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**MA**

**The Aesthetic Turn**

**Assessed Essay 1**

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**The Victorian Seaside  
as a Source of Narrative**

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## **The Victorian Seaside as a Source of Narrative**

The seaside was a problematic location for Victorians and I will argue that painters used narrative to deal with these problems and their use of narrative reduced as the problems were resolved. The seaside was a new environment for social interaction so there were many new class and sexual problems but I will take the gendered gaze as indicative of all these problems. I will start by looking at two paintings with a strong narrative element, William Powell Frith's *Life at the Seaside* (later called *Ramsgate Sands*) (Fig. 1) and Abraham Solomon's *Brighton Front*, 1860 (Fig. 3) and I will then show how with William Dyce's *Pegwell Bay* (Fig. 4) the narrative became ambiguous and was replaced by allegory and a strong sense of atmosphere. This erosion of narrative continued in the 1870s, for example, with Berthe Morisot's *Eugène Manet on the Isle of Wight* (Fig. 5) and by the end of the century in paintings such as Phillip Wilson Steer's *Girls Running, Walberswick Pier*, c.1888-94 (Fig. 6) and Walter Richard Sickert's *The Bathers, Dieppe*, 1902 (Fig. 7) we find the narrative element has virtually disappeared.

I will consider the paintings using three axes of representation based on Roland Barthes—functions, indices and the 'blurred effect', and I will argue that during the second half of the nineteenth century, particularly in paintings regarded as modern, the proportion of each element changed from mostly functions to mostly indices and finally to mostly the 'blurred effect'.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The definition of function, index and 'blurred effect' is discussed in more detail later. The analysis of narrative is based on R. Barthes, 'An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative', *New Literary History*, Vol. 6, No. 2, On Narrative and Narratives (Winter, 1975), pp. 237-72 and of allegory on Bainard Cowen, 'Walter Benjamin's Theory of Allegory', *New German Critique*, No. 22, (Winter, 1981), pp. 109-122.

## What is Narrative Painting?

In literary criticism narrative concerns the part of the text that represents the sequence of events and a single painting is clearly restricted in its ability to show this.<sup>2</sup> Painters can reference a literary text and so derive their narrative meaning from the text or use a sequence of paintings but I shall be concerned with a different type of narrative construction in which the artist suggests a story by showing a single event with a clear before and after. A non-literary single narrative painting must therefore provide the viewer with clues, through detailed, clearly presented content, that enable the viewer to construct such a sequence of events, what Barthes calls a 'what-comes-after' being read in a narrative as *what-is-caused-by*.<sup>3</sup>

The seaside holiday was a social and cultural construct of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and from the 1850s it was a popular subject for Victorian painters.<sup>4</sup> The rapid growth in seaside holidays during the 1850s was assisted by the railway boom of the 1840s as this enabled city dwellers to access seaside locations and engage in new types of leisure activity. These new activities gave rise to new problems, for example, how the middle-class holiday-makers could distinguish themselves, how new forms of sexual display and contact could be controlled and how the environment could be structured to support a wide range of socially distinct leisure activities. A narrative construction enabled artists to tackle these social issues in an interesting and instructive way.

To create an interesting narrative painting the artist had to find a way to present a solution that was socially acceptable and which made the 'what-is-caused-by' clear without being vulgar. I will focus on only one such problem, the gaze, and show that different rules applied to the male and the female gaze and such rules were heavily asymmetrical and based on social conventions. I will first consider how the gaze was handled in a narrative painting, Frith's *Ramsgate Sands* (Fig. 1).

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<sup>2</sup> In Barthes terminology a 'sequence' is a logical string of cardinal functions, see Barthes (1975), p. 253. The definition of cardinal functions is given later.

<sup>3</sup> Barthes (1975), p. 248.

<sup>4</sup> The history of the seaside is discussed in A. Corbin, *The Lure of the Sea : the Discovery of the Seaside in the Western World 1750-1840* (London: Penguin, 1995).

## ***Ramsgate Sands and Brighton Front***

Frith's *Ramsgate Sands* was 'a huge success with the Victorian public.'<sup>5</sup> It was the first painting of the seaside that showed what purported to be a detailed representation of modern life. Frith places us in the unusual position of standing in the sea looking back at the beach upon which 'all human life is there'.<sup>6</sup> Placing us in the sea is a way of presenting a frieze of holiday-makers face on, so that their various gazes can be used to deal with the problem of bathing, one of the central sexual and social issues of a seaside holiday, without needing to show any bathers. It also solved the problem, present in his later works *The Railway Station* and *Derby Day*, of how to explain the lack of people in the near foreground. In these later paintings Frith cleverly lines up and masses the crowds in the middle distance and paints them in such detail we believe they are near us. However, in *Ramsgate Sands* the sea acts as a natural barrier and explanation for this omission.

The only bather in the painting is a small girl paddling, an innocent surrogate for the bathing that is taking place to the right of the painting. Men and women were meant to bathe separately with the bathing machines hiding the bathers until they were in the sea. However, men frequently bathed naked and it was reported that women's costumes could ride up to their necks either because they lay down in the waves or jumped up and down with clinging costumes.<sup>7</sup> Also working class visitors were 'oblivious of prohibitions against mixed bathing and unable to afford a swimming costume'.<sup>8</sup> So bathing was subject to much popular discussion as it raised issues of decorum and respectability within the context of public display and class distinctions.

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<sup>5</sup> Although less so with the critics, see E. Ehrman, 'Frith and Fashion' in M. Bills and V. Knight (eds.), *William Powell Frith: Painting the Victorian Age* (London: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 111.

<sup>6</sup> M. Aziz (ed.), *The Tales of Henry James*, Vol. 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 226-27.

<sup>7</sup> References to the historic associations of *Ramsgate Sands* are from C. Arscott, 'Ramsgate Sands, Modern Life, and the Shoring-Up of Narrative', in B. Allen (ed.), *Towards a Modern Art World, Studies in British Art 1* (New Haven, 1995), pp. 157-68 or, when necessary, as here, to the more comprehensive but unpublished account in C. Arscott, *Modern Life Subjects in British Painting, 1840-1860* (unpublished PhD, Leeds University, 1988), pp. 40, 55.

<sup>8</sup> J. Smith, *Charles Darwin and Victorian Visual Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 62.

At Ramsgate the beach was small and so at high tide the men's and women's bathing areas were 'only the width of two bathing machines apart.'<sup>9</sup> Within this small area men and women bathed and in England at this time it was regarded as a man's right to bathe naked and it was the responsibility of women to avoid looking.<sup>10</sup> Frith deals with this by showing the women, with a few exceptions, looking away from the bathing area and intently gazing at various approved female activities. The middle-class men, however, are mostly looking in the direction of the bathing area. From the evidence of this painting women were either not interested or were forbidden by convention from looking and men were both interested in looking and were allowed to do so.

Further evidence of why men should be interested is provided by a Punch cartoon of 31 July 1858 (Fig. 2).<sup>11</sup> This suggests that men found loose hair displayed in public sexually stimulating and this is reinforced by Elizabeth Gitter's article on 'The Power of Women's Hair in the Victorian Imagination.'<sup>12</sup> We can see the man on the left of the painting is enhancing his visual power with a telescope and we also know from a letter to *The Times* in 1850 that such behaviour was regarded as 'brutal'.<sup>13</sup> Frith trod a fine line between showing these questionable activities and presenting a typical scene. He cleverly defuses the 'brutal' behaviour of the man with the telescope by humorously moderating it by placing a young boy with a telescope in front of him.

We also see how the middle class used the gaze to maintain a distinction and a distance between themselves and the working class. Ramsgate had a particular status related to its associations with royalty and following the visit of George IV in 1821 it was regarded as 'visited by far more select company than Margate; the amusements are of a more quiet kind, and there is altogether a higher style among both the

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<sup>9</sup> Arscott (1988), p. 48 and less specifically in Arscott (1995), p. 162. If the position of the water's edge with respect to the cliff is compared to the same scene today it is clear that Frith has chosen to show high tide and the available bathing area is very small.

<sup>10</sup> Arscott (1988), pp. 43-4.

<sup>11</sup> Women loosened their hair after bathing to dry it and the cartoon refers to the attractiveness of loose hair by suggesting that it makes even a well built woman attractive but it is interesting that the men in the background do not appear to be looking at any of the women.

<sup>12</sup> E. Gitter, 'The Power of Women's Hair in the Victorian Imagination', *Transactions and Proceedings of the Modern Language Association of America*, Vol. 99, No. 5, (October, 1984), pp. 936-54.

<sup>13</sup> Arscott (1988), p. 54, quoting a letter in *The Times*, 4 September 1850. The letter 'Sea Bathing at Brighton' refers to a man who, not satisfied with 'espionage from the beach, actually hired a boat in which he caused himself to be rowed to and fro close to the machines, for the purpose of more effectively gratifying his brutal curiosity.'

residents and the occasional visitor.<sup>14</sup> Frith signals class using shared codes, for example, we infer the central woman in white looking at the mice is well bred from her slim face, refined features, high forehead, small mouth and demure expression and we see on the right, in the background, a ruddy-faced man whose round face, stout appearance and ill-fitting clothes signal that he is less refined. If we examine the working-class entertainers and hawkers in the painting we see that Frith distinguishes them through dress, appearance and physiognomy. He presents a number of engagements between the classes, for example, the matronly woman on the left ignores the man selling the manikin, the 'paterfamilias' in the centre reads his paper as the entertainer shows white mice to his daughters and the ruddy-faced man ignores the young boy and man selling donkey rides.

However, not all the entertainers are ignored; the minstrels by the stage on the left and the hare leaping forward in the centre middle distance are attended by a middle-class audience who gather to look. The difference is that in the first case the working-class person is attempting to invade a middle-class space and in the second the middle classes go to an established entertainment area. The difference is therefore concerned with the existence of a space around a middle-class family that is assumed to be owned and controlled by them and the working-class people who invade this space are obliterated by a refusal to look. A more subtle example is the entertainer with the mice who does invade a middle-class space but has three women in the group looking. This could suggest they would rather look at an invader's entertainment than risk looking towards the forbidden bathing area. Their father avoids engaging in 'not looking' by transferring his gaze to a newspaper, perhaps to allow his female companions to maintain their innocence.

We should not underestimate Frith's achievement in constructing a readable representation of the crowd. The verisimilitude of his painting is indicated by the critics' accusation that it was copied from photographs but his figures and composition are laid out like no normal beach scene and according to his biography he did attempt to use

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<sup>14</sup> W. Pinnock, *The Guide to Knowledge*, Vol IV (London: Pinnock, 1836), p. 235 and J. Murray, *A Handbook for Travellers in Kent and Sussex* (London: John Murray, 1858), p. 197.

photography but 'the result was useless'.<sup>15</sup> Frith's 'richly anecdotal' work was based on studies he did while on holiday in Ramsgate in 1851.<sup>16</sup> The critics who accused him of photographic accuracy were implying that Frith's painting was an accurate description of a typical day on a Victorian beach. However, as Caroline Arscott points out 'all representations are constructed, and received, on the basis of shared codes' and she adds that Frith's painting is not 'simply a comforting wish-fulfilment fantasy' but a 'therapeutic mastering of fears'.<sup>17</sup> We have examined some of these fears and seen how Frith dealt with them by constructing representations using codes the Victorians shared and which we can sometimes only uncover through careful historical research.

Following the success of Frith's painting the number of illustrations of seaside life increased.<sup>18</sup> I will take as one further example of this narrative style, a work by Abraham Solomon called *Brighton Front*, 1860 (Fig. 3). This painting shows a crowded promenade at Brighton and although it uses Frith's convention of positioning the crowd in the middle distance it is less successful as it gives the impression of a row of people.

The eye is first drawn to two women on the right who appear to be in the final stages of mourning as they wear brown dresses and hats with white feathers. To the left are many examples of the gendered gaze such as the asymmetrical gendered gaze of the man on the bench staring at the woman the other side of the same bench. Social conventions dictate that she may not look directly back but she signals her level of interest by the precise nature of her gaze, in this case, half turned with downcast eyes. Further left the gender situation is reversed, a young woman looks intently at a man in a bath-chair who sits with downcast eyes. This indicates that looking was not just gender based but also role based. We can speculate that the woman is the man's daughter and is showing concern by stopping to examine him and the artist is signalling the man's ill health using a downcast gaze. Further left again, a 'cad', identified by his Dunreary whiskers, too smart clothes and slouching stance, stares at a woman in conversation with a respectable man. His companion stares across at what could be a

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<sup>15</sup> Arscott (1988), p. 73 and W. Frith, *My Autobiography and Reminiscences*, Vol 1 (London, Richard Bentley, 1887), p. 246. I am not suggesting photography is a neutral medium as it is also subject to selection, cropping and manipulation.

<sup>16</sup> L. Nochlin, *Realism* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 147.

<sup>17</sup> Arscott (1988), p. 38.

<sup>18</sup> A. Werner, 'The *London Society* magazine and the Influence of William Powell Frith on Modern Life Illustration of the Early 1860s' in M. Bills and V. Knight (eds.), *William Powell Frith: painting the Victorian age* (London: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 103.

prostitute in a red dress who stares back at him. This final example shows that not all gendered gazes were asymmetrical as it shows a woman and man looking directly at each other, but the possible commercial transaction is asymmetrical as she is the seller and he the buyer.

We have seen how a painting signals its narrative intent by presenting a scene clearly with a cast of character types and one or more sub-scenes each of which presents a frozen moment in time with a clear history and consequential future. To interpret the narrative the viewer must use the clues provided and there is no single, unambiguous interpretation but only possibilities circumscribed by known social conventions. Among the clues provided are dress, appearance and physiognomy and these help us to distinguish the character types involved.

### **From Narrative to Allegory**

In the same year as Solomon's *Brighton Front* William Dyce produced *Pegwell Bay, Kent - a Recollection of October 5th 1858*, c.1858-60 (Fig. 4). The painting shows a family group consisting of Dyce's wife, two sisters-in-law and his son collecting shells while on the far right a man holding a sketchbook has his back to the group and is looking at Donati's comet.<sup>19</sup> The man could be Dyce and so the painting could therefore be seen simply as a record of a family outing and this interpretation is supported by the fact that it was bought by his wife's father.<sup>20</sup> However, the figures are presented in an unusual way for a family portrait as the man is looking away from the group and Dyce's wife and son are staring off to one side at something we cannot see. The title with its precise date suggests an alternative interpretation.

The painting is extremely detailed and so we can examine it minutely for narrative clues but no ready narrative springs to mind. The detail in the painting seems to fulfil the role Barthes describes as indices rather than functions.<sup>21</sup> As Barthes puts it 'functions imply metonymic relata, indices metaphoric relata; the former are functional

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<sup>19</sup> Donati's comet is faintly visible in the painting and was widely reported at the time, see M. Pointon, "The Representation of Time in Painting: A Study of William Dyce's *Pegwell Bay: A Recollection of October 5th, 1858*," *Art History* 1, No. 1, (March 1978), pp. 97-103. On October 5<sup>th</sup> 1858 Donati's comet was at its brightest in the evening sky.

<sup>20</sup> A. Staley, 'William Dyce and Outdoor Naturalism', *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 105, No. 728, Victorian Art: Painting, Furniture, Sculpture. (Nov., 1963), p. 475.

<sup>21</sup> Barthes (1975), pp. 246-50.



in terms of action, the latter in terms of being.<sup>22</sup> In other words the painting is full of indicators of atmosphere rather than clues that determine the action sequence of a narrative. The atmosphere of a painting is like the description of a character in a novel; it adds to our understanding but does not move the action forward. One index, and therefore indicator of atmosphere, is the unusual lighting—the foreground figures and the cliffs are presented *contre-jour* yet they are well lit on the side away from the setting sun and this 'metaphoric relata' denotes a feeling of unease, mystery or otherworldliness.

Other interpretations are possible; for example, Marcia Pointon has suggested it is a painting about time with Donati's comet a metaphor for astronomical time, the chalk cliffs geological time and his family human time.<sup>23</sup> The theme of time is also reinforced by the title and its reference to memory. The notion of 'being about time' extends the idea of atmosphere towards allegory. An allegory is an extended metaphor in which 'properties and circumstances attributed to the apparent subject really refer to the subject they are meant to suggest.'<sup>24</sup> In other words the family group, the cliffs and the comet could be part of an extended discourse on time and we know this was topical as it was the central conflict between religion and science.<sup>25</sup> Tennyson referred to astronomy and geology as the 'Terrible Muses' because of the way they had undermined religious belief which had been further undermined by recent scientific findings.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Barthes (1975), p. 246-50. Barthes actually distinguishes between two types of function and two types of index. 'Cardinal functions' (or 'nuclei') affect the continuation of the story and 'catalyses' are functions that 'fill in' the narrative space. Indices are either parametrical relations, that is, elements that remain constant, such as a character trait, a feeling or an atmosphere, or they are 'informants', which provide local data, such as a character's precise age or a product brand that serve to root fiction in the real world.

<sup>23</sup> Pointon (1978), pp. 97-103.

<sup>24</sup> Oxford English Dictionary Online (<http://dictionary.oed.com> accessed 1 November 2007).

<sup>25</sup> See J. Hopkins, *Terrible and traditional muses: science, religion and landscape art from John Martin to William Dyce* (unpublished PhD, London, Birkbeck College, 1990), p. 297 for a discussion of this issue. C. Lyell in *Principles of Geology or the Modern Changes of the Earth and its Inhabitants Considered as Illustrative of Geology* (London: John Murray, 1850 Eighth Edition) talks in terms of 'millions of ages before our time' but Bishop Usher computed the birth of Christ as 4004 years after creation, see Rev. J. Baylee, *Genesis and Geology; the Holy Word of God Defended from its Assailants* (London: Arthur Hall, 1857), p. 28.

<sup>26</sup> Before Dyce had finished this painting C. Darwin had published *The Origin of Species*, see P. Fuller, 'The Geography of Mother Nature', Chapter 1 in D. Cosgrove and S. Daniels (eds.), *The Iconography of Landscape: Essays on the Symbolic Representation, Design and Use of Past Environments* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 22-4

Ruskin wrote in 1851,

*'If only the Geologists would leave me alone I could do very well. But those dreadful hammers!—I hear the chink of them at the end of every cadence of the Bible verses.'*<sup>27</sup>

Dyce was a High Church Tractarian and 'was keenly interested in natural science and a believer in the essential unity of religion, science and art'.<sup>28</sup> Pointon suggests that as a comet is a symbol of ill omen it is possible Dyce was referring to the conflict between scientific observation and conventional religious belief. However, Christiana Paine points out that 'it seems more likely that it is an affirmation of the artist's faith...Dyce was a religious man, and there is no evidence that he ever lost his faith.'<sup>29</sup> This seems unlikely as although he may not have lost his faith the painting still appears to be raising questions rather than being a simple affirmation of faith.

Part of the puzzle of the painting is caused by the gazes already mentioned and it is interesting that these are gendered gazes. The man with the sketchbook is looking at the comet with his back to the family group. Does this imply an interest in science and theological problems on the part of men but not women? Or is it a statement of the artist's interest in questions of time and space while the women and children gather trinkets or, alternatively, are the women and children engaged in a constructive activity while the man wastes his time on theological speculation?

A fundamental change has taken place from the Frith and Solomon paintings—the seaside has become a site for representing problems rather than a source of problems itself. The artist is therefore freed from the need to use narrative to explore the problems of the seaside and can use it as a symbolic setting.

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<sup>27</sup> Ruskin's letter to Henry Ackland 24 May 1851 in E. Cook and A. Wedderburn (eds.), *The Works of John Ruskin* (London: George Allen, 1908), Vol. 35, pp. 115.

<sup>28</sup> Smith (2006), p. 77.

<sup>29</sup> C. Payne, 'Seaside Visitors: Idlers, Thinkers and Patriots in Mid-nineteenth-century Britain' in S. Anderson and B. Tabb (eds.), *Water, Leisure and Culture: European Historical Perspectives* (Oxford: Berg, 2002), p. 100.

## From Allegory to Paint

As the social problems of the seaside were resolved it started to be used as a location to explore the decorative and formal properties of the medium. This change was seen by Clement Greenberg as an attribute of modernism and a 'guarantee of painting's independence as an art.'<sup>30</sup> However, in terms of a narrative reading we can look at these aspects as just 'noise' and although Barthes points out that 'Art does not acknowledge the existence of noise' he is referring to literature and he acknowledges in a footnote that painting does enable what he called the 'blurred effect' to be represented.<sup>31</sup> I would argue that this blurred effect is what Greenberg sees as the decorative and formal properties of the medium and it is therefore a tool for analysing painting in a way that avoids the complex associations of the terms 'modernism' and 'decorative'.<sup>32</sup>

The French Impressionists often showed the seaside as a non-problematic space with the viewer positioned as a participant. However, Berthe Morisot's *Eugène Manet on the Isle of Wight*, 1875 (Fig. 5) raises questions concerning the gendered gaze at the seaside. Like Dyce's painting it is hard to categorize; it could be seen as a portrait of the man she had recently married and this simple explanation, that it is a record of an enjoyable holiday, is supported by her description of the Isle of Wight as 'the prettiest place for painting'.<sup>33</sup> However, it is not a typical portrait; Eugène is shown twisted in his chair and looking away from us. The seaside view is partly cut off from Eugène and from the viewer as the esplanade and sea can only be seen through a narrow strip between the barriers of the window frame and the garden fence and the seaside and the interior are disintegrating into a painterly flurry of colours and shapes with the holiday-makers outside indistinct and fading from view. The woman walking past outside has

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<sup>30</sup> C. Greenberg, 'Modernist painting', in C. Harrison (ed.), *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), p. 776.

<sup>31</sup> Barthes uses the term 'noise' in the informational sense, see Barthes (1975), p. 245. In information theory noise is a complex concept referring to a typically unwanted, random signal but Barthes was probably referring to a lack of information, in other words noise refers to those parts of the painting that do not add to the meaning. The 'blurred effect' is, according to Barthes, what distinguishes (literary) art from 'life' which only offers 'blurred' communication.

<sup>32</sup> The decorative is sometimes associated with the deprecating phrase 'merely decorative' and with positive but complex ideas of abstract beauty; see E. Prettejohn, *Beauty and Art: 1750-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>33</sup> M. Shennan, *Berthe Morisot: The First Lady of Impressionism* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2000, first published 1996), p. 163 quoting D. Rouart (ed.), *The Correspondence of Berthe Morisot with her family friends, Manet, Puvis de Chavannes, Degas, Monet, Renoir and Mallarmé* (London: Lund, Humphries, 1959), p. 89.

been 'guillotined' by the window frame and although the colours are high tone and bright the overall feeling is one of alienation.

Interestingly, in this picture Morisot has inverted the normal role of the balcony as described by Griselda Pollock.<sup>34</sup> She describes how a balcony acts not only as a barrier between private and public spaces but 'between the spaces of masculinity and of femininity'. Pollock is referring to the normal association between the female private domestic space and masculine public space but in the painting the balcony has been replaced by the window and the roles have been reversed. The man sits in the domestic space and the woman is outside in the public space. There could, of course, be a more prosaic reason such as the 'atrocious weather which put paid to her plans to paint outside.'<sup>35</sup> Although it adds little to ascribe personal motives we might speculate that Morisot's longing for her former freedom is represented by the woman outside, free, with her husband locked away in the domestic setting instead of her. The window acts as a frame that contains the seaside view which becomes a picture within a picture and therefore tamed. We no longer have the 'wild west' of *Ramsgate Sands* but a controlled and domesticated scene, although another interpretation is that the problematic public scene at Ramsgate has been replaced by an equally problematic private one.

By the 1880s English artists, such as Philip Wilson Steer, influenced by Whistler and the French Impressionists were painting seaside scenes that emphasised, as Ysanne Holt writes, purely 'pictorial qualities of design, colour and organisation'.<sup>36</sup> The strong narrative content typical of Frith had been replaced by a world of paint and ambiguous figures, such as those in Steer's *Girls Running, Walberswick Pier*, 1888-94 (Fig. 6). The people in the picture are the middle class at leisure in the late afternoon and it can therefore be seen as holiday-makers from the city, as in Frith's *Ramsgate Sands* or Dyce's *Pegwell Bay*, but the painting resists any simple narrative interpretation. Steer used a restricted palette of red, blue and yellow with, except for the sky, blocks of colour painted using a repeated short brushstroke. The brushstroke direction changes, for example, on the pier it is horizontal but on the girls' dresses vertical. This repetition

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<sup>34</sup> G. Pollock, *Vision & Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 62.

<sup>35</sup> Shennan (2000), p. 163

<sup>36</sup> Y. Holt, 'Nature and Nostalgia: Philip Wilson Steer and Edwardian Landscape', *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 19, No. 2. (1996), p. 32.

of similar brushstrokes is often found in English impressionistic paintings of the period but the French Impressionists tended to use a variety of brushstrokes. The brushstrokes, foreshortened perspective and bright colours draw our attention to the paint and the flatness of the surface.

The picture is dreamlike with the girls appearing to float over the pier like fairies. There is deliberate ambiguity introduced that disrupts any attempt to create a narrative, for example, although the girls are not holding hands their shadow shows they are. The elements of the painting are indices, metaphorical relata, that refer perhaps to innocence and nostalgia, and this creates a dreamy, wistful feel. Like a picture of a memory with the long shadows and the sea suggesting time passing and eternity. Symbolically, the girls might be trying to escape their inevitable loss of innocence by running away from womanhood as represented by the two women at the end of their shadows. It could therefore be seen as an allegory of the loss of childhood innocence.

The three shadows at the bottom add a note of mystery. The central shadow appears to be of someone wearing a hat with a feather and the shadow on the left is shorter. Are they a family of husband, wife and child, do they relate to the running girls or is this a reference to our multi-gendered gaze?

## **Conclusion**

I have examined the changing role of narrative in seaside paintings of the second half of the nineteenth century and how the strong narrative content of, for example, Frith's painting was gradually replaced by allegory and a stronger emphasis on paint that conveys no information, the 'blurred effect'.

Why this change took place may be impossible to answer in full but one interesting suggestion for the increase in allegory was that 'Allegory is precisely the

dominant mode of expression of a world in which things have been for whatever reason utterly sundered from meanings, from spirits, from genuine human existence.<sup>37</sup>

Perhaps the question can be better approached by considering one final painting, Walter Richard Sickert *The Bathers, Dieppe, 1902* (Fig. 7). The contrast with Frith is telling; Frith's holiday-makers proudly face us as individuals in control of their new world of the seaside, or at least bravely coming to terms with its new challenges. We can read Frith's painting as a series of stories but Sickert's bathers invite no such narrative interpretation. Instead they turn away from us, lost, isolated souls walking into a sea that entirely covers the canvas and hides any hope of reaching a final destination. Apart from such limited allegorical interpretations there is no what-comes-*after* and the broad expanse of sea encourages us to appreciate its formal properties of colour, composition and design.

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<sup>37</sup> Fredric Jameson quoted by Linda Nochlin in her chapter 'Courbet's Real Allegory: Rereading "The Painter's Studio"', in S. Faunce and L. Nochlin (eds.), *Courbet Reconsidered* (exh. cat., Brooklyn Museum, 1989), pp. 17-41.

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## Illustrations

Fig. 1, William Powell Frith, *Life at the Seaside* (later called *Ramsgate Sands*), 1852-4,  
oil on canvas, 76.3 x 52.4 cm. Collection of HM the Queen

Fig. 2, John Leech, Miss Stout, 'The worst of letting one's back hair down is, that it  
makes the young men stare so!'  
*Punch*, No. 35, July-December 1858, 31 July 1858

Fig. 3, Abraham Solomon, *Brighton Front*, c. 1860,  
oil on canvas, 48.2 x 101.6cm, Tunbridge Wells Museum & Art Gallery

Fig. 4, William Dyce, *Pegwell Bay, Kent - a Recollection of October 5th 1858*, c.1858-  
60, oil on canvas, 63.5 x 88.9cm, Tate Britain

Fig. 5, Berthe Morisot, *Eugène Manet on the Isle of Wight*, 1875  
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Fig. 6, Philip Wilson Steer, *Girls Running, Walberswick Pier 1888-94*,  
oil on canvas, 62.9 x 92.7cm, Tate Britain

Fig. 7, Walter Richard Sickert, *The Bathers, Dieppe*, 1902,  
oil on canvas, 131.5 x 104.4cm, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool



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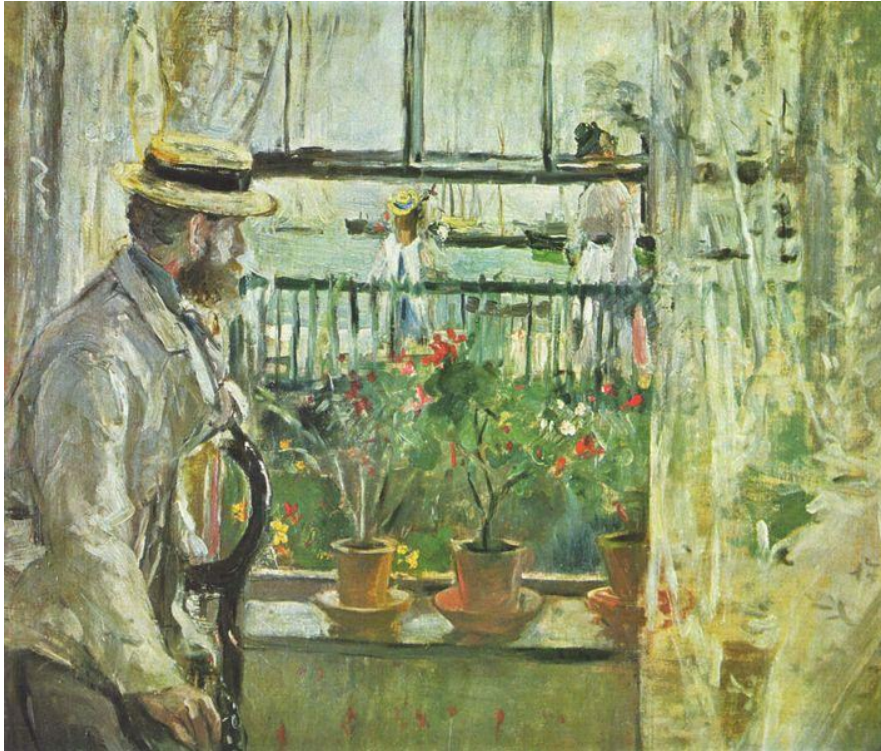


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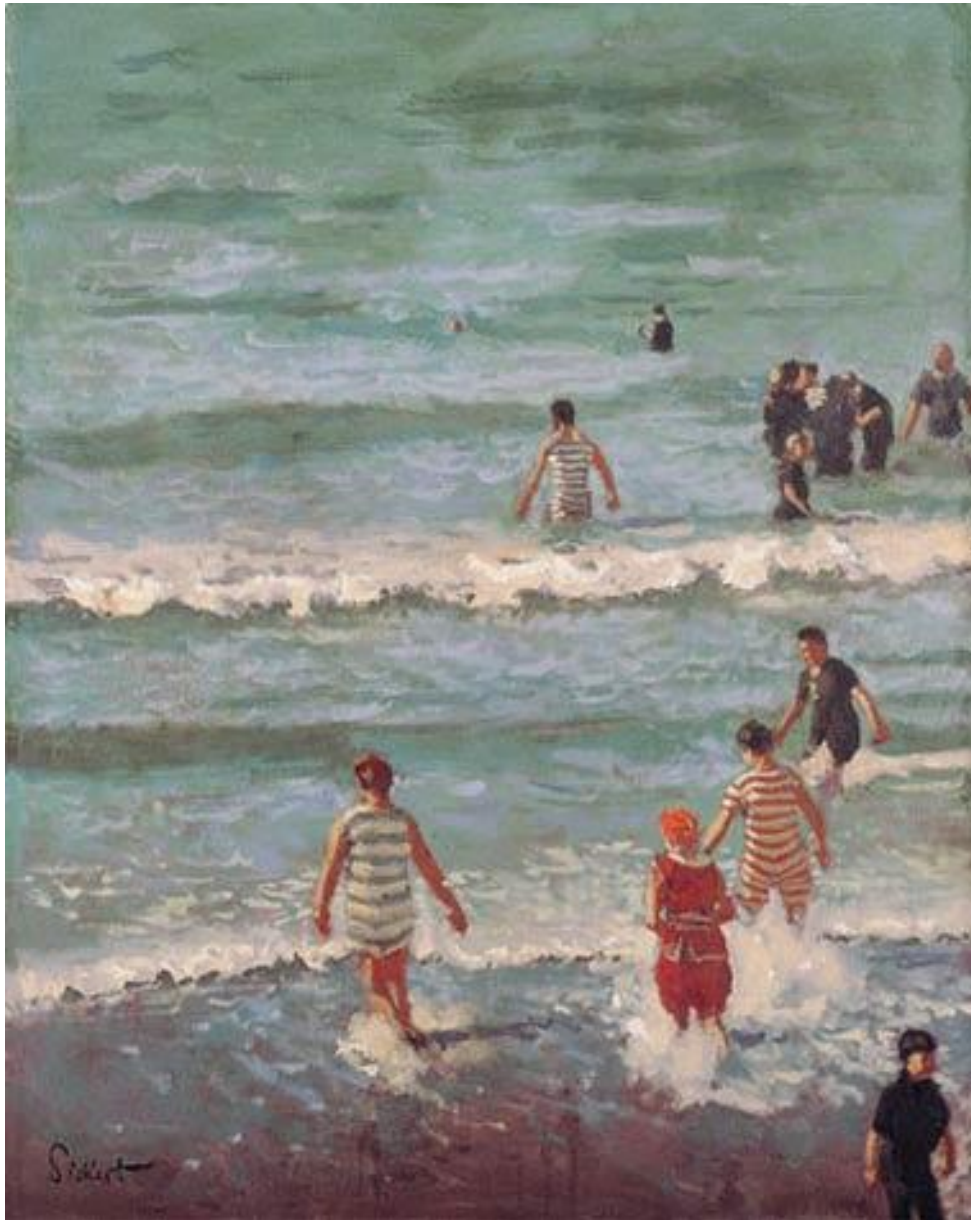


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