



Dovedale by Moonlight, c. 1784-85

Joseph Wright of Derby (English, 1734-1797)

Oil on canvas | 24 5/8 x 30 5/8 in. (62.5 x 77.8 cm)

- Why do you think the artist has painted this scene at night, and what unique qualities does he use to emphasize the setting?

VISUAL ANALYSIS

Dovedale by Moonlight depicts a long, narrow valley called Dovedale, 14 miles northeast of Wright's hometown of Derby in the English countryside. It is a night scene, rare for traditional pastoral images of this era, and evidence of Wright's vested interest in playing with the effects of light. The Dove River flows through the valley, a smaller

tributary of a larger river called the Trent. The only source of illumination is the moon, and as a result the foliage and rocks on either side of the river seem to form one large, dark mass, with little differentiation of detail in the trees or their leaves. This simplification of forms idealizes the scene in an almost picturesque way. The shapes of the hills form diagonals as they come together in the center of the picture plane, giving the illusion of perspective, and draws the eye of the viewer towards the *vanishing point*. The moon, hanging almost directly above this point, is framed by the delicate

➤ In this work, does Wright seem more interested in creating an emotive atmosphere or a detailed examination of the landscape? What visual evidence can be found in the work to support each viewpoint?

branches of a large tree on the right and the soft billows of clouds on the left, creating a well-balanced composition. The greenish color palette gives the scene an unnatural or ominous quality.

FUNCTION/Form & Style

This work is part of the *Picturesque* tradition of English landscape painting, but Wright seems to be taking a fresh look at the natural world—the tone of the piece feels tranquil and calming, and the nighttime setting gives it a hushed intimacy that perhaps comes from the largely neutral and dark color scheme, and the stillness of the scene overall.

It is exemplary of Wright’s interest in the often-dramatic effects of light, both natural and artificial, and of atmosphere created by moonlight. Often he would paint daytime landscapes juxtaposed with night landscapes in order to actively compare and contrast the two. It has been suggested in scholarly writings that Wright was influenced by the nocturnal landscapes of the German artist Adam Elsheimer, who he may have studied while in Italy. Though it has been argued that *Dovedale by Moonlight* is a highly Romantic piece, Wright very much stays true to how this landscape actually would have looked by night. The moonlight would have been pale and rather weak, not picking up much detail, and therefore causing the same extreme lights and darks in reality that we see in the painting.

Wright created several different versions of this painting, continuing to use Dovedale as the backdrop for his experiments with light and perspective. *Dovedale by Moonlight* was originally created with a companion piece, called *Dovedale in Sunlight*, now in a private collection in England.

Cultural and Historical Importance

This work was painted in the late 1700s, at the height of the Enlightenment, and at the very beginning of the Industrial Revolution. New ideas about science, reason, and philosophy were at the forefront of intellectual thought, and crossed over into the art world of the time. Wright, in particular, depicted many Enlightenment-influenced images—he had a strong interest in scientific experiments, and is probably best known for his images of them. One of his most famous paintings is the unusually titled *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump*, from 1768, nearly 20 years before *Dovedale by Moonlight* was created. This painting, in the National Gallery in London, dramatically depicts a lecturer in front of an audience, conducting an experiment that presents the notion that “without air all living creatures must die.”

Wright’s fascination with the different effects of light could also be attributed to Enlightenment connotations of the imagery of light—depictions of light

VOCABULARY

Picturesque: An aesthetic ideal first conceived of in England in 1782 suggesting that beauty is appreciated not rationally, but on an instinctive level.

Tributary: A stream that flows into a larger stream or other body of water.

Vanishing Point: A point of disappearance, cessation or extinction; in the study of perspective in art, the point toward which receding parallel lines appear to converge.

OHIO ACADEMIC CONTENT STANDARDS

Study of this work and its related classroom activities meets some or all of the following K-12 benchmarks:

- **Language Arts:** Acquisition of Vocabulary; Concept of Print, Comprehension Strategies and Self-monitoring Strategies; Information, Technical, and Persuasive Text; Writing Process; Research; Communications: Oral and Visual
- **Mathematics:** Measurement; Geometry and Spatial Sense; Mathematical Processes
- **Sciences:** Life Sciences; Physical Sciences; Science and Technology
- **Social Studies:** History; People in Societies; Geography; Economics; Skills and Methods
- **Visual Arts:** Historical, Cultural, and Social Contexts; Analyzing and Responding; Valuing the Arts/Aesthetic Reflection; Connections, Relationships, and Applications

were symbolic of logic and reason, and darkness associated with ignorance. Enlightenment-era images often, quite literally, cast a glow onto those who were “enlightened,” and left those who were not in the shadows.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Joseph Wright, often called “Wright of Derby,” was born in Derby in 1734. He came from a middle-class family; his father was an attorney and the Town Clerk of Derby. In 1751 he first began to receive formal artistic training in London, under the artist Thomas Hudson, who also taught renowned portraitist Joshua Reynolds. Not long after, he gained a reputation in Derby as

a talented portrait artist. Wright spent the majority of his life in Derby, but did travel to London and Italy, both of which deeply affected his work. While in Italy, from 1773-1775, he witnessed the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius, which appealed to him greatly—he painted the scene more than 30 times.

Wright remained deeply interested in other scientific subjects as well as the effects of light, reflecting the idea of light as the symbol of Enlightened thought—knowledge, logic, and reason.

Wright continued working until the year before his death in 1797.

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

LANGUAGE ARTS: Write like an Enlightenment-era scholar—find a topic or cause that is of interest, and write a “philosophy” that concerns and defines it. This can be as broad or specific as needed, but the underlying point should remain clear. (*All ages*)

SCIENCE: Study some of Wright’s pictures of scientific experiments, such as *Lecture on the Orrery* or *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump*. What specific scientific concepts or problems does he illustrate, and why would Wright chose to paint the exact moment of the experiments that he did? Are these images true to how the experiment would actually have been conducted? (*High School*)

SOCIAL STUDIES: Locate Dovedale and Derby on a map of England. Place them in relation to other cities in England, such as London. Investigate what Dovedale and Derby are like now, and compare this to Wright’s depictions. How do they differ, and what might it have been like to live there during Wright’s time? (*Elementary and Middle School*)

What exactly was the Enlightenment? Research some writers, philosophers, and artists associated with it, and the works or ideas for which they are most well known. Research and discuss the legacy of the Enlightenment Age. (*Middle and High School*)

VISUAL ARTS: A very popular compositional technique used by Wright in this painting is the “rule of thirds,” whereby important features of the work, such as the horizon line, are aligned towards one third of painting, in this case the bottom third. Artists often state that this rule helps works look more aesthetically pleasing. Create a landscape using the rule of thirds, and illustrate the scene in both the daylight and moonlight, as Wright did with Dovedale. (*All ages*)