

Though *The Goldfinch* touches on many different artists and paintings throughout the book, there is one painting that I believe fits the mood of the book entirely. It is called *Watson and the Shark*, by John Singleton Copley. The painting depicts a young boy, Brook Watson, as his right leg is being torn off by a shark and soldiers on a boat attempt to rescue him. Curiously, the painting was commissioned by Brook Watson himself, who survived the attack at the loss of his leg. Copley actually created three versions of this exact painting, all quite similar, but for this assignment, the version I'm talking about is the last one, the one that I have seen myself, the one hanging in the Detroit Institute of Arts.



It is a haunting painting, and when I first saw it, I thought Watson's figure to be a siren, not a fourteen-year-old boy. He's extremely thin, with long blond hair flowing out in the water around him. He's pale, almost like a marble statue more than a painting, and his right arm is outstretched. Most likely reaching towards the men saving him, but to me, it looks like he's reaching for the sky above him as if asking God himself for help. His face is what I thought most notable, however, as his expression is completely and entirely catatonic. He looks helpless, and lost, and terrified all at once, with his eyes bulging out in a grotesque way.

There are a few ways I can connect this piece with the book. One of those ways is how it connects to the plot. The main character, Theo, moves in briefly with his friend, Andy, after Theo's mother dies. Andy's family takes good care of Theo, and during Theo's stay with them, it's mentioned that Andy's father loves the artist John Singleton Copley because of the beautiful skies he paints over vast waters. Andy's father's heart belongs to sailing, which he pushes on his children. Not so secretly, Andy tells Theo he is terrified of the water and boats and hates sailing.

Years later, Theo finds out that Andy, his father, and his older brother are out sailing when Andy's father is swept overboard. Andy tries to save him but is taken as well. They both drown. Though Watson, the subject of the painting, does not die, he looks helpless, and I find his expression to be representative of the fear Andy must've felt in his last moments.

The other way the painting connects to the book is like I said; Watson's form in the water. He looks frail, weak, and damaged, and *The Goldfinch* is the story of a frail, weak, and damaged individual, Theo.

Theo is never portrayed as a strong, bold protagonist. In fact, most of the story is about just how fragile he is. He's helpless and seems to remain in the same mental state as the young boy that lost his mother. When I look at *Watson and the Shark*, I feel terrified, which is exactly the reason I took a picture of it a year ago at the Detroit Institute of Arts. I wanted to remember that painting specifically, and the illness it made me feel.

Copley's focus was less on the shark and more on Watson, as is evident in the way he purposefully draws the viewer's eyes towards Watson through his use of lighting and color. The shark doesn't have to be there for the feeling to be the same. The way I see it, we know that Watson survives the incident, but I could almost argue this is not true, which is why I believe Watson commissioned the painting in the first place. The way that Copley emphasizes Watson's corpse-like body in the deep, dark, water, I could almost believe that he died right there, in that moment. But he didn't.

When Theo's mother dies, he dies right with her. But he doesn't, and we know this. When I read *The Goldfinch*, I feel that same sickness in my stomach and in my bones. The mood is the same. They are both helpless pieces, in a way that you can't help but love.