

Two Strings to her Bow by John Pettie: painted in 1887

Welcome to this audio guide in which we'll be taking a look at this picture together for a few minutes.

As we view this painting, immediately we may find our eye is drawn to the trio in the foreground, and perhaps we barely notice the picturesque background, or all the delicate colours and textures of the earth and foliage. However, a brief look tells us that the earth and trees have been loosely painted, the brush strokes are soft, the colours are fairly subtle and the look of this background is slightly diffused. Do you think this is deliberately the case so that we quickly concentrate on the figures?

Coming to the figures, here is a young woman, strolling along arm in arm with two gentlemen. Possibly she's the only one of the three who's enjoying the walk! We can read a rich and perhaps comical story from the body language of the threesome. The woman is standing tall, her chin and chest raised, her cheeks glowing, a broad smile on her lips and her eyes looking into the middle distance. How would you describe her emotions in this scene?

The two young men, though attached by their arms to the young woman, are angling themselves as far away from each other as they can. They're clearly both fashionable young men, possibly wealthy, but beyond that, the painter suggests somewhat different characters for them. Take a look at the young man in the dark blue jacket. How would you describe his facial expression? His downcast mouth and eyes and his slight slouch tell us about his mood. On the other side, the young man in the russet coat puffs forward his chest and stomach, and raises his cane to his mouth in a nonchalant pose. What do you think this tells you about *his* character and *his* mood? Which man do you think feels the most confident in the affections of the woman? Is there a hint that one man is more smartly dressed than the other? If so which one? Which young man do you most warm to, if either? Why is that?

The trio are strolling along a sunken lane, passing from the shade on the right into the bright sunlit centre of the painting. It might suggest to us the moment when actors walk onto the stage and the lights fall on them -our attention is caught.

Where have they come from? There's a country house just on the brow of the hill, with the hint of other buildings clustered around it. So, the young woman might be the daughter of this household, and we would guess is dallying with several suitors at once.

How serious do you think she is about either young man?

Are you surprised that she's shown walking out with these gentlemen, without a chaperone? From the costumes we could assume this scene is set in the Regency period. This may be familiar to us from the novels of Jane Austen such as 'Pride and Prejudice', and 'Sense and Sensibility'. So in that era, the early 1800s, walking out with gentlemen would have been rather scandalous and any young woman doing so would risk her reputation. Maybe this is also a clue as to the woman's social status – perhaps she's a country girl and neither wealthy nor of high social class. It could be possible that one of the men is a relative, and is in fact her chaperone. Do you think this is likely?

If the men are rivals in love, which of them do you think is most interested in the woman? Why do you think that?

What conversation might they be having together? Or, do you think they're walking along in complete silence?

If this were an illustration in a book, and you could flick through to the last chapter, how do you think the story ends?

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