The Nightmare

The imagery of the painting “The Nightmare” was initially jarring for me. It took a few moments for me to process what it was that I was looking at. The young woman laying helplessly over the bed with that creature on her chest smiling with the dark horse peering from the shadows made me think about my own life. I saw the creature as representing despair, mounting debt, hopelessness and all the other melancholy things that could possibly weigh a person down. The lady appears to have given up all hope and accepted her fate. The horse peering in from the shadows with that disgusting grin on his face, for me represented the establishment, the machine, the orchestrator of all the pain that has caused the woman to lose hope. Nothing of the imagery of this painting interested me for I find myself feeling like the woman in the photo on a frequent basis, if anything, I found myself angered. I just haven’t given up as I have my children to keep me focused and fighting to persevere and don’t plan to any time soon. Personally, I would like to slap that damn grin off the horse’s face. I find it typical that a woman was used as the subject of this painting instead of a man. I figure it was not typical of that era to present men in a helpless light, just proves that male chauvinistic tendencies haven’t declined at all.

The Nightmare is an oil painting that was created in 1781 by the artist Johann Heinrich Henry Fuseli, a swiss born son of artist Johann Caspar Fuseli (The Nightmare, 2019). Henry developed an early penchant for drawing at a young age probably due to his father being a portrait and landscape artist. Upon moving to London in 1764 he took up painting when he became influenced by Joshua Reynolds who was the first president of the recently established Royal Academy of Arts. Henry continued to nurture his love of the arts by studying figure painting of Michelangelo during his stay in Italy in the 1770’s. In addition to Michelangelo’s influence on Fuseli and his art style, Shakespeare and other literary sources of the 16th century contributed to his works as well (The Nightmare (1781) by Henry Fuseli, 2019). Fuseli would later be appointed to teach at Royal Academy as a professor of painting. Henry Fuseli imagination and ability to create works that evoke intense emotion has distinguished him as one of the best English painters of the Romantic period. Fuseli led a long life with no significant illness or significant turmoil. He was one of 18 children of which his father intended for him to be associated with the church. Henry was sent to Caroline college of Zurich where he received a classical education.

During this period, many of the artists were shifting their focus from rationality and reason as their predecessors of the Age of Enlightenment. Artists of the Romantic era worked to express and invoke extreme feelings and deep emotional responses to their works in all the arts. The Nightmare was one of those paintings, first displayed in 1782 at the Royal Academy, whose imagery scared, surprised, and fascinated visitors, scholars and critics alike. Some say that the painting itself is of a lost love during his time in Zurich. While in Zurich, Henry fell in love with the Anna Landholt, niece to Johann Kasper Lavater, whose father would later disapprove of Henry’s marriage proposal to Anna. The Nightmare was soon painted after Anna married a family friend. Art Historians suggest that Anna is represented by the woman on the bed and the demonic figure represents Henry. (The Nightmare, 2019) Deviating from the paintings of other popular and successful exhibits at the Royal Academy, Henry’s Nightmare was a product of his imagination with no roots in reality or history.

Artistic creativity during the Romantic period was influenced by the Industrial Revolution with its shift from an economy driven by rural living and agriculture to an economy that embraced urbanization, mechanization and industrialization. Because of this regression from nature and the close quarters that became prevalent in the urbanized cities, artists began to focus on nature in their art to force people to reflect on their feelings about the power, splendor, and horror that nature can impose upon people and the lands they live on.

Before I started this research and paper, I didn’t know how or what I would write as all I saw was a painting of a woman draped over a bed with some gremlin on her chest and a pervert horse looking in. Now with an understanding of what the artist of the Romantic period work toward achieving with their pieces of artwork I have a greater appreciation for this piece. Delving into the Art Historians interpretations of the Nightmare opened my eyes to how color and its placement can affect the ambiance of a portrait and its subject both outside and inside the painting. Though I may not agree with their interpretation, I do understand how and why they may have come to their conclusions about the painting.

# Bibliography

*The Nightmare (1781) by Henry Fuseli*. (2019). Retrieved from visual-arts-cork.com: http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/famous-paintings/nightmare-fuseli.htm

*The Nightmare*. (2019). Retrieved from Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\_Nightmare