

## Art/Western Cultural History essays

Essay #10: Compare and contrast another painting from this time period to Homer's

4 paragraphs: an introduction paragraph, a paragraph about the similarities between the two paintings, a paragraph about the differences between the two paintings, and a conclusion paragraph.

Use the handouts (in your art binder) about the art elements, art study with the 5 common topics, and the art terminology for analyzing art. These handouts will help guide your thoughts.

Winslow Homer, *The Gulf Stream*, 1899, oil painting  
American Realism



Compare this work to another similar American Realism painting.

Talk about similarities and difference in:

- Medium/technique
- Composition (are both arranged similarly? Symmetrical? Asymmetrical? Same size figures? Same number of figures? Same arrangement of figures?)
- Use of colors
- Use of light and shadow

- Do they appeal to the emotions?
- Are objects in the painting the same? Are there different objects?
- How about symbolism?
- Their treatment of space?
- Are there things going on in the world that impacted both artists?
- How about their worldview?
- The meaning and story behind each painting?

Hint: Include the two images in your paper (two additional pages). And give the information for each painting under each image. When writing about art, visuals are helpful!

Here are some other American artists to research for comparing to Homer:

- Thomas Eakins
- Edward Hopper
- Grant Wood
- Thomas Hart Benton
- Andrew Wyeth
- John Singer Sargent
- Frederic Edwin Church
- James Abbott McNeill Whistler

European Realism artists:

- Gustave Courbet
- Jean-Francois Millet
- Edouard Manet
- Honore Daumier

Theodore Gericault, *Raft of the Medusa* (1818) is a world-famous shipwreck painting from a French Romantic painter.

Or you could look up paintings for your comparison based on subject:

- Shipwrecks, seascapes and marine paintings, Romantic landscape paintings

### Realism

Realist artists argued that only the things of one's own time, what people could see for themselves, were "real." It wasn't an art style that was striving to be realistic as in photo-realism. They focused their attention on the experiences and sights of everyday contemporary life – *real* life. Art had always depicted life of the upper class and was idealized. Realist artists objected to this and wanted to show real people and real events. They rejected the idealism of Neoclassicism and other styles. They also rejected the imagination and subjectivity of Romanticism. These artists disapproved of historical and fictional subjects on the grounds that they weren't real, visible, or from the present time. Instead, they strove for an accurate description of the ordinary, observable world. They wanted to be truthful and honest. Finally, their art often had a social critique and political message. Realism started in France after the Revolution in 1848. The style became popular in America too. The paintings gave an honest representation of everyday life.

## Winslow Homer

Winslow Homer (1836 - 1910) was a self-taught American landscape painter and printmaker, best known for his marine subjects. While in Europe, he took in the works of Courbet and Daumier and, for a while, even painted works in the style of Millet (all Realist artists). When he returned to America, he worked with a freer application of paint and a brighter palette. He also began to depict ordinary folk climbers, hikers and tourists, subjects unknown in American art.

One of America's most famous painters, Homer had a unique talent for portraying nature in a way that convincingly reflected the American pioneering spirit. His seascape paintings were typically infused with strong narrative content. He also completed many fine landscapes and genre-paintings. His realist painting deals with the obscure lives of fishermen, soldiers, sailors, woodsmen, hunters, pioneers - the toilers and the vagabonds and the sufferers of the human race. Winslow Homer created so many pictures of common folk because he loved the common folk and understood them.

## *The Gulf Stream*

In contrast to other landscapes or seascapes where the background is still and calm, here, the ocean is full of action. The man is still on a boat while waves splash and sharks swim around. The power, beauty, and strength of the ocean is clearly portrayed. The smallness of man is evident. Homer's other paintings usually depict the sea and nature in a more calm and peaceful way.

Homer had traveled to the Caribbean, crossing the Gulf Stream, many times. The Gulf Stream is a strong current that brings warm water from the Caribbean Sea north. Homer's depiction of the sea, sea life, and clouds are accurate.

A shipwrecked black man lies stretched out in an oarless, damaged lifeboat, drifting aimlessly over the blue Caribbean waters. The craft is surrounded by a number of sharks who wait, with hungry mouths wide open. In the far distance a merchant ship passes along the horizon. Nobody on board has observed the exhausted sailor, who is too weak even to be aware of this last disappearing hope of rescue. There is but one end to this grim and ghastly story - the sharks. The man calmly seems to accept his fate. There is no sense of hope.

The man is clearly the focal point. Although the boat is placed in the center of the composition, there is still an asymmetrical feel to the composition. The diagonal of the man's body creates an angled line in the composition (going off to the right), while the direction of the boat off to the left side makes another angled line in the composition. The horizontal line of the horizon along with the horizontal arrangement of the sharks in the foreground stabilize the composition.

A lot of the story is untold, leaving it up to the viewer's imagination to finish. What will happen next? Will the sharks get a hold of the man? Will the water spout off to the right tear his lifeboat apart?

The painting was created 34 years after the Civil War. However, the situation for African-Americans was still bleak. Could the man's struggle against nature in the painting parallel the struggles of Jim Crow laws and social/racial issues? The man is free from slavery, but dangers lurk all around him. Others speculate that pieces such as this depicting shipwrecks and rescues are a metaphor for salvation. In this case, the message is to the Christian, encouraging him to help save the unsaved.

## Art comparison chart

These are just a few questions to get you thinking about how to compare the works of art. All of these questions may not apply, and there might be additional questions that are relevant; this is not a complete list. The information above, your own observations, and with additional research you can complete this chart to help with your essay. I have *started* the chart to help get you going. Spend some time truly observing each work and fill in the chart.

	Artwork #1 Artist: Winslow Homer  Title: <i>The Gulf Stream</i>	Artwork #2 Artist:  Title:
Describe the composition of each work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- centered, yet asymmetrical</li> <li>Has an X shape</li> </ul>	
Describe the use of color in each piece	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- blues and blue-greens dominate</li> <li>- browns and grays</li> </ul>	
Describe the use of values, light, and shadow	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- full range of values</li> <li>- even lighting (no dramatic shadows)</li> <li>- there is a sense of sunlight shining down from above the image</li> </ul>	
Describe the use of space. Is it flat or more three-dimensional and realistic?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- sense of space seen in the boat and how it tilts and recedes in space</li> <li>- atmospheric perspective (hazy background)</li> <li>- tiny ship in the distance</li> </ul>	
What is the story, meaning, mood, emotions, etc.?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- shipwrecked man</li> <li>- losing hope</li> <li>- seascape</li> </ul>	
What/who is depicted?  What is happening in the image?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- a shipwrecked man on a lifeboat on the Gulf Stream</li> <li>- a ship passes by in the distance</li> <li>- sharks swim around him</li> <li>- a waterspout is off to the right adding to the ominous feeling</li> </ul>	

<p>Under what conditions was this artwork created? (for example, was a war going on, persecution, were the arts thriving...?)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- a few decades after the Civil War; still racial issues</li> <li>- Progressive era in America (research these to add context)</li> </ul>	
<p>What was the worldview or prevailing philosophy at the time?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-</li> </ul>	
<p>Is there any symbolism used?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- possible Christian message</li> <li>- possible message about life for African-Americans (read description above and research)</li> </ul>	
<p>Is there anything about the artist that influenced their decisions making? For example, were they a Christian? Were they commissioned by someone and told what to create?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Transcendentalists movement</li> <li>- Romantic and Realism painters</li> </ul>	
<p>Is there a focal point in each?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The man on the boat is clearly the focal point</li> </ul>	
<p>Did a previous art style influence this artwork?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- He seems to be inspired by the Romantic artists</li> </ul>	
<p>Do these two works of art have a direct relationship to each other?</p>		

### Essay Outline

After completing the chart, you will have it to refer to for writing your essay.

Think of your thesis. Was one artist more of a master? Did one artist impact the world more? Or did one of the artworks have more of an impact on you? Why? Or are both artists great examples of a certain style or technique? Did an event in the world or certain politics play a major role in how the artwork was made?

Thesis:

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Introduction paragraph:

Do some research. Introduce each artist. Where are they from? What time period?

Some ideas to consider including: How were they trained? Did both artists work in the same style? Did they have similar artistic goals, styles, patrons, etc.? Was there something going on in the world that affected both artists? Briefly introduce each painting. What is depicted in each? What is the technique in each? What is the style for each?

Similarities paragraph:

Use the questions on page 1&2 and the comparison chart to put the similarities together.

Differences paragraph:

Use the questions on page 1&2 and the comparison chart to put the differences together.

Conclusion paragraph:

Wrap it up. Restate thesis. Back it up. Give context/circumstances to each artist and artwork (what was going on in the world, what were the artists beliefs, etc.). How did this relate to the artwork and artist? Did it impact their artwork? Did it dictate what they painted and why? Did a previous art style or artist influence these artists? Or did either of these artists influence the art world?