

Nocturne in Grey and Gold: Snow in Chelsea by James Abbott McNeill Whistler: painted in 1876

Welcome to this audio guide in which I'll be inviting you to take a look at this painting for a few minutes whilst I lead you around it.

Although the painting is called Nocturne in Grey and Gold, there are a few more subtle colours than that in the picture, but all colours are muted and quite neutral. What's the effect of this limited palette? Overall there's a mood of wintry darkness, failing light that bleaches all colour from the surroundings. Perhaps there's a hint of fog or mist, and of night closing in around the solitary figure.

It's not clear if this is twilight or later, partly because of the reflected light from the snow. What impression do you have – is it dusk or night time?

Notice the cloud of mist hanging in the air at the top right of the painting, obscuring the rooftops beyond. Could this be a London smog, could it be steam from a nearby vent, or even smoke from an unseen train passing along tracks running parallel with this street?

What sort of feeling do you get from this scene? Do you think it looks quite cosy because of the light coming from the window? Or gloomy and a bit sinister? Lonely perhaps? Or just atmospheric?

Despite all the dark coloured shadow in this painting, there's also some spots of light or reflected light which we'll look at now.

Notice the three spots of light leading our eye into the distance on the right of the painting – gaslights, or distant windows maybe. See how they sink away into the gloom, taking you off into the mysterious depths of the street.

Around the warmly glowing bay window, there are other windows - how many can you see? Do you think these are houses, shops, or offices?

There's also reflected light picking out details in the picture. The foreground is illuminated by the light bouncing up from the snow, while the buildings and street are framed by the light shining off the cloud of fog. If you look on the left hand side

of the image, you can see how the painter has used light reflecting off snow to highlight the top of the wall, while beyond, more snow gleams on the bark of a slender tree.

Coming back to the brightly lit window at the centre of the painting, what sort of building do you think *this* is? Do you feel it offers a welcoming glow to us onlookers, or does it, for you, increase the isolation? There's a smudge at the window – could it be a figure? What *else* could it be?

Look now at the lone figure as he walks away from us. Where is the man going? Is he making for the lit window, or is he going to walk past it and on into the dark and the fog?

Although there's little detail to the man, we can infer a few things about him. What's his posture like? He seems a little hunched – this could be against the cold, or because he's walking carefully, wary of slipping on the snow and ice. Can you tell anything about his age? He's not carrying anything. What could this mean? Do you think he's on honest business or up to no good?

Is this a busy street? Can you see evidence of any carriage wheel marks, footprints? Certainly we can see no other figures, but what might be beyond the canvas?

Now imagine yourself inside the picture, to give yourself a more vivid experience of this painting. Visualize yourself standing in the lit window, looking out into the street, watching the man approaching. Is he a visitor you're expecting, is he a customer for your shop, or is he just a stranger? What can you see beyond him? Is it a busy scene, with carriages, horses, buildings and people, or is it very quiet and deserted? Perhaps you think it's late at night and all is quiet around you?

What happens next – do you welcome the visitor in, or does he walk past? And what do you do next?

We've come to the end of this audio guide now, although you're welcome to spend more time looking at the painting on your own.

Next, you might like reflecting on what you most enjoyed about this brief activity so scroll down to **Wrap up your painting** to have a go at this.