

# Visual Analysis: Sample Student Essays

## Sample 1

*Woman and War*, by Harry Sternberg, Oil on canvas

### Description

*Woman and War* is a surreal oil painting by Harry Sternberg. Near the center of the painting is the largest and most prominent figure, a gaunt and nude woman with a solemn expression and pale blue-green skin. She appears to be sitting with a yellow sheet wrapped around her legs, while she looks outward to the left. Her gaze is directed neither at her surroundings nor at the viewer. In the bottom right area of the painting, Sternberg draws the viewer's attention to a mob of surreal figures that appear as nothing more than large exaggerated and gaping mouths. In the background, a giant wall of flames burns high into the air, dissipating near the top of the painting to reveal the dark blue sky from which the headless bodies of men appear to be falling. On the left side is a two-story house that appears to have been destroyed. On the second floor sits a bed that has been revealed by the missing walls. A bed sheet floats down off this bed past the exposed cross section of the floor. Finally, several books are also seen falling in the bottom left of the painting.

### Topic Sentence

Sternberg's expressive use of complementary colors draws our attention to the woman, helping the viewer to identify with her distressed emotional state.

### Formal Analysis

Sternberg superimposes the large figure of the woman over the wall of flames, which makes the blue-green color of her skin appear especially intense. Likewise, the giant red-orange flames in the background of the painting appear much more intense due to Sternberg's extensive use of blue-green in the rest of the painting. Blue-green is used in all of the major figures of the painting; the woman, the mouths, and the headless bodies all have pale, blue-green skin. The walls of the house are also mostly blue-green, and some of the mouths even brandish black and blue-green flags. This color relationship is a bit more subtle in a few places; the mouths have red-orange lips and tongues that contrast with their skin, while each individual book is either dark blue-green or red. Through these color contrasts, Sternberg establishes the woman as the subject of the painting, while her nightmarish surroundings are considered in terms of what they mean to her and how they reveal her psychological state.

## Sample 2

*Silver Sea and Sky*, by Nancy Lorenz, Lacquer and pigment on wood panel

### Description

*Sea and Sky*, by Nancy Lorenz, is a powerful piece that captures a tumultuous moment in time--a storm at sea. In this piece, Lorenz manipulates her materials in a way that powerfully conveys to her viewers that nature is beautiful but also incredibly powerful. To begin, this piece is seven feet tall and ten feet wide and draws the viewer's immediate attention due to its immense size. By choosing such a large panel for her painting, Lorenz immediately makes a statement that, in addition to being visually interesting, contributes to her message that nature is powerful, almost overwhelming in its strength. Additionally, she strategically decorates her painting in a variety of dramatic diagonal and curvilinear lines that represent chaotic sheets of rain and ocean currents. These help reinforce to the overpowering strength of the storm that has been captured in this piece. She also brings in details that are breathtakingly beautiful, such as the silver and gold leaf that coats her piece and the mother of pearl that has been inlaid into her panel. By including these stunning ethereal elements, she alludes to the beauty of nature even in a moment of complete chaos and destruction.

### Topic Sentence

Lorenz's unique use of textural elements creates a shimmering stormy scene that conveys both the power and the beauty of nature to her viewers.

### Formal Analysis

Lorenz evokes a watery effect by scratching deep lines that reveal the silver lacquer that coats the panel. Patterns and swirls add a water-like shimmer to the pouring rain and tumultuous sea, while straighter etched lines convey the force with which the rain crashes into the turbulent and iridescent ocean. In addition to these scratched lines, Lorenz also drips "Pollock-like" splashes and dots onto her stormy panel. Contrasted with the straight lines, which are used to emphasize the heavy rainfall, these dotted lines mimic individual raindrops in this storm. Together, these elements enhance the sense of movement and create a three-dimensional effect. Finally, Lorenz applies thick layers pigment to create volume and depth that mimic the body of the sea and sky. This impasto technique is especially effective in the plumes of billowing rain clouds that, if two-dimensional, would simply not convey the same sense of volume and texture that is achieved with this layering technique. Lorenz's use of texture helps to create a scene that is not only more visually intriguing but is also more effective in emphasizing the high-drama that is produced during a storm at sea.

### **Sample 3 (Version 1)**

*Cho-Looke, the Yosemite Fall*, by Albert Bierstadt, Oil on canvas

#### **Description**

Hanging on the wall amidst a collection of American and European art in the Timken Museum of Art is a serene and realistic painting by Albert Bierstadt. The painting, titled *Cho-Looke, the Yosemite Fall*, shows a group of artists with their horses in the bottom right corner of the painting, while just across the valley behind them is a steep mountain face with an enormous waterfall plummeting to the ground. There is a cluster of tall trees directly behind the artists and a misty cloud cover encompasses the top of the mountain at the edge of the painting. The use of atmospheric perspective from the middle to the top of the painting enhances the viewer's sense of the colossal height of the mountain and, therefore, the incredible power of the falls. The quiet drama of this painting, however, does more than reveal Bierstadt's deep appreciation for the power and beauty of the landscape.

#### **Topic Sentence**

Through Bierstadt's careful use of color and shifting light, the serene setting acquires a subtle drama and sense of time.

#### **Formal Analysis**

Bierstadt's convincing use of naturalistic color and temperature makes the scene feel believable. Under the cloud cover, colors such as the green of the valley grass or the blue in the sky are muted and cool, while areas in the scene revealed by sunlight breaking through the clouds are painted in slightly brighter and warmer colors. None of the elements of the painting appear to be exaggerated or unrealistic in color; the trees are a mix of browns, grays and greens, the mountain face is a hazy mix of stone grays and creamy whites, and so on. However, the areas of the painting where the cloud cover steals away the vivid colors or where the sunlight illuminates them evokes the ever-changing and sometimes intense weather conditions of the landscape.

Depending on the time of day, parts of the valley are illuminated, while other parts remain covered in shadow. The extra light given to the misty clouds against the darker sky evokes a sense of motion and unpredictability. At the same moment, on the mountain face, sunlight moves in and out of the clouds and across the thundering waterfall, which highlights the intensity of the white water and draws special attention to its power. While the overall appearance of the painting is calm, the enveloping light within this scene is in constant flux, suggesting the mutability of creation and paying respect to the majestic nature of the landscape and the authoritative beauty it holds.

### **Sample 3 (Version 2)**

*Cho-Looke, the Yosemite Fall*, by Albert Bierstadt, Oil on canvas

#### **Description**

Hanging on the wall amidst a collection of American and European art in the Timken Museum of Art is a serene and realistic painting by Albert Bierstadt. The painting, titled *Cho-Looke, the Yosemite Fall*, shows a group of artists with their horses in the bottom right corner of the painting, while just across the valley behind them is a steep mountain face with an enormous waterfall plummeting to the ground. There is a cluster of tall trees directly behind the artists and a misty cloud cover encompasses the top of the mountain at the edge of the painting. The use of atmospheric perspective from the middle to the top of the painting enhances the viewer's sense of the colossal height of the mountain and, therefore, the incredible power of the falls. The quiet drama of this painting, however, does more than reveal Bierstadt's deep appreciation for the power and beauty of the landscape.

#### **Topic Sentence**

Bierstadt's use of dramatic shifts of scale invites the viewers to identify with the artist's depicted and to reflect, with them, upon their place in creation.

#### **Formal Analysis**

Although Bierstadt clearly reveals an acute appreciation for the natural world, his use of dramatic shifts of scale seems to convey an awareness of a power beyond this landscape, the idea that something else is much more important. People are present in this painting, but when viewed from a distance, the viewer may not notice the artists and their horses at the bottom. Although they are large enough to be identified, the immense scale of the mountain is overwhelmingly prominent. Even elements such as the cluster of trees behind the artists or a boulder to the right of them are significantly larger. When viewed as a whole, the focus of the picture seems to be the beauty of the natural world and not the story of the small group of artists in the valley. Their presence in this scene helps mainly to support the feeling that people are physically insignificant compared to the grandeur of the vast and pristine landscape.

## Sample 4

*Orpheus Leading Eurydice to the Underworld*, by Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, Oil on canvas

### Description

Deep in the cool misty forest depicted in *Orpheus Leading Eurydice from the Underworld*, by artist Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot, our eyes are first drawn to the wooden lyre in the outstretched left hand of a male figure wearing a tunic, with a sanguine red cape flowing behind him. He wears a dark fig leaf crown on his curly golden-brown shoulder length hair, and his face is turned away, mostly hidden from the viewer. As he briskly steps into a denser part of the forest to the right, behind him he grasps the frail wrist of a limp white hand. The dangling arm belongs to an emotionless young woman in a flowing white silk gown. Her skin is porcelain and her veiled hair is the color of dawn. To her left stands a tree covered in ivy and white blossoms. The trail behind them, covered by damp grass and white flower bushes, borders a reflective and mercury-still river. This river separates the man and the young woman from a light fog in the upper left, which hides five forlorn veiled women wearing dark gowns, probably spirits. Three of these spirits huddle close to one another for warmth. The fourth embraces the arm of the fifth figure, as her head rests on her shoulder. Behind these women is a sparse forest, which hides even more indistinct shadowy figures, slightly illuminated by the cold white light that emanates from the horizon.

### Topic Sentence

In *Orpheus Leading Eurydice from the Underworld*, Corot carefully contrasts the implied motion of the figures to enhance the power of the frozen moment just before Orpheus looks back at Eurydice, forever losing her to the underworld.

### Formal Analysis

The somber emotions suggested by the spirit figures and by Eurydice, herself, stand in stark contrast to the lively presence of the male Orpheus. Orpheus is the most noticeable of all the figures. In his outstretched left arm, he holds a lyre, directing Eurydice where to go. Our eyes follow this implied movement to the wooden lyre, the focal point of the entire picture. His other hand has a tight hold over the wrist of Eurydice. While his illuminated right leg moves forward into the forest, his blood red cape floats behind him as it catches a light breeze. His movements are invigorated and his pace seems brisk and with purpose. He can't wait to take his beloved back to the world of the living, but Eurydice is not helping. While Orpheus' movements are alive and vigorous, Eurydice's are feeble and sluggish. As Orpheus's hand grips around the wrist of Eurydice, her hand lays limp and her arms dangle. Much like the spirit figures in the background, she is still an apparition and, at this moment, still belongs to the underworld. Most intriguing is the direction Orpheus' head is turned. His head is facing neither at the path in front of him nor at Eurydice. He looks over his left shoulder, as he hides his face, and thus his gaze, from his beloved Eurydice. He knows that to look back at her will be to lose her forever to Hades.