

Art/Western Cultural History essays

Essay #6: Compare and contrast another painting from this time period to Rembrandt'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.

Rembrandt van Rijn, *Return of the Prodigal Son*, c. 1668, oil on canvas
Baroque



Compare this work to another similar Baroque 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 Baroque artists to research for comparing to Rembrandt:

- Caravaggio
- Peter Paul Rubens
- Artemisia Gentileschi (a woman artist)
- Diego Velázquez
- Jan Vermeer
- Judith Leyster
- Francisco de Zurbarán
- Anthony van Dyck

About Rembrandt and the *Return of the Prodigal Son*

Rembrandt was the most important painter in the Netherlands in the 17th c. He was known as the master of light and shadow. He discovered degrees of light and dark, degrees of differences in pose in the movements of facial features and psychic states. His paintings seem to glow and add psychological depth. His use of light and shadow here creates a dark and mysterious feeling. The darkness and shadowy background obscure the setting and make the viewer lean in to figure out who is back there and see what is going on. The viewer is invited to use their imagination.

Baroque characteristics: asymmetrical composition, dramatic lighting (dramatic chiaroscuro-tenebrism)/spotlight type lighting, emotional subject, sense of time (here, it is a frozen moment in time). It is a painting about forgiveness. The emotion of love, acceptance, and forgiveness can be felt. The light source is unknown. It seems like a spotlight.

The son has returned home in a wretched state from travels in which he has wasted his inheritance and fallen into poverty and despair. He kneels before his father in repentance, wishing for forgiveness and the position of a servant in his father's household, having realized that even his father's servants had a better station in life than he. His father receives him with a tender gesture and welcomes him as his own son. The son is kneeling down in a position of humility as he kneels in shame.

The son's clothing is beat up and falling apart. He has lost everything. He is even missing a shoe. His one shoe is worn out and the other is dirty and bare.

Standing at the right is the prodigal son's older brother, who crosses his hands in judgment; in the parable he objects to the father's compassion for the sinful son:

But he answered his father, "Behold, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed a commandment of yours, but you never gave me a goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this, your son, came, who has devoured your living with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.

The father explains, "But it was appropriate to celebrate and be glad, for this, your brother, was dead, and is alive again. He was lost, and is found" (Luke 15:32).

Rembrandt was moved by the parable, and he made a variety of drawings, etchings, and paintings on the theme that spanned decades. *The Return of the Prodigal Son* includes figures not directly related to the parable but seen in some of these earlier works; their identities have been debated. The woman at top left, barely visible, is likely the mother.

The seated man, whose dress implies wealth, may be an advisor to the estate or a tax collector. The other figure could be a servant.

Use of color: reds, browns, and golds bring a warm and cozy feeling. The red and gold gives a feeling of wealth and celebration. The colors are analogous and give a harmonious feeling.

The son's back is turned away from the viewer. This is a change from traditional compositions. This forces the viewer to focus on the father instead of on the son. The father's face is the brightest part of the painting.

The figure's expressions evoke sympathy. The painting seems to ask the viewer which character are you? Are we the merciful father? Are we humble and in repentance, asking for mercy and compassion like the son? Are we hard-hearted and unforgiving like the brother? The viewer is invited to contemplate the complexity of the moment.

Relevant to the time of Rembrandt, consider the Reformation and Catholic Counter-Reformation, as well as the Dutch Golden Age (a period of trade, art, and science around 1667).

Art flourished despite the Anglo-Spanish War of 1654-1660 and the Franco-Spanish War of 1635-1659.

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: Rembrandt van Rijn Title: <i>Return of the Prodigal Son</i>	Artwork #2 Artist: Title:
Describe the composition of each work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Asymmetrical composition - most of the visual weight is on the left side of the composition (father and son) 	
Describe the use of color in each piece	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - warm colors: browns, yellows, reds 	
Describe the use of values, light, and shadow	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - dramatic lighting - intense chiaroscuro/tenebrism - bright highlights against dark shadows - glowing feeling - full range of values, but high contrast 	
Describe the use of space. Is it flat or more three-dimensional and realistic?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The figures are painted in a way that makes them have depth and seem three-dimensional, but the dark background prevents there from being a deep sense of space 	
What is the story, meaning, mood, emotions, etc.?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - emotional, dramatic moment of the story (See description above) 	
What/who is depicted? What is happening in the image?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - prodigal son returning home to the father (See description above) 	

<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"> - art of the Reformation - strong Christian message - Dutch Golden Age - arts thriving <p>(do research)</p>	
<p>What was the worldview or prevailing philosophy at the time?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Christianity, Reformation <p>(do research)</p>	
<p>Is there any symbolism used?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <p>(do research)</p>	
<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"> - Rembrandt was a devout Christian <p>(do research)</p>	
<p>Is there a focal point in each?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the father and son 	
<p>Did a previous art style influence this artwork?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Renaissance <p>(do research)</p>	
<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:

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 2 and the comparison chart to put the similarities together.

Differences paragraph:

Use the questions on page 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?