Dovedale by Moonlight, c. 1784-85
Joseph Wright of Derby (English, 1734-1797)
Oil on canvas | 24 5/8 x 30 5/8 in. (62.5 x 77.8 cm)

Why do you think the artist has painted this scene at night, and what unique qualities does he use to emphasize the setting?

VISUAL ANALYSIS
Dovedale by Moonlight depicts a long, narrow valley called Dovedale, 14 miles northeast of Wright’s hometown of Derby in the English countryside. It is a night scene, rare for traditional pastoral images of this era, and evidence of Wright’s vested interest in playing with the effects of light. The Dove River flows through the valley, a smaller tributary of a larger river called the Trent. The only source of illumination is the moon, and as a result the foliage and rocks on either side of the river seem to form one large, dark mass, with little differentiation of detail in the trees or their leaves. This simplification of forms idealizes the scene in an almost picturesque way. The shapes of the hills form diagonals as they come together in the center of the picture plane, giving the illusion of perspective, and draws the eye of the viewer towards the vanishing point. The moon, hanging almost directly above this point, is framed by the delicate
branches of a large tree on the right and
the soft billows of clouds on the left,
creating a well-balanced composition.
The greenish color palette gives the
scene an unnatural or ominous quality.

FUNCTION/FORM & STYLE
This work is part of the Picturesque
tradition of English landscape painting,
but Wright seems to be taking a fresh
look at the natural world—the tone of
the piece feels tranquil and calming, and
the nighttime setting gives it a hushed
intimacy that perhaps comes from the
largely neutral and dark color scheme,
and the stillness of the scene overall.

It is exemplary of Wright’s interest in
the often-dramatic effects of light, both
natural and artificial, and of atmosphere
created by moonlight. Often he would
paint daytime landscapes juxtaposed
with night landscapes in order to
actively compare and contrast the
two. It has been suggested in scholarly
writings that Wright was influenced by
the nocturnal landscapes of the German
artist Adam Elsheimer, who he may have
studied while in Italy. Though it has
been argued that Dovedale by Moonlight
is a highly Romantic piece, Wright very
much stays true to how this landscape
actually would have looked by night.
The moonlight would have been pale
and rather weak, not picking up much
detail, and therefore causing the same
extreme lights and darks in reality that
we see in the painting.

Wright created several different
versions of this painting, continuing to
use Dovedale as the backdrop for his
experiments with light and perspective.
Dovedale by Moonlight was originally
created with a companion piece, called
Dovedale in Sunlight, now in a private
collection in England.

CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL
IMPORTANCE
This work was painted in the late 1700s,
at the height of the Enlightenment, and
at the very beginning of the Industrial
Revolution. New ideas about science,
reason, and philosophy were at the
forefront of intellectual thought, and
crossed over into the art world of the
time. Wright, in particular, depicted
many Enlightenment-influenced
images—he had a strong interest in
scientific experiments, and is probably
best known for his images of them.
One of his most famous paintings is the
unusually titled An Experiment on a Bird
in the Air Pump, from 1768, nearly 20
years before Dovedale by Moonlight was
created. This painting, in the National
Gallery in London, dramatically depicts
a lecturer in front of an audience,
conducting an experiment that presents
the notion that “without air all living
creatures must die.”

Wright’s fascination with the different
effects of light could also be attributed
to Enlightenment connotations of the
imagery of light—depictions of light

VOCABULARY

Picturesque: An aesthetic ideal first conceived of in England in 1782 suggesting
that beauty is appreciated not rationally, but on an instinctive level.

Tributary: A stream that flows into a larger stream or other body of water.

Vanishing Point: A point of disappearance, cessation or extinction; in the study
of perspective in art, the point toward which receding parallel lines appear to
converge.
were symbolic of logic and reason, and darkness associated with ignorance. Enlightenment-era images often, quite literally, cast a glow onto those who were “enlightened,” and left those who were not in the shadows.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY
Joseph Wright, often called “Wright of Derby,” was born in Derby in 1734. He came from a middle-class family; his father was an attorney and the Town Clerk of Derby. In 1751 he first began to receive formal artistic training in London, under the artist Thomas Hudson, who also taught renowned portraitist Joshua Reynolds. Not long after, he gained a reputation in Derby as a talented portrait artist. Wright spent the majority of his life in Derby, but did travel to London and Italy, both of which deeply affected his work. While in Italy, from 1773-1775, he witnessed the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius, which appealed to him greatly—he painted the scene more than 30 times.

Wright remained deeply interested in other scientific subjects as well as the effects of light, reflecting the idea of light as the symbol of Enlightened thought—knowledge, logic, and reason.

Wright continued working until the year before his death in 1797.

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

LANGUAGE ARTS: Write like an Enlightenment-era scholar—find a topic or cause that is of interest, and write a “philosophy” that concerns and defines it. This can be as broad or specific as needed, but the underlying point should remain clear. (All ages)

SCIENCE: Study some of Wright’s pictures of scientific experiments, such as Lecture on the Orrery or An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump. What specific scientific concepts or problems does he illustrate, and why would Wright choose to paint the exact moment of the experiments that he did? Are these images true to how the experiment would actually have been conducted? (High School)

SOCIAL STUDIES: Locate Dovedale and Derby on a map of England. Place them in relation to other cities in England, such as London. Investigate what Dovedale and Derby are like now, and compare this to Wright’s depictions. How do they differ, and what might it have been like to live there during Wright’s time? (Elementary and Middle School)

What exactly was the Enlightenment? Research some writers, philosophers, and artists associated with it, and the works or ideas for which they are most well known. Research and discuss the legacy of the Enlightenment Age. (Middle and High School)

VISUAL ARTS: A very popular compositional technique used by Wright in this painting is the “rule of thirds,” whereby important features of the work, such as the horizon line, are aligned towards one third of painting, in this case the bottom third. Artists often state that this rule helps works look more aesthetically pleasing. Create a landscape using the rule of thirds, and illustrate the scene in both the daylight and moonlight, as Wright did with Dovedale. (All ages)