

The Last Judgment

Michelangelo Buonarroti, c. 1535-1541 CE

Subject Matter

↑ *Make sure your section headings are easy to identify.*

In *The Last Judgment*, we see Michelangelo's vision of the last judgment from the book of Revelations – the final book in the Christian bible. This rather dramatic event is elegantly rendered with swirling masses of people rising up from the ground and circling Jesus at the center who is passing his judgment. His hand is raised as if he's hurling his judgment down upon each soul with the full weight of its impact on their eternal fate. Though none of the traditional iconography is present, we can identify Jesus based on his central position in the piece, the glowing halo shown behind him exclusively, and the image of Mary (his mother) clutching to his side as an expression of compassion for those being judged.

↑ *The more elegant you can be with your descriptions, the better. You don't need to list EVERY detail of the work, but make sure you find the most important ones and make it clear WHY you think they are important.*

Going deeper, we can see that no detail has been spared in this work. For example, bodies of the dead can be seen littering the ground at the bottom of the piece. Some are lucky enough to have their souls guided up to heaven by angels, while others are devoured by skeletal demonic creatures. We can even see an image of hell spilling out into the world as a piece of the earth has fallen away to expose images of fire and torment at the lower left hand corner. In the lower right, Dante's vision of the *Inferno* makes an appearance through Charon, the boatman of the damned, ferrying passengers to their doom – a popular piece of Renaissance imagery in the Catholic Church. He even raises his oar and prepares to swing it at the unlucky souls as they protest their fate and try to flee..

Context

The High Renaissance styling of this piece is apparent in the heavy use of color, the focus on the human body within a religious context, and high degree of virtuosity in Michelangelo's painting technique. The artwork also falls into the hazy category of *Mannerism* that bridges the gap between the traditional end of the Renaissance in 1520 to the beginning of the Baroque in 1600. More than a span of time, Mannerism was the culmination of all that the Renaissance artists had been striving toward and included extreme displays of skill, new inventions in visual symbolism, and a concerted effort from the artist to make his work identifiable as uniquely his. Michelangelo's unique way of showing the human body as overtly muscular and idealized reflects the impact of Renaissance philosophies. These Humanist beliefs promoted the idea that human beings are more than just flawed creatures likely to sin. Instead, the human body is a representation of, and a tool for, the fullest realization of our potential for good.

↑ *This is when you can go into the Period and Movement of the work. Only include details that can help the reader understand the artwork.*

Oddly enough, this is the first fresco that Michelangelo had ever painted. He was meant to only make sculptures for St. Peter's, but the Sistine Chapel job was forced upon him by the Pope. Not only does this prove Michelangelo as a well-rounded and highly versatile artist, it helps explain his unique way of showing the human body as previously discussed. Since he lacked the habits of a painter, he was more willing to experiment with new styling outside of the status-quo.

↑ *Small anecdotes about the piece can often be linked back to the work. Feel free to do so, but only if it really helps your paper.*

Content

This work has a variety of meanings depending on what angle you approach it from. In a religious sense, it impresses upon the viewer the immensity of the Last Judgment as a prophecy they will be affected by. The sheer immensity of the work is a constant reminder of the gravity of the events taking place. From a Catholic perspective, this would remind the viewer to keep their behavior in check and avoid sin at all costs. Failure to do so might result in their soul being pushed along by Charon to a less than desirable fate. The fact that it's located in the Sistine Chapel would mean that it was the cardinals and other church leaders being reminded of this, making it even more grave. That being said, the piece contains significant beauty and the inclusion of idealized human forms is important. This idealization shows that Michelangelo had a very Renaissance view of humanity as flawed but capable of immense good. As terrifying as the lower portions of the piece are – those closest to the viewer literally, and therefore symbolically – raising one's awareness higher, beyond the immediate threat of damnation reveals a beautifully chaotic promise of eternal life.

↑ *This is when you combine the Subject Matter and Contextual info. Remember, this can be thought of as the "why?" of the artwork. Why was it made? As you may also notice, Contextual information can be brought up again in this section to reinforce and clarify the Content of the work.*

Media & Technique

Michelangelo worked in fresco to make this piece, along with the rest of his Sistine Chapel paintings. Frescos are made by mixing pigment with water and applying the color to freshly mixed plaster. One of the oldest media in the Mediterranean, frescos are very durable and long-lasting since the painting becomes part of the wall it is created on. Damage and deterioration can still occur, but the structural nature of a fresco usually leads to better preservation. The drawbacks of the medium include a limited range of colors and a more labor intensive application process. Each time plaster is added to the wall, the artist has about 7 hours to work on that section before it dries too much. Once dried, edits are not possible without being very obvious.

↑ *Start by just talking about the medium itself.*

The choice of fresco may have been largely motivated by tradition and functionality, but the medium also applies to the content of the piece. By making *The Last Judgment* as a fresco, it adds a level of permanence to the piece. If it was a canvas or panel painting, then it may be removed or replaced by other "on trend" artworks. Given the intense content message of the piece and the longevity of the Catholic Church, this kind of longevity in the artwork seems ideal.

↑ *This is the really important part. Try and see if there is a way to connect the properties of the medium to the meaning of the piece.*

Formal Analysis

↑ You may find it easiest to approach this section like a math equation.

(First, introduce the term you are using and briefly tell me **HOW** it applies...) The **composition** of the piece is deeply chaotic and busy. (Next, give me a detailed description of what elements of the work **SUPPORT** your previous statement...) The figures present in the piece are clustered together, occupying nearly all available space, and reflect the chaotic nature of the event taking place. **Directional lines** can be seen in many locations, most prominently on the right and left sides of the piece directing the viewer toward the center of the piece. The figures grouped together on either side both frame and direct one's attention toward the key figure of the piece: Jesus as judge.

↑ And repeat for each term. Do this for all 5 terms, and you'll have about 10 sentences at the end. Putting your terms in **bold letters** can help you keep track of them as you write and makes it easier for me to grade your assignment quickly and accurately.

The **rhythm** of the work is more like the climax of an opera than a casual symphony. The amount of notable figures and identifiable subjects in the piece encourages the viewer's eye to wander from point to point in search of new pieces of visual information. [I'm not going to keep going with these here. You get the idea...]

Personal Interpretation

[This section should be the easiest. I don't want to unwittingly give you a model to follow for it, so I'm not including one here. Just try and connect it to your life and tell me something interesting about your experience with this work of art. You can even talk about it in the context of writing this paper if you had a meaningful experience as a result.]

Word Count: 1,485

(Without the final section...)

Note: This sample paper contains **ZERO in-text citations**.

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