

MEANING AND INTEPRETATION OF HISTORICAL ICONS

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Andreanne Vallee

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Accepted:

Dr. Noel Verzosa
Portfolio Advisor

Dr. Corey Campion
Program Director

Dr. Trevor Dodman
Committee Member

April M. Boulton, Ph.D.
Dean of the Graduate School

Dr. Heather Mitchell-Buck
Committee Member

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Historical Icons and the Application of Reception Theory

Throughout time, it has often been taught that the author or creator holds the greatest authority on the meaning of a work of art. Even today, some critics still hold true to the artist's intention as the sole source of meaning in an artwork. One such example is the conductor Roger Norrington. He has spent his entire career performing classical music the way the *composer* intended rather than the way modern performers have performed it. In his article he states, "how wildly we are mistaken when we make such an assumption." He is referring to the ignorance of the modern audience when listening to orchestral music from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The ignorance is not only the audience's though, for according to Norrington it is also at the hands of the conductor and performers. His article was written, as he states, as a sort of "call for papers for an imaginary conference." He writes about the negative impact of applying the modern interpretation to these classical pieces stating that doing so distorts the composer's "original intent."¹ While Norrington is perhaps the most notorious example, he is not alone. This idea has persisted through scholarship.

Though the traditional view was that the creator's intent holds the greatest meaning, around the mid-twentieth century, many began to argue that it is instead the audience's own interpretation that holds the greatest authority. Over time, scholars have come to discuss the balance between creator and audience. In 1946, Wimsatt and Beardsley wrote

¹ Roger Norrington, "The Sound Orchestras Make," *Early Music*, vol. 32 (2004): 2-5.

“The Intentional Fallacy” in which they argued that the “design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work...”² These scholars make the distinction between the creator and the audience and place greater value on the audience’s interpretation than the author’s intention. They also argue in their work that the very idea of an unbiased audience who approaches a work of art without their own preconceived notions, is in fact a fallacy.

The work of Wimsatt and Beardsley combines the works of many scholars to create this perspective on author’s intention. It is important to understand that intention refers to the creator’s “design or plan” for the creation.³ Wimsatt and Beardsley used poems as the basis for their work, but their scholarship can be applied more broadly. According to the two men, using the author’s intent is inherently flawed because it brings into question issues of “inspiration, authenticity, biography, literary history, and scholarship.”⁴ No matter what, one cannot reach the author’s original intent unless they are the author themselves. Furthermore, intent can only be determined at the moment of the creative act, meaning even the author may not be able to accurately pinpoint the original intent. Through extensive studies, Wimsatt and Beardsley have argued that people have doubted author’s intention as

² W. K. Wimsatt and M.C. Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy,” *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 54, No. 3 (1946): 468.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

far back Socrates.⁵ In his writings, Socrates describes how not even a poet can truly explain the intention of his poem after the poem is written. He resigns himself to the fact that a poem is not written out of some great knowledge but rather “by a sort of genius and inspiration.”⁶ But if, as Wimsatt and Beardsley argue, there is no way to truly understand the author’s original intent, then how does one answer the question of intention? Later critics have expanded upon this idea of authorial intent and its inherent uselessness. One such writer is Richard Taruskin, who studies the work of composer Igor Stravinsky, who, he states “was by far the most played, most recorded, most interviewed, most photographed, most talked about” of the twentieth century. According to Taruskin, even if the author specifically states an intention, that very intention could be a fallacy and should not be automatically trusted as they could be misremembering or lying. Stravinsky states his work, *The Rite of Spring*, was mostly conceived as purely instrumental work and that the idea of using it to accompany story and dance came later. Despite Stravinsky’s claims, all evidence contradicts this train of thought, calling into question the author’s own intention.⁷

While Wimsatt and Beardsley view the author’s intention as almost useless, one would be remiss to remove all thought of the author or creator. When considering the creator, one must consider the inherent biases that each person brings with them. It is

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Richard Taruskin, “How the *Rite* Became Possible,” in *Russian Music at Home and Abroad: New Essays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 377.

impossible to consider simply the creators' point of view removed from their own preconceived notions and, furthermore, it would be inaccurate to try to separate the creator from the world in which they created. At the same time, the audience's perspective is influenced by the creator whether the meaning derived from the work matches the author's intention or not. One would be negligent to assume the creator and audience act separately from one another and separate from the outside world. Therefore, intentions and meaning are no simple understanding, but rather a complex compilation of interpretations over time.

Writing some thirty years later, in 1973, Stuart Hall published his work "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse." Stuart Hall was a cultural theorist who built upon the work of scholars such as Wimsatt and Beardsley and developed his own theory of interpretation and meaning. Hall is considered one of the leading experts on audience interpretations and in his works he applied his theories to that of media art such as television. Reception theory, as defined by Stuart Hall, is the process in which meaning is developed from a work of art. The process depends on both the creator's intention and the audience's interpretation. The process as described by Hall is made up of four states and in each stage the product can be reinterpreted.⁸

The first stage is production in which the creator applies his or her own intentions to the product. This is the point of original intent that is the moment of creative thought, when

⁸ Stuart Hall, ([1973] 1980): 'Encoding/decoding'. In Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (Ed.): *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79* London: Hutchinson, pp. 128-38 , ('Encoding and Decoding in Television Discourse', 1973).

the initial product is made. This is when the poet writes, the artist paints, the composer composes. Some works can take extended time to complete, weeks, months or even years. When a work of art (no matter the type) takes a longer time to complete, the author's original intent can morph or change as the work is being created. For example, the composer Paul Hindemith first wrote his work *Das Marienleben* in 1923 as a part of the "New Objectivity" movement. At this time, his intention was likely to humanize the Virgin Mary, rather than present her as a religious icon. However, 25 years later, he chose to revise his work applying a new meaning to it. Anyone would change over a quarter of century and by this time the movement had changed, Hindemith had matured as a composer, and therefore the final product presented a different intent.⁹ Another, more modern, example comes from a pop culture reference. The romantic comedy *Fever Pitch*, released in 2005, offers a distinct change in original intent. Movies take months or longer to write, cast, film, edit and release. While the original movie was written using the Red Sox horrible record as a metaphor for the main character's inherent personal flaws, it was during this season that the Red Sox pulled off a miraculous series of victories ending in their winning the World Series. Ultimately, the original intent was no longer valid and the directors had to rewrite and re-film the end of the movie to fit this dramatic turn of events.¹⁰ This first stage is the only point at which the author's original intent can be reached if it can be reached at all.

⁹ Harold Truscott, "Hindemith and 'Das Marienleben,'" *The Musical Times*, vol. 110, no. 1522 (1969): 1240.

¹⁰ *Fever Pitch*. Film. Directed by Bobby and Peter Farrelly. 20th Century Fox, 2005.

After this point, the interpretations can try to reach author's intention but they are still interpretations.

The second phase is the circulation in which the product is viewed by others.¹¹ The poem, novel, painting, sculpture, song, etc. is first presented to the audience with only the implied meaning. Next is the consumption phase in which the audience can apply their own meaning to the product.¹² At this point, the audience takes the product they have now seen and begins to apply their own meaning. They interpret the product through the lens of their own bias and their own environment. This happens naturally, not necessarily intentionally.

Finally the product reaches reproduction in which the audience or the creator may reproduce the original product with the possibility of new meaning applied.¹³ The audience has the ability to recreate the product or to share the product with others while inserting their own meaning. At this point, a cycle begins. As the audience reinterprets and then redistributes, a new audience views the recreated product, reinterprets and then redistributes. It is hard to find the authentic interpretation as it soon gets lost in the cycle. Throughout this cycle, the meaning created by the audience often overtakes the original meaning. For example, the melody of the "Star Spangled Banner" was written by John Stafford Smith who intended it to be a drinking song. It was much later when someone set

¹¹ Hall, "Encoding/decoding," 128-138.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

the song to underscore the poem by Francis Scott Key that it became the iconic anthem.

Since then, the melody (even when played without the words) has taken on a new meaning that the composer could never have imagined and infinitely more culturally significant.¹⁴

This process as a whole represents a discourse between the work of art and the world around it.

It is clear from Hall's work that he believes the author and audience work together to create interpretation. Hall categorizes interpretation in three different ways: preferred, oppositional, and negotiated. The preferred or dominant interpretation refers to the creator's original intent. In a preferred interpretation little to no emphasis is put on the audience's reaction and almost all meaning is derived from the creator.¹⁵ This is a more traditional approach which many scholars before Wimsatt and Beardsley would take. In this case, the historian would attempt to decipher the artist's original intent based on the art and the contextual evidence of the time. While many no longer take this approach, it still holds value. It is often beneficial to consider the creator's intent prior to applying one's own interpretations.

Hall's second interpretation is oppositional in which the scholar goes against the author's intent and focuses instead on the meaning derived from the audience. In an oppositional interpretation the author's intent is no longer the emphasis. In fact, the artist's

¹⁴ Noel Verzosa, personal correspondence.

¹⁵ Hall, "Encoding/decoding," 128-138.

original intent holds little to no meaning to a scholar who takes an oppositional approach.¹⁶ This is often when a work of art may be recreated with new meaning and no consideration of the original meaning. Perhaps the most famous modern example of oppositional interpretations would be the creation of gifs and memes. Oftentimes the public will take famous images and use them in a quirky way to create a new meaning. These public creations surely are not tied to the artist's original intent. For example, the memes below are considered some of the most famous, but each one was created using an already existing (and sometimes even copyrighted) image. It is highly unlikely that Abraham Lincoln imagined his portrait to be used in this way.



Figure 1. Terminator-Pun. Digital Image. Know Your Meme. July 28, 2015



Figure 2. Who's Awesome? You're Awesome. Digital Image. Know Your Meme. May 12, 2011.

¹⁶ Ibid.

When the two views, preferred and oppositional, meet to create a combined view, it is referred to as a negotiated interpretation. In this case, the scholar considers the original intent, but also applies his or her own meaning to the work of art.¹⁷ This compromise is the view often found in more modern scholarly interpretations of creations. One such example is the work of Steven Granelli and Jason Zenor. The two scholars consider the negotiated interpretation of the TV show *Dexter*. They consider how the audience interprets and wrestles with morally ambiguous characters while also considering the producer's intention when creating the show therefore coming to conclusion through a negotiated interpretation.¹⁸

Hall's theory of reception can be applied to meaning production in general, not just the meaning of art. Through the use of Stuart Hall's work and the later expansions, Reception Theory can be applied to the interpretation of icons throughout history. Iconography and iconology are heavily studied subjects, but the application of reception theory to iconology seems to be a limited field. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, iconography is defined as "the branch of knowledge which deals with the representation of persons or objects by any application of the arts of design."¹⁹ In today's society, icons make

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Steven Granelli and Jason Zenor, "Decoding 'The Code': Reception Theory and Moral Judgment of *Dexter*," *International Journal of Communication*, vol. 10 (January 2016): 5056–78.

¹⁹ "Iconography, n." OED Online. March 2019. Oxford University Press. <http://taurus.hood.edu:2306/view/Entry/90897?redirectedFrom=iconography> (accessed April 08, 2019).

up modern culture built on both positive and negative icons. The people, images, movies, industries, and more that influence daily life are all a series of icons. Through these representations, we have developed a common perception of good and evil. However, icons go deeper than just pictorial representations. Icons are instead concepts or figures that hold a meaning created and interpreted in society. An icon can be the superhero created by a movie producer and depicted on screen, then interpreted by the audience. An icon can also be a political figure, whose image is created by themselves or rather a team of advisors and still further interpreted by the citizens. Icons can be vastly different. The study of icons in relation to culture is known as iconology. The analysis of icons through Stuart Hall's reception theory is an act of iconology combining the images with their role in society as created by the icon or as interpreted by the audience.

One of the leading scholars on iconology was Jan Biatostocki, an expert in his field of art history. He worked with the idea of icons and their representations in art. He described the way in which a work of art should be interpreted as "first of all a specific set of forms carrying some meaning, then as a composition of 'stories,' symbols, and allegories."²⁰ What he is describing is the application of an audience's reception of icons. By first interpreting the "specific set of forms" he is considering the author's initial design. He then considers the

²⁰ Seymour Howard, "On Iconology, Intention, Imagos, and Myths of Meaning," *Artibus et Historiae* 17, no. 34 (1996): 83.

actual meaning of the icon itself by applying meaning. This is the audience adding their own interpretation to the work of art.

Following Biatostocki, Seymour Howard explored further iconology and interpretation in his work, *On Iconology, Intention, Imagos, and Myths of Meaning*. Iconology, according to Howard is “the lore and language of visualization.”²¹ Iconology is therefore the application of meaning onto the icons. Howard, like Wimsatt and Beardsley, argues that “motivation is ultimately inaccessible to explanation”²² but that negates the value of the creator’s intention. While it impossible to truly understand the creator’s intention, the study of an icon would be incomplete without some consideration of the intention. In his work, Seymour Howard uses the famous example of Leonardo Da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*. As iconic as the *Mona Lisa* is, people have recreated the image over and over again. Many have studied the Renaissance man’s intention while others have added their own interpretation and meaning by creating new, revised versions of the icon.

²¹ Ibid, 83.

²² Ibid, 84.



*Figure 3. The Dab-Mona Lisa.
Digital Image. Know Your Meme.
May 14, 2017.*



*Figure 4. Banksy's Mona Lisa Smile. Digital Image.
Know Your Meme. Jan. 14, 2013.*

These figures, each its own interpretation of the original, allow the reproduction fitting into Hall's theory of oppositional interpretations. In his work, Howard applies only oppositional interpretation to iconology but each of Hall's interpretations can be found in the study of icons.

Before one can truly analyze icons in terms of creator and audience, one must first define the creator. In this case, the creator depends on the specific icon. Famous figures such as Marilyn Monroe and John F. Kennedy created their own images with a purpose to portray a specific image to the public. While others do not become icons until after their death, they become famous later through the image created by artists and authors in works of art and literature. Next, one must define the audience which interprets the icon. The audience is anyone who is influenced by or interacts with an icon. The general public as a

whole and the individuals in society all act as the audience of icons. This portfolio will consider the application of reception theory on three icons, the Virgin Mary, Abraham Lincoln, and Adolf Hitler, each represented in a different format.

Perhaps one of the most famous icons, the Virgin Mary, has been depicted in countless pieces of art throughout time. The icon of the Virgin Mary was created through the Catholic Church and then spread through widespread devotion. As a fully human person, she helped people to find a tether to a god who felt distant in challenging times. She is not an icon built by herself but rather by multiple institutional forces and the devotion of her followers. The specific depictions of Mary from the Renaissance period fit what Hall calls the dominant hegemonic code. According to Hall, the preferred reading is when the consumer takes the actual meaning directly and decodes the piece exactly the way it was encoded. The agreed upon symbols of the time appear throughout paintings of the Virgin and her Son. Therefore the interpretations at the time the paintings were created would have allowed the audience to see what the painters intended.

Another well-known icon is the sixteenth United States president, Abraham Lincoln. The image of Abraham Lincoln as an icon was created by Lincoln himself through his actions, speeches, and photographs. Modern interpretations of Abraham Lincoln as an icon, such as the literary genre of historical mash-ups, which pair classic stories with paranormal themes, directly ties into Hall's oppositional theory. Books such as *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire*

Hunter, written by Seth Grahame-Smith and published in 2010, take a classic image (that of the all-American president) and alter the view drastically breaking from the original intent.

An equally well known, if not more infamous figure, is that of Adolf Hitler. Hitler, like many politicians, used media to create his image. It is the recordings of Nazi rallies, Hitler's speeches, and photographs of him that created the icon. In this case, the depictions of Hitler are more through rhetoric than images, but the look at the use of Hitler in political rhetoric follows that of Hall's negotiated position. The negotiated position is a mixture of acceptance and rejection of the creator's intended meaning. In this case, Hitler can be viewed as the creator of his own image and in today's political discourse that image is twisted and manipulated to fit one that paints politicians in a negative manner. But the manipulations do not stray too far from Hitler's original image. Through his actions, Hitler created an icon of evil and the political comparison is used to draw on that image of evil.

This project will propose that reception theory can help explain how meaning works not just in art but also in history and culture. Ultimately, the audience holds the power in determining what historical icons mean rather than the historical icon themselves. A historical figure becomes an icon *only* from the perspective of the present, which reaffirms the claims of reception theory that it is the receivers, not the makers, who create meaning.



Figure 5. Terminator-Pun. Digital Image. Know Your Meme. July 28, 2015



Figure 6. Who's Awesome? You're Awesome. Digital Image. Know Your Meme. May 12, 2011.



Figure 7. The Dab-Mona Lisa. Digital Image. Know Your Meme. May 14, 2017.



Figure 8. Banksy's Mona Lisa Smile. Digital Image. Know Your Meme. Jan. 14, 2013.

Preferred Interpretation: Renaissance Portrayals of the Virgin Mary

The Virgin Mary has served as one of the great icons throughout history. The original depictions of the Virgin come from the New Testament of the Bible. In the Gospel of Luke, an angel visits a young maiden and tells her she will bear the son of God. It is from these writings that the image of the Virgin Mary came to life in paintings. As early as the Middle Ages there existed a fascination with the Virgin. It is apparent in medieval art that a cult existed around the ideal mother. She served as a model for women to achieve perfection as a woman, as a mother, or as a Christian. In the eyes of the church, women were either the Virgin Mary or Mary Magdalen and it was better to strive to be like the virgin than the whore.²³ Through church teachings and various scripture, a symbol or icon of the ideal woman was born. Who better to represent the perfect woman and mother than the mother of Christ?

The emergence of the early-modern period, also known as the Renaissance, serves as a movement away from a deep religious focus to a new more secular time of culture through art, literature, music, and more. With the rebirth came a new focus on humanism and individualism as well as a focus on the well-rounded 'Renaissance-man.' The concepts of humanism and individuality revealed themselves in the paintings and the figures depicted in the work of artists such as Da Vinci and Michelangelo.²⁴

²³ John T. Paoletti and Gary M. Radke, *Art in Renaissance Italy* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2001).

²⁴ *Ibid.*

The techniques and styles that developed presented a break from medieval art and the beginning of a new focus. Artists began using linear perspective, rather than the previous style of the middle Ages which privileged different aspects of the painting and appeared almost flat and depthless in comparison to the work of the early modern era. Italian Renaissance paintings also told a story revealing hints at the culture of Italy during this time. The works produced at this time still centered on religious scenes as the art was funded through patronage. While the Renaissance spread across Europe, the focus of this chapter is on the artwork that derived from Italian painters such as Leonardo Da Vinci, Raphael, and Andrea del Sarto.²⁵

During the Renaissance, numerous paintings, sculptures, and other works of art were created. However, each depiction shares the same colors, gaze, gestures, and clothing. The most common paintings of the Virgin by Da Vinci, Raphael, Del Sarto, and Luini feature both her and her young son and reveal an intimate (and fictionalized) moment between the two. Despite the distinct styles by vastly different artists, together, these depictions of the Virgin and her Child represent the highest ideal for Renaissance women. These depictions of the icon represent Hall's preferred style of interpretation.

The view of women during the Renaissance also changed. While the role of women changed in all socioeconomic classes, the focus here was on the upper class or the 'elite' woman. The elite women were those who strove for the ideal and were expected to fit into a

²⁵ Ibid.

conscripted role. Poor women, or women of the lower class, also had a role to fill, but the focus for those women was more to fulfill basic needs such as feeding their families. The artwork and literature of the Renaissance was geared towards those elite women who had the leisure time to enjoy the fine arts, rather than the women who could barely feed their children. This is apparent in the elegant clothes and scenery in the paintings of the Virgin.²⁶

Though the role of women changed, as did the style of art, the icon remained the same. The traditional interpretation of the Virgin remained that of a symbol of the ideal woman. That being said, the role of elite women changed during the Renaissance. However, Renaissance women were not 'liberated' in the traditional sense. They still demonstrated subordination by maintaining the household and raising the children. Instead the idea of the 'perfect' women changed. Like men in the Renaissance, women were expected to be educated in all fields. These women were taught by private tutors and received an in-depth education not for the purpose of employment, but rather for the appeal in courtship. The famous book written by Castiglione, *The Courtier*, described this perfect woman and detailed the need for educated women to benefit the Renaissance man. She would also make her work seem effortless. Castiglione stated, "Practice in everything a certain nonchalance that shall conceal design and show that what is done and said is done without effort and almost without thought."²⁷ The ideal woman was also expected to meet an

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Baldassarre Castiglione and George Bull, *The Courtier* (London: Penguin Books, 1976).

ascribed standard of beauty. Castiglione wrote that outward beauty served as a symbol of inner goodness. She was expected to be light skinned with long hair and perfect features. She was also expected to be devout in her religion.²⁸

Three famous painters of the Renaissance used their art to depict Madonna and Child and it is through this artwork that scholars have analyzed the role of women and the role of the Virgin in Renaissance society. An interesting note should be made here, as the Virgin in real life would have been a poor woman, who could not even afford a room and instead delivered her child in a manger. The depictions from the Renaissance instead portray a woman who was likely upper class based on the clothes and the status of the Virgin in each painting. This is likely because the purpose of these paintings was not accuracy but rather to glorify the holy mother and her child.²⁹

Born in April 1452, Leonardo Da Vinci was *the* Renaissance Man. He had a rough start to life as the child of an unwed peasant. He received little formal education but, despite his origins, at fourteen began a formal apprenticeship. Through the teachings of great artists in Italy, he developed his craft and quickly emerged a master. His all-around skill set as a scientist, artist, architect, and scholar made him even more revered. His works

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ All paintings are duplicated in a larger size at the end of this chapter.

embodied the Renaissance ideas of humanism and individualism and he continued to work and paint throughout his life until he died in 1519.³⁰



Figure 9. Da Vinci, *Saint Anne, the Virgin, and Child*.

Da Vinci's most famous works include the *Mona Lisa* and *the Last Supper* but he also painted numerous depictions of the Virgin Mary. The first painting by Da Vinci in this study is titled *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne*. Da Vinci paints the Virgin Mary leaning over, grasping for her child, a young baby Jesus. The baby is similarly grasping at a lamb and looking up at his mother. The Virgin is dressed in elegant clothes with long dark hair pulled back

and pale skin and she looks down lovingly at her child. Behind Mary is an angel who seems to be watching the scene. The colors are not vibrant but rather muted tones and the group is placed in a nature scene. This painting begins to depict the ideal image of the Virgin Mary as a symbol of elegance, status, and modesty.

³⁰ David Alan Brown, *Leonardo Da Vinci: Origins of a Genius* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998, 218-235.



Figure 11. Da Vinci, Leonardo. *The Virgin of the Rocks*. 1483-1485. (The Louvre, Paris, France.)

Throughout his life, Da Vinci continued to paint the Virgin and her young child. Between 1483 and 1485, he painted his most famous depiction of the holy family, *The Virgin of the Rocks*. The Virgin is hovering over the scene but not holding the child. Her hand is outstretched over the head of the baby Christ. Again, she is wearing an elegant blue dress with her blonde hair pulled back in a braid. The scenery surrounding the family is again that of nature and clearly European. The two children are posed differently. The baby

Jesus is seated with his hand raised in the symbol of the sign of the cross while the other child is kneeling, genuflecting, towards the baby Jesus with his hands clasped in prayer.

Da Vinci also produced the work *Madonna of Yarnwinder* between 1499 and 1507. This painting pictures the Virgin dressed in a blue gown with flowing excess materials. Her blonde hair is braided and pulled back with some pieces laying around her face. She cradles baby Christ with her hand and looks down toward the child. The baby is naked and plump, depicted like a true child. He holds a cross in his hand and gazes up towards the cross. Around the holy family are mountains and rocks with green scenery clearly somewhere in Europe. Each of Da Vinci's depictions of the Virgin



Figure 10. Da Vinci, *Madonna of Yarnwinder*

Mary represents a preferred interpretation of the icon. He uses the church's original ideals to depict the icon in the church's the intended way.



Figure 12. Sanzio, Raphael. *Madonna Del Granduca*. 1505. (Palatine Gallery, Firenze, Italy.)

Raphael was also considered a Renaissance man because of his skills as both a painter and an architect. He was born in 1483 to a painter in Urbino amongst rich culture and is most well-known for his depictions of the Virgin Mary. His father began his teaching and when he died at a young age, Raphael took over the shop and soon refined his skills. It was at that time that his status rose and he began depicting Madonna. He also designed churches and palaces for commissions. He continued to paint but died tragically in 1520

before completing his final work *Transfiguration*.³¹

The first Madonna painting by Raphael was *Madonna Del Granduca* painted in 1505. Here the colors are more of a pastel with the nature scene in the background. The Virgin is again adorned in elegant clothes, this time with a head dress and seated on a throne. Her hands are clasped together in prayer, a gesture symbolizing her devotion to her faith, and

³¹ Labella, Vincenzo. *A Season of Giants: Michelangelo, Leonardo, Raphael*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1990.

her son is reaching for her, held up by cherubs. The cherubs are facing the viewer while baby Jesus looks up toward the sky. Mary appears to be looking down at her hands, not at her child. Her position, seated, is similar to Ginevra the aristocrat featured in Da Vinci's famous painting and likely alludes to the ideal woman who is educated but does not work.



Figure 13. Sanzio, Raphael.
Madonna of the Pinks. 1506-07.
 (The National Gallery, London.)

Raphael's most famous portrait of the Virgin, or at least the most reproduced painting, is that of *Madonna of the Pinks*. The original is believed to have been painted between 1507 and 1508 and shows a unique relationship between the Virgin and Child. She seems to be playing with her child as if they are perfectly normal. She holds the naked baby Jesus in her lap. She is again dressed in an elegant blue gown with her very blonde hair pulled back.

It is apparent how pale her skin is and how pale the skin

of the child Christ is. They are inside a house or building with a light scene of a castle or building outside the window. Both Mary and the child are holding flowers in their hands.

In addition to *Madonna of the Pinks*, Raphael also painted the *Madonna of the Meadow* and the *Small Cowper Madonna*. Both paintings have the Virgin seated in nature in a blue and red elegant gown. In the *Meadow*, the child is holding a cross and leaning on his mother. There is a second child again who seems to be genuflecting towards baby Jesus. The *Small Cowper Madonna* shows again the playful relationship between the Virgin and Child as the baby hangs on his mother with arms around her neck and her hand on his behind. In both paintings, the Virgin's gaze is cast down at her child and not toward the audience.



Figure 14. Sanzio, Raphael. *Small Cowper Madonna*. 1505. (National Gallery of Art.)

Born in 1486, Andrea Del Sarto worked mostly in Florence. In 1509, he received his first commission and soon after he painted his first depiction of the Virgin Mary, a nativity scene depicting the birth of Christ. Little else is known of his real life but as an artist he gained fame. He was employed by the church Annunziata to paint frescos of religious scenes. He was tremendously influenced by the work of Leonardo Da Vinci and used his ideas of light and shade. He continued throughout his career to paint the Virgin in nativity scenes and with the young child. Throughout his career, he utilized the techniques of his contemporaries sharing the humanist and individualistic views of the time. He died just

eleven years after Da Vinci.³²

Sarto's most famous depiction of the Virgin is in his painting *Virgin and Child* painted in 1510. This painting is unique in comparison to the works of both Da Vinci and Raphael as both figures' heads are surrounded by halos to indicate their holiness. The Virgin is still depicted in an elegant blue and red dress with the additional fabrics revealing her status and her blonde hair pulled back with a red ribbon. Her pale face is clear in the contrasting colors. The depiction of Jesus appears more grown up, his body structure is much more representative of an adult's body with a child's face. He is slightly draped with lace and is seated upon a platform or altar.



Figure 15. Del Sarto, Andrea. *Virgin and Child*, c.1510. Panel, 82.5 by 65.4 cm. (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston).

In all of these depictions, the presentation of the Virgin and Child differs from previous medieval art. The perspective gives a three dimensional feeling and the people are painted more realistically. In medieval art, even as a baby, Jesus is painted with the face of a man.

³² S.J. Freedberg, *Andrea Del Sarto* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1963) 281-287.



Figure 16. Da Barnaba, *Madonna. The Virgin and Child*, c. 1370. Encyclopedia Britannica Image Quest.

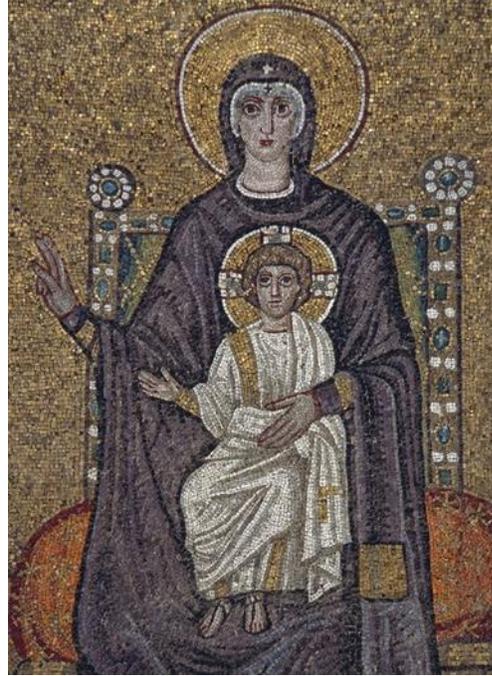


Figure 17. *Enthroned Virgin and Child with angels*, Artist Unknown. 5th-6th Century. Encyclopedia Britannica Image Quest.

In all three Italian Renaissance paintings, he is painted with a child's face. Another distinction is the lack of halos around the baby and the cherubs, except for Sarto's *Virgin and Child*. It is assumed that the viewer will recognize the figures without a halo adorning their heads. In medieval art, holy figures were always identified for the viewer with a halo.

One common theme among these paintings is the portrayal of the Virgin's gaze. In each painting her eyes are cast down, either gazing at her child below her or just not directed at the audience. This gaze is very important to the portrayal of the ideal woman. Da Vinci believed the eyes to be the most important organ and he therefore believed it was

his job to paint them. During the Renaissance, women were still in a subordinate position, especially those in the upper class. Women were expected to remain obedient to their husbands and the church. The gaze cast down, rather than facing the audience, reveals the subordination of the Virgin. In addition, her focus on her child symbolizes both her obedience to her family and to the church symbolized by the baby Christ.

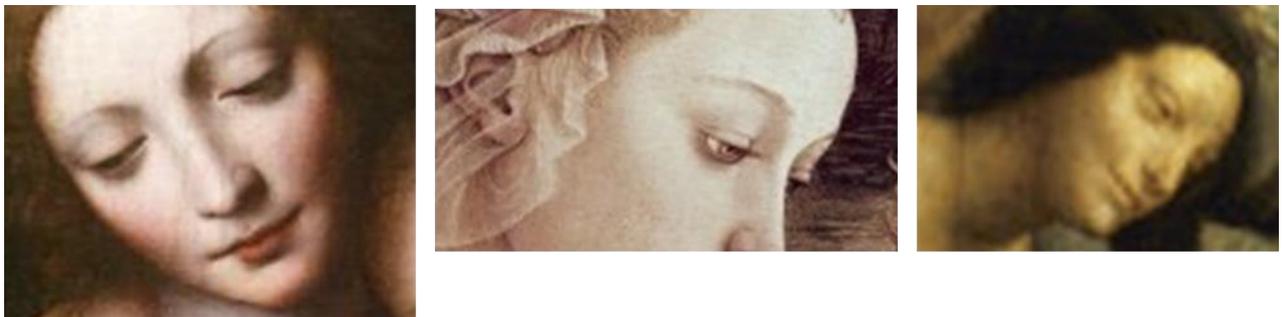


Figure 18. Selected portions of paintings by Raphael and Da Vinci

In each painting, the Virgin Mary is dressed in elegant gowns with excess fabric. The elegance of these dresses symbolizes the status of the Virgin. While the real Virgin Mary was poor and likely could not afford even the simplest of gowns, the rich colors and elegance symbolize her later importance within the church. Her pale skin also symbolizes a sort of



Figure 19. Select portion of Saint Anne, the Virgin, and Child.

elevated status. Pale skin was seen as a quality of the well off as they did not need to work. The Virgin would likely have been Middle Eastern (based on the origins of Jesus and the holy Lands) and therefore would not have been the ideal pale, European woman. Instead this change both serves the purpose of elevating the Virgin's status as well as conforming her to the ideal of European Christianity and European ethnicity. Finally, the fact that her hair is pulled back in each painting, as well as her down turned gaze, represents her modesty. This quality, seen as one of the virtues of the Virgin Mary, was certainly an ideal expected of women during the Renaissance.



Figure 20. Select portion of Madonna Del Granduca.

Each artist uses the same colors in these paintings. During the Renaissance blue would have symbolized royalty, peace, and nature (the sea and the sky). These attributes fit with the version of Mary that the artists hoped to display. The Virgin, while clearly a

poor woman, would have been associated with royalty as there is no one above God and she is the mother of Christ. She would have symbolized peace as the mother of the Savior and therefore the mother of salvation. Finally, the association with nature is very fitting and aligns with the scenery in several of the paintings. The red dress, painted most often by Raphael,



Figure 21. Select portion of Virgin and Child

symbolizes the Holy Spirit. The color red was used throughout Renaissance paintings of the Virgin and Christ to symbolize both the Holy Spirit and human nature.

While each painting varies from artist to artist (and even from one painting to the next) the similarities between each painting are striking. While this could be seen as a coincidence or as a symptom of the times, the recognizable similarities must indicate some accepted view of the Virgin and Child. If analyzing these paintings in a purely formalist view, the colors and design of the women and child do differ, but when adding the layers of history and culture, it is clear these artists recognized something within society. They recognized the societal desire for a pure, pale, and pious woman who spent her time doting on her child.

Some scholars have argued that the audience's perception (and the societal norms) are irrelevant to the painting and should not factor in the interpretation of the work. However, these scholars fail to see (or rather do so not see the importance of) the impact of society on the artist as well as the motivation of the artist. While artists do have a certain amount of autonomy, Renaissance painters relied on patronage to make a living and to fund their careers. Therefore, paintings were not only a reflection of their own views on the world but also a reflection of the ideals and desires of the patron. Their own interpretations had to meet the preferred style of the icon in order to sell or gain recognition.

Some scholars such as Pieter Van den Toorn have argued that the context in which a work is composed or produced does not impact the art itself. His argument holds that the

value is found in the work itself and not through the surroundings.³³ This theory is flawed as it fails to see the whole picture and it fails to recognize the importance of societal impacts on an artist or composer. Other scholars such as Richard Taruskin, musicologist and music historian, have argued for the importance of culture and historical context. In his work on Stravinsky, he contends that both the historical and cultural context at the time influenced the works of Stravinsky.³⁴ His compelling argument can be applied here to the Renaissance paintings of Mary and baby Jesus.

Art must be viewed as a product of the whole, a combination of the artist's personal views, the audience's perception, the culture and history of the time, and the artwork itself. Failing to acknowledge any one part, fails to see the true product. By neglecting to see the importance of Da Vinci's own personal upbringing and views on society, one might miss the greater meaning in his works. By failing to see the cultural desire for pure and pious women, one may fail to see the importance of the depictions of the Virgin Mary. Overall, considering the works of Renaissance painters, it is apparent that the various depictions of the Virgin Mary reveal an icon Renaissance society for women to aspire, represented through the preferred method of interpretation.

³³ Pieter C. van den Toorn, "A Response to Richard Taruskin's 'A Myth of the Twentieth Century'," *Music Theory Online* 1 (1995).

<http://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.95.1.5/mto.95.1.5.vdToorn.html>.

³⁴ Richard Taruskin, "Just How Russian Was Stravinsky?," *New York Times* (18 Apr 2010).



Figure 22. Da Vinci, *Saint Anne, the Virgin, and Child*.



Figure 23. Da Vinci, Leonardo. *The Virgin of the Rocks*. 1483-1485. (The Louvre, Paris, France.)



Figure 24. Da Vinci, *Madonna of Yarnwinder*



Figure 25. Sanzio, Raphael. *Madonna Del Granduca*. 1505. (Palatine Gallery, Firenze, Italy.)



Figure 26. Sanzio, Raphael. *Madonna of the Pinks*. 1506-07. (The National Gallery, London.)



Figure 27. Del Sarto, Andrea. *Virgin and Child*, c.1510. Panel, 82.5 by 65.4 cm. (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston).



Figure 28. Da Barnaba, Madonna. *The Virgin and Child*, c. 1370. Encyclopedia Britannica Image Quest

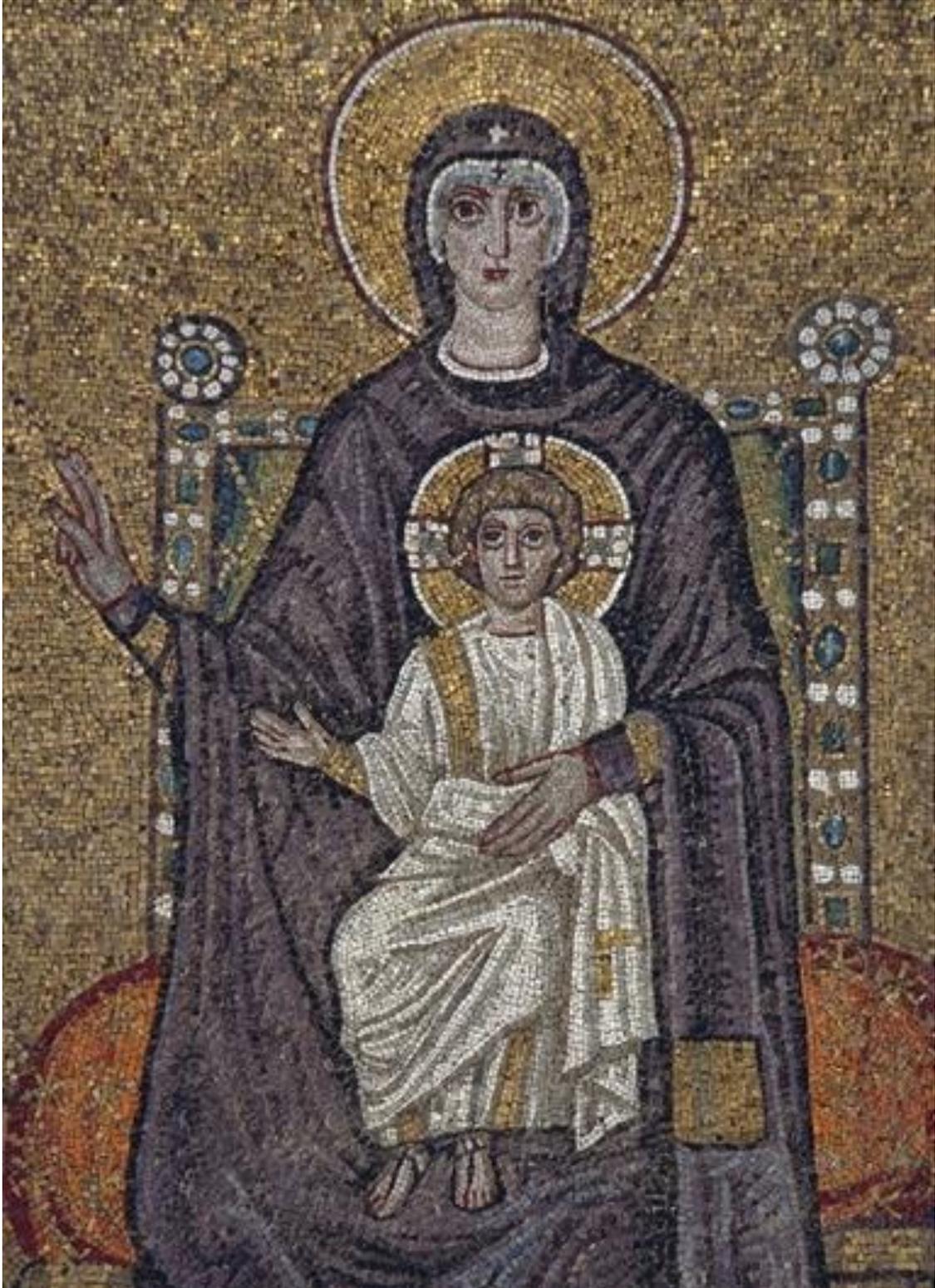


Figure 29. *Enthroned Virgin and Child with angels*, Artist Unknown. 5th-6th Century. Encyclopedia

Britannica Image Quest.

Oppositional Interpretations: Abraham Lincoln and the Paranormal

Abraham Lincoln is arguably the most iconic United States President. He grew up with little means and struggled to advance through life. Through it all he became a lawyer and after hard work and determination, he found his way into the White House. His election at a time of such turmoil was one based on morality. His sense of right and wrong earned him titles such as “Honest Abe.” More than a century after his untimely death, people still idolize this great president. At his inaugurations in 2009 and 2013, President Barack Obama used Lincoln’s Bible to be sworn in. Again in 2017, Lincoln’s Bible was used by President Donald Trump for his inauguration. As an icon, Lincoln still serves as the standard by which a “great” president is measured.

Historical mash-ups, a modern genre of literature, utilize iconic works or icons such as Lincoln to intertwine paranormal stories with the original. These such products exemplify Hall’s theory of reception. The use of historical mash-ups serves as an example of oppositional interpretation and a return to Baroque ways of thinking.

Immediately following the Renaissance, a unique style of art, literature, and music arose in Europe. The Baroque style defined the culture at the time and proved drastically different from the previous era. According to art historian and Baroque scholar Heinrich Wölfflin, the Baroque period can be described in terms of contrasts with the Renaissance. The Baroque is painterly and open form, meaning figures are not separated in squares of their own but blended together to make one image often with

no center focus. It is also planar and unified.³⁵ These terms can be combined with Joy Kenseth's description of the marvelous to create a unique definition of Baroque literature.³⁶ Baroque literature is defined as a style of writing that is extravagant, marvelous, and blends together the story and the author. It also combines literary techniques such as personification, imagery, and sentence structure to achieve the extravagant and marvelous. Artists such as Velasquez, Caravaggio, Reubens and writers such as Shakespeare, Moliere, and Cervantes exemplified the ideas of the Baroque.

These themes and structures defined during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, can be applied to modern day literature and art creating a baroque genre, one that is both marvelous and unique. One such example is the novel by Seth Grahame Smith, *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter*. Published in 2010, the novel is a historical account (including real and fictional journal entries) of the life of our sixteenth president. Throughout the real history of Lincoln's life, Grahame-Smith intertwines the fictional concept of vampires.

The novel begins with a description of Lincoln's childhood where many events in his past, including his mother's death and his poor relationship with his father, are

³⁵ Marshall Brown, "The Classic Is the Baroque: On the Principle of Wölfflin's Art History," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 9, no. 2 (1982): 379-404.

³⁶ Joy Kenseth, "An Introduction," in *The Age of the Marvelous* (Hanover, NH: Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, 1991), 25-59.

explained through interactions with vampires. The second section of the book explains both his early careers and his political rise while associating all his actions and movements with the hunting of vampires. The final section of the book focuses on the Civil War and its connection with the world of the undead. The author's use of history and fiction together in the journal style of writing offers an incredible take on the past, leaving the reader to question what is fact and what is fiction. He interweaves both the paranormal and simply fictional stories to help narrate the story. This take on literature can be considered a reinterpretation of the original but the complete and quite drastic change allows works like these to fit into Stuart Hall's oppositional interpretation of reception theory.

Many of Grahame-Smith's techniques in writing *Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* are characteristic of the Baroque era. The first and most obvious is the use of the author as a character within the story. Before the book begins, Grahame-Smith writes a detailed introduction about his own personal interaction with a prominent character, the vampire known only as Henry, who leads him to the secret journals of Abraham Lincoln and therefore the untold story of Lincoln as a vampire hunter. This introduction and the very style of writing, the author's words mixed throughout with the journal entries of Lincoln, create two stories within the pages. As seen in the figure 18, the words and journals are mixed together, leaving the reader to differentiate the author from the character. The only distinction between the author and the journals are the

indentations that imply the writing is from a journal. This idea of a story within a story is evident in several Baroque works including Pierre Corneille's *Theatrical Illusion* and Shakespeare's *Tempest*. In *The Theatrical Illusion*, the father, Primadant, is looking for his lost son and seeks the help of a magician. As the play unfolds, the audience watches with Primadant and Alcandre as the son's life unfolds thus creating a story within a story. In the final act of the play, Alcandre, Primadant, and the audience witness the son acting in a play creating one more layer of the story within a story.³⁷ Similarly, in *The Tempest*, the magician, Prospero acts as a puppet master creating the story and even the love between his daughter and Ferdinand. Here the author, Shakespeare, has created multiple stories within his play. Prospero is both the playwright and a character in the play as is Grahame-Smith in *Lincoln: Vampire Hunter*.³⁸

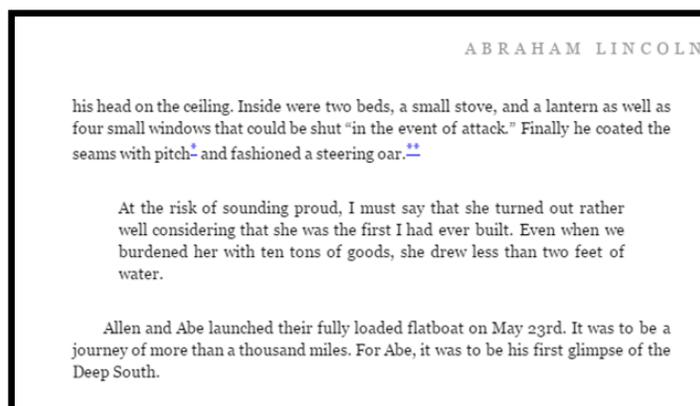


Figure 30. Selected portion of Seth Grahame-Smith's novel *Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter*. Screenshot taken of Kindle version.

³⁷ Pierre Corneille and John Cairncross, *The Cid; Cinna; The Theatrical Illusion* (London: Professional Books, 1975).

³⁸ William Shakespeare and Mark McMurray, *The Tempest* (Canton, NY: Caliban Press, 2001).

In addition to the use of the story within a story, Grahame-Smith uses many literary techniques to structure his work which mirror those of Baroque literature. To emphasize an often disgusting scene, Grahame-Smith uses a series of short, choppy sentences. These differ from the use of long, often very descriptive sentences used elsewhere in the book. One example is when describing the reports of murders in a nearby town: “No trauma. No blood. Open eyes and rigid body. The face a mask of terror.”³⁹ The series of sentences is in direct contradiction to the words used to describe the more mundane parts of the story. Just a paragraph later, Smith describes the town in which Lincoln lived as:

Sinking Springs Farm was about as far from New York City as one could get in early nineteenth-century America. Despite its name, the 300 –acre “farm” was mostly heavily wooded land—and its rocky eastern Kentucky soil made the prospects of bumper crops unlikely at best.⁴⁰

The contrasting writing is used to make clear the difference between the horrific events and those of everyday life. This same style can be seen in Baroque writing such as *Tartuffe* by Molière. In Act I, Scene IV, Orgon speaks to Dorine about his family in his absence. As Dorine speaks at length about the family and specifically Orgon’s wife,

³⁹ Seth Grahame-Smith, *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* (Turtleback Books, 2012), 23.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

Orgon responds in short, choppy sentences, simply asking, "And Tartuffe?" In comparison to Dorine's lengthy descriptions, these short sentences signify the importance of Tartuffe to Orgon.⁴¹ The use of this technique to show a change in perspective is used both by Molière and Grahame-Smith in order to juxtapose the contrasting ideas.

Grahame-Smith also uses several false comparisons to create a unique image of a reality that could not possibly exist. He describes the way Henry Sturges "humanizes the notion of immortality"⁴² and the way in which Lincoln was seen: "it turns out that the towering myth of Honest Abe... is inherently dishonest."⁴³ These false comparisons are used throughout the novel to enhance the descriptions. The very same technique can be seen in several Baroque poems. Pedro Calderon De La Barca writes of the lives of man and combines life and dreams when he states, "Man dreams the life that is his/until his living is done," he continues this contradiction in the poem when he states, "that all life is a dream to all/and that dreams themselves are a dream."⁴⁴ These contradictions create a false reality that pulls the reader in and creates an image despite the impossibility.

⁴¹ Moliere and Dermot Killingley, *Tartuffe* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Grevatt & Grevatt, 2009), .Act I, Scene IV.

⁴² Grahame-Smith, *Abraham Lincoln*, 75.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 15.

⁴⁴ Pedro Calderon De La Barca. "Life Is a Dream." Project Gutenberg. March 31, 2006.

Grahame-Smith also includes quotes and poems to enhance his work and create the illusion of reality within the book as a whole. The very concept of Lincoln interacting with vampires and therefore changing the course of history only to fight vampires is in and of itself a false reality. Grahame-Smith then weaves very real quotes and poems throughout the book to add to the layer, making it seem, even for only an instant, as if this false reality could be the truth. Grahame-Smith includes a poem, published in the *Sangamon Journal*, which he seems to credit to Lincoln but in fact is written again by Grahame-Smith. The poem, included below, offers a version of reality in which Lincoln, so distraught over the death of his first love, Ann, contemplates suicide. Using the real poem and the real events, including the death of Ann, creates this illusion that the events happening could be true. He also includes a direct quote from Lincoln at the start of each chapter. These quotes from letters, congressional addresses, and even political debates add another layer of fact and reality to the fictional book.⁴⁵

Personification is also used throughout the novel in order to create an image, and while this is not necessarily a distinctly Baroque concept, the way in which Grahame-Smith uses personification to show the flawed humanity of the character mirrors that of Baroque writers. In one of the first descriptions of Lincoln, Grahame-Smith describes a

⁴⁵ Grahame-Smith, *Abraham Lincoln*, 20.

turkey as it died: "It gasped for breath, but could draw none, and its eyes wore a kind of fear I had never seen."⁴⁶ This description applies human emotions such as fear to an animal and places the feeling and flaws of Lincoln onto the animal. Similarly, John Donne writes of the emotions of death in his poem when he writes "Death be not proud, though some have called thee/Mighty and dreadful." Here he uses the personification of death to show the flawed humanity within the world just as Grahame-Smith's description of the turkey revealed the flaws of Lincoln himself.

Finally, Grahame-Smith uses an incredible amount of imagery throughout the novel. He creates an image of Lincoln painted in words and the very concept of the quizzical, towering, anomaly that is Lincoln fits the Baroque image described in "The Age of the Marvelous: An Introduction" by Joy Kenseth. Kenseth describes the unique fascination with the marvelous that existed during the age of the Baroque. She describes the marvelous as "those things or events that were unusual, unexpected, exotic, extraordinary, or rare."⁴⁷ This description matches the very concept of Lincoln. At six foot four inches, he towered over most people and his large hands and features certainly made him an unexpected sight. His skill as an orator with no formal education also proved to be a marvel as was his quick rise in politics and his ability to reach the presidency. This image is both reality and described in Grahame-Smith's novel. The

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Kenseth, "An Introduction," 25.

author describes young Lincoln as quizzical and an anomaly.⁴⁸ He also describes the image of the young career-driven Lincoln as “more towering than intellect,” implying his size was much more impressive than his intellect, at least early on.⁴⁹ Grahame-Smith then begins to fabricate stories that make his appearance even more marvelous, including a scene taking place in New Salem, Illinois in which Lincoln was able to best the biggest and bravest fighter, lifting the man over his head and throwing him against a wall.⁵⁰ This story creates the image of a fierce and marvelous towering giant, one akin to the fascinations of Europeans in the Baroque age.

Grahame-Smith also paints a picture of God and the human soul. The imagery of the soul as well as the description of the way in which the vampires wrestle with their souls is reminiscent of certain Baroque paintings. Smith describes the first vampire Lincoln kills and the way in which Lincoln observed the dying being:

I could see his soul (if indeed he had such a thing) departing.

Bidding an unexpected, frightening farewell to such a long, long

life—one undoubtedly filled with happiness, and agony, and

struggle and success.

This description offers an image of the vampire’s life and the view of the soul itself. As he kills many vampires, Lincoln responds the same, describing the look of fear as their

⁴⁸ Grahame-Smith, *Abraham Lincoln*, 127.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

soul slips from them. This description brings to mind the painting by Caravaggio of Judith decapitating Holofernes. This image shows not a look of fear or concern on Judith's face but rather one of wonder and thought. Instead the look of fear is on the face of Holofernes, whose head is being decapitated and the viewer witnesses the moment in which he is likely considering his own soul and the fate that awaits him. Judith's look is mirrored in the novel by Lincoln's thoughts and the look of fear on Holofernes face is similar to the description of the dying vampire.



Figure 31. Caravaggio. *Judith Beheading Holofernes*. 1598-1599. Galleria Nazionale D'Arte Antica, Rome, Italy.

While Grahame-Smith wrote *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* in a post-modern world, his structure and themes render his novel a modern Baroque piece. His work mirrors those of Shakespeare, Corneille, and Caravaggio while also including his own twists creating his own unique and marvelous work. While Grahame-Smith's work is

clearly oppositional interpretation, very tiny negotiated interpretation can be found. He relies on the traditional image of "Honest Abe" to weave his tale. But ultimately, the reinterpretation strays so far from the original icon that it can only be considered oppositional.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

his head on the ceiling. Inside were two beds, a small stove, and a lantern as well as four small windows that could be shut “in the event of attack.” Finally he coated the seams with pitch* and fashioned a steering oar.**

At the risk of sounding proud, I must say that she turned out rather well considering that she was the first I had ever built. Even when we burdened her with ten tons of goods, she drew less than two feet of water.

Allen and Abe launched their fully loaded flatboat on May 23rd. It was to be a journey of more than a thousand miles. For Abe, it was to be his first glimpse of the Deep South.

Figure 32. Selected portion of Seth Grahame-Smith's novel *Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter*. Screenshot taken of Kindle version.



Figure 33. Caravaggio. *Judith Beheading Holofernes*. 1598-1599. Galleria Nazionale D'Arte Antica, Rome, Italy.

Negotiated Interpretation: The Fallacy of the Icon of Hitler

Political rhetoric often relies on the use of icons as comparisons to create an image in the minds of citizens. Some compare great first ladies to Eleanor Roosevelt for their humanitarian work. Some compare rising politicians to the great presidents like Lincoln. Others use more negative icons to paint a picture of their opposition as incompetent or sometimes evil. One such icon used repeatedly in political discourse is Adolf Hitler. As a politician and visionary, Hitler created a certain image of himself. He carefully constructed an image through films and speeches presented to the German people. That image, over time, has come to represent blind faith in a leader and the root of all evil. It is this image that politicians use to create a comparison, but in doing so they must negotiate between the original image and the reinterpretation that fits the intended comparison.

One such example of a negotiated interpretation of the icon of Hitler is the comparison of Donald Trump to Hitler. In order to make the comparison work, writers must pick and choose the pieces of Hitler which fit the negatives of President Donald Trump. On the surface the comparison seems to fit. The two men share characteristics, charisma, the ability to captivate an audience and so much more.

Both Trump and Hitler can be described as “leaders whose power is built on their exceptional sanctity, heroism, or exemplary character as opposed to the rule of law

or simply brute force.”⁵¹ When looking at these leaders, it is clear their followers saw that heroism and developed blind faith in their leader. Even when flaws are discovered these men seem to be above the law. President Trump has been exposed and criticized in the media yet his followers deny those accusations or excuse the actions. Despite Hitler’s call for government change, he stole power and his followers allowed it.

Even their speeches share similarities. According to Korndorfer both men used speeches to captivate their followers. While different in style, “did not Hitler in his speeches violate all accepted political decorum and get away with it, just as Trump does?”⁵² Both men used “in your face” speeches to convince audiences including specific hand gestures and tone of voice. Both men call out their respective governments and criticize the democratic system as whole. Hitler hoped to return Germany to the glory days before World War I and Trump pledged to “Make America Great Again.” Both men gained steam by attacking the bureaucratic systems that had led their countries to this point.

The comparisons do not end here. The two leaders also called for absolute loyalty from their followers. The Nazis were required to greet each other with “Heil Hitler” even when not in his presence. Trump made clear to his appointees that loyalty

⁵¹ Emily Cadei. “Make America Grande Again!” *Newsweek Global*, Vol. 166, no. 19 (May 20, 2016): 12.

⁵² Bjorn Krondorfer, “Is Trump like Hitler? the value and limits of analogy.” *The Christian Century*, vol. 133, no. 10 (May 11, 2016): 10.

was a precondition of their appointment, and he made this clearer when he fired those who did not maintain their loyalty.

While the similarities between Trump and Hitler are hard to deny, they remain superficial. Scott Gilmore stated the worst form of “inflated [political] rage is to compare a politician to Adolf Hitler, the Nazis, or fascism.”⁵³ Hitler had become an infamous icon to represent the worst sort of politician. The icon is based on his enigmatic speeches, his quick rise to power, and his party’s supposed blind faith. However, this image lacks depth and therefore must be met through a negotiated interpretation. As one digs deeper, it becomes clear that the comparison falls short and certain facts must be overlooked to make it fit. It is only when the image of Hitler and the image of Trump are twisted or negotiated that the comparison can be used to sway American political opinion.

American media often compare controversial politicians to the Führer in order to equate these politicians with the evils of Hitler and the Nazi regime. The contemporary comparisons fail to acknowledge Hitler’s background and rise to power and instead focus on the Führer as seen through contemporary historiography, looking backwards with the end in sight, rather than considering Hitler without knowing the Holocaust and World War II. Likewise, the image of Trump must also be distorted in order to

⁵³ Gilmore, Scott. “Trump, Hitler and the Arc of History,” *Maclean’s*, vol. 128, no. 50 (21 December 2015): 26.

equate Hitler to Trump. Trump may have done some bad things but none of them can remotely compare to the genocide of the Holocaust. The comparison to Hitler fails to acknowledge the historical reality of both sides. When one compares the actual person, Adolf Hitler, to contemporary politicians such as Donald Trump, the comparison falls short.

The background and childhood of a person help to shape his or her ideologies and views of the world. That same background helps shape the image of an icon. Hitler and Trump experienced very different childhoods. Hitler was born an outsider, the illegitimate child of an Austrian Catholic. His father was a mid-level government agent and the family was not wealthy. In his adolescent years, Hitler pursued an art career in which he failed to achieve success. With the assassination of Franz Ferdinand and the start of the Great War, he then found his way into the military. Following World War I, young Hitler refused to return to the life of a starving artist and found his way into politics.⁵⁴ Donald Trump, on the other hand, was born into a wealthy, American family. He was very much an insider, living a privileged life as a part of the elite. He never wanted for anything. His life epitomized the theory that wealth breeds wealth. He developed his own business empire and worked in reality television until later in life, finally finding his way into the political realm. The two entered politics at very different stages in life and for very different reasons. On the surface both men fit an image of a

⁵⁴ Corey Campion, personal correspondence.

disgruntled citizen entering into the political realm to return their country to greatness. The reality must be renegotiated to make each of these men fit this simplified political image.

Rarely the comparisons between controversial politicians and Adolf Hitler refer to the early life of these men. This is not part of the image or icon so it does not help to prove the rhetoric. This would lead each of them to a unique perspective on the world and politics. Since this does not aid in the negative comparison it is entirely left out of many political arguments.

Both men entered politics with an aim for power. Hitler's political career began at the bottom of the ranks. He quickly rose in power due to his charismatic nature and his talent for oration. His early attempt to steal power during the Beer Hall Putsch taught him that power would have to be taken through elections. In order to win votes, Hitler and the Nazi party would offer false promises and contradicting statements to differing groups. This seems to be a fair comparison with less of a negotiated image. Both men made contradicting statements or empty promises in order to reach certain audiences. Hitler might speak to industrialists in the morning and change his speech by the evening when speaking to the workers. The closer he got to power, the more evident it was that he wanted ultimate power. Even still, he never won a clear majority, in the last free election; the Nazi party only won 43% of the vote.⁵⁵ At this point, Hitler

⁵⁵Ibid.

appointed himself Chancellor with no vote from the people. Just as Hitler changed his statements to match his audience so did Trump. Throughout his campaign and presidency Trump has made conflicting comments on who will pay for the southern border wall. He also has changed his stories from one media source to another in the hopes of protecting his image. In recent news, he misspoke calling Tim Cook by the wrong name and rather than admit to the mistake he continued to change his story.⁵⁶

Trump's political career began much differently. According to Fedja Buric, he first entered the political realm with "his insistent, nonsensical, irrational, and blatantly racist demand that President Obama show his birth certificate and his Harvard grades."⁵⁷ He did not start at the bottom and earn his place at the top. Instead he immediately sought the highest position, President of the United States. While Hitler carefully played to his audiences, Trump speaks his mind. He does not deliver carefully contracted speeches for the specific audience, often he rambles and his speeches at times contradict themselves.⁵⁸

The political career of Trump and quick rise to power is often equated with Hitler's. However, again this comparison fails to acknowledge the whole story. Hitler experimented briefly with other careers but quickly found his way into politics. The

⁵⁶ Megan McClusky, "Trump Says He Called Tim Cook the Right Name," *Time Magazine*, March 11, 2019.

⁵⁷ Fedja Buric, "Trump's Not Hitler, He's Mussolini: How GOP Anti-intellectualism Created a Modern Fascist Movement in America," *Salon*, March 11, 2016.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

political prowess of Hitler was carefully planned and put into place in order for him to take power through legal means. Trump's campaign seemed to start on a whim and as he gained support became a more legitimate maneuver for office. He does not appear to have the same carefully calculated moves, but rather speaks his mind and his ideology seems to be malleable and rich with contradictions.⁵⁹

Within the political party and political system, both men held similar positions. Hitler quickly maneuvered within the National Socialist German Workers Party (NSDAP) to create his own party. By the end of 1921, the party was truly Hitler's party, all operating under Hitler's agenda.⁶⁰ Trump initially allied himself with the Tea party movement, a fairly new political party. Only after gaining some support, Trump operated within the political party system. Recognizing that only Democrats or Republicans are elected, he ran on the Republican ticket though he threatened to run as an Independent if the Republican Party did not make him the nominee. He would come to represent a new Republican. The staunchest Trump followers identify not with the GOP, but instead with the specific ideas of Trump. They rally behind the Trump campaign more than the ideas of the Republican Party. One could argue, with the winning of the Republican nomination, that the party became Trump's party in the way

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Richard Bessel, "The Nazi Capture of Power," *Journal of Contemporary History* vol. 39, no. 2 (April 2004).

that the NSDAP became Hitler's party.⁶¹ Despite the differences in their true stories, a negotiated interpretation of the story glosses over the details creating a better comparison.

The two demagogues offer vastly different personas, both appealing to the masses but in contrasting ways. Adolf Hitler was a talented speaker and charismatic presence. He was a dreamer who often left the planning to his fellow party members. According to Ian Kershaw, Hitler had "an essentially propagandistic preoccupation with avoiding any harmful inroads into the prestige and image of the Führer."⁶² Some have argued that Trump is the opposite: his background in business has made him a determined realist. However, his image here could be negotiated again to fit the icon of Hitler. Since his election, Trump has turned to propaganda. He also wants to hold a military parade which could be seen as reminiscent of the Nazi marches.⁶³ He is also a presence but not in the same way as Hitler. He gains people's attention with his bold statements and his lack of decorum when speaking to an audience. Within the age of social media, Trump seems unconcerned with the damaging of his image.⁶⁴ Where Hitler seemed overly concerned with the way the people viewed him, Trump seems to

⁶¹ Buric, "Trump's Not Hitler, He's Mussolini."

⁶² Ian Kershaw, "Hitler's Power: An Evaluation," in *The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation* (London: Arnold, 2000), 80-81.

⁶³ "Trump's Military Parade Set for Veterans' Day," *BBC News*, March 10, 2018.

⁶⁴ Adam Gopnik, "The Dangerous Acceptance of Donald Trump," *The New Yorker*, May 20, 2016.

care little for the public at large. Ultimately, he cares only for his base of supporters, as those are the ones who elected him in the first place.

The biggest failing in the political comparison is the political approaches of each leader. Hitler created a vague agenda with a few key ideas: anti-Semitism and anti-communism, a resistance to modernism, and a desire to create a socially unified people's community. Of these goals, anti-Semitism, the most historically remembered piece of the Nazi Reich, was often understated. Hitler played to his audience and quickly realized that the overt anti-Semitic speeches did not do well among the German people. He therefore spent more time on the other three agendas and left the anti-Semitism quiet.⁶⁵ Hitler also refrained from making major political decisions. He allowed other party members to fight over major decisions and when a victor was clear, Hitler would join that side in order to refrain from damaging his image.⁶⁶ These vague, non-committal actions allowed Hitler to remain a figure to represent all Germans.

Trump's agenda is not as clear. His often anti-democratic opinions ring out in his speeches and he shares very overt opinions on certain racial groups. He has spoken against allowing Muslim immigrants into the country and in recent speeches even suggested ridding America of any Muslims.⁶⁷ He also famously suggested building a wall between America and Mexico to keep illegal immigrants out of the United States.

⁶⁵ Corey Campion, personal correspondence.

⁶⁶ Kershaw, "Hitler's Power," 84.

⁶⁷ Gilmore, "Trump, Hitler," 26.

As he gained support, his ideas became more and more radical, making no secret his plan to keep out certain groups. Trump is not afraid to shock the public and to make clear decisions that may cause him to lose supporters. Many of his supporters value just that characteristic, the idea that Trump will do what he wants regardless of the political ramifications.

This anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant opinion is often what seems to be negotiated to make the comparison between Hitler and Trump; that, and the cult of personality that both have cultivated. Historians have argued that the "Nazi capture of power was the step which made the most appalling rail of destruction. It opened the door to barbarism."⁶⁸ Many in America seem to believe that Trump's quick rise in the political realm mirrors that trail of destruction. On the surface, the German people held a long standing distaste for the Jewish people, similar to the ever growing distaste and distrust of Muslim immigrants by the American people. Both politicians have drawn on those sentiments to gain support. However, it is clear that Hitler was not preaching to the masses of his plan to exterminate the Jewish people and by offering a comparison, one suggests that Trump may be planning a mass extermination, which is a stretch, even for the most anti-Trump person.

Many in America have used the comparison of contemporary politicians such as Donald Trump to the Nazi leader, Adolf Hitler. These comparisons look only at the

⁶⁸ Bessel, "The Nazi Capture of Power," 169.

surface and fail to acknowledge the background, politics, and personality of Hitler. When analyzing all aspects of Hitler's rise to power, the comparison falls short. Ultimately, "nothing can compare to what the Nazis did in Germany."⁶⁹ The glossed over version of Hitler and Trump creates a nice comparison for the anti-Trump movement. But only through a negotiated interpretation can the comparison hold up. However, Trump's rise to power has not concluded and as Gopnik stated, "Hitler wasn't Hitler – until he was."⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Krondorfer, "Is Trump like Hitler?" 10.

⁷⁰ Gopnik, "The Dangerous Acceptance."

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