

A Formal Analysis of Eero Järnefelt's *Under the Yoke*

Eero Järnefelt's piece titled *Under the Yoke (Burning the Brushwood)* (1893), represents a harsh depiction of agricultural labor, painted in the late 1800s. The scene depicted in the work is Lapinlahti, Northern Savo. The piece's current location is in Helsinki, Finland, displayed at the Ateneum Art Museum (Google Arts & Culture 2022). It is painted with oil on a 131 x 164 centimeter canvas. Eero Järnefelt was a Finnish painter, and art professor born on November 8, 1863. He is well regarded for his portraits and landscapes inspired by Koli National Park (Google Arts & Culture 2024). In *Under the Yoke*, Järnefelt paints workers in a field, depicting many human figures including a young girl, Johanna Kokkonen, along with a man crouching over, both surrounded by smoke filled with ash and fire (Google Arts & Culture 2022). Through Järnefelt's use of color, direction, light, and texture, he creates a visual expression of hardship and exhaustion from the consequences of rural labor.

*Under the Yoke* highlights a burning field, coupled with multiple figures of people, tirelessly working under harsh conditions, depicted by large plumes of dark smoke. Johanna Kokkonen, is painted in the center of the piece, carrying a stick (Google Arts & Culture 2022). The girl's tired expression, black grime smeared across her face, and destroyed clothing, show the severe conditions of the work environment. Beside the girl, a working man holds a long stick wearing the same worn clothing.

In the foreground of *Under the Yoke*, Järnefelt paints dark colors that contrast with the painting's background colors. These fade into a horizon, showing distance and the difference between the brutal setting in the foreground and the clear horizon. Järnefelt's choice of low-intensity greys and browns in the foreground contrasts with high-intensity oranges in the fire. As the horizon's more intense colors clash with the flat colors in the foreground, Järnefelt highlights the difference between the poor environment of the field and the horizon. The vivid

orange flames in the background are intense, representing disaster. This intentional use of dull colors with subtle contrasts of orange contributes to the emotionally draining atmosphere that surrounds the workers in the painting.

The work of art leads the viewer's direction from the closest figure of the man, followed by the young girl in the center, all the way to distant workers standing on the field in the background. The unity of characters, each holding sticks and moving in similar fashions, creates a representation of repetitiveness, as the workers' task on the field presents an endless and draining atmosphere. The direction and angles of the long sticks the workers carry, direct the viewer's attention across the canvas horizontally. This is highlighted through the angle of the stick tools, spanning across the entire canvas. The sticks suggest the large size of the field, and the elongated feeling of repetitive tasks the workers carry. Järnefelt depicts the stick sizes long, which occupy much horizontal space in the canvas, displaying the emotional weight the field workers carry.

Light is muted and diffused by white and grey smoke which fills the space, softening the landscape colors and terrain. With no direct source of light in the painting, the smoke hides visibility and clarity in the setting of the field. There are no direct sources of light shining onto the workers, and this lack of direct light creates shade to emphasize the physical exhaustion of the workers.

Järnefelt also uses crooked brushstrokes to contribute to the rough texture of the field, with ash, rock, and soil, showing the difficulties field work brings. The soil in the burning foreground is uneven. The texture of the workers' clothing is torn and dirty. These textured choices in the terrain and condition of the workers' clothing further accentuate physical discomfort and fatigue.

Personally, interpreting *Under the Yoke* was emotionally moving because it vividly conveyed the depressive reality of rural labor. I felt empathy and sorrow for the workers, as Järnefelt captured intricate details in Johanna Kokkonen's facial expression, portraying sheer exhaustion. Kokkonen's gaze also communicated hopelessness and resignation, which are emotions further emphasized by the black grime smeared across her face. This caused me to reflect on the harsh realities that individuals have experienced in the demanding working conditions given in the modern day, and historically. Järnefelt's work motivated me to consider how physically demanding field work can be, and how one can underestimate the emotional and physical challenges involved.

In summary, in Järnefelt's piece, *Under the Yoke*, his choices of color, direction, light, and texture, illustrate the visual representation of the hardship and exhaustion from physical labor. With elements of low-intensity colors, direction leading the audience's view across the canvas, limited direct light sources across the subjects, and texture in the worn, ripped clothing, *Under the Yoke* communicates the brutal intensity of rural labor.

## References

Google Arts & Culture. 2024. "Eero Järnefelt." Google Arts & Culture. Accessed July 9, 2025.

<https://artsandculture.google.com/incognito/entity/eero-j%C3%A4rnefelt/m01d579>.

Google Arts & Culture. 2022. "*Under the Yoke (Burning the Brushwood)* - Eero Järnefelt."

Google Arts & Culture. Accessed July 9, 2025.

<https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/under-the-yoke-burning-the-brushwood-eero-j%C3%A4rnefelt/TgE5-s2gPkOE6Q>.