

Joseph Mallord William Turner was an incredible artist in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, who eventually turned away from traditional landscape art and paved the way for art movements to come later on like abstraction. Turner astounded the viewers at the exhibitions and salons, leaving the people wanting more. Nearly all of Turner's paintings were successful when exhibited in the Royal Academy, yet there was always one critic who did not find a work appealing even so, there was often always a patron excited to purchase the works regardless. However, in the case of the painting, *The Parting of a Hero and Leander*, there was never a buyer after it was displayed at the Academy, even though it is an incredible Romantic approach to illustrating different Greek tales of mythology. When it comes to *The Parting of a Hero and Leander*, what affected its likability at the Royal Academy? Why was this piece in particular unsuccessful compared to works before or after it? What was it that changed? Turner's style and artistic approach? Or perhaps the viewers of his works had a developing taste Turner couldn't satisfy? Within this research paper, my objective is to go through the year leading up to this painting and the one following to determine any contextual clues as to why this painting in particular wasn't sold.

Before diving straight into artworks by Turner, it is beneficial to look at his way of painting. With a painting style unique to his time, Turner would illustrate scenes that contained a spirit of freedom unbound by the need to paint a perfect scene of nature. By using oil paints, Turner would create a sense of transparency within limitless colors and lighting that was anything but natural. Joseph Mallord William Turner's paintings contain an abundance of storytelling, though his stories are not tied down to the content.

In 1836, the year before *The Parting of a Hero and Leander* was being exhibited in the Royal Academy, he spent time traveling to Venice and completed quite a few paintings and

sketches while there. With his travel experience and sketchbook, Turner had the ability to paint exactly what he saw, the way he physically could see it in Venice. Though Turner was not one to keep a scene contained by the tangible nature in front of him. There is a work from the exhibition of 1836 that earned some interesting criticism, which is *Juliet and her Nurse* (figure 1). This work is a birds eye view of St. Mark's Square, though the title of this painting is a reference to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. The Reverend John Eagles wrote in *Blackwood's Magazine* that this piece was 'A strange jumble— 'confusion worse confounded.' It is neither sunlight, moonlight, nor starlight, nor firelight... Amidst so many absurdities we scarcely stop to ask why Juliet and her nurse should be at Venice. For the scene is a composition as from different models of different parts of Venice, thrown higgledy–piggledy together, streaked blue and pink and thrown into a flour tub.'

The painting *Juliet and her Nurse* is an illustration of a real place one would see in Venice, and yet Turner placed two fictional individuals into the outskirts of this city square. The two figures in the bottom right corner of the composition are assumed to be both Juliet and her nurse. With all of the bold color choices of dark blues and unnatural lighting created by whites and yellows throughout the work, it seems Turner could be capturing the spirit of St. Mark's Square. His art is not restricted to the square itself when focusing on the beauty in the atmosphere of the place.

With such a strong review tearing apart Turner's work, the writer John Ruskin was quite frustrated with the magazine and decided to respond with a publication defending the artwork. Upon his father's advice, Ruskin sent J. M. W. Turner his draft that he was ready to publish though Turner advised him not to publish. In a stirring passage Ruskin writes, 'Many–coloured mists are floating above the distant city, but such mists as you might imagine to be aetherial

spirits, souls of the mighty dead breathed out of the tombs of Italy into the blue of her bright heaven... Instinct with the beauty of uncertain light they move and mingle among the pale stars and rise up into the brightness of an illimitable heaven...'. Needless to say, Ruskin was a great supporter of Turner and his works, and always found means to defend his works. There are many similarities between John Ruskin and Hegel's Concepts of Art and Aesthetics. Both of these men write about the influence the art has on the viewer.

Before jumping straight into what critics have to say about this piece, here is a short summary of the myth of *The Parting of Hero and Leander*. In this tale of Greek mythology Hero is a priestess of Aphrodite, who lived on a strait that separates Europe from Asia. Hero was deeply in love with Leander, a young man who resided Asian side. During the night Hero would go out and hold a lamp out to guide Leander as he would swim through the waters to get to her. Though one fateful night the lamp went out, and then Leander was drowned by the raging sea. Hero could not live knowing her love was no longer living and threw herself over the balcony of her tower to join him. Turner takes creative liberty flips the formalities within history painting, which often places the main characters within the centre of the composition, and moves them to the dark water's edge where Leander is about to leave into the raging sea. With this form composition it gives the viewer a deeper way to engage with the work by having to intently analyze the scene in its entirety.

Turner also does not seem to be solely focused on representing nature in its true form, instead it is a fantastical spirit of nature. The wave crashing against the cliff does not appear to be made completely of the churning waters, it seems it is configured by humanlike bodies. The bright, almost ghostly foam is reaching great height on the face of the cliff, as if the figures are attempting to claw their way up the wall to safety, though the waters are overcoming and

swallowing them. These ghost-like figures are something one would never truly see in nature, and yet it makes sense in the tension of the moment. If Turner were to simply paint an ocean wave crashing onto the face of the cliff it would fall back to a typical landscape scene of the times. Though using his artistic freedom, Turner released this painting from being confined to a natural seascape.

With the usage of such rich blues and dramatic brush strokes Turner breaks the pictorial boundaries of natural colors and forms. As an artist he chooses not to subject himself to substantial content, he illustrates scenes of Greek mythology which can be interpreted in any way one chooses to tell it. Turner uses the romantic styles to emphasize the enigmatic nature of Greek myths in his artworks.

Some scholars write that Turner could have found his subject from William Etty's *The Parting of Hero and Leander* which was exhibited in the Royal Academy in 1827 as well as in New York in 1836. This one was a completely different style, with drastic amounts of chiaroscuro, almost in the style of Caravaggio. Though Hegel would most likely disagree when it comes to the style being related to Caravaggio, Hegel does not favor keeping things lifelike or so strongly connected to the content. This is the difference in approach with the two artists, each of them are illustrating the same tale from Greek mythology and yet they are completely different. Etty's version of the Hero and Leander story is utterly realistic, highlighting human anatomy and form. With this version being so life-like would this leave room for the geist that Hegel speaks of so much? It seems with the realistic style of art there is no room for a spirit or spiritual truth to provoke a feeling from a viewer. Whether or not either is true, Turner's painting of this tale was not received well within the public scene.

Blackwood's Magazine claimed Turner was 'boldly attempting to insult the public taste being a dream of sick genius... blending the ridiculous and mysterious' as well as the excessive use of white. The Athenaeum stated 'full of imagination – but imprudent imagination... and its bearing faults can be only let pass by the exercise of the strongest forbearance'; the figures were 'gross and deformed in their shapes'. Needless to say there was no buyer ready to jump at purchasing *The Parting of Hero and Leander*. The only two owners listed under this painting are Turner himself and The National Gallery. The criticism did not stop at the exhibition, and continued once it was sent to the gallery.

This painting was not exhibited at the Academy alone, it was hung alongside another painting of a Greek tale titled *Story of Apollo and Daphne*. Even though they were not meant to be viewed as a pair, it was bound to happen. The two paintings have nearly opposite color palettes, one with warm and pastel like tones while the other is dark with cool tones. Though there is a similarity in the freedom within the way Turner is illustrating the sky. It is light and airy in comparison to *The Parting of Hero and Leander*, yet the feeling of the atmosphere in this work is more subdued. With the *Story of Apollo and Daphne* being created by using a more natural palette the public may have been more willing to accept it. While this painting did not get away without criticism, it wasn't nearly as disliked as the others. Ruskin described the piece by saying, 'the whole picture us to be illustrative of the union of rivers and the earth; and of the perpetual help and delight granted by streams in the earth, in their dew, to the earth's foliage'.

Every other magazine had pleasant things to say about this painting; The Spector said it was 'a wonder of art; a splendid picture of nature'. The Athenaeum compares it to *The Parting of Hero and Leander* by saying, '*Apollo and Daphne*...', exuberant in its invention, and rich in colouring, and exceptionable in the careless deficiency of its figures, is more moderate than the

last mentioned extravaganza [*Hero and Leander*], and we therefore prefer it...'. Out of the two paintings of Greek tales, it is apparent that the *Story of Apollo and Daphne* was much more favored among critics. This critique also shows how much the public valued the true form of nature rather than the essence or spirit of it.

In conclusion, Leo Costello says at the end of his writings 'We should not, therefore, imagine that we can or should see Turner whole. Rather it is by seeing the individual painter... We do the most service both to his art and the period to which he gave such complex form.' With that we can look back at the exhibition of 1837 and see that the critics in the time were focused on what was typically seen, which was nature illustrated as it was seen. Also, they only had what was typical to see is all they had to compare to *The Parting of Hero and Leander*. Turner was an artist who was not one to shy away from challenging what the critics and public were expecting to see from him. Joseph Mallord William Turner embraced the artistic liberty he had to create his own version of reality free from the limits imposed on him by society at the time.

After reading over my research paper I believe I wrote in Wolfflin's theory of Formalism. The majority of my paper relies on the forms and visual constructs of Turner's paintings, and using comparisons of the paintings. I wrote quite a bit on how Turner would use dramatic lighting and implied lines to deliver his paintings in a stronger way.

For example, in the research paper I bring up *The Athenaeum's* comparison of *The Parting of Hero and Leander* to the artwork it was hung with in the 1837 salon, *Apollo and Daphne*. By comparing the overall visual affects the vivid colors and deficiency of its characters, calling it more pleasing to the eye and it is the one the public prefers.

I don't think I utilized this theory of art history to its full potential in my research paper. I think I would have been more successful with the theory of Formalism with a few additions to this paper. I believe it would help to complete a visual analysis for each painting I mentioned, so I would have a stronger comparison of the works. As well as expanding more on Costello's writings on Turner's "complex form" , or the *Art-Union's* publication speaking on the difference between his works and "common nature" being drastically different. Perhaps bringing in more details on the caravaggio comparison and the critiques of *Juliet and her Nurse's* colors. To simply expand upon and provide more ground to base my writings around.