Francisco Goya’s Descent into Madness: A Critical Analysis of *Saturn Devouring One of His Children*

*Saturn Devouring One of His Children* is arguably one of the most famous and gruesome paintings of the Romantic period. Produced near the end of his life, this work is the most famous of Francisco Goya’s “Black Paintings” – a series of works Goya painted directly onto the plaster walls of his home at the age of 73. These paintings show a darkness and grotesqueness uncharacteristic of Goya’s previous work. The man who was once the deputy director of painting at the Royal Academy, and designated royal painter for multiple monarchs was now deaf from fever complications and disturbed by the political turmoil of Spanish civil unrest. As with all works of art, *Saturn Devouring One of His Children’s* physical properties, formal structure, subject matter, and cultural context give us insight into the designs and motivations of its creator. In this we find in Francisco Goya a man who is ill, aged, depressed, and losing hope for humanity.

The physical and mental turmoil of Goya near the end of his life are apparent in the physical characteristics of *Saturn Devouring One of His Children.* In this piece we see the rapid painterly brush strokes characteristic of the Romantic period. While some use the painterly style to communicate an ethereal dreamy effect, Goya’s use of paint portrays Saturn as a nightmarish monster full of motion and passion. Coupled with the violent nature of the painting, these painterly strokes demonstrate a sense of haste, recklessness, and compulsivity in Goya’s painting. We also see a sacrifice of detail for increased emotional effect – a technique widely adopted by the Romanticists. Probably the most telling physical characteristic of the work is its medium – while Goya was famous for his oil paintings on canvas, in this work he applied paint directly to his wall. Considering the violent horrific nature of the work, one can only infer Goya was in a poor emotional state when deciding to permanently display the piece on the walls of his home. While infinitely more could be said about the physical characteristics of the work, solely based on these few characteristics it is safe to assume Goya was nothing short of disturbed.

Goya’s declining state is just as evident in the formal structure of the work as it is in the physical characteristics. The work being called a “Black Painting” is incredibly fitting – while the term black may refer to Goya’s dark outlook, this painting is also incredibly dark in appearance. We see dramatic tenebrism – the only things visible in the piece are Saturn himself and his offspring he is consuming – all else is black. From this we gain a haunting, other-worldly tone. Goya chooses to depict Saturn’s offspring as what seems to be an adult. The length, anatomy and detail of the nude figure suggest not a child, but a fully grown human figure. This distinction adds to the monstrosity of Saturn – we see him as a larger-than-life representation of evil – a being capable not only of consuming defenseless children, but instilling fear into all. The composition of the work is also incredibly disturbing – Goya features the dismembered, bloody carcass of Saturn’s child in the very center of the work. The body is the brightest figure in the work, seemingly illuminated by a light source to the top left. In composing the scene like this, Goya made it impossible to miss the most violent part of the painting – the naked decapitated figure dominates the work and commands the attention of its viewers. The work in totality is no doubt an example of the Romantic sublime – the viewer cannot help but experience shock and awe from the cannibalistic scene. From all these formal elements we can infer but one thing – Goya deliberately chose to create a work to instill fear, disgust, and anguish. (Which, considering the placement of this piece on his wall, only further attests to his mental trauma - this was not a work for public viewing, but one for him alone.)

The subject matter of the painting is an interesting point of discussion – while Goya never named the work, and most likely didn’t intend for it to be displayed, the content is widely agreed upon to be a depiction of Saturn, the Roman god of agriculture and plenty. The influence of the classical tradition is apparent in Goya’s choice of subject. The combination of subject and style in the piece is incredibly symbolic – Roman gods were typically portrayed in a classical style – posed, idealized, and larger than life. Goya, instead, chose to depict the Roman god as a crazed, bloodthirsty fiend with little detail on a relatively small space. In the way that Goya saw his seemingly perfect life come to near ruin, he may have been trying to reduce the god’s grandeur. The symbolism in the work is also apparent – the hair and beard of Saturn look less like human hair, and more like an animal’s mane. That, in combination with his crazed, unfocused eyes, portrays Saturn not as a noble god, but as a ferocious, merciless animal consuming its prey.

It is the social and political context of the painting in which we gain great insight into the potential causes of Goya’s madness. As was previously mentioned, because of complications of a fever, Goya was almost completely deaf at this point in his life. Losing something as fundamental as the ability to hear would no doubt take a toll on his mental and emotional health. On top of this, Goya had recently been intimately familiar with the horrors of war. Around the same period, he produced a series of works entitled *The Disasters of War* recording his reactions to the horrors and consequences of the Napoleonic wars. In the last two decades of his life, Goya experienced both theses Napoleonic wars, and the Trienio Liberal (Spanish civil war). At the time of his painting of Saturn, Spain was actively engaged in that civil war. These social influences no doubt took a heavy toll on Goya, and his art of the period reflects that fact. While once the appointed painter to a noble Spanish monarch, he now saw the country he loved in turmoil. In these bleak circumstances, it is no wonder Goya’s art became so dark – he was a dying man slowly losing his hope in humanity. As such, the choice of Saturn then may have been a commentary on the Spanish political and social situation. Just as Saturn devoured his own children, Spain was devouring her own children in civil war.

The life of Francisco Goya inevitably came to an end in 1828 mid continued socio-political upheaval. The painter’s impressive career concluded in incredibly humble circumstances. The man who was once one of the most celebrated painters in the country was now losing a battle within his own head. His deafness, isolation, and experience with war and violence no doubt took a toll on the aging man. His disturbed state is apparent in the works of art he produced near the close of his life, none of which was more gruesome nor famous than *Saturn Devouring One of His Children.*