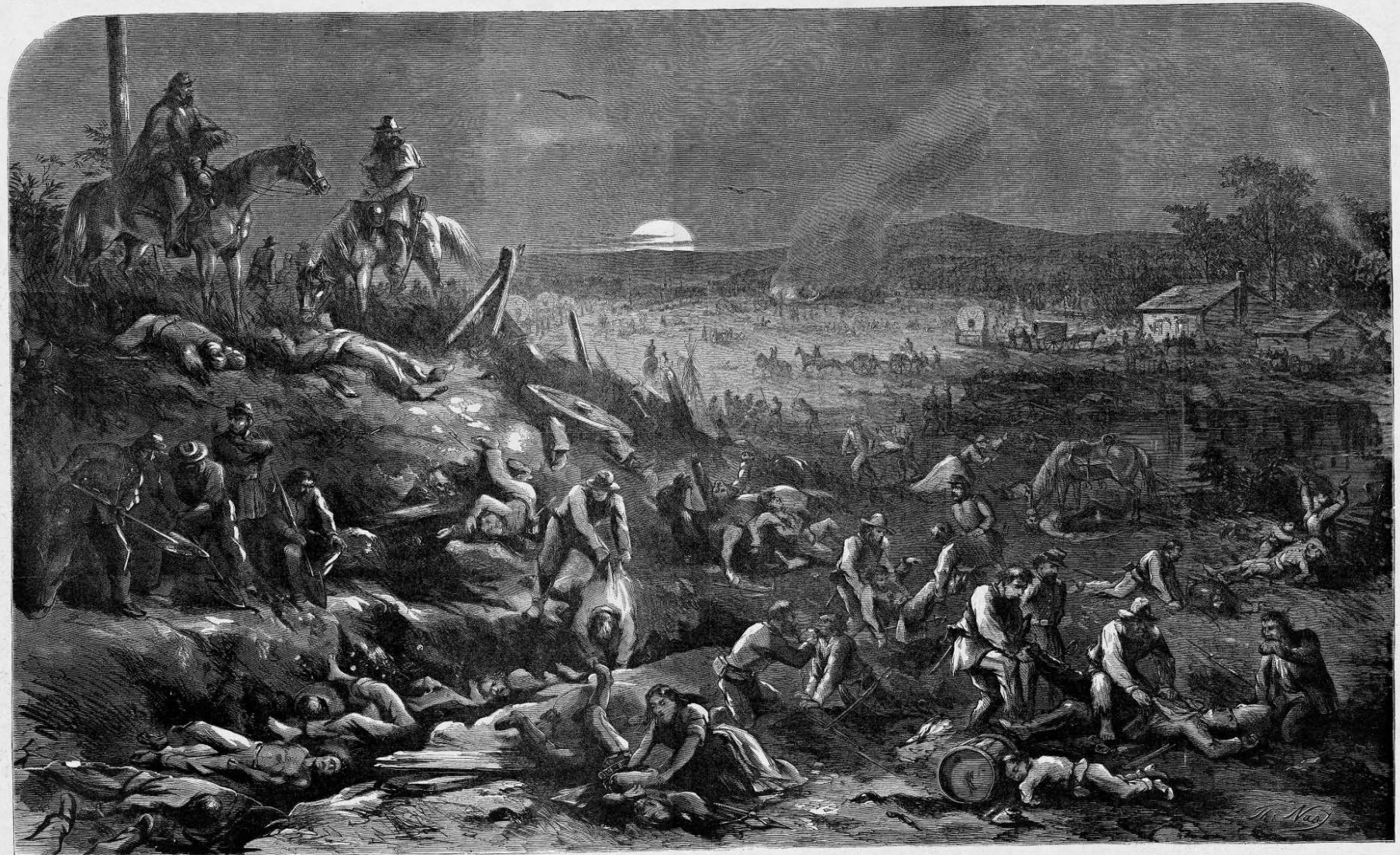
Caption: "After the Battle—The Rebels in Possession of the Field"

After the Battle, by Thomas Nast, Harper's, October 25, 1862

680

HARPER'S WEEKLY.

681



AFTER THE BATTLE—THE REBELS IN POSSESSION OF THE FIELD.—[SEE PAGE 686.]



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HARPER'S WEEKLY.

NOVEMBER 15, 1862.

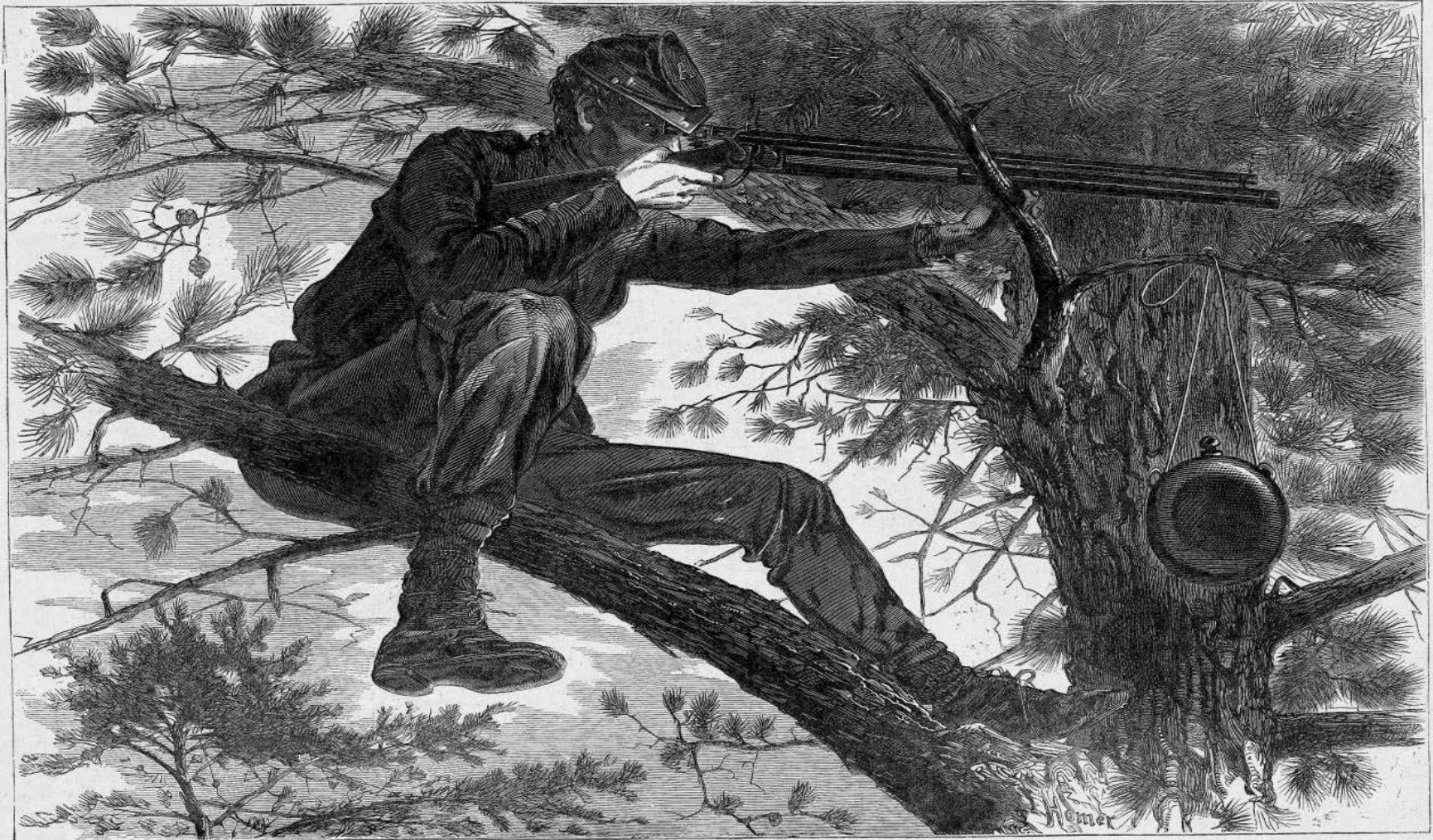
THE ARMY OF THE POTOMAC—A SHARP-SHOOTER ON PICKET DUTY.—[FROM A PAINTING BY W. HOMER, Esq.]

Caption:

“The Army of the Potomac—
A Sharpshooter
on Picket Duty”

Discussion Questions

- How does the Sharpshooter's image compare to the more traditional image of soldiering Homer depicts in the Bayonet Charge? What are the key differences?
- Does the picture have a point of view? Does it make him look heroic or sinister?



THE ARMY OF THE POTOMAC—A SHARP-SHOOTER ON PICKET DUTY.—[FROM A PAINTING BY W. HOMER, ESQ.]

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HARPER'S WEEKLY.

NOVEMBER 15, 1862.

Defiance: Inviting a Shot Before Petersburg (painting, Detroit Institute of Art, 1864)



Discussion Questions

- What is the story that Homer's painting is depicting?
- What pictorial devices does Homer use to make the central figure appear heroic? What devices does he use to undercut that heroism, to draw out the tragic irony of the man's position?
- Why does he include the figure of the black banjo player?

Defiance: Inviting a Shot Before Petersburg
(painting, Detroit Institute of Art, 1864)



Part II: The Home Front

Filling Cartridges, Harper's, July 29, 1861



Discussion Questions

- What does the image tell us about war mobilization? about gender roles?
- Is the image merely documentary, or does it seek to persuade us? How so?

Caption: “Filling Cartridges at the United States Arsenal at Watertown, Massachusetts”

News from the War, Harper's, June 14, 1862



Discussion Questions

- Why does the phenomenon of news itself deserve a picture?
- Why show bad news so prominently in the center?

Caption: “News from the War”

Our Women and the War, Harper's, September 6, 1862



Discussion Question

Compare this image of women and the war to the picture of the cartridge factory. How does this image depict gender roles?

Caption:
“Our Women
and the War”

Letter for Home, (lithograph, L. Prang, 1863)



Discussion Question

How does this image depict gender roles?

Part III: The African American Experience

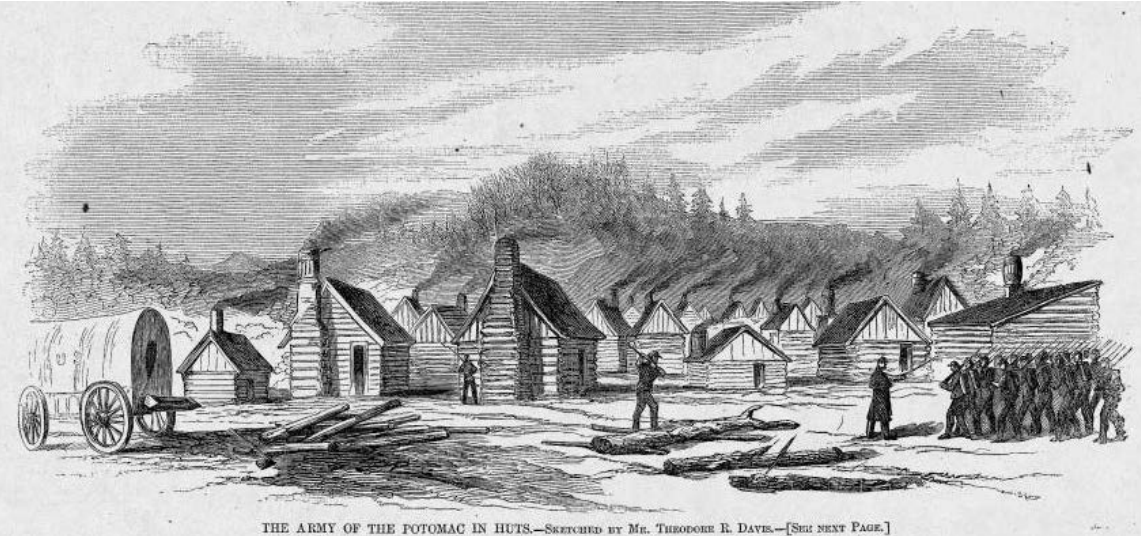
Bivouac Fire on the Potomac Harper's, December 21, 1861

Discussion Questions

- “Weel about and jump Jim Crow”: What elements of racial caricature does Homer incorporate into this image?
- What does this image say about its audience – both the audience inside the image and the audience for the image?



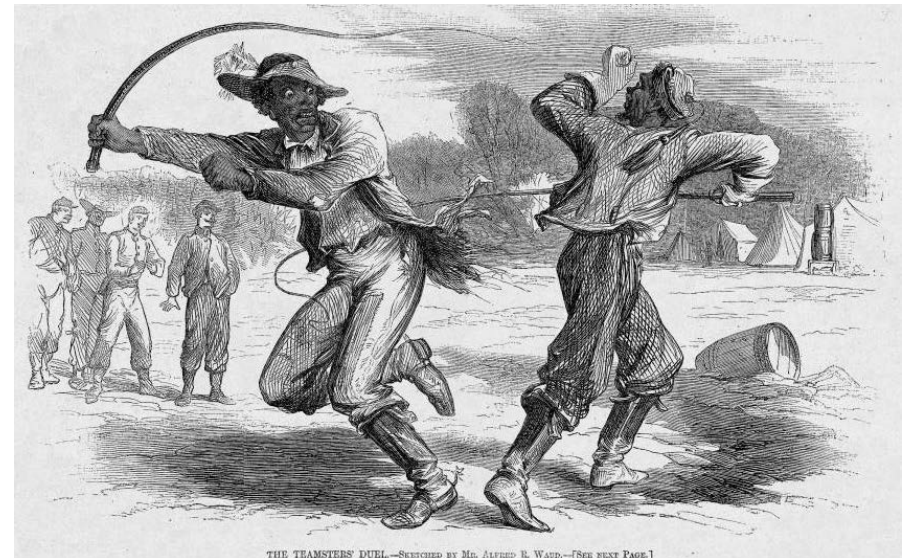
Caption: “A Bivouac Fire on the Potomac”



Discussion Question

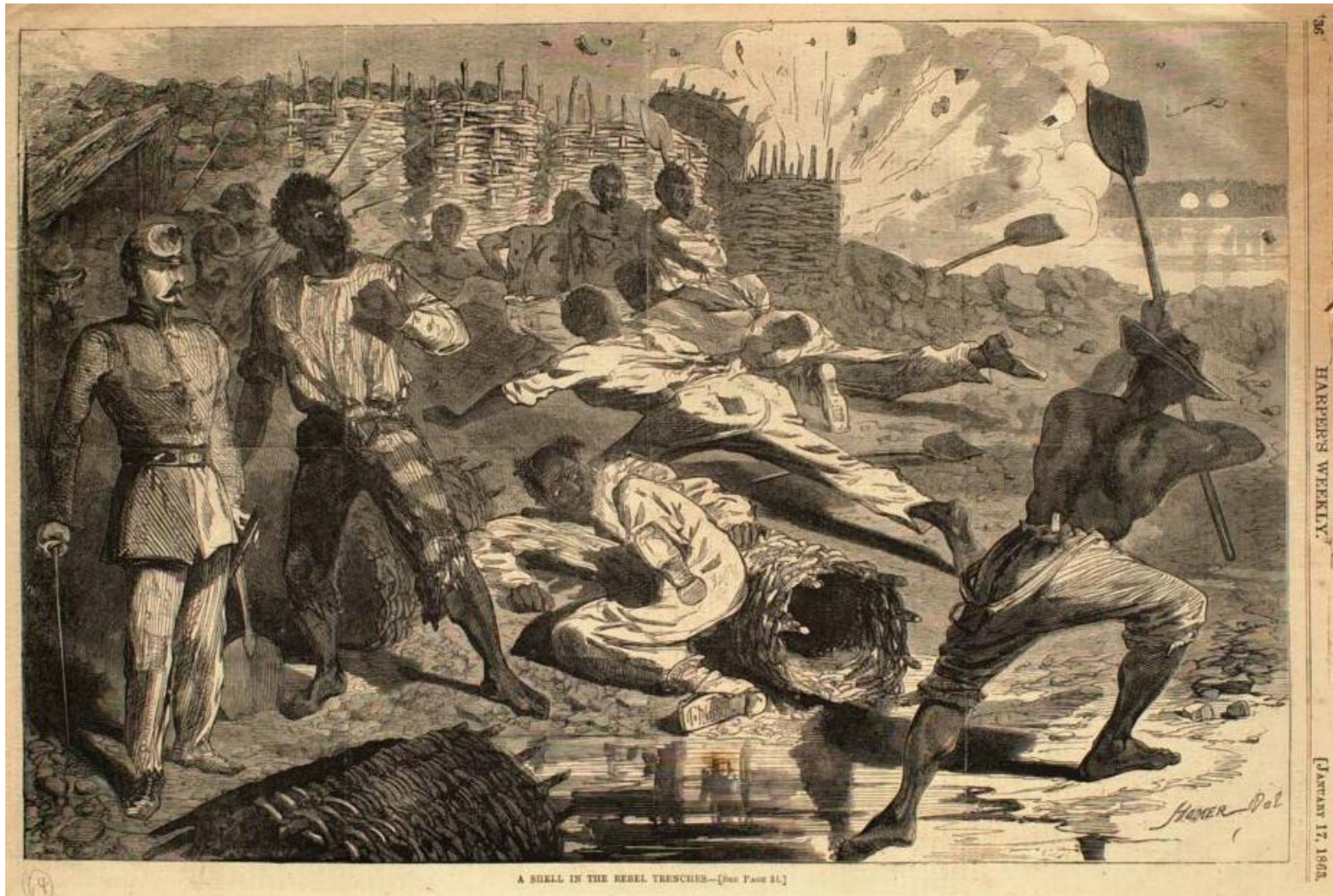
How does Homer's image of camp life compare to this one by Alfred Waud?

Caption: "The Army of the Potomac in Huts"



Caption: "The Teamsters' Duel"

Shell in Rebel Trenches, Harper's, January 17, 1863



Discussion Question

How does
Homer's image of
the trenches
compare to the
text describing it?

Caption: "A Shell in the Rebel Trenches"

The Bright Side (painting, DeYoung Museum, SF, 1865)

Discussion Questions

- Who are these men and what is their role in the army?
- Why the title *The Bright Side*? Does it have a larger significance?



Near Andersonville
(painting, Newark Museum, 1866)



Discussion Questions

- Who are the men in the background of this painting?
- How is this image organized?
- How does Homer use the contrast of light and dark, in and out?
- How does this compare to his Bright Side?

Part IV: The Aftermath

Prisoners from the Front, painting, MET, 1866



Discussion Questions

- Who is in this face off?
- How does Homer use body language and to what effect?

Visit from the Old Mistress painting, Smithsonian, 1876



Discussion Questions

- Who is who in this faceoff?
- How does Homer use body language and to what effect?
- How does this image compare with *Prisoners from the Front*?

Veteran in a New Field, painting, MET, 1865



Discussion Questions

- How does Homer turn the old idea of “swords into ploughshares” into an iconic image?
- Why is the veteran’s back turned toward us?

Cotton Pickers, painting, LA County Museum, 1876



Discussion Questions

- As an image of labor, how does *Cotton Pickers* compare to *Veteran in a New Field*?
- How does Homer use body language and gaze in this image, and to what effect?

Final slide

Thank you.