

Exploring the Relationship Between Humanity and Nature in the Art of J.M.W. Turner

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Abstract. During the Romantic era, artists grew increasingly interested in the sublime forces of nature and the vulnerability of humanity. One of the most renowned artists of the day, Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775–1851), gained a hearing in this debate due to his revolutionary treatment of color, light, and atmospheric representation. This paper explores Turner’s conceptualization of the human-nature relationship, focusing on two of his iconic works: *The Slave Ship* (1840) and *Snow Storm: Steam-Boat off a Harbour’s Mouth* (1842). The analysis describes how such Turner techniques as emotive brushwork, atmospheric dissolution, and startling contrasts generate a multi-sensory experience of nature’s grandeur and human vulnerability that is particularly intense. To trace Turner’s positioning within the Romantic aesthetic and beyond, the present analysis adopts a literature-based approach that intersects art-historical, philosophical, and ecocritical frameworks of thought. In addition to dramatizing nature’s overwhelming and inevitable power, Turner’s works blur the line between observer and scene, engendering an embodied spectacle of awe, terror, and wonder. Furthermore, the study juxtaposes Turner’s perspective with that of artists including Richard Long, Claude Monet, and Katsushika Hokusai to reveal commonalities and divergences across artistic traditions in depicting what it means to be in nature, whether framed in terms of overpowering experiences, terror, beauty, or the sublime. Turner’s seascapes also anticipate later artistic explorations of sensory involvement and ecological consciousness, while at the same time representing the Romantic sublime. His work reveals human interaction with nature, yet this relationship is experiential, dynamic, and never completely mastered by humans.

Keywords: Turner, Human-Nature Relationship, Sensory Experience, Romanticism, Seascape Painting

1. Introduction

As part of broader cultural, philosophical, and scientific debates, the interaction between the human body and the environment has long constituted a central theme in art history. This posture was further reinterpreted throughout the Romantic period, with a focus on mood, imagination, and sublimity. Artists drew inspiration from the natural world, seeking to represent its dramatic and, at times, awe-inspiring power, as well as its beauty. Among these artists, Joseph Mallord William

Turner (1775–1851) brought the struggle between the elemental forces of nature and the frailty of humanity to a dazzling climax, revolutionizing the conventions of landscape painting.

Instead of separating humans and nature as two distinct domains, this research draws on bodily sensation as it relates to the natural world. Turner's canvases boldly whisk the eye to storms and tempests and the impermanence of the sea with dissolving forms, dynamic compositions, and radiant light. In doing so, they seek to induce in the onlookers a faint sense of veneration and horror, which constitutes the essence of the Romantic sublime.

The research is important because it holds potential to advance our understanding of how art mediates human perception of nature. The study addresses how painting can modulate the perception of natural powers. It emphasizes the importance of both sensory experience and emotion. In doing so, it highlights Turner's unique place in Romantic aesthetics. It also demonstrates how his oeuvre continues to shape visual culture into the 19th century and beyond. This framework further reveals how specific artistic strategies can guide humans in encountering, interpreting, and internalizing nature.

This article focuses on two of Turner's most well-known paintings, *The Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On)* (1840) and *Snow Storm: Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth* (1842), to analyze how the two works negotiate the dual motifs of natural sublimity and human frailty. The analysis pays close attention to Turner's painterly choices: his light, color, and vortex brushstrokes create a charged, unstable space. It then explores how such techniques lead to powerful, immersive sensory experiences for viewers. Methodologically, the study adopts a literature-based approach. It is informed by art historical, philosophical, and ecocritical analysis. This technique facilitates a multidimensional interpretation of Turner's works. It brings them into relation with Romantic aesthetic theory but also places them within wider cultural and scientific discussions.

The ultimate goal of this paper is to demonstrate that Turner's paintings do not simply depict, but also engender the experience of sublimity, recasting natural violence as an aesthetic encounter. To this end, the paper employs close visual analysis in conjunction with comparative frameworks, situating Turner's vision alongside artists such as Claude Monet, Katsushika Hokusai, and Richard Long, thus creating a cross-cultural dialogue on human sensory engagement with the natural world.

The art world is celebrating the 250th anniversary of Turner's birth in 2025, providing a significant opportunity to reconsider his contributions to art history and his enduring vision of the connection between humanity and nature.

2. Overview

2.1. Introduction of J.M.W. Turner

Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775–1851) was one of the most beloved and influential painters of the Romantic era, often celebrated as the “painter of light” [1]. Born in London, he entered the Royal Academy of Arts at the age of fourteen. At first, he gained recognition as a gifted topographical watercolorist, and then rapidly established himself as a painter of sublime and historical landscapes. He was a British painter and printmaker who became a central figure in nineteenth-century art, shaping the direction of landscape painting in Britain [2]. Throughout his lengthy career, Turner created prints, oil paintings, and watercolors that expanded the possibilities of what the landscape genre could express. His works often feature storms, shipwrecks, fires, and dramatic atmospheric effects. They showcase the great power of nature and perfectly align with the Romantic interest in the sublime. At the same time, he challenged established painting conventions

through innovative use of light, color, and brushwork, foreshadowing the development of Impressionist techniques and inspiring artists such as Claude Monet. Turner's landscapes and seascapes are widely regarded as the pinnacle of British Romantic art. Imbued with poetry and symbolism, they reveal nature's beauty and cruelty through profound moral and aesthetic depth, establishing him as the most revolutionary and enduringly innovative painter of his era [3]. Moreover, his enduring legacy lies in his ability to place human figures within vast, untamed natural landscapes, prompting contemplation of nature's grandeur and humanity's fragility.

2.2. Literature review

Scholars from different disciplines have offered valuable perspectives on the relationship between humanity and nature in Turner's art, but important gaps remain. Gillis, in his essay on the Blue Humanities, situates Turner as one of the first artists to grant the sea an independent aesthetic status and a pioneer of the "pure seascape," aligning his work with the Romantic rediscovery of the ocean as a sublime symbol [4]. More recent Blue Humanities scholarship reframes the sea from backdrop to agentive object of inquiry, emphasizing that the human-ocean relationship is at once material, historical, and symbolic [5]. From an ecological standpoint, Ogée contends that Turner and Constable helped inaugurate an "ecological turn" in landscape painting by introducing the Anthro(s)genic, positioning nature as an active subject rather than a passive backdrop, which marks a de-anthropocentric shift that anticipates modern ecological thought [6]. Within this framework, Turner's seascapes no longer read as simple views of nature; they center the ocean in pictorial construction and spectatorship, making it a key cultural site for theorizing modernity and the natural sublime. From the perspective of artistic practice, Oliver employs the concept of "coastal knowledge ecologies" to demonstrate that natural philosophy and environmental science provide important insights for British Romantic seascapes [7]. Public science writing and museum studies also link Luke Howard's cloud system and optical studies to Turner's images of cloud, light, and mist [8]. These accounts together support this paper's view that Turner turned careful observation of clouds, light, and weather into a way of painting. In this way, the canvas becomes a place where air and weather are shown and shaped. Additionally, Rodner views the steamboat image as representing both industrial progress and human weakness, while Gould, writing from an environmental perspective, sees Turner's late works as creating a "polluted" style that illustrates the effects of industrialization on the air [9,10]. Hunter places Turner in social, economic, and colonial settings and argues that Turner was not merely a Romantic lover of beauty. Hunter sees him as an artist who cared about the economic and political ethics of his time. Thus, his work becomes a visual record of how insurance systems and colonial violence intersected [11]. Finally, recent studies of spectatorship bridge the philosophical "sublime" with the psychological construct of "awe," showing that high-intensity threats kept at a controllable distance can elicit a mixed affect that is both terrifying and pleasurable [12]; in parallel, research on immersive media and extended reality indicates that "sublime experiences" can be triggered and amplified by environmental and mediating conditions [13]. Other contemporary perspectives, such as Serafin-Pospiech's analysis of immersive installations by Studio Drift and Olafur Eliasson, underscore that the sensory and emotional dimensions of the human-nature encounter remain central in art today [14]. While these studies provide cultural history, philosophical, ecological, and curatorial insights, they rarely juxtapose Turner with other artists across time and cultures to compare how different visual strategies express distinct emotions and negotiate the human-nature relationship. My research, therefore, seeks to fill this gap by situating Turner within a broader comparative framework, showing how his seascapes

communicate the overwhelming force of nature and human fragility, while setting these concerns in dialogue with artists from Monet and Hokusai to Richard Long.

3. Case analysis

3.1. The slave ship

This painting depicts a vessel caught in a violent storm, with African slaves being thrown into the turbulent sea. The fiery sunset dominates the canvas, its lurid glow clashing with the raging waves below. In the churning waters, limbs shackled with chains emerge from the surface, bearing witness to human suffering. As Andrew Walker notes, Turner drew on literary and historical sources such as James Thomson's *The Seasons* and Thomas Clarkson's *History of the Abolition of the African Slave-trade* (1839), which recounted the infamous 1781 Zong Massacre where enslaved Africans were deliberately drowned for insurance claims [15].

In 1840, when this painting was first exhibited at the Royal Academy of Arts, critics were unsettled by both its "painterly and coloristic excesses" and its disturbing subject. Yet over time, it came to be reinterpreted as a searing moral indictment. In Boston, for example, one reviewer described it as "a picture of moans and tears and groans and shrieks. Every tint and shade and line throb with death and terror and blood. It is the embodiment of a giant protest, a mighty voice crying out against human oppression" [15]. The painting thus produced an extreme visual and emotional shock for the viewers, overwhelming them with its fusion of terror and grandeur.

Visually, Turner's brush dissolves the boundaries between sea, sky, and human form. Shackled limbs emerge from the waves, almost indistinguishable from the chaotic waters. The blazing sky both beautifies and condemns the horror, which Frederick Farrar later called "Turner's sermon against the slave-trade ... no sermon more awfully effective was ever preached" [15]. In this way, *The Slave Ship* is not simply a historical record but a cosmic drama in which nature's uncontrollable violence collides with human cruelty.

Scholars have argued that Turner here underscores the predatory parallel of humanity and nature, revealing the avarice of the slave trade in relation to nature's own destructive forces [9]. The painting stages an overwhelming spectacle: a fiery sky, raging waves, and a sinking ship intertwine to present nature as a force that is both magnificent and merciless. This manner of portrayal creates a potent moral shock, and atrocity is turned into visual sublimity [16]. The wild, uncontrollable, savage power of nature stares back at viewers, immobilizing them with the realization of how vulnerable human life is in the face of vast, elemental forces.

On both literal and symbolic levels, nature here functions as a punishing force. The turbulent sea threatens to engulf the ship and its cargo, while the blood-red sky foreshadows divine judgment and moral reckoning. For Turner's audience, the immersive effect was profound: the painting confronted them with the intertwining of natural violence and human atrocity, blurring the boundaries between the two. Ultimately, *The Slave Ship* dramatizes both the cruelty of slavery and, above all, the overwhelming and uncontrollable power of nature, which dwarfs human endeavor and leaves viewers with a visceral experience of fear, awe, and moral unease. In this sense, Turner visualizes what Burke described as the "delightful horror" of the sublime and what Kant defined as humanity's recognition of its own smallness before nature's immeasurable power, an experience that both terrifies and elevates the spectator.

3.2. Snow storm

This painting depicts a steamboat caught in a violent blizzard, its form almost obliterated by the swirling forces of wind and sea. Turner's loose, swirling, and chaotic brushstrokes create a vortex of movement that engulfs both ship and spectator, dissolving distinctions between figure and ground. The palette of whites, grays, and blacks, punctuated with fleeting highlights, suggests flashes of lightning or reflected light. The vessel itself is rendered nearly indistinct, as if on the verge of disintegration.

This painting embodies the height of Romanticism. The storm here is not a mere backdrop but the true subject of the work, overwhelming human existence and technological progress alike. The steamship, symbol of industrial modernity, is powerless before the ocean's elemental force. Turner was said to have tied himself to a ship's mast to experience a storm firsthand. Whether fact or myth, the story reinforces the painting's insistence on presence and immersion, "being in it". Viewers are not placed at a safe distance but drawn into the storm's very core.

Through his vortex-like brushwork, blurred contours, and the mix of smoke, waves, and vapor, Turner turns the canvas into an "atmospheric screen". The painting is no longer a transparent "window" onto the world, but an extension of the storm itself [17]. The steamship's artificial smoke merges with the natural mist, creating a hybrid airspace where technology and nature cannot be told apart. This dissolution of clear borders is linked to the current scientific interests of the time, such as Luke Howard's cloud system and new optical studies. Turner absorbs these ideas and reworks them through his own way of painting, so that careful observation and artistic invention come together.

In this way, Turner situates himself in nature, and viewers are also made to stand in that same immersive environment. The painting, therefore, is the best representation of the Romantic sublime: an overwhelming sensory experience where terror and beauty coexist, and humanity is confronted with its fragility in the face of uncontrollable forces. The storm's engulfing vortex represents the blinding force of the blizzard, while also standing for "human struggle within a chaotic world."

4. Discussions

4.1. The sublime in nature and human smallness and vulnerability

Turner's art was informed by the theories of Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant, and it embodies the Romantic ideal of the sublime—a fusion of beauty and terror that both awes and frightens viewers. His works employ stark contrasts of light and shadow, wild natural scenes, and vigorous brushstrokes that directly impact the emotions of his viewers. In *Snow Storm*, the tempestuous power of the wind and waves overwhelms the frail human craft, revealing the essence of sublime beauty: both terrifying and mesmerizing. Turner repeatedly illustrates humanity as a delicate creature in the face of nature's strength. In both *Snow Storm* and *The Slave Ship*, human forms are rendered near-invisible or submerged, crafting a broad pact between humanity and nature that suggests the human challenge of harnessing or understanding natural forces. These attitudes correspond with the Romantic belief that humanity is small in the vast cosmos.

In *Snow Storm: Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth* (1842), Turner employs a swirling, vortex-like composition to convey the engulfing power of the storm. The steamship, symbol of human technological progress, is shown as fragile and powerless, perpetually threatened by the surrounding forces of wind and sea. Here, humanity appears insignificant and exposed, dwarfed by the uncontrollable vastness of nature.

Turner was neither a straightforward advocate of industry nor an outright critic. Rather, he revealed through a Romantic lens that, regardless of industrial advancement, nature always remains the stronger force. The steamboat paintings thus serve as profound meditations on the relationship between humans and nature: industrialization may open new possibilities, but human destiny continues to be bound by the overwhelming power of the natural world.

4.2. The viewer's sensory experience

Turner's loose brushstrokes, blurred outlines, and vortex-like compositions generate not a linear narrative but an immersive sensory experience. In many of his seascape paintings, the absence of a stable horizon or coastline produces a pressing sense of disorientation, as if the viewer were drifting in a boundless and unpredictable environment. This effect extends beyond the representation of external nature: Turner's techniques convey his own emotional response to natural forces, creating an affective atmosphere that envelops spectators and transforms viewing into an embodied experience.

This approach resonates strongly with Edmund Burke's theory of the sublime in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757). Burke observed that "When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are, delightful." [18]. Turner's paintings enact this paradox by presenting the terror of storms and tempests within the aesthetic frame of art. The viewer, although confronted with uncontrollable natural violence, experiences not paralyzing fear but a mediated awe that is simultaneously terrifying and pleasurable. In this way, sublime art functions as a kind of morbid delight: it contextualizes the audience's own minor stresses and anxieties by setting them against the immensity of the larger natural order, allowing fear to be transformed into aesthetic wonder [19].

What distinguishes Turner is his ability to merge technique with sensation: dissolving forms, turbulent brushwork, and radiant light collapse the boundary between observer and scene. Rather than merely depicting the external world, his canvases simulate the visceral feeling of being inside nature's overwhelming force. In this way, Turner redefines the sublime as a shared emotional encounter, compelling his audience to sense, rather than simply see, humanity's fragility in the face of elemental power.

4.3. Comparative perspectives

To further contextualize Turner's engagement with nature, it is useful to compare his work with three artists from different traditions and time periods – Claude Monet, Katsushika Hokusai, and Richard Long. Each demonstrates a distinct way of addressing the relationship between humanity and the natural world.

Claude Monet, an Impressionist painter of the late nineteenth century, was profoundly influenced by Turner's treatment of light and atmosphere. Yet his works, such as *Impression, Sunrise* (1872) and the *Water Lily* series (1897–99), focus on the fleeting beauty of natural effects rather than the terror of the sublime. Monet captures the transient play of light and color, evoking sensory delight rather than fear. While Turner immerses the viewer in the chaos and uncontrollability of storms, Monet invites contemplation of ephemerality and visual pleasure.

Katsushika Hokusai, a Japanese ukiyo-e master, created the renowned woodblock print *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* (c. 1831), dramatizing human fragility by juxtaposing small fishing boats against the monumental, towering waves. Like Turner, Hokusai emphasized humanity's

vulnerability before overwhelming natural forces. Yet his stylized, crisp lines and precise composition stand in contrast to the soft, dissipating atmosphere Turner creates. Despite their differing visual languages, both artists evoke awe for nature's power and reveal humanity's precarious existence within its forces.

Richard Long, a contemporary British artist who is known for Land Art, offers a fresh, radical rethinking of the relationship between humans and nature. Unlike Turner, who paints natural forces on canvas, Long works directly in the landscape through walking, making marks, and documenting his actions. His work, *A Line Made by Walking* (1967), transforms a simple movement into a work of art. It focuses on process and experience with the body, rather than pictorial representation. If Turner's sublime pulls the viewer into the vast and frightening power of nature, Long's works point to a quieter kind of intimacy. They show the lightness and ephemeral presence of humanity woven into the environment. Both artists view nature as an active force, not just a static backdrop. They remind us that the meeting between humans and the natural world is a real experience that changes us and is never entirely under our control.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that Turner's paintings, particularly *The Slave Ship* (1840) and *Snow Storm: Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth* (1842), exaggerate the overwhelming, uncontrollable power of nature, at the same time suggesting human vulnerability. Using light, color, and expressive swirls of brushstrokes, Turner dissolves the boundary between the viewer and the image, converting the brutality of nature into a sublime aesthetic experience that inspires awe, fear, and wonder. The comparative analysis with Monet, Hokusai, and Long further reveals that, even though artistic strategies differ over time and culture, the relationship between humanity and nature consistently exhibits experiential and transformative qualities. Turner appears not only as a model of Romantic sublimity but as a precursor for subsequent artists investigating sensory immersion and environmental consciousness. His work demonstrates how art can reconcile human perceptions of nature, offering audiences a means to confront existential vulnerability while appreciating natural grandeur.

The significance of this research lies more broadly within art history and the interdisciplinary study of human-nature relations. It provides valuable insight into the ways in which art strategies, from Turner's sublime seascapes to contemporary immersive art practices, influence cultural views of the place of humanity in the natural landscape.

Looking ahead, future research should further explore cross-cultural comparisons and cross-media approaches, examining how different artistic traditions and modern technologies continue to represent sensory experiences of nature. Particular attention should be given to Turner's lesser-studied works depicting calmer or less oppressive seascapes, as these may evoke alternative sensory experiences such as nostalgia and intimacy. Such investigations will not only deepen our understanding of the breadth of Turner's artistry but also illuminate the evolving role of art in fostering ecological awareness and sustaining humans' ongoing negotiation with the natural environment.

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