

The Raft of the Medusa Romantic Characteristics

What characteristics in the painting *The Raft of the Medusa* qualify the work as Romantic? The following are possible student responses:

- **An interest in the common man and childhood.**
According to the information on the historical background handout, the individuals on the raft consisted of people from the lower classes of society. Géricault's decision to use these "common" men as subjects of the painting is typical of the Romantic creators. By depicting the common man suffering due to the actions of the upper class of urban society Géricault was able to elevate them to a level of martyrdom.
- **A stress on strong senses, emotions, and feelings.**
In the center of the painting is a pyramid created by dead figures on the bottom, dying figures in the middle, and a topmost figure who waves a cloth in hopes of being rescued. This rise from death to hope creates a "pyramid of hope" and helps establish the two different tones of the painting. The figure at the topmost of the pyramid frantically waving a rag at a tiny ship on the horizon is a good illustration of Wordsworth's "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings."
- **A stress on the awe of nature in art and language and the experience of sublimity through a connection with nature.**
There are many examples of imagery in this painting which emphasize the Romantic's awe of and connection to nature. One example is seen on the left side in the mid section where a large, dark wave threatens to swamp the raft. However just above this wave is a "ray of hope" breaking through a lowering cumulus cloud.
- **A celebration of the individual.**
Each of the characters tells a story about the predicament that has befallen the survivors on this raft. In the bottom left quarter of the painting a gray-haired man clasps the body of his dead son. In the center top of the painting another man gestures with his hand as he turns back to the despairing people on the raft behind him. These are two examples of how Géricault celebrates the individual.
- **An emphasis on the importance of imagination.**
Romantics legitimized the individual imagination as a critical authority. To help elevate the individuals on the raft to heroic status Géricault allowed his imagination to heavily influence his depiction of the survivors on the raft. A good example of this is the exaggerated muscular bodies of the survivors. In reality the survivors who had been adrift at sea for 13 days and had begun to resort to cannibalism would have looked quite different.