

The World of N. C. Wyeth

By Diana Childress

Newell Convers Wyeth wanted more than anything else to create art that would express his great love for nature. The deepest happiness a person could experience, he believed, came from living simply and treasuring the beauty and the bounty of land and sea.

As a boy growing up in Needham, Massachusetts, in the late 1800s, Wyeth loved to draw. He delighted his family with his sketches, and earned pocket money drawing horses and selling the portraits.

Wyeth's mother encouraged his efforts and persuaded his father to let him attend art school. His teachers there urged him to study illustration. Most publications of the time used drawings, not photographs, and good illustrators were well paid.

Wyeth developed a talent for composing dramatic scenes. His vivid pictures for western stories in popular magazines attracted attention. Publishers asked him to illustrate books, including such classics as *Treasure Island*, *Robin Hood*, and *Robinson Crusoe*. Architects wanted him to decorate the walls of their buildings with paintings of historical events and famous Americans. And businesses asked him to design their advertisements.

He spent hours in libraries researching his many assignments. And whenever possible, he gained firsthand knowledge of his subjects—working on a ranch in Colorado, visiting a Navajo reservation in Arizona and New Mexico, and touring Civil War battle sites in Virginia. He enjoyed experiencing different lives as he captured the drama and emotions of the stories he painted.

Many of Wyeth's paintings were based on his own experiences and feelings. His fondest memories were of his parents' farm, spending time outdoors with his three brothers, doing chores, taking care of animals, and swimming in the Charles River.

He had gone to Wilmington, Delaware, as a young man to study with the famous illustrator Howard Pyle. He soon fell in love with the surrounding countryside and eventually settled in nearby Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania. "I feel so moved sometimes toward nature," he wrote to his mother in 1907, "that I could almost throw myself face down into a ploughed furrow..."

It wasn't wilderness that moved him most, but farmland—land where people and nature coexisted. In a letter to a friend, Wyeth expressed his love for "haystacks in the burning sun, the smell of cows and the calls of the barnyard."

To teach himself how to paint these scenes, Wyeth took his sketchbooks outdoors. He believed that a close knowledge of nature was essential to his work. "I have spent considerable time on the study of an apple-tree trunk," he once wrote.

For more than thirty years, as he supported himself, his wife, and their five children by doing countless illustrations, he also painted landscapes and quiet scenes of rural life: men building fences, a boy fishing,



Illustration by N. C. Wyeth (1920) for *Robinson Crusoe*. Here young Robinson Crusoe refuses to take his father's advice.
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Reading Mini-Assessment Grade 7 Cluster 1 Form B

a newborn calf, girls playing in a meadow. In the 1930s, Wyeth spent summers on the coast of Maine, painting seascapes and fishermen.

An opportunity to combine historical illustration and landscape painting came in 1940 when a large life insurance company asked Wyeth to create a series of murals for its New York City headquarters. Wyeth's idea was to represent life among the Pilgrim settlers in Plymouth, Massachusetts. The theme allowed him to unite carefully researched history with views of the natural world he cherished most: the farms and coastline of New England.

The details of Pilgrim life in the fourteen canvases he completed before his death in 1945 are as accurate as he could make them. But more important than the details are the emotions he shows, especially the calm, confident faith of these people.

Instead of focusing on the hardships the Pilgrims suffered, Wyeth opens our eyes to their happiness. He lets us feel their gratitude for a life free from persecution, for their friendship with Squanto and other Native Americans, for the rich harvest and abundant wildlife, and for the beauty of their new homeland.

Wyeth's Pilgrims wear colorful clothing and they smile. They farm, hunt, fall in love and marry, and joyfully share their harvest feast with the neighbors who taught them to plant maize. The fourteen tranquil scenes with their bright colors are a testament to Wyeth's deep faith in our world, and his personal thanks for the rich blessings of life.

Reading Mini-Assessment Grade 7
Cluster 1 Form B

Name _____ Date _____

Directions: Read the passage “The World of N. C. Wyeth,” then circle the letter of the correct answer.

1. When the author writes “farmland—land where people and nature coexisted” he means that on farms
- A. people valued nature.
 - B. nature seemed untamed.
 - C. people and nature lived together.
 - D. nature looked beautiful to the people.

2. Read the following sentence.

To teach himself how to paint these scenes, Wyeth took his sketchbooks outdoors. He believed that a close knowledge of nature was essential to his work.

What does the word *close* mean in this sentence?

- A. tight
 - B. narrow
 - C. nearby
 - D. detailed
3. Which two words from the article are most nearly the same?
- A. calm, tranquil
 - B. researching, composing
 - C. encouraged, delighted
 - D. emotions, memories

4. Read the following sentence.

The details of Pilgrim life in the fourteen canvases he completed before his death in 1945 are as accurate as he could make them.

What does the word *accurate* mean?

- A. colorful
- B. exact
- C. cherished
- D. creative

Reading Mini-Assessment Grade 7
Cluster 1 Form B

5. Read the following sentence.

He enjoyed experiencing different lives as he captured the drama and emotions of the stories he painted.

What does the word *captured* mean?

- A. represented
- B. seized
- C. confined
- D. arrested

Reading Mini-Assessment Grade 7
Cluster 1 Form B

ANSWER KEY – The World of N. C. Wyeth – LA.A.1.3.2

LA.A.1.3.2: word structure, context clues, inferences, conclusions, organizational patterns

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ANSWER KEY – The World of N. C. Wyeth – Page 2

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