

Lesson Plan: Reading Pictures, Seeing Poetry

Provided by the Art Institute of Chicago Department of Museum Education

Suggested Grade Level: 11–12

Estimated Time: two to three hours

Introduction

An exploration of Delacroix's painting and its literary source serves as an excellent introduction to a unit on Romantic literature. Students will discover characteristics of Romanticism through comparative discussions of the painting and the poem.

Artists often turn to literature for inspiration as they search for subject matter. The French Romantic painter Eugène Delacroix based his painting *The Combat of the Giaour and Hassan* on the poem *The Giaour* by English poet Lord Byron. Both the painting and the poem tell of a dramatic conflict between a Muslim and a Christian over the death of a woman. The exotic setting for the confrontation—a Greek battlefield—reveals the 19th-century European fascination with foreign lands and makes reference to the contemporary Greek war for liberation from the Ottoman Turks.

Lesson Objectives

- Become familiar with qualities and characteristics of Romantic painting and writing.
- Describe and analyze a Romantic work of art.
- Compare how Romantic artists and writers made choices about visual elements and language to depict their subjects.
- Discover how writing and painting complement each other as creative processes.

Key Terms

- Giaour
- Hassan
- Romanticism

Instructional Materials

- pencils
- notebook paper
- excerpts of *The Giaour* by Lord Byron

Procedures

Discussion

- Introduce the term Romanticism by looking at *Delacroix's The Combat of the Giaour and Hassan*.
- First, brainstorm as a class to develop a list of descriptive words and phrases. Ask students to write down the first three words or phrases that come to mind when they look at the painting. Compile this as a class list on the board or overhead transparency.
- Next ask:
 - What do you see? Encourage students to identify as many details as possible.
 - Who are the two men on horseback, and what are they doing?
 - Can you tell whether one man is a hero and another a villain? What clues in the painting make you think so?
 - How do we know that this scene takes place outside the United States during a different time?
 - What kind of mood or atmosphere does the artist create, and how does he do it?
- Summarize your discussion to develop a definition of Romanticism. Return to the list of words you made at the beginning of the discussion. What words and phrases can be added to the list? Discuss that Romantic works of art depict intense emotion, dramatic actions, and exotic themes through bold colors and brushwork. Do your students think this definition applies to this work? Why or why not?
- Explain that Delacroix was inspired by the poem <http://citiweb-images.artic.edu/resources/giaour.pdf> *The Giaour* by the English poet Lord Byron. Distribute excerpts of the poem that relate to the painting. Read the excerpts aloud as a class, reviewing new vocabulary as necessary.
- As homework, ask students to read the poem again, and then have them write the answers to the following questions:
 - What happens in this portion of the poem?

- What kind of language does Byron use to describe the Giaour and Hassan? Write down specific words and phrases he used.
- What words and phrases are used to describe their actions and encounters? Write down specific words and phrases he used.
- Review the students' lists as a class, compiling them on the board or overhead. Discuss what effects this use of language produces.
- Compare this vocabulary to the list of words and phrases students compiled while looking at the Delacroix painting. What similarities and differences can students find?
- Remind students that Romantic works of art depict intense emotion, dramatic actions, and exotic themes. How does this definition apply to the poem?

Activity

Ask students to decide if they think the painting or the poem is a better example of Romantic art based on what has been discussed in class. Ask them to defend their opinion in a one-page paper.

Evaluation

Base students' evaluation on their ability to participate in class discussion, describe and analyze a work of art, compare the use of visual elements and mood in a work of art to word choice and mood in a text, and write clearly in support of a thesis statement.

Illinois Learning Standards

English Language Arts: 1–5

Fine Arts: 25–27

Excerpt of *The Giaour*

They reach the grove of pine at last:
'Bismillah! now the peril's past;
For yonder view the opening plain,
And there we'll prick our steeds amain.'
The Chiaus spake, and as he said,
A bullet whistled o'er his head;
The foremost Tartar bites the ground!
Scarce had they time to check the rein,
Swift from their steeds the riders bound;
But three shall never mount again:
Unseen the foes that gave the wound,
The dying ask revenge in vain.
With steel unsheathed, and carbine bent,
Some o'er their courser's harness leant,
Half sheltered by the steed;
Some fly behind the nearest rock,
And there await the coming shock,
Nor tamely stand to bleed
Beneath the shaft of foes unseen,
Who dare not quit their craggy screen.
Stern Hassan only from his horse
Disdains to light, and keeps his course,
Till fiery flashes in the van
Proclaim too sure the robber-clan
Have well secured the only way
Could now avail the promised prey;
Then curled his very beard with ire,
And glared his eye with fiercer fire:
'Though far and near the bullets hiss,
I've 'scaped a bloodier hour than this.'
And now the foe their covert quit,
And call his vassals to submit;
But Hassan's frown and furious word
Are dreaded more than hostile sword,
Nor of his little band a man
Resigned carbine or ataghan,
Nor raised the craven cry, Amaun!
In fuller sight, more near and near,
The lately ambushed foes appear,
And, issuing from the grove, advance
Some who on battle-charger prance.
Who leads them on with foreign brand,
Far flashing in his red right hand?

"Tis he! 'tis he! I know him now;
I know him by his pallid brow;
I know him by the evil eye
That aids his envious treachery;
I know him by his jet-black barb:
Though now arrayed in Arnaut garb
Apostate from his own vile faith,
It shall not save him from the death:
'Tis he! well met in any hour,
Lost Leila's love, accursed Giaour!

As rolls the river into ocean,
In sable torrent wildly streaming;
As the sea-tide's opposing motion,
In azure column Proudly gleaming
Beats back the current many a rood,
In curling foam and mingling flood,
While eddying whirl, and breaking wave,
Roused by the blast of winter, rave;
Through sparkling spray, in thundering clash,
The lightnings of the waters flash
In awful whiteness o'er the shore,
That shines and shakes beneath the roar;
Thus - as the stream, and Ocean greet,
With waves that madden as they meet -
Thus join the bands, whom mutual wrong,
And fate, and fury, drive along.
The bickering sabres' shivering jar;
And pealing wide or ringing near
Its echoes on the throbbing ear,
The deathshot hissing from afar;
The shock, the shout, the groan of war,
Reverberate along that vale
More suited to the shepherds tale:
Though few the numbers - theirs the strife
That neither spares nor speaks for life!
Ah! fondly youthful hearts can press,
To seize and share the dear caress;
But love itself could never part
For all that beauty sighs to grant
With half the fervour hate bestows
Upon the last embrace of foes,
When grappling in the fight they fold
Those arms that ne'er shall lose their hold:
Friends meet to part; love laughs at faith;
True foes, once met, are joined till death!

With sabre shivered to the hilt,
Yet dripping with the blood he spilt;
Yet strained within the severed hand
Which quivers round that faithless brand;
His turban far behind him rolled,
And cleft in twain its firmest fold;
His flowing robe by falchion torn,
And crimson as those clouds of morn
That, streaked with dusky red, portend
The day shall have a stormy end;
A stain on every bush that bore
A fragment of his palampore
His breast with wounds unnumbered riven,
His back to earth, his face to heaven,
Fallen Hassan lies - his unclosed eye
Yet lowering on his enemy,
As if the hour that sealed his fate
Surviving left his quenchless hate;
And o'er him bends that foe with brow
As dark as his that bled below.

'Yes, Leila sleeps beneath the wave,
But his shall be a redder grave;
Her spirit pointed well the steel
Which taught that felon heart to feel.
He called the Prophet, but his power
Was vain against the vengeful Giaour:
He called on Allah - but the word.
Arose unheeded or unheard.
Thou Paynim fool! could Leila's prayer
Be passed, and thine accorded there?
I watched my time, I leagued with these,
The traitor in his turn to seize;
My wrath is wreaked, the deed is done,
And now I go - but go alone.'