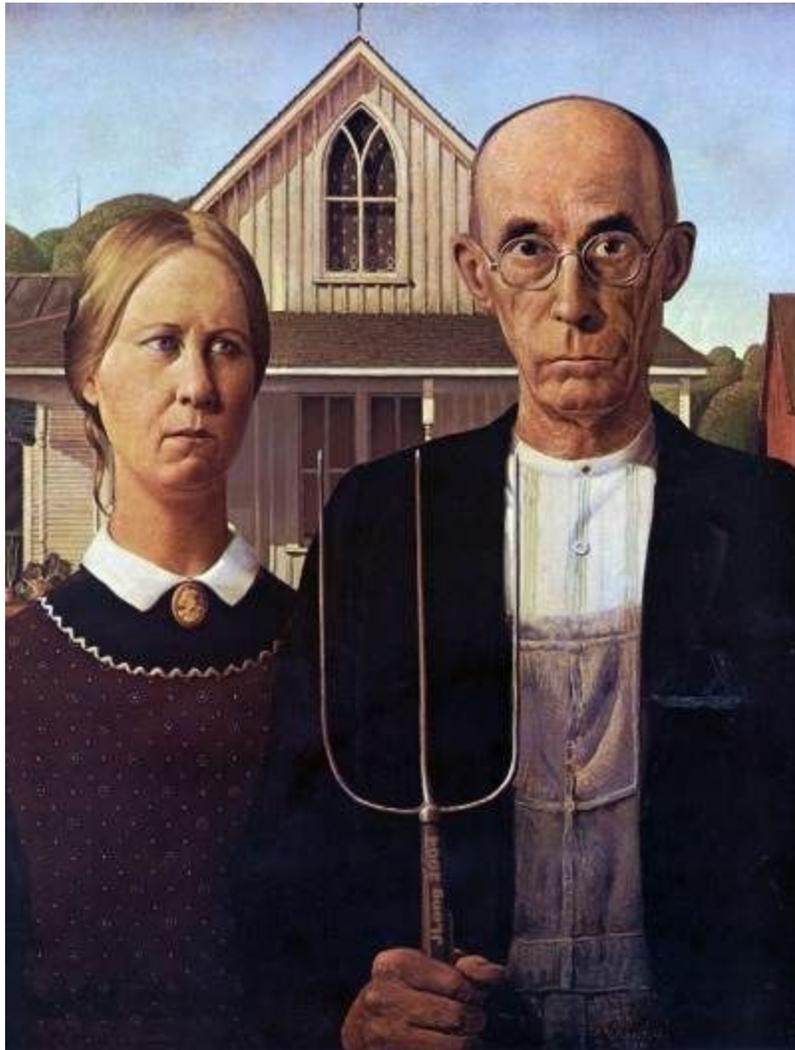


American Gothic Meaning: Grant Wood Painting Interpretation & Analysis

What is the meaning of the painting *American Gothic* by Grant Wood? Why is this piece of art so famous and popular? Read our critique, interpretation and analysis of this famous example of 20th century American regional art. You may not understand the meaning of the painting yet, but you should know that there are a few different reasons why *American Gothic* is "so famous."



Artist Grant Wood's *American Gothic* (1930): Where was the Portrait Painted?

American Gothic was in many ways a very personal painting for American artist Grant Wood. Planning to enter an art exhibition in Chicago and in search of local inspiration, in the end it was the architecture of a small house in his Midwestern home town of Eldon, Iowa that inspired Grant Wood to paint *American Gothic* in 1930, one of the most famous Americana paintings of all time and the inspiration of dozens of parodies. Like Wood, the man and woman in the painting are also natives of the small Midwestern town of Eldon, IA, but their relationship is open for interpretation and not what it first seems...

Up for Interpretation: Who Are the People in *American Gothic*?

After an initial analysis of the famous painting, many people assume that Grant Wood's *American Gothic* is just a portrait of a prim and proper older, local married couple, but not a very happy one. In the portrait, the hard, somewhat cold woman frowns and furrows her brow in resignation as she stares off vacantly into the distance. The tight-lipped older man, seemingly an Amish farmer, is stern and somber looking, holding his pitchfork and staring head-on, perhaps anxious to escape the limelight and retreat back to his work on the farm. Why does Wood make this couple look so sad and serious?

Though you assume the man and woman in *American Gothic* are husband and wife, they're actually not even in a relationship—romantic or otherwise. The people in *American Gothic* are actually just the artist's sister and the town's local dentist, both recruited by Wood as artist's models for the painting.

The total lack of physical chemistry and warmth in *American Gothic* is not just because Wood's two models were bad at posing.

The man and woman never physically posed for the painting together, but were actually painted on separate occasions by Wood, partly explaining the awkwardness and discomfort evident in the painting.

So why did Grant Wood paint these people together if they didn't really have a relationship? Why do they look so unhappy? As it turns out, much of the meaning of the *American Gothic* painting comes back to satire and, surprisingly enough, that little American farm house in the background.



American Gothic Architecture & Meaning of the Satire

According to artist Grant Wood, much of his attraction to the house featured in the background behind the couple was due to its quaint architectural style: American Gothic. Also referred to as "carpenter Gothic," this suburban style of home popular during the Depression era was meant to mimic the lofty, vaulted Gothic architecture of historic European cathedrals--though obviously at a price the working class could afford to buy and live in.

While cathedrals often work as symbols of timeless elegance and enduring grandeur, American Gothic homes like the one seen in Wood's painting, on the other hand, are manufactured quite cheaply and quickly, not built to stand for hundreds of years.

In *American Gothic*, artist Grant Wood uses the house to paint a satire of modern American culture, what he perceives as an almost laughable and somewhat off-kilter knockoff of the real thing.

Though this new form of "American Gothic" architecture was economical and much more practical than authentic Gothic architecture for the typical American family during Depression era, Wood seems to take issue with its trying to be more dignified and established than it really is. When asked about the couple posing in front of the home, artist Grant Wood said, these are "the kind of people I fancied should live in that house," thereby insinuating that the couple and the house were both unknowingly ridiculous despite their seriousness.

"There is satire in it, but only as there is satire in any realistic statement. These are types of people I have known all my life. I tried to characterize them truthfully--to make them more like themselves than they were in actual life."

GRANT WOOD ON *AMERICAN GOTHIC* AS A SATIRE

Critical Response to Wood's *American Gothic* Painting

Artist Grant Wood might have thought his satire of small town Midwestern America was funny and right on target, but many art critics initially found his painting *American Gothic* to be mean spirited and insulting toward the simple, a low blow toward the hardworking men and women of the Midwest living through the tough economic times during the Great Depression.

American Gothic Meaning: A Critique of Midwestern Culture

Many interpreted the meaning of *American Gothic* to be the artist's snobby judgment on the humble people of Middle America. Like other Regionalist artists and writers, however, Grant Wood seems to critique the oppressive confines of Midwestern culture in *American Gothic* more than the people themselves. In terms of composition, the tightly cropped painting indicates the claustrophobic and restrictive nature of life in small town American society. One look at the grim and humorless expressions on the models' faces suggests their true feelings about their lives and environment. The ceilings in their American Gothic home might be vaulted, but the lifestyle and culture are nothing short of stifling.