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Applying a range of critical theories, identify, discuss and evaluate an artwork of your choosing

An essay on the painting American Gothic by Grant Wood (1930)

In this essay I plan on applying the critical theories, Semiotics, by breaking down the facial expression, and other gestures that could help give up a better understanding of the image. I will also attempt to discover who are the two people? Why are they there? Attempt to analyse the artists, Grant Wood, thoughts while creating this work. It is just as important to learn about the artist and his opinions and feeling at the time or in some cases more important. Grant DeVosion Wood, he was born on 13th of February 1891 in Anamosa Iowa and died the day before his 51st birthday on 12th of February 1942 in Iowa City. He was married to Sara Sherman Maxon from 1935 to 1938, in early days before art when his father passed away 1901 the remaining family moved to Cedar Rapids where he became an apprentice in a metal works shop, this did not work out he then applied and graduated from Washington High-school after this he immediately enrolled in 1910 into the Handicraft Guild which was in Minneapolis. After completing his course in 1913 he enrolled in the School of the Art Institute of Chicago where he tried to become a silversmith. Then along came The Great War (WW1), towards the end of the war he joined the US military where he designed Camouflage scenes and other art which it's not disclosed this can be found in the following website: WikiArt (Last updated 2023) After the war in 1919 he taught art to Junior High Students in Cedar Rapids. This continued until 1925. This employment gave him financial dependability which allowed his travel to Europe on holidays to study art. During the years of 1923 to 1924 he took a gap year to study in Europe his love of art. Eventually during 1928 he went to Munich to oversee the production of his designed stain glass windows, which were created for the Veterans Memorial building in Cedar Rapids which can still be seen today.

I will begin by applying the critical theory, Semiotics. Semiotics can be broken down into 2 general groups being the sign and signifier as seen in Roland Barthes book the Elements of Semiology signifier which is the physical object incorporated in the painting, where the sign is the object and what the meaning of it is as discussed in Elements of Semiology. "In his book, signs are often objects of everyday use. Used by society in a derivative to signify something: clothes are used for protection, and food for nourishment" Barthes, R (1968) and these are all things I intend to discuss and explore in this essay. I began by analysing every aspect of the painting by Grant Wood, upon first viewing I was immediately intrigued by a few details such as what is the historical context? Why was this painting created? And is there a deeper meaning than the basic signifier? (objects). My research brought me too. Biel (2005) p.76, in this I discovered the man on the right is a 62 year old dentist Byron McKeeby and the woman is Grant Wood's sister.

It was painted in the Great Depression which was between the years 1929 to 1939. Here is a brief run down of the Great Depression and its cultural impact on America as research on this website: historic newspapers (2021). During this ten year period which is classed as the longest and most severe depression ever experienced by the industrialised western world, sparking changes in economic institutions, factories, farms, mills and peoples well being and day to day lives. As tens of thousands of jobs and homes were lost due to closers and other financial ruining of executives and

CEOs of America. This of course meant no one was working, so no one was being payed which meant people starving. Going back to the painting the style of painting is classed as regionalism which means, and I quote from the Oxford Dictionary: "the theory or practice of regional rather than central systems of administration or economic, cultural, or political affiliation." The signifier shows a farmer and his daughter standing steadfast against the backdrop of their farmstead, where as the sign can be ascertained from their glum facial expressions and drab clothing, symbolising the depression and hardships of the era. Their resilience is shown in their defiant stances. Many people have very unique takes on the story or message this painting displays, for example there is a theory regarding the woman's brooch that depicts the mythological goddess Proserpina also referred to as the Queen of the underworld and the goddess of female fertility and re cultural fertility and spring time growth. This signifier signs the hope of a better farmers harvest as referenced in Grovier, Kelly (2019)

Now we know who is in the painting and when it was set/created, the next question is where is painting set? On first inspection there is clearly a house in the background and that tells us rather little as to where it is based so referred to the internet and found this website: anitalouiseart.com. (2022). It states the paintings background is based on a real house in Eldon, Iowa. This is also where the name comes from as the house had "House Head American Gothic Windows." The actual name for the house is the Dibble House. The house was built in 1881 to 1882 by Cathrine and Charles Dibble. The house has recently been occupied by Beth Howard popularly known as "Pie Lady" who moved out in 2014, my research tells me there is present occupier of the property. A reference for analysis is the book by Steven Biel *"American Gothic: a life of Americas most famous painting"*, for example (Biel, 2005. Page 185). The signifier for the house is its quirkiness and opulence which caught the attention of Grant Wood. As for the sign it's elegant windows are juxtaposition of elegant windows against the crippling economic effect of the Great Depression. Once again showing a resilience and steadfastness and hope to return to level of opulence in which these windows were installed.

So far, we have established who the people are, where it is located. But now I wish to discover why this painting has captured many people including my own eye. In my personal opinion it has a sense of depth of sign, while keeping the execution simple. What I mean is the image is simple enough to break down into the sign and signifier, for example you could say its two people one man one woman on either side with glum expressions standing a few hundred yards from a gothic style house. On the topic of hidden signifiers of creating subtle sign, for example the pitch fork. This signs a determination and possible will to work hard and survive during the Great Depression. On also the positioning of the fork can be construed as a defensive stance. This information was found on the following website, Jackson, Kitty (2019).

In conclusion I like this piece because of its meaning such as their signed and signified key details which this painting withholds, this painting uses arbitrary/symbolic sign, this is where the painting garners meaning from its culture context. It also uses an anchorage sign which is created by combining all the different aspects discussed previously in this essay to create a meaning. This painting is full of connotations as discussed is the symbolic and abstract meaning and intention of the artist when creating the signs/painting. I would also like in my conclusion to point out the paradigm in this painting. These are the theories and interpretations of other people beyond myself who have viewed and studied this painting. I can a 'hundred' percent see why this painting is such an icon as it has appeared throughout history whether it is parody or a direct replica, this really up to viewer and their interpretation and their ways of seeing. When assigned this task I thought of many

different art pieces but this one stood out the most, as it spoke to me personally. There are a few details that I did not like such as the use of in my opinion bland colours and flat feeling to the painting this is not a criticism this is more of an honest opinion to the work. I know I have learned quite a few things about art, a subject matter I never really investigate to a full extent before. I believe there will not be another painting with such depth and detail beyond the naked eye for a very long time as modern-day work is nothing like it used to be. These are not just pieces of art that are causally hanged up on a wall, they are pieces of history/culture and are well deserved of their place on a gallery wall. In my opinion most art and artists today are rather boring as they lack originality when compared to Grant Wood and his paintings.

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