The beauty of a painting is that it is able to depict a time, person, place, or even an idea to an observer without the use of words. A painting is a visual display of information stored away inside the mind of another put down onto a canvas for all to view, study, and learn from. A personal, visual narrative from another fringe in time. The beauty lies within the story that the painting tells, and that just by looking, one is uncovering the story. In George Morland’s *The Slave Trade*, he reveals the story of human-trafficking and African enslavement during the late 1700’s.

*The Slave Trade* was painted by George Morland in 1791. The English painter was already an established artist during the time of production. According to PBS online, Morland was inspired to create *The Slave Trade* after reading an emotionally moving poem written by one of his close companions. The poem was dark and unsettling, written about the English dismantling African families in order to sell them for slavery (“The Slave Trade”). Disturbed by what he had read, Morland began the painting during the movement to abolish slavery in northern early America. George Morland led a somewhat corrupt life. His lifestyle was consumed by drinking, hiding from creditors, and even finding himself in prison, yet he still managed to produce a wide variety of paintings, and several of them. Though he was of the lower-middle class in society, According to the *Oxford Dictionary of Art and Artists*, Morland managed to obtain extensive popularity with his paintings among the contrasting social classes (“Morland, George”).

I personally chose *The Slave Trade* for the sake of studying the cruelty and foul treatment of African slaves during this time in history, as well as the obvious insensitivity of the English regarding the fact that the slaves were human beings with lives and families, just as the English were. This particular image stood out to me on the grounds of that it is altogether depicting what it must have been like for the African slaves to be separated from their families and sold to a circumstance that made death a gleeful alternative. The painting displays an African male wringing his hands in despair as he is being hauled away from what appears to be his wife and son by the English. He is being obviously threatened and brutally handled. Terror and antagonism are the indisputable emotions displayed on the faces of all Africans in the painting. Another African male who appears to be awaiting departure sits in despair with his wrists chained together. He is being pulled by what looks to be only a child, English of course. The painting captures a bleak and gloomy day, setting the sorrowful mood. The water is colored charcoal black, as well as the sky. What draws one in is the state of anguish among the family being broken apart. The woman is in obvious distress as her child reaches for her, and her husband seals his own fate with complete misery, unwillingly. One can sense the panic in the scene by only looking. Even the dog seems
to be in distress. In the distance, there are Africans in a huddle, appearing to be marching, bent over with their heads hung low. The boat that will import them to the slave land awaits. The painting is unique in that it is not pleasing to the eye by any means, yet still summons an array of conflicting emotions. Its sole purpose is to demonstrate the intimate perspective of African slave trade.

During the time of production of The Slave Trade (1791), African enslavement was still a relatively thriving commodity to the American economy, particularly in the south. The northern states were calling to abolish slavery, due to their relative unimportance to the economy. According to the History Channel online, many colonists (especially in the north) linked the oppression of black slaves to their own oppression by the English. Slavery was eventually abolished in the northern states between 1774 and 1804 ("Origins of Slavery in America"). However, it still remained vital to the states of the south. In fact, slaves in the south took up nearly one third of the entire population. As previously stated, the ongoing occurrence of the African slave trade most likely had a large emotional impact on all bystanders and witnesses. Thus, this painting was a result of the artist's desire to put the tragic circumstances into perspective for essentially the world's population.

Racism was evidently not frowned upon during this point in time, as it commonly is in today's society. The majority of colonists were not opposed to the enslavement of these black human beings. Though the African slaves were a large sum of the population, they were hardly considered American. The early Americans were all involved in the harsh and brutal mistreatment of the slaves; even if they were not intimately involved, they certainly did not stop it from happening. Though there were some parties in society that strived to abolish African slavery, the fact that it still occurred for a hundred years to come proves that the majority had no problem with conceding it. George Morland aimed to address the bleak situation to the general public, and especially those who stood by and allowed the ongoing calamity. These people were his intended audience of the piece. Considering his inspiration was a poem that illustrated the brutal hardship, the man must have been motivated to inquire the rest of the world as well. The painting aims to be perceived through the eyes of the painter himself. Just like any dramatic painting, The Slave Trade is a mere illustration of Morland's inner impressions and ideas of what a scene during the separation and trade of the African slaves looked like. His goal was to adhere his own perspectives to those of his intended audience.

Any decent painting is held to some form of bias, just as the audience or observer brings forth a biased opinion when studying any source of history. Any portion of history already previously studied will affect the way one perceives or examines another. When viewing this particular painting, one takes into consideration any knowledge regarding African enslavement formerly learned. When a topic in history has already been absorbed in a particular way, it is not easily modified. Facts are facts, and history is typically taught as hard, factual evidence. Though there is not a wide range of opinions in regards to slavery (most would agree that it was considerably inhumane), everyone perceives an illustration individually. The bias in Morland's painting was clearly that the English were disturbingly harsh, and that African slaves were miserable and hopeless. There is little argument against this
impression; however, had his assessment been the opposite, the painting would have looked considerably different.

_The Slave Trade_ will remain throughout history an illustrated perception of what exactly African slave trade stood for. Separating families, taking human beings from their homes and lives, and replacing it with Hell on Earth are the lives that these people knew for hundreds of years. A painting has the power to visually inform on a more personal level, and that is exactly what _The Slave Trade_ did.

**Works Cited**

