"The Slave Ship" (1840) by Joseph Mallord William Turner

"The Slave Ship" (1840), by J. M. W. Turner, is a perfect example of a romantic landscape painting. His style is expressed more through dramatic emotion, sometimes taking advantage of the imagination. Instead of carefully observing and portraying nature, William Turner took a landscape of a stormy sea and turned it into a scene with roaring and tumultuous waves that seem to destroy everything in its path. Turner's aims were to take unique aspects of nature and find a way to appeal strongly to people's emotions.

The Historical Context of "The Slave Ship"

William Turner was inspired to paint, "The Slave Ship" after the publishing of a book, "The History of the Abolition of the Slave Trade". This book by, Thomas Clarkson, characterized an incident that happened in 1783, involving a ship filled with slaves. Many of the slaves onboard were sick, but the captain's insurance company would not pay him for slaves that died on board the ship. He would only be paid for the slaves that were lost at sea. In order to earn the money he wished, he ordered all the sick and dying to jump off the ship and into the sea. It was a gruesome scene that influenced Turner to create his landscape. It is noted that the full title of "The Slave Ship" is really, "The Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On)"). Turner was largely affected by the cruelty that was expressed towards these people, and he is able to portray this through the "frenzied emotional depiction of this act" (Kleiner). This particular landscape also reveals Turner's preoccupation with the Industrial Revolution and its effects on society.

Romantic Techniques

William Turner used many techniques typical to Romantic painters. In this painting he does not have defined brush strokes, this makes the picture appear blurry and makes the viewer uses their imagination more. Also, the most vibrant colors can be found in the orange around the sun and some of the blue in the ocean. This is typical of Romantic art because it is focusing on nature, and the power that nature has over man. Turner is also showing the power of nature by making the ship in the painting not the main focus. Even though its name is The Slave Ship the sun and the ocean are the most conspicuous parts of the painting.

Light and Color

The use of light and color is the technique used to add the dramatic effect that this painting has on its audience. It contains a variety of colors from dark maroons, to yellows, reds, oranges and blues. The main focus is on the maroon spots in the water representing the bodies of the slaves and the vividly bright red and orange colors of the sunset. These colors are warm and intriguing, but instill a sense of fear and pandemonium. Acting as a trademark to the Romantic era, the colors of this painting represent hues of nature and the emotions of the sea. In this specific painting, Turner used a technique where pure colors are filtered through the other layers of the painting and can be seen shining through, creating a glowing, and luminous effect. Light also plays an important role; especially where it casts the shadows of the waves. It allows the viewer to envision the intensity of the waves and how large and dangerous they are. The reds and oranges and the presence of a sinking sun portrays the sunset during the scene; which also gives the painting a romantic feel, through a sunsets connection with nature.

The Ocean and Wind

The ocean is a distinct portrayal of the capabilities and powers that nature can take hold of on earth. The strong, fierce waves highlight the ominous storm. With the various paint strokes, the ocean coincides with rough winds that over looms the context of the painting. The primary context, or instant image, of the painting is clearly a ship sailing the open waters during a harsh rainstorm, however; when looking more closely, one would realize that the secondary context, or deeper understanding, highlights the magnificent power of nature. Also, throughout history, it is perceived that in Turner's eyes, the ship was a punishment to the earth's inhabitants and their industrial actions. It is also important to note that among the upset waters, the sunset in the background portrays nature's beauty, serenity, and peace.

Comparison to Claude Lorrain

Many times Turner admired Claude Lorrain, a French romantic painter, for his accomplishments with landscapes and his use of light. Lorrain's Seaport at Sunset (1639) can be compared and reflected in "The Slave Ship" for his use of warm oranges and yellows reappear. It is quite evident that through studying Lorrain's paintings, Turner was able to become a master of the light and a famous painter.