

# [Odilon redon essay](https://assignbuster.com/odilon-redon-essay/)

Odilon Redon As an artist, Odilon Redon expressed his volition to “ place the visible at the service of the invisible. ” What, in these terms, constitutes the “ visible” aspect of Redon’s works, and what constitutes the “ invisible”? Similarly, what reappearing motifs do we see in Redon’s works, and how might these be contextualized or interpreted? As a child, Odilon Redon had learned from his father, to watch the rolling clouds and see the infinite manifestations of form. This carried on far into his career as an artist, the man who saw orphaned dreams lurking behind every corner of reality. He was the rare Symbolist artist who found the strange grey plane between science and art, and saw their inseparability in a time when the human race obsessively sought to classify the infinite works of Mother Nature.

Redon saw in the great technique of sculpting reality known as Chiaroscuro, the ability to create a sense of reality even in the fantastical. This he discovered from his study of the shadowy paintings of Rembrandt, The Night-Watch in particular. Here he saw how shadow could be used to create a sense of curious ambiguity in stark contrast to figures in the painted light. The darkness, to him evoked a strange sense of the unknown, and this he would apply over and over again in Noirs, or Black drawings and etchings.

Chiaroscuro is a method used to create the great illusion of reality in a painting, and this Redon employed to represent his visions of the fantastic with a sense of credible reality. He tells the viewer what is visible by describing his figures in light, even though they may be the stuff of fantasy. Such presentation of “ reality” encourages the viewer to challenge the concept of real “ sight”, which I will go further into later in this essay. The visions of Redon are by no means mere whims of fantasy, but rather things that were constructed by the same general laws of nature.

For a creator of monsters and apparitions, a huge amount of passionate effort was spent studying reality in order to create the strange creatures that float in the space of Redon’s world. His creations were all scientifically authentic, in the sense that he studied botany, biology, icrobiology and anatomy among others in order to create his imaginary beings. Redon saw reality as infinite fodder for the creative mind, and his works were usually products of the distortion or degeneration of reality as he saw it. This, he felt, was the true sight of an artist; the ability to see into and beyond the physical forms he was presented with. His delving into botany arose from a lifelong mentorship with Armand Clavaud, an artist and the keeper of the Bordeux Botanical Gardens who took great interest with the microscope and the study of plant germs.

Much of Redon’s work is reflective of microbes seen through the microscope and the character of plants and flowers as believed by Clavaud. The influence of the science of biology in Redon’s work was reflective of the times. The sudden surge of research in the sciences came shortly after the Franco-Prussian war, in which the French had lost. Hence, the nation saw research in the sciences as the only way for the country to reemerge out of post-war melancholy, with many writers and artists reflecting this ideal. It is notable then, that Redon’s works reflect a transitory world caught between an emphasis on Realism and Naturalism coupled with the responsive rise of the Symbolism and Decadence movements, which looked at the importance of the dream and imagination.

Many more aspects of the visible and “ real” were incorporated into Redon’s drawings in order create a credible world of fantasy. Perspective and depth was not forsaken in his images, with the appearance of accurately drawn tiled floors such as those used in Vision, from his series In Dreams, usually found in the lower part of the painting whose lines followed the rules of perspective. This gave the images a proper sense of space that made his fantastical world believable. The use of a section of water or floor in the lower part of the image happens often in Redon’s drawings, acting as a sort of buffer or bridge between the fantastical and the real.

Or it could represent the gap that we, as viewers, have to overcome in order to proceed over to the other world of superior sight. Redon’s creatures tend to evoke a sense of empathy in the viewer despite being weird and inhuman physically. This is borne of the uncannily humane expressions on the faces of the flowers, polyps and Cyclops, a possible influence from his past study of Rembrandt. The latter was known for his accurate portrayals of humanity in his portraits through gestures and expressions. It is evident then, that in order to produce such expressions, Redon would have studied more than mere plants and biology, and possibly the despair and intense emotions from the death of this first child contributed to his sincerity of human emotion. His monsters appear to breathe the breath of life, as though they face and have faced the same troubles of the human condition as we do.

Some do complain though, that the emotions drawn are merely basic emotions, giving no hint of complex character, but the beauty of Redon’s work is that from one seemingly basic yet powerfully immersive emotion, we feel compelled to start deducing what it is that lies behind that one emotion. This complexity and endless speculation of character of a monster, of all things, is the result of Redon working the visible towards the means of the invisible. First made known for his Noirs by Joris-Karl Huysmans in his novel Against Nature, Redon was portrayed as one to produce images of hauntingly black strangeness. Redon’s use of huge areas of black reflects the indeterminable character of his monsters. Blackness represents the unknown, the potential of the unseen presence that he discovered from Rembrandt’s paintings and use of Chiaroscuro.

Though his blacks could be seen as a charcoal-covered expanse of paper, it has effect of encouraging introspection in viewers, much like a journey into the unconscious. Black does not distract as colours distract the emotions, enabling the spectator to purely “ look” at the image. It gives the sense of a place that could only be found in the bottomless void of the mind, both personal and mysterious, in which such monsters do exist in all their reality. Charcoal and Lithography were Redon’s main mediums for the first half of his life, especially after the death of his first son, during his period of Noirs. Charcoal was the medium that seemed to suit his ideals almost perfectly.

His love for the transitory, duality in nature, and also the ungraspable, just as Francisco de Goya was. The medium became the expression of his ideals, able to create the starkly definable and the ambiguously indefinable. This was also the character of his monsters and figures, all of which appear to be emerging or merging with their environments at the same time, a weird transitory mix of the scientific aesthetic. Charcoal had the tendency to fade with time, or at least give the impression of transience, and his creatures appeared as dreams that threatened to disappear at the first sign of light.

The smokiness of charcoal powder played a large part in creating the murky, deep environments of all his drawings, which emphasized the sense of the deep unknown and formlessness of the image. Throughout his entire career, Redon had various repetitive images of great eyes floating in space, apparitions, strange flower monsters, polyps, Cyclopes, severed heads, fallen angels, and winged horses. All of these seemed to cry out some meaning or message, most of which Redon kept a certain ambiguity about his entire life as an artist. The Eye appears in Redon’s work with a frequency that borders on obsession. Looking at the historical context, however, we can discern that he was not alone in the craze of the idea of “ sight”. Research of the times led to a better understanding of the workings of the eye, which sparked off philosophical and psychological theories of sight, once thought to be purely objective.

Redon saw dreaming as a form of sight, and constantly reminded his audience of the eye’s ability to look freely beyond physical reality, with images of for example, a massive bodiless eye-balloon hovering passively over a landscape with its gaze upturned towards the invisible. His drawings of vague and ambiguous apparitions in a shadowy landscape dealt with the general feeling of doubt over the eye, and the subjectivity of visual perception. All of his works, in fact, are apparitions of the unseen behind the seen, encouraging the spectator to truly “ look” at the world. The monumental size of Redon’s eyes demonstrates the importance he places on “ seeing”, and the literal “ size” of the gaze tends to stir up a sense of self-awareness and empathy for the melancholically introspective eyes. Their effect could even be compared to the images of religious importance such as those of Christianity and Buddhism, which Redon was influenced.

Redon both drew and painted flowers throughout his life; those of his Noirs usually given faces marked with despair or introspection, while his later flowers were brightly coloured, without faces, but still completely fantastical while appearing to be real. The flower motif shows the influence of Darwin and evolutionist theories on Redon, who was a great enthusiast. Man is symbolized in the flower, who grows out of the ground and blooms into consciousness under the light of intelligence. The living flower demonstrates the possibility of life in the lowest evolutionary forms, much like Redon’s microbial monsters in ethereal underwater landscapes, which echo the idea that life evolved from the depths. The transitory nature of the flower must have interested Redon, because it was believed that plants could have animal-like qualities under the effects of light.

This was all during the period of discovery that plants had organs and could respire as animal and humans did. This love of the transitory and ambiguous becomes even more outstanding in his portrayal of monsters. Monsters such as the one in the Cyclops, as Redon called them, represented nature’s awesome and unexplainable complexity, and the infinite possibilities of the creative forces of nature. It was an opposition to a generation obsessed with classification and order, presenting them a series of completely unclassifiable creations, tagged with possibility of such strangeness in the nature. They are forced to see that human ability pales in comparison to the complexity of the world and its infinite mysteries. The monsters also reflect Darwinist thought, being subjects of transition and formlessness, a strange mix of science and art, beings in the process of endless evolution.

Unable to define the monster, the spectator is forced to reflect on his own human incompleteness and vague origins, possibly empathizing with the monster that yearns to be complete but never is. Redon was insistent on the ambiguity and “ greyness” of his monsters along with other motifs, which has been the most obvious thread in all his works. It brought out the beauty of the unknown as much as his blacks did. The uneasiness his audience felt from his formless and vague drawings of monsters could also stem from the general fear of degeneration of the species arising from the turmoil and despair after being defeated in the Franco-Prussian War.

For it is during such depressions that one looks back and questions the Origins and human nature. Hence, his monsters were an uncomfortable yet enlightening opposition to a time of obsession with the factual and graspable. Odilon Redon was one who understood and lived within the incredibly vague area of the visible and invisible, using the former to assist the expression of the latter through the scientific study and understanding of life, and the use of physical mediums to push the unsuspecting viewer into the world of the strangely familiar, a world where monsters are but the lost dark twins of the human intellect and comrades of the human condition. Bibliography 1.

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