

# Essay on the slave ship by j m w turner

[Art & Culture](#), [Painting](#)



Discuss Slave Ship by J. M. W. Turner shown on page 544 of the textbook. Refer to the early chapters of the text with regard to the Fundamentals of visual art, and also the relevant chapter on Media and Processes. Do not simply describe the artwork (we can all see what it looks like), but discuss how the artist has created the work and how you respond to it. How does it make you feel? Do you think it is successful? Do you like the artwork? Be as detailed as possible in responding to the essay prompt.

### **Introduction:**

Perhaps one of the most famous paintings of all time, 'The Slave Ship' by Turner is an incredibly powerful piece of visual imagery which demonstrates man's inhumanity to man especially on the slavery issue. Turner was commissioned to paint this canvas by abolitionists who were appalled at the conditions on slave ships where human beings died like flies after being kept in shackles and fed a rudimentary amount of food to eventually be sold like chattel to the highest bidder. Turner was evidently quite fired up by the subject matter since he came up with what was probably his best painting

### **Creation of work**

Turner's The Slave Ship uses most of the characteristics for which he is mostly known, the yellow and sunlit background and the brushwork with strong lines which demonstrates his feeling for the atmosphere in the sea at that time. A storm seems to be approaching and due to this, the slave ship captain throws most of his slaves overboard to reduce the weight of the ship, a practise common in those times. The bodies which are floating in the sea are muddy and unclear, this adds to the mystical nature of the piece which is

almost battle like in its intensity and vividness.

Probably the best part of the work is the slave ship itself. This is reeling to the right as the sails which are unfurled almost droop lazily in the wind. The attention to detail is enormous with the timber masts clearly visible whilst the large number of artefacts which are floating in the sea also give the impression of terrible wreckage and carnage throughout. To my mind this means that the ship is bound for a horrible end sinking beneath the waves but there is absolutely no salvation for those poor slaves who have already been committed to the deep and who have no chance of survival. Turner's canvas is powerful in the sense that he manages to communicate a sense of impending tragedy which has also permeated the mind set of those who are against slavery.

### **Key points:**

In the foreground of the painting one can see a hand which is manacled with chains and which sticks out of the sea as the slave there is dying. This powerful imagery seems to say it all as it demonstrates how slaves were left to die in horrible circumstances as they faced their fate with alacrity.

Personally I found this part of the painting to be hugely powerful as it demonstrates the terrifying waste of life which occurred during such slave expeditions. Turner wanted to create what might be termed as a shocking painting and one has to remember that in those days, artists held sway in more ways than one over the community which was greatly influenced by all that happened and occurred in the artistic scene. And although the ship is very important in the whole context of the painting, the slaves who are drowning are also the heart of the painting in that sense.

**Personal reflections:**

Turner's painting of this Slave Ship incident recalls accounts of the terrifying Middle Passage although he does add some graphic details which are already well known, especially in pieces such as the famous film 'Amistad' and other previously published accounts of former slaves. Personally this painting did create tension and anger inside of me as I viewed it as it made me recall the several and untold millions who died in the slave trade for no reason at all but for profit

However Turner does go into painstaking detail on how the slaves perished. One can only imagine the gruesome descriptions of chained men with blood running through the decks and others being sick on each other. It is obviously harrowing but very realistic and truthful. Personally this creates a lot of anger and chagrin so the message of Turner's painting is undoubtedly there and very powerful.

Turner was undoubtedly extremely successful in creating imagery which denounced the slave trade completely. His powerful graphic imagery and use of mystical brushwork creates a sense of mystery and beauty although the subject matter is quite horrifying and disastrous. The message of abolitionism cannot be too strong here as it demonstrates that African slaves were treated as worse than chattel and their lives counted for nothing. Undoubtedly, Turner's painting helped to create a sense of horror and anger against the terrible slave trade and all that went with it. It is hugely successful in that sense after all.

## **Works Cited:**

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