

Lure of the West

Acting It Out

Overview: After completing this activity, students will better understand the motivating factors behind westward migration and the experiences of the people moving west.

Subject Area: Social Studies

Age Group/Grade Level: 9-12 years, grades 4-7

Duration: approximately 60 min.

Background

Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way, Leutze's mural study for the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C., celebrated the idea of Manifest Destiny just when the Civil War threatened the Republic. The surging crowd of figures in the study embodies the births, deaths, and battles fought as European Americans settled the continent to the Pacific Ocean. Like Moses and the Israelites, who appear in the ornate borders of the painting, these pioneers stand at the threshold of the Promised Land ready to fulfill what many nineteenth-century Americans believed was God's plan for the nation.

Discussion

Share Leutze's *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way* with students. Begin your conversation by asking students:

- What do you see or notice in this picture?

Focusing on the central panel, select two scenes on both the left and right sides of the canvas for students to act out. Have students take on the poses of each figure in these four scenes, executing a *tableau vivant*. Then pose the following questions:

- What do each of these four scenes mean, individually? What new meaning do they have when added together?
- What story does the whole painting tell?
- What might these figures be saying to one another?

As a large group, brainstorm what students already know about westward expansion. Note contributions on the board. Identify gaps in knowledge by asking:

- What more might we need to know in order to write a play inspired by this artwork?
- Where might we find that information?



Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze, [Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way \(mural study, U.S. Capitol\)](#), 1861, oil on canvas, 33 1/4 x 43 3/8 in., Bequest of Sara Carr Upton, 1931.6.1.

Activity

Gather students in small groups and task them with developing three 20-second scenes in a play inspired by Leutze's painting. Using the characters from the painting, students must decide whether Leutze's work will serve as the beginning or middle of their play (see table below). They must write action and dialogue for all three scenes based on their prior understanding of westward expansion and basic research.

After each group has performed their series of scenes, have the class come back together and reflect on the following questions:

- How did you decide where the painting fits into the story?
- How did your scenes connect to the painting?
- What did you discover about westward expansion in America during this time?

	Option 1	Option 2
Scene 1	<i>Westward the Course ...</i>	Beginning
Scene 2	Middle	<i>Westward the Course ...</i>
Scene 3	End	End

For a full-size image of Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze's *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way (mural study, U.S. Capitol)*, visit:

https://ids.si.edu/ids/deliveryService?id=SAAM-1931.6.1_1