

Crossing the Brook exh1815

JMW Turner (1775–1851)

Why do you think the figures are so small in comparison with the rest of the painting?

Do you think this is a realistic representation of life in the English countryside? Do you think it is a scene from his own time or the past? Why?

Why do you think Turner decided to paint the scene in this way?

What time of year is it? How can you tell?

Compare this painting with one of Turner's later works, for example *Norham Castle, Sunrise*.

What is the main difference?



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The style of landscape painting set by Nicolas Poussin and Claude Lorrain in the seventeenth century was followed right up to the time of Turner and Constable. Claude's recipe was as follows: he framed the view with a solid mass around the edge of the left or right hand side of the painting, usually a group of trees or buildings to stop the spectator's gaze from straying to the sides. From there the eye is gradually led through to the distant horizon. Eventually, Turner and Constable, while continuing to admire Claude, invented other, more natural ways of painting.

Claude's vision of Italy with its antique architecture was often inspired by classical mythology. This painting, although obviously inspired by Claude's composition, is based on a scene in England, namely the Tamar Valley in Devon.

Claude painted an idyll, utopia rather than reality, and people yearn for utopia when real life is too difficult. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, there was great social and political upheaval and England was at war with France. As well as turbulence on the continent, the Industrial Revolution in Britain was radically transforming the English countryside.

The gradation of colour and light to the distant horizon in this painting shows Turner developing Claude's 'aerial perspective'. The title *Crossing the Brook* refers to the figures at the bottom, but they are placed off-centre, and the eye is drawn past them and into the landscape. Turner's aim was to create the atmosphere of the English summer, more than to represent the Tamar valley specifically, or even the children crossing the brook. His aim is confirmed by the testimony of a friend who visited his studio and commented on a flake of paint which had come off the painting, to which Turner replied "What does it matter, the only use of the thing is to recall the impression".