

# Biography and Vulnerability: Loss, Dying and Death in the Romantic Paintings of J.M.W. Turner (1775–1851)

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Narratives of suffering and vulnerability are an important theme in western art, the humanities and the social sciences. It is argued here that J.M.W. Turner's pictures, like those of many artists, are biographical tales. The central tenet of Turner's romantic art is the arousal of sensation and Turner's pictures include wonderfully evocative 'visual poems' on the human experiences of loss, decline, 'the fallacies of hope', grief and death. This paper first explores the connections between Turner's biography and his art through a discussion of several of Turner's key paintings. It then moves on to a more in-depth discussion of two pictures painted by Turner in 1842, when he was 67 years old: *Peace – Burial at Sea*, and *War – The Exile and the Rock Limpet*. These paintings can be seen as insightful biographical narratives on the embodiment of vulnerability. In conclusion, it is suggested that Turner's paintings of loss and death are valuable exemplars of the capacity of art to meld together biography, narrative, vulnerability, suffering and embodiment.

## INTRODUCTION

The paintings of Turner may seem an unpromising way to approach the topic of suffering in western painting. This is because Turner is not usually seen as a painter of suffering, but rather as a painter of unforgettable sunrises and breathtaking sunsets (Beckett, 1994). There are, of course, more obvious examples of paintings illustrating suffering than those by Turner, for example: *The Scream* (1893) by Munch, and *Guernica* (1937) by Picasso (see Gombrich, 1995; Spivey, 2001). The purpose of this paper, however, is to concentrate on the less obvious examples. It hopes to

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demonstrate that some of Turner's pictures are insightful narratives on the precariousness of the body, on suffering, on vulnerability and therefore on the nature of our shared humanity. In other words, the aim in this paper is to reflect upon a dictum of the French philosopher, anthropologist and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (Calhoun *et al.*, 1993; Shusterman, 1999). For Bourdieu, the objective of academic research is, 'to make the mundane exotic and the exotic mundane' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 68). Or, to put it a little differently, the goal is to illustrate the ethnographic dictum of 'making the familiar seem strange and the strange seem familiar' (Atkinson *et al.*, 2001) through a discussion of some paintings by J.M.W. Turner that are narratives of suffering.

Turner tends to be viewed as a landscape painter with an innovative use of colour to depict movement and atmosphere, rather than as a painter of 'the body'. However, many of Turner's paintings can be understood as studies of the embodiment of vulnerability, being visual reflections on loss, 'the fallacies of hope', grief, ageing and death. Moreover, the emotional effect that his landscape paintings can produce in the bodily spectator underlines this link between his art and the vulnerable body. The guiding principle of Turner's romantic art is the arousal of sensation. In summary, Turner reminds us that our bodies are fragile, and it is our awareness of this precariousness that is the epitome of being human (Turner and Rojek, 2001).

Human frailty is seen more explicitly in portrait painting, and this genre of art can be read as life narratives (Brockmeier, 2001). In particular, self-portraiture provides a rich genre of life writing. So, for example, the numerous self-portraits of artists such as Dürer, Rembrandt, Van Gogh and Schiele all offer compelling examples of the interweaving of the creative process with the trajectory of their artistic lives (Brightstocke, 2001). This is summed up by Brockmeier, who states: 'Leonardo [da Vinci] worried that an artist's creative and self-inquiring soul is so potent that it risks creeping into all his work, until every figure he paints comes to feel, even look, like him. ... The art of portraiture became the art of understanding life' (2001: 262, 263). However, Turner was a poor figure painter, painting only one self-portrait and no other portraits, but he revolutionized the genre of landscape painting. This paper argues that Turner's paintings represent aspects of his life, as painted by himself.

Turner is arguably Britain's greatest artist (Gowing, 1966; Vaughan, 1999; Joll *et al.*, 2001). However, despite the large literature on Turner, there is no single account of his paintings as narratives of suffering. Instead, there is a series of academic books concentrating on a particular aspect of his art; for instance, his hundreds of oil paintings (Butlin and Joll, 1984), his prints (Herrmann, 1990), his travels (Herold, 1997), the impact of the industrial revolution on his art (Rodner, 1997) and his

thousands of watercolours (Shanes, 2000). In addition, there is a plethora of more popular biographical books that chronicle Turner's life and career (Lindsey, 1966; 1985; Reynolds, 1969; Tate Gallery, 1987; Wilton, 1987; Bailey, 1997; Hamilton, 1997; Venner, 2003), plus a number of illustrated books on the art of Turner (Gaunt, 1981; Bockemühl, 2000; Smiles, 2000; D. Brown, 2001a). In contrast, this paper supplements an art history approach with social science insights to Turner's paintings as biographical narratives of vulnerability (Wainwright and Turner, 2003). It draws upon a range of both recent and historical sources on Turner to illustrate our theme of Turner as a painter of human frailty and suffering. Our argument in this paper is the uncontentious one that both Turner's biography and the society within which he lived are essential to understanding his art and his life. Turner's paintings link 'personal troubles' and 'public issues' – to borrow Mills's (1959) classic formulation of 'the sociological imagination'. As we shall see, these public issues included war, empire, slavery, decline, loss and death.

Painting is a rich medium through which to expose our embodied vulnerability (D. Brown, 2001b). We have all yelled in pain, we have all bled, and we have all wept. These three universal human experiences are the explicit subjects of some great paintings (see Spivey, 2001). One reason why artists paint such matters is because they want to *move* us (Clarke, 1969). As the artist John Constable said: 'Painting is another word for *feeling*' (Reynolds, 1969: 127; our emphasis). As John Drury (1999: ix–x) writes: 'First and above all, it is simply true that pain and pleasure are the constant reality of our lives. Horrible things happen in lovely places and beauty dies in torment.' In short, the pleasure and pain of great art (whether it be music, literature, painting) can penetrate us, so that *we* recognize some insight, some 'deeper truth', about the nature of our human condition (Alexander, 2003). In relation to Turner himself, Clarke (1976: 194; our italics) states: 'Turner fulfils practically every aim that the earlier romantics foreshadowed. He is *penetrated* by a sense of nature's unsubduable, destructive force.' We, as spectators, can imagine and even feel similar emotions. As we will see, a number of Turner's paintings remind us that life is a litany of loss – at times we all venture through a vale of vulnerability and we are all swamped by surging seas of suffering.

Specific works of art can reduce us to tears. More generally, the arts make us *feel*. In our view, paintings should be seen as more than either; just 'spots of beauty on the wall', or merely 'index cards for intellectual debates' (Elkins, 2001: ix). In contrast, the aim of James Elkins's book – *Pictures and tears* – is to counter this tendency, because, quite simply, '*the more you look, the more you feel*' (Elkins, 2001: x; our italics). Medieval paintings and prayer books are full of 'devotional images ... enjoining worshippers to do more than sympathise with Jesus or Mary: the aim of

prayer was to identify with them bodily, to try and think of yourself *as Jesus*' (Elkins, 2001: 155; original italics). In the medieval world intensity of faith was made manifest, and tears of compunction (where the praying viewer weeps as they experience the suffering of Christ) were an everyday example of blatant emotion.

In a somewhat similar way, the 'sublime landscapes' of nineteenth-century romanticism – in literature, painting and music – evoked the fierce wildness of the irrepressible forces of Nature (Wu, 2000). Edmund Burke (1958: 39; original italics) defined the elements of sublimity as 'whatever is in any sort terrible ... is a source of the *sublime*, that is, productive of the strongest emotion'. It is argued that romanticism is the art of the sublime (Joll *et al.*, 2001), being essentially a movement of yearning, of 'an irretrievable sense of loss' (D. Brown, 2001b). Turner's paintings have the capacity to emotionally overwhelm the spectator. As one art historian puts it: 'There can be few things more exhilarating than to encounter the full force of a great Turner' (Beckett, 1994: 266). Turner's genius transforms nature into the stuff of great art. He is famed as the creator of a visual poetry of spectacular iridescence (Brightstocke, 2001). However, Turner is also the creator of tremendous images of fatality and suffering: 'His subjects usually encapsulate pivotal movements, a rise or a fall, a victory or a defeat, a sunrise or a sunset. ... [They] emphasise man's insignificance in the face of the powers of nature' (Strong, 1999: 498). In the following section, the analysis of Turner's work starts with an overview of the relationship between his art and his biography.

#### **J.M.W. TURNER: ART AND BIOGRAPHY**

John Mallord William Turner (1775–1851), the son of a Covent Garden barber, was born, lived and died in London. He showed such a prodigious talent for drawing that his father sold his childhood pictures in his barber's shop. He learnt the rudiments of art through copying and colouring prints and drawings and through working as an assistant to an architectural draughtsman. He attended the Royal Academy of Art from the age of 14, exhibited his first watercolour a year later, and he soon became recognized as one of the leading watercolourists in Britain. Many of these pictures were engraved, and in his twenties he became quite wealthy from the sale of prints and watercolours. He continued to dominate art in these two fields for the rest of his long life. He exhibited his first oil painting in 1796, was elected an Associate of the Royal Academy (ARA) at the youngest possible age (24) in 1799, and became a full member of the Royal Academy (RA) in 1802. This meant that he could exhibit any of his new paintings at the annual RA exhibition, which enabled the flowering of his considerable artistic imagination.

Turner was extremely hardworking and prolific throughout his life – filling over 300 sketchbooks, and producing over 1500 finished water-colours and some 550 oil paintings (Joll *et al.*, 2001). He assimilated and synthesized the influence of a wide range of other artists and artistic traditions to produce works of distinctive originality. Turner was fully aware of his artistic genius; for example, he claimed at one RA dinner, ‘I am the great lion of the day’ (Hamilton, 1997: 301). He let nothing deflect him from his artistic mission, being driven to experiment and to excel. His revolutionary use of colours, especially yellow, together with his tendency to dissolve forms in a luminous haze, provoked scathing accusations of eccentricity and madness – especially of his later paintings (Butlin and Joll, 1984). Lindsey (1985) links key features of Turner’s life and art with the madness of his mother. He writes:

The experience of living for his first 25 years with a fierce mother torn by tempests of fury and ending insane [in Bedlam] could not but have deeply affected her son. ... We are probably correct in linking it with his interests as an artist in convulsions and violent moods of nature.

(1985: 5)

Although this is one plausible interpretation, albeit a rather simplistic one, little is actually known on this matter. Turner was a revolutionary figure in art and he was constantly driven to better his rivals, many of whom also painted the violent moods of nature.

Much of Turner’s emotional and social life centred on the RA, so that the Royal Academy became Turner’s family and his paintings became his surrogate children (Lindsey, 1985). A lifelong bachelor, Turner left a complex will in which he left almost 400 oils and thousands of other pictures to the nation. Lindsey (1985: 163) claims that Turner left: ‘95,800 water-colours, sketches, [unfinished] oils, engravings and plates’. It was almost 130 years before the ‘Turner bequest’ was housed together (in the Clore Gallery of Tate Britain), although six of his most famous paintings are on permanent loan to the National Gallery (London). Turner was aware of his own mortality, but he believed his bequest assured him of immortality.

What is striking about Turner is his movement from an architectural draughtsman to the masterly painter of ‘tinted steam’ (Shanes, 2000). We see this transformation when we compare, say, a painting such as *High Street Oxford* (1810, BJ 102,<sup>1</sup> Ashmolean Museum, Oxford)<sup>2</sup> with *Norham Castle, Sunrise* (c. 1845–50, BJ 512, Tate Britain, London). The good (in *Oxford*) becomes the great (in *Norham Castle*). *Norham Castle* is a wonderfully transcendent vision of shimmering morning light. The drinking cow shows us that this is not just an abstraction, but rather a wonderfully imaginative artistic response to the real world. As Kenneth Clarke (1976: 102) writes: ‘Turner is one of those rare cases

of a great artist whose early work gives no indication of the character of his genius.'

Turner travelled widely, sketching extravagant scenery and extreme climate conditions, which he transformed into paintings that he exhibited with poetic quotations (Langmuir, 1997: 325), often from his own unpublished epic poem on 'the Fallacies of Hope' (Joll *et al.*, 2001). The light of the Mediterranean had a profound effect on Turner (and on many other artists too; Gombrich, 1995). Kenneth Clarke (1976: 186) puts it admirably when he writes:

The memories of Italy were like fumes of wine in his mind, and the landscape seemed to swim before his eyes in a sea of light. Shadows became scarlet and yellow, distances mother-of-pearl, trees lapis lazuli blue, and figures floated in the heat engendered haze, like diaphanous tropical fish.

For instance, Turner's painting of the sea near Naples, *The Bay of Baiae, with Apollo and the Sibyl* (1823, BJ 230, Tate Britain, London), is a picture that critics often describe as 'gorgeous'. John Ruskin described this painting as an illustration 'of the vanity of human life' (Butlin and Joll, 1984: 139). It is based on the story of the unrequited love of the god Apollo for the Cumaean sibyl. Apollo offered her eternal youth in return for her love, but she denied him, and so her body aged and wasted away until she became a disembodied voice. The youthful beauty of the sibyl is contrasted against a middle ground of ageing and ruinous buildings, which suggest the finite nature of existence. Like Byron, Turner saw Italy (and especially Venice) as a poetic lesson in the transience of human achievements (Tate Britain, 2003). *Apollo and the Sibyl* is a painting on the ruined beauty of Italy and also a warning of the unavoidable deterioration, distress and death of our ageing human bodies.

Turner's seascapes also illustrate this theme of suffering. Turner's sea storms, in particular, are meant to evoke in the viewer his or her own vividly felt personal experience of human vulnerability. The landscapes of romanticism called for violent and spectacular effects to invoke the untamed awesomeness and mysteriousness of nature (Wilton, 1987). The precariousness of man is overwhelmed by a natural world of uncontrollable forces: of mountains, fires, floods, storms and raging seas. *Shipwreck* (1805, BJ 17, Tate Britain, London) was the first of Turner's oil paintings to be engraved. The graphic realism of the boats lurching in a churning sea reflects Turner's romantic view of man's frailty in his relationship to the terrible power of nature. We will never know whether the trembling individuals in the centre of the picture were saved. 'They remain for ever in danger' (Vaughan, 1999: 228). Their peril, and the threat to the viewer too, is heightened by the painting's deliberate lack of a refuge of safety (Appleton, 1975). With his seascapes Turner set

himself the task of matching the great Dutch marine painters of the seventeenth century, for instance, Aelbert Cuyp. Sea storms reflected Turner's own experiences; for instance, his painting of *Calais Pier* (1803, BJ 48, Tate Britain, London) has the documentary realism of his own stormy arrival, about which his graphic diary entry states: 'Nearly swampt' (Joll *et al.*, 2001).

*Snow Storm: Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps* (1812, BJ 126, Tate Britain, London) is another picture in which Turner's own experiences of extreme weather are transmuted into his art. In this case, the inspiration came during a snowstorm in Yorkshire. Turner told his patron's son (who was watching him sketch), 'in two years time you will see this again and call it Hannibal crossing the Alps' (Butlin and Joll 1984: 89). This 'terrible magnificence' was well received by critics. The swirling snowstorm was seen as a masterly blending of moral and physical elements that awaken emotions of awe and splendour in the viewer. This is a romantic masterpiece, where the diminutive figures are engulfed in a vortex of atmospheric light and darkness. The painting is symbolic of the disappointed ambitions of life and history. Gage (1987) suggests that Turner saw a parallel between the struggle of Rome and Carthage, and that between England and Napoleonic France.

The Napoleonic wars also had a direct and overt influence on Turner's art. Turner's paintings of war are about death and suffering. *The Field of Waterloo* (1818, BJ 138, Tate Britain, London) presents the horrors of war in a composition of great theatrical power. Turner visited Waterloo in 1817 (some two years after the battle) and made numerous sketches, plans and notes about the famous site (Joll *et al.*, 2001). His anti-triumphalist painting on the subject was exhibited with the following quotation from Lord Byron's epic poem *Childe Harold* (iii, 28):<sup>3</sup>

Last noon behold them full of lusty life;  
 Last eve in Beauty's circle proudly gay;  
 The midnight brought the signal – sound of strife;  
 The morn the marshalling of arms – the day,  
 Battle's magnificently stern array!  
 The thunder clouds close o'er it, which when rent,  
 The earth is covered thick with other clay  
 Which her own clay shall cover, heaped and pent,  
 Rider and horse – friend, foe, in one red burial blent!

*The Examiner* (25 May 1818)<sup>4</sup> praised the work's depiction of, 'the carnage after the battle when the wives and brothers and sons of the slain come, with anxious eyes and agonised hearts'. *Waterloo* is a lament for the disintegration of a wider culture through war. Such 'war pictures' are inevitably imbued with graphic images of death.

Intense feelings of loss, blackness, rage and despair are all exemplified in Turner's deeply disturbing painting of the inhumane horrors of the slave trade. Ruskin remarked of *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying – Typhoon Coming on* (1840, BJ 385, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts): 'If I were reduced to rest Turner's immortality upon any single work, I should choose this' (Butlin and Joll 1984: 236). In fact, Ruskin owned this painting for 28 years – until the subject became too painful for him to live with. This intensely dramatic picture is based on the story of a shocking incident. The captain of the slave ship *Zong* ordered sick slaves to be thrown overboard, as insurance could be claimed for slaves that drowned, but not for those who died of disease. This is a horrifying image of carnage and death. In the foreground, sea monsters are devouring the drowning slaves. Lindsey (1966: 187) sees *The Slave Ship* as an indictment of a society where, 'human relationships were being supplanted by the cash nexus. The slave trader and the shark are one'. In a capitalist world enthralled by material ends, Turner asks, 'Where is thy market now?' *Slavers* was exhibited with the following lines by Turner:

Aloft all hands, strike the top masts and belay;  
Yon angry setting sun and fierce-edged clouds  
Declare the Typhoon's coming.  
Before it sweeps your decks, throw overboard  
The dead and dying – ne'er heed their chains  
Hope, Hope, fallacious Hope!  
Where is thy market now?

Vaughan (1999: 243) states that: 'Nowhere did [Turner] use his new sense of colour with more power than when he painted the ship's rigging blood red to suggest guilt and the sky with purple and violent orange to intimate Divine retribution.' Ruskin (cited in Joll *et al.*, 2001) writes in adulatory prose that the picture contains:

The noblest sea that Turner has ever painted ... and, if so, the noblest ever painted by man. ... Purple and blue, the lurid shadows of the hollow breakers are cast upon the mist of night, which gathers cold and low, advancing like the shadow of death upon the guilty ship as it labours amidst the lightening of the sea, its thin mast written upon the sky in lines of blood, girded with condemnation in that fearful hue which signs the sky with horror, and mixes its flaming flood with the sunlight, and cast far along the desolate heave of the sepulchral waves, incarnadines the multitudinous sea.

*Death on a Pale Horse* (c. 1825–30, BJ 259, Tate Britain, London) is Turner's most harrowing image of death. This painting was formerly called *A Skeleton Falling off a Horse* (Butlin and Joll, 1984: 158). Gowing (1966) suggests that the subject may have been inspired by the death of

Turner's father in 1829. The painting reflects the pale horse bearing Death in the Book of Revelation (6:2), with a decomposing skeletal body slumped in the saddle. It is a wonderful example of the art of 'the terrible sublime'. *Death on a Pale Horse* was never exhibited, and it is argued that it remained in the artist's studio as Turner's lament to the profound loss of his father: 'a passionate reaction to the overwhelming power of death' (Hamilton, 1997: 259).

Venner (2003: 4, 205) argues that as Turner:

... grew older he became more conscious of the brevity of life and the frailty of human ambitions. ... In the last two decades of his life Turner became increasingly distressed whenever a friend or colleague died. In addition, the robust good health he had generally enjoyed until the 1830s was interrupted by periods of illness, which led him to reflect more often on his demise.

Having looked more generally at the relationship between Turner's art and biography, in the next section we focus on a pair of his paintings depicting loss, death, suffering and vulnerability, enabling aspects of this theme to be explored in more detail.

#### **PEACE – BURIAL AT SEA AND WAR – THE EXILE AND THE ROCK LIMPET**

*Peace – Burial at Sea* (oil on canvas, BJ 399, exhibited at the Royal Academy London in 1842, 87 × 86.5 cm, now in Tate Britain, London) is a poignant narrative of loss and suffering. *Peace* is a painting that is a memorial to Turner's friend and rival, the painter Sir David Wilkie (1785–1841), who died at sea on his way home from Egypt, and who was buried at sea off the coast of Gibraltar. 'The presence of a Mallard, a pun on Turner's second name, stresses his involvement [in the subject]' (Joll *et al.*, 2001: 222). The picture was exhibited, as a 'complementary pair' with *War* (see below). *Peace* was exhibited with the following lines from Turner's own poem on the *Fallacies of Hope*:

The midnight torch gleamed o'er the steamers's side  
And Merit's corse was yielded to the tide

The dominant black of *Peace* forms a striking contrast to the domineering red of *War*. Clarkson Stanfield, RA, objected to the darkness of the sails, to which Turner famously replied, '*I only wish I had any colour to make them blacker*' (Butlin and Joll, 1984: 248; our italics), surely a measure of the depth of Turner's sorrow. *Peace* is Turner's threnody for his colleague Wilkie. George Jones, another contemporary painter friend of Turner's, thought the black sails were characteristic of Turner, although he claims that it is typical of Turner to imbue his painting

with obscure symbolism: 'to have indicated mourning by this means probably retaining some confused notions of the death of Aegeus and the black sails of the returning Theseus' (Thornbury, 1897: 323–24). For us, this is a wonderful evocation of the utter blackness that we can all be engulfed by in our moments of despair and despondency. Being human means that there are times when we are completely shattered and distraught – when we all suffer from the feeling of being 'filled with emptiness'. An obsession with the apparent, and painfully real, meaninglessness of life is the theme of the other half of this pair of paintings by Turner.

*War – The Exile and the Rock Limpet* (oil on canvas, BJ 400, exhibited at the Royal Academy London in 1842, 79.5 × 79.5 cm, now in Tate Britain, London) is a pendant to *Peace*, and has been described as a 'quirky commentary on the banal end of Napoleon's career' (Bailey, 1997: 70). For us, however, this picture visibly encompasses the themes of loss, suffering and vulnerability. For Ruskin, Turner's 'crimsoned sunset skies' always symbolized death (Butlin and Joll, 1984: 231). The painting was exhibited with Turner's suggestive lines:

Ah! Thy tent-formed shell is like  
A soldier's nightly bivouac, alone  
Midst a sea of blood  
But you can join your comrades

John Ruskin commented (Butlin and Joll, 1984: 249):

The lines that Turner gave the picture are very important, being the only verbal expression of that association in his mind of sunset colour with blood ... the conceit of Napoleon's seeing a resemblance in the limpet's shell to a tent was thought trivial by most people at the time; it may be so (though not to my mind); the second thought, that even this poor wave-washed disk had power and liberty, denied to *him*, will hardly, I think, be mocked at.

Ruskin's view, however, was at odds with those of the other critics, and the contemporary press was universal in its condemnation of this picture of Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821), general and Emperor of France, on St Helena (Blackburn, 1991) – and also of Turner's painting *Peace*. For instance, *The Spectator* (7 May 1842) remarked: 'He is as successful as ever in caricaturing himself in two round blotches of *rouge et noir*.' *The Athenaeum* (14 May 1842) was even more scornful, commenting sarcastically that it could 'not endure the music of Berlioz, nor abide Hoffmann's fantasy-pieces'. *The Times* (6 May 1842) described the ship in *Peace* as 'an object resembling a burnt and blackened fish-kettle', whilst the *Literary Gazette* (14 May 1842) condemned *War*, claiming that 'the whole thing is truly ludicrous'.

The savagery of these criticisms in 1842 spurred Ruskin on to write the first volume of his classic *Modern painters* (1843). Ruskin saw Turner as the greatest landscape painter who had ever lived, persuasively arguing that Turner's apparent 'abstractionism' was in fact a profound and visionary form of naturalism. With the benefit of hindsight, *The Exile and the Rock Limpet* can be seen as a moving narrative of loneliness and loss, a moving evocation of the suffering of a defeated Emperor. It is, in Virginia Woolf's (1976) phrase, a 'moment of being'. Napoleon died on St Helena in 1822, but his body was returned to Paris in October of 1840, which gave *War* a topical outlook. Clarke argues that Turner eloquently exposed: 'The pathetic inadequacy of human beings in an ineffably beautiful and terrible universe' (1973: 234). Napoleon stands on the shore of St Helena amidst the visionary landscape that Turner's artistic imagination has conjured up around him. The natural is allied with the spiritual in a painting that exemplifies Turner's daring, atmospheric, romantic vision.

The powerful bond between the pair of paintings on *Peace* and *War* is tellingly emphasized through the emphatic use of the symbolic colours of dark orange and red for blood in *War*, and of the blackest of blacks for despair in *Peace*. Moreover, the dominant colours of each painting are also introduced into its companion, so that the black and white uniform of Napoleon in *War* balances the red and yellow torches for Wilkie in *Peace*. The deeper connections between the two paintings is highlighted by Joll *et al.* (2001: 198), when they compare the fate of Wilkie with that of Napoleon:

Wilkie's burial at sea after self-chosen exile in peacetime must have recalled for Turner the many losses in that same Mediterranean as a result of the long years of war [the Napoleonic wars tore much of Europe apart between 1783–1815], the outcome of which had been for their instigator no more than humiliating, solitary exile.

History and painting become entwined in Turner's imagination. Turner's art has the power to speak to us of the vulnerability and suffering both he and we experience as we pass along the trajectory of our lives.

## DISCUSSION

Death as a narrative of suffering is an important theme of some recent writings on painting (Drury, 1999; Elkins, 2001; Kemp and Wallace, 2000; R. Brown, 2001; Spivey, 2001). In his survey of the 'sweet violence of the tragic' in literature, Eagleton (2003) highlights the reciprocal connections between the tragedies of life and tragic art, for instance, between Goethe's unrequited love and his novel, *The perils of young Werther* (Goethe, 1956). It is claimed that this book was largely responsible for the

cult of romantic suicide (Minois, 1999), contributing to the suicide of the teenage poet Thomas Chatterton (see R. Brown, 2001: 138–45), which was subsequently immortalized in the painting *The Death of Chatterton* (Henry Wallis, 1856, Tate Britain). In this discussion, the sociological notion of embodied vulnerability is drawn on to further explore Turner's paintings of loss, dying and death.

A focus on the embodiment of vulnerability is a fruitful approach to the intimate relations between self and society, biology and culture, and reason and emotion (Shildrick, 2002; Wainwright and Turner, 2003). Embodiment is an ongoing ensemble of corporal practices that produces and gives 'a body' its place in everyday life (Crossley, 2001). Our embodied vulnerability is fundamental to our existence as persons (Crowther, 1993). Our vulnerability is a conspicuous feature of biographical approaches that typically explore what Denzin (1989: 69) labels 'epiphanies', as they describe 'turning point moments in an individual's life'; or what Giddens (1991) calls, 'fateful moments'.

Biographical transformations are forged in such fateful moments, so that 'vulnerability is ... the very condition of becoming' (Shildrick, 2002: 133). The concept of vulnerability is derived from the Latin word for wound – *vulnus* – and in its modern usage vulnerability has come to denote the human ability to be open to wounds (Wainwright, 2004). Hence vulnerability denotes our openness to physical, psychological, social and moral injury (Turner, 2001). Our vulnerability is evinced as we chart our way through the vicissitudes of the world. This susceptibility is essential as: 'the peculiar beauty of human excellence just is its vulnerability' (Nussbaum, 1986: 86). The representations of suffering in the romantic paintings of Turner speak to our innate human embodied vulnerability. 'Romantics ... probe the inner psyche ... [and so epitomize] the romantic principle that artists must be judged by sensibility' (D. Brown, 2001b: 12, 64). Romantic art delivers unprecedented freedom of imagination and expression, and appeals directly to the emotions of the audience. Turner's paintings, which are essentially visions of feelings, are profoundly poignant, being 'fundamental to our concept, not only of art, but also of ourselves' (D. Brown, 2001b: 16). As Rapport (2000: 39) writes: 'Narratives manifest the connection between individuals' outer worlds and their inner consciousness.'

Turner's paintings inevitably reflect his own life experiences. Examples abound (Joll *et al.*, 2001), for instance, of Turner sticking his head out of a train window and then drawing on this experience to paint the evocative *Rain, Steam and Speed* (1841); of being tied to a ship's mast in a storm and then transmuting this into the turbulent *Staffa: Fingal's Cave* (1832); whilst his experience of his coach overturning in an Alpine pass was transformed into the dramatic watercolour *Return from Italy, in a Snow*

*Drift upon Mount Tarrar* (1829). As the current Keeper of the Turner bequest at Tate Britain notes, Turner 'delighted in weathering such storms and incorporating them into his art' (D. Brown, 2001a: 147). For Turner, the whole of life was grist to his artistic mill. Hence this account of some of Turner's paintings as autobiographical narratives is certainly a plausible one. It is not, however, claimed that Turner's life experiences always completely determined the topic and nature of his paintings. The composer Wagner shows that there is never a one-to-one correspondence between life and art, as he wrote his most comic opera when he was in despair and his most tragic opera when he was at his happiest (Magee, 2000). Turner both contributed to the romantic movement in the arts and he was inevitably moulded by the romantic spirit of his age, and the pervasive romantic tendency of the time to represent extreme emotional states, tragedies and wild conditions of nature.

Although it is incontrovertible that the experience of suffering is universal, the notion that there is a universal representation of suffering in visual art is contested. Symbolic representations of suffering are culturally specific; for example, although black is a symbol of death in the West, it is not a universal symbol, in that white stands for death in China and India (Gombrich *et al.*, 1972). Moreover, a postmodern approach to aesthetics denies that there can be a universal approach even to western art. This paper argued that loss, death and dying are important themes within Turner's art and that these themes reflect elements of Turner's life and times. These can all be seen as forms of grand narrative and as Lyotard (1984: xxiv) 'define[s] postmodernism as incredulity towards metanarratives', the theme of universals in art needs to be briefly addressed.

Much of aesthetics amounts to an attempt to support or deny the universal features of art (Wolheim, 1980). For Tolstoy (1960), the universal essence of art is its communicative capacity to bind people together; for Hume (1987), the best works of art, such as Greek tragedy, pass 'the test of time' as their appeal to a universal human nature remains constant across cultures and history; whilst for evolutionary psychologists, art, especially in the form of stories, functions as a universally adaptive practice for living (Pinker, 1997). Fuller (1983) draws on Timpanaro's (1985) Marxist materialism of the stability of the human body to argue for a universal approach to representation in art via a focus on both what is signified (for instance, a suffering body) and by the linkage of somatic experiences and visual metaphors of value. Dutton (2002), in his summary of some of these approaches, lists seven 'universal features of art': expertise or virtuosity, non-utilitarian pleasure, style, criticism, imitation, a special focus, and an imaginative experience for both artists and audiences. There is much in Dutton's (2002) claim that universal 'theories of aesthetic

value, which are dead set against absolute relativism, go hand-in-hand with hypotheses about the universal nature of human beings ... [consequently] Arts travel across boundaries as well as they do because they are rooted in our common humanity', or in our terms, the arts reflect our shared embodied vulnerability.

This paper has tried to make some links between the motifs of suffering and vulnerability in some pictures by Turner on the themes of loss, dying and death, and to begin to illustrate the dictum of Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992): to 'make the mundane exotic and the exotic mundane'. This paper also contested a commonly held view of Turner as essentially a landscape painter with an innovative use of colour, by showing that Turner's pictures can be interpreted as emotive paintings of our embodied vulnerability; as moving testimonies to the universal human experiences of suffering through ageing, loss and death. In particular, Turner's pair of evocative pictures on *Peace* and *War* remind us that the themes of personal growth and transformation through loss and suffering are the universal shared experiences of our embodied human lives.

In terms of James Elkins's (2001) recommendations about 'seeing art', Turner's pictures should be *witnessed*, and not just viewed. In other words, Turner's paintings are not simply something one should fleetingly look at. Rather, they are pictures that should be stared at and studied because these are paintings that the imaginative observer can actually *live and feel*. After all, romantic art is the art of the visceral and as such is deliberately designed to evoke a profoundly emotional and embodied response (Vaughan, 1994). In conclusion, it is claimed that Turner's paintings on the themes of loss and death are highly evocative examples of the ways in which art can deepen our understanding of the interconnections between biography, narrative, vulnerability, suffering and embodiment.

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#### NOTES

1 Turner's oil paintings have been catalogued by Butlin and Joll (1984) and a unique BJ number now refers to each painting.

2 For outstanding colour images of Turner's paintings see the following websites:

- Tate Britain (London): <http://www.tate.org.uk/britain> (where both *Peace* and *War* can be found, together with hundreds of other Turner paintings)
- The National Gallery (London): <http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk> (for some of Turner's most famous paintings)

- The Ashmolean Museum (Oxford): <http://www.ashmol.ox.ac.uk/>
  - Museum of Fine Arts (Boston): <http://www.mfa.org/>
- 3 All quotations of poetry are from Joll *et al.* (2001).  
4 All quotes from newspaper reports are from Butlin and Joll (1984).

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