

Irving and Delacroix: The Use of Beauty to Transcend Time, Culture, and Reality

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Throughout history, the themes of art work and literature have closely reflected one another. Though pieces of artwork and literature created about one topic may be created in different eras and in different places, they are uniform in their creative expression of the subject at hand. The excerpt “The Court of Lions” from *Tales of the Alhambra* by Washington Irving is an 1832 short story of the history and legends of the Moors in Spain. Irving uses narration to paint a vivid description of the magical palace and past events that occurred within its walls. In 1828, artist Eugène Delacroix used oil on canvas to depict his own cultural story of power, emotion, and chaos in the painting *The Death of Sardanapalus*. Though these two works depict different cultural events, they are connected in their emphasis on beauty and aesthetics, portrayal of events not personally witnessed by the artist, and imaginative distortion of reality.

In “The Court of Lions,” Irving describes the Alhambra, a mystical symbol of the occupation of Spain by the Moors. The nineteenth century American author Washington Irving lived in the palace for several months and imagined his own version of events that happened in the fortress centuries before his time. The Alhambra was built by the Moors of Spain in the thirteenth century. In the years before 1492 when the Christian re-conquest of Spain was completed, the Alhambra was the Moors’ last foothold. The Court described in Irving’s excerpt had been the site of harems and murder, which became the subject of his speculation and imagination. Irving begins by explaining how the magical court of the palace helps him conjure up memories of events he never witnessed. He feels as though the Moorish influence still exists as vibrantly as it did in the past. Irving describes a “blood-stained fountain” at the center of the court and how it tells of violence and death (497). Amidst his description of the blood and pain,

he mentions a “lively swallow,” buzzing bees, and butterflies flying around the court (Irving 497). It becomes obvious that Irving is cynical of the Christian monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella, who recaptured Spain from the Moors. Irving continues to create fictional images of the Alhambra when he meets a Moor near the fountain. The man explains to him that the Moors placed great emphasis on the creative arts. The Moor comforts himself with the notion that his people will one day rule Spain again. Irving explains that many contemporary Moors of the Barbary Coast believe that they will once again rule Spain (500). The excerpt ends with a supernatural tale of a group of four wealthy Moors appearing in the Court of Lions. The Moors eventually tell a man where they have buried their treasure, and he becomes one of the richest men in the region (Irving 502). Throughout the excerpt, Irving weaves the tales he has heard with historical facts and his creative imagination.

The Death of Sardanapalus
Eugène Delacroix, 1828



<http://images.encarta.msn.com/xrefmedia/sharemed/targets/images/pho/t267/T267382A.jpg>

When Irving's writing is compared to Delacroix's painting, it becomes clear that the literature and the art of this period share similar characteristics. Eugène Delacroix's 1828 painting, *The Death of Sardanapalus*, depicts the death of an Assyrian king. Delacroix was a Romantic painter, who emphasized the dramatic and theatrical. In the painting, the artist depicts Sardanapalus, the last king of the second Assyrian dynasty, around the ninth century B.C. Rather than be conquered by an enemy army, Sardanapalus chose to kill himself and all of his servants, horses, and wives, along with his other belongings (Sayre 84). The use of line in the painting is not controlled but is fluid and emotional. In Delacroix's preliminary drawing for the painting, it is evident that he used a flurry of intertwined, swirling lines to create the composition. The lack of control of line contributes to the work's drama. The light in the painting also makes it more emotional and theatrical. The artist uses tenebrism, making the background very dark and using light to draw attention to the individuals in the foreground. The painting is oil on canvas, which allows the artist to create fine detail, such as the embellishments on the horses head and reins. Another benefit to the artist's use of oil is that he could correct any mistakes and continue to rework the painting. The painting is relatively small, only 12 feet 1.5 inches by 16 feet 2 7/8 inches (Sayre 84). There is a lot happening on a small piece of canvas, making it more appealing to the eyes and imaginations of the viewers. The color is dark and rich, with saturated hues. The movements of the female forms are very fluid and dramatic. Their bodies are softly curved and strewn about the picture plane. Delacroix uses the primary color red to symbolize wealth and to make the king's position stand out to the audience. It is not certain where the light source is coming from, but it is shining on the king's legs at the bottom of the bed, where his wives surround him. The use of light and color make the piece a swirl of emotion and passion, which make it even more appealing to the audience.

Both Irving and Delacroix creatively embellish the tales they are depicting. Their focus is on beauty, passion, and the sublime. In “The Court of Lions,” Irving goes beyond nature and explains that the palace is able to clothe “naked realities with the illusions of the memory and imagination” (497). At the opening of the excerpt, Irving is already creating a vivid image of the mysterious, beautiful palace. He also describes how everything in the fortress seems as though it is designed to “inspire kind and happy feelings” (497). Despite the violence that occurred at the Alhambra, Irving describes it as a beautiful, lighthearted place. He romanticizes it when he creates his own fictional accounts of what occurred in the palace. Even when he discusses blood and battle, he always goes back to the beauty and serenity of the location. This emphasis on beauty is characteristic of American Romantic authors, as well as artists. In *The Death of Sardanapalus*, Delacroix also focuses on drama, passion, and beauty. In the foreground, a woman is on her knees being killed; however, she does not appear to be screaming or even in pain. Her back is gracefully arched; she is a beautiful woman. Another woman, lying across the bed at the king’s feet, appears to be devoting herself willingly and elegantly to death at the king’s side. The scene is not bloody and does not even appear to be the site of much violence. The emphasis is not on violence or the accurate depiction of the event but on creating an aesthetically pleasing, beautiful work. Both the author and the artist use Romantic principles in their depictions of historical events.

Another similarity between the two works is that the creators depict events that they did not personally witness. Washington Irving was not living in the Alhambra when the Moors ruled Spain. He never witnessed any of the murders he wrote about, nor did he see the women of the harems whose beauty he boasted about in his writing. Irving relied on the accounts he had heard and his own imagination to create the scenes he described. In addition, Irving was an American,

not a Moor. He was not part of the culture he so clearly discussed in the excerpt. Therefore, “The Court of Lions” gives us a romanticized American account of events born from Irving’s creative mind. Despite the fact that Irving did not witness the events he recounts, his storytelling is quite believable. Readers are able to become involved with the material, not because of its historical accuracy, but because of its imagery, creativity, and vivid details. Likewise, Eugène Delacroix did not witness the ninth century B.C. slaughter of King Sardanapalus and his horses, servants, and wives. The painting was not created until 1828, hundreds of years after the event. The French painter was not from Assyria and was not part of Assyrian culture. Delacroix used swirling, uncontrolled lines to create a passionate scene. Though it may not be historically or culturally accurate, the painting romanticizes the event and makes it look like an act of passion, rather than selfishness. The use of light and dark allows the artist to express the emotion and passion in the art, rather than the facts. He renders the painting in such a way that it seems unimportant that he is a French artist living in the 1800s. Both Irving and Delacroix are able to use the characteristics of the Romantic movement effectively to transcend their eras and cultures in their works.

In both pieces, the use of beauty and imagination distort the reality of the events depicted. In “The Court of Lions,” Irving describes a bloody massacre that claimed many lives and led to the Moors’ loss of rule in Spain. Irving disguises the blood and death with his active imagery and focuses on the sublime. He draws attention to the “sunshine gleaming” and “some pensive beauty of the harem loitering in these secluded haunts of Oriental luxury” (497-498). The reader is so swept up by Irving’s colorful imagery that the violence and hatred seem unimportant. Irving skillfully creates an alternate reality that is beautiful and serene, unlike the reality experienced by the Moors in Spain between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries. Delacroix

manages to do the same thing in the painting. The viewer can easily forget that individuals are being killed and focus instead on the passionate colors and dramatic light. The intricate, ornate details mask the harsh reality of the slaughter.

Though one is a work of visual art and the other is a work of literature, *The Death of Sardanapalus* and “The Court of the Lions” are closely connected to one another. The Romantic writer and artist both use their imaginations to depict scenes that they did not witness. Their emphasis on beauty, detail, and creativity overshadow the cruel reality of the events they depict. The creators strove to surpass nature and to focus on the sublime. Although Delacroix and Irving created very different works, both focused on beauty and aesthetics. They each depicted events that they did not personally witness to create a distorted reality for their audience.

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