

Analysis of Rembrandt Joseph Accused by Potiphar's wife Essay

The story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife is told in the first book of the Bible, Genesis, chapter 39. Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers and bought by Potiphar, a high ranking official in the Pharaoh's service. "The Lord was with Joseph," and gave him success in everything he did. This pleased Potiphar and before long Joseph was given the highest position in the household, and left in charge when Potiphar was away. Now Potiphar's wife found Joseph to be very good looking and had approached him several times saying "come to bed with me;" and Joseph being a man of God would not sin against his master or the Lord, so he refused her. One day when all the servants were gone, Joseph entered the house and Potiphar's wife approached him and while holding on to his cloak said "come to bed with me". Joseph refused and left the house leaving his cloak behind. Potiphar's Wife screamed for help saying that Joseph had attacked and tried to sleep with her. When her husband came home she told him the same false story. Potiphar was so angry at Joseph he had him locked up in Pharaoh's prison. "But while Joseph was in the prison, the Lord was with him." This is the subject matter for which Rembrandt chose to do his representational painting by. The content of the painting all reveals Rembrandt's interpretation of the story

This is the account from the Bible of the accusation of Joseph by Potiphar's Wife. Rembrandt Van Ryn chose this particular story as the subject of his narrative painting completed in 1655, under the title of "Joseph Accused By Potiphar's Wife". Before researching this painting, I noted my first perception of Rembrandt's work of art. I realized through that as a result of my later research, my first perception did not change, but instead was enriched and enlarged by a newfound understanding of the man and his art. I largely concentrated on my first and later perceptions in the design elements and principles of lighting or value, infinite space, color, and focal point.

After conducting research, my first perceptions about the value, or relative degree of lightness or darkness, in the painting did not change, but instead I learned that Rembrandt's use of light and dark was both purposeful and a technique well-known to the artists of his time. When I first observed this painting, I thought how dark everything seemed. The only exceptions to the darkness are the bed and Potiphar's wife, both of which are flooded in light almost as if a spotlight were thrown on her and the bed. Some light shines on Joseph's face and from behind him like a halo around his body, but this light is very dim. Potiphar in great contrast to his wife is almost in complete darkness. I first felt there should be more light from perhaps candles to cast the entire room in partial light. But after research I found that "Rembrandt liked strong contrasts of light and dark and used them in his paintings all his life, letting darkness hide unnecessary details while using light to bring figures and objects out from the shadows. The high contrast of light against dark changed an ordinary scene into a dramatic one ... the Italian word for this use of light and dark [is] *chiaroscuro*" (Muhlberger 9). Rembrandt must have believed that too much detail in the room would have obscured the primary players of this scene. He uses light to brightly illuminate the most important person in this painting, Potiphar's wife. In descending order of importance, Rembrandt places a glow around Joseph and casts Potiphar in a almost total darkness. I now am able to see how the contrast of light and dark demonstrates drastically this crucial turning point in Joseph's life. The fact that an Italian word exists for Rembrandt's lighting technique only proves the technique's establishment in the art world he lived and worked in.

As a result of research, my first perceptions about the presence of infinite space in the painting did not change, but instead I gained an understanding of why Rembrandt employed this particular technique in his painting. I first noticed before conducting any research on Rembrandt or this painting how the walls appear to go on indefinitely; there are no boundaries to the room. In addition the artist chose not to add any details to the walls or floor. I believe that the design element of infinite space, endless space as found in nature, best describes this technique. Upon conducting my research I found that, according to Richard Muhlberger, "Rembrandt learned to lavish attention on small parts of a painting, leaving the rest without much detail. He knew that details look more impressive surrounded by areas that are plain; they are harder to notice when they cover the entire surface of a painting" (16). Obviously in this painting of Joseph Accused by Potiphar's Wife, Rembrandt's purpose in using the design element of infinite space is to attract the audience to the characters in this story and not so

much their surroundings, with the exception, perhaps, of the bed. Therefore, my perception of this design element was only enlarged by the knowledge of Rembrandt's motivation in including infinite space in his composition.

My first perceptions about the colors in the painting did not change, but instead I gained an understanding of how the colors Rembrandt used contributed to the characters' portrayal/depiction. Color, the character of a surface resulting from the response of vision to the wavelength of light reflected from that surface, influences people in various ways. One of the greatest color affects people is through their emotions. When I first studied the painting of Joseph being Accused by Potiphar's wife, the dreary, somber colors left me feeling depressed. I've never really enjoyed Rembrandt's painting because of his frequent use of low intensity colors like muddy browns. But then, after reading the passage in the first book of the Bible, Genesis, where the story in the painting is recounted, I began to understand Rembrandt's reasoning behind his choice of colors (at least) for this particular painting). Joseph is being accused by his master's wife, the master he has served with all of his ability, of a crime he has not committed, not even in his mind, despite the many opportunities the woman has given him. For Rembrandt to successfully depict Joseph's situation, he "had to ... know the stories he painted and all the characters in them" (Schwartz 15). Instead of focusing on the luxurious setting of an Egyptian official's bedroom, Rembrandt chose to underscore the seriousness of Joseph's situation through color. After researching Rembrandt's painting, my first perceptions of the focal point of this composition did not change, but I felt I understand better how he created the focal point. Before researching Rembrandt's work, I felt drawn to the woman in this painting for the mere fact that she is easiest to see and in the middle of the picture. The design principle, focal point, the point of emphasis that attracts attention and encourages the viewer to look further best explains how I was pulled in by Potiphar's wife. Through my research I discovered Rembrandt, in order to heighten the importance of Potiphar's wife's action, her fingers pointing to the robe, placed her fingertips in the middle of the canvas (Munz 10). Another important placement involves the bed. After a careful look at the picture, I found the bed also is located in the middle of the painting, and covers over half of the canvas. The bed also then another focal point since it dominates the composition while other areas are subordinate to it. Rembrandt's focal points work because of the strong contrast between light and dark and because of placement of the characters in this story. Thus, through research I learned how Rembrandt achieves his focal points which my first perception initially discovered.

Now without knowing the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife one could piece together the events taking place by the content in the painting. There is a large room partly lit. In the center is a bed with snow white sheets fitted perfectly, as if a maid had just finished dressing it. To the side of the bed, seated in an equally large chair, is a most troubled-looking woman. She is adorned with a lavish, bright-colored gown, and wears decorative jewelry, with her hair luxuriously woven. She points with her right hand an accusing finger at a dark maroon cloak draped on one of the bed posts. Her other hand nurses a torn lapel of an under garment, suggesting she has been in some manner violated. She looks, with a creased forehead, at a tall, dark figure to the her left, whom for the lack of lighting shimmers in an elegant uniform, his head donning a turban. He leans on the back of her chair, his hand closed, but his arm pointing in the same direction as the cloak. His other arm is on his hip directly above a sheathed sword. His overall stature and facial expression appears quizzical, as he ponders over the serious situation. The situation of course concerns the accusation his wife makes of the owner of the cloak. The lonely figure in the corner dressed in the drab olive green tunic stands silently listening to the woman, obviously the accused owner of this cloak. His maroon red sash with the keys reveals his importance to the household. Rembrandt clearly brought this "scene to life convincingly"(Schwartz 15). For him to have accomplished this feat, he "had to give each figure an appropriate expression, pose, and costume"(Schwartz 15). All this Rembrandt has done, leaving us with a tragic moment in biblical history captured beautifully in this awesome painting of Joseph accused by Potiphar's wife.