



Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986)

Critical Analysis of the Painting *My Last Door* by Georgia O’Keeffe

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Abstract

This paper examines Georgia O’Keeffe’s ‘My Last Door’ through the lenses of compositional interpretation, semiotics, and discourse analysis. Created during a period of war, fascism and social upheaval, the painting interrogates societal structures while reflecting the individual’s precarious position within them. ‘My Last Door’ encapsulates the emotional and psychological landscape of mid-20th-century America, employing geometric simplicity and a muted colour palette to convey themes of loss, transition, and constrained identity. Utilising Saussure’s theory of signs, Barthes’ concepts of denotation and connotation, and Foucault’s discourse on subjectivity, this analysis uncovers the layered meanings embedded in O’Keeffe’s visual language. Additionally, a feminist reading positions the painting as an assertion of autonomy within a male-dominated artistic tradition. Ultimately, ‘My Last Door’ invites viewers to engage in a process of deconstruction, challenging fixed interpretations and opening pathways for new creative and existential possibilities.

Keywords: art, discourse, door, Georgia O’Keeffe, semiotics, feminism, subjectivity

Introduction

Georgia O'Keeffe's *My Last Door* (1954-1956) stands as a significant work within the renowned American artist's exploration of abstract form. Created in the wake of the cataclysmic mid-20th century – an era marked by global war (1939-1945), fascism, genocide (including the Holocaust), and profound societal trauma – the painting invites interpretation within this context of widespread destruction, displacement, and existential anxiety. The period fundamentally reshaped human consciousness, fostering feelings of fragmentation, lost peace, and a heightened sense of individualism amidst pervasive inhumanity.

Artistic responses to this turmoil were powerful and varied. Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) stands as a seminal abstract condemnation of the horrors of the Spanish Civil War, becoming, as Patterson (2007: 3) notes, "the most famous image of total war" by "articulating the terror of it so potently". Similarly, Salvador Dalí's surrealist work *The Persistence of Memory* (1931), emerging after the First World War and during the fraught interwar period, presented a disquieting vision of time's fluidity and decay in a barren landscape, reflecting on the erosion of human experience and memory. Zlatić (2014: 11) suggests such works explore how "Human memory and consciousness, embedded in time... resist analysis... and thus digitization". The human creation at that time shows the transformation of living essence into the non-living things.

Both Picasso and Dalí employed avant-garde styles (abstraction, Surrealism) to reject traditional artistic forms and offer potent critiques of contemporary reality, signaling vital transformations within art and society. This wave of avant-garde expression, including Abstract Expressionism, deeply influenced American art. Within this milieu, Georgia O'Keeffe emerged as a revolutionary figure, consistently challenging traditional artistic methods, styles, and the prevailing male-dominated art establishment. Her work forged new dimensions of visual expression. *My Last Door*, a powerful example of her late abstract period, represents such a paradigm shift. This paper, therefore analyses O'Keeffe's *My Last Door* through the integrated frameworks of compositional interpretation, semiology, and discourse analysis to uncover its formal strategies, symbolic resonances, and its situated meaning within the artistic and historical currents of post-war America.

My Last Door is the representative piece of art that shows the socio-political scenario during 1950s. It is known as one of the remarkable abstract forms of work, which was created between 1954 and 1956. The period of 1939 -1945 and even till the 1950s was the era of war, conflict and the rise of fascism in many countries. As a result, the world has witnessed mass slaughters and incidents like the holocaust. Many people lost their lives, homes, and families. On the other hand, the negative impact of war, destruction, and inhumanity affects the entire European and American society. The rise



Pablo Picasso, *Guernica*, 1937, oil colour on canvas, Museo Reina Sofía, Madrid.

of the power of the authoritative group, such as Hitler and his allies, as well as the autocratic system's control over the lives of the people and the nation. As consequent, people of that time became disoriented, out of their minds and individualistic. In that situation, there are a number of literary figures who react against the war and its impact on society. History has witnessed that many literary figure and artist have shown their interest in war, through their works. Figures such as Pablo Picasso generated '*Guernica*', the painting which depicts the situation of the Spanish Civil War and its impact on the lives of people during 1937.

Guernica is a powerful reaction against the power disposition. Patterson (2007:3) mentions that "Picasso's painting in response to the bombing made *Guernica* the most famous image of total war, and articulated the terror of it so potently". The painting exposes the situation of the war and its undesirable impact on society.

The painting of Salvador Dali's '*The Persistence of Memory*', a Surrealist painting, enables us to rethink our relationship with time during the 1930s, after the phase of the First World War. The image shows a melting clock, and time is also melting in a dry and bizarre land, as many years have been wasted in war, and when it is over, then none of the humans will exist. There is no essence of the human, only the existence of the species. Zlatic (2014:11) describes that "Human memory and consciousness, embedded in time, similarly resist analysis (i.e., breaking into pieces) and thus digitisation". The essence of living beings' transformation into non-living things became a matter of interest and relevance during that time. The painting of Dali also depicts the notion of human consciousness about time, which can be rejoiced in, as well as a resistance that is not pleasurable at all. Both paintings by Pablo and Dali reject the traditional form of thinking and the tendency of the

old method of production. Through their work, they bring avant-garde moments in the form of abstract and surrealist paintings. Which is known as a vital change and transformation of in and out of the artists, artistic movement, as well as for the society. A similar trend of abstract expressionism spread into American society. This generated a new form of art at that time. Among many Avant-garde artists in the context of America, Georgia O'Keeffe has challenged the traditional style of art, its methods, as well as the male-oriented notion of art and its value. She is the revolutionary female painter of her time who broke the traditional form and introduced a new dimension. Among her many famous works, *My Last Door* is one of the abstract paintings that brought a new paradigm in the field of art. Hence, the paper discusses *My Last Door* as an American avant-garde work based on its compositional interpretation, semiotic and discourse analysis.

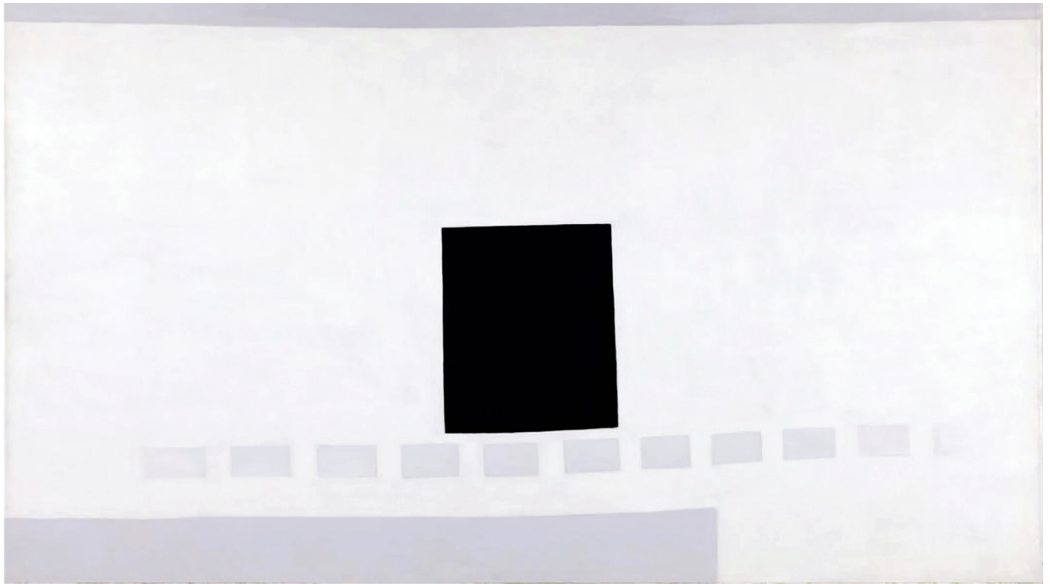
Compositional description

Painting is a form of visual art that projects the visual culture. The visual culture includes audio, visual and kinesthetic methods through which people can communicate and exchange their thoughts and ideas. Any sort of image, like photographs, sketches and paintings as visual images, produces its meaning on the basis of its content, forms and compositional interpretation. Rose Gill (2016:4) coined the term “compositional interpretation”, which refers to a method that offers a way of looking very carefully at the content

and the form of the images. It is the way of close reading of the images, which is practised by art historians. The compositional interpretation of *My Last Door* is as an abstract form on canvas that has a door at the centre with two different portrayed colours. Kaffe et al. (1976: 19) explain that “square black shape at the centre of the image, it features only two dark grey strips at the upper and lower edge of the canvas and a series of smaller light grey rectangles, seemingly marching along below the square”. The composition of the paint consists of a black door at the centre with a background of light grey colour, and on top of that, blue resemblances. The door is positioned at the centre, dominating the canvas. This symmetrical proportion draws the attention of the viewer directly into the work by the threshold. In front of the door, there are orange colour square strips, whereas the section of the grey colour is in a rectangular shape. Furthermore, the upper and lower case of the canvas suggest shadows, and it looks like the building is shaped into three-dimensionality. So, the compositional interpretation explains the component of the piece of art in an objective manner.

Analysis

Semiology denotes the study of the sign, which holds the aspects of idea, object and image. The ideology of the sign explains that concept and image are related while communicating or forming any words. Ferdinand Saussure, the father of linguistics, proposed the idea that a sign consists of a signifier and a signified as a form of object and



Georgia O'Keeffe, *My Last Door*, 1952-54, oil colour on canvas, The Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe, New Mexico, USA.

image. Joseph (2004: 60) states the union of a concept and an acoustic image. Later, the terms signifier and signifi' or 'signified' are introduced for the acoustic image and concept, respectively. The language system is the union of a concept and an image or sound, which helps people to understand and communicate accordingly. Moreover, it helps to provide an accurate image, as well as the essence in the human mind. So, the sign system generates precise and literal meanings, such as a cat is a cat, because it is not a rat, which means when the cat is mentioned, the image and sound of the cat occur as a mental imprint in the human mind, which makes the person familiar with the objects. In the case of Keeffe's painting, it holds the semiotic meaning which provides the literal images of it. The semiotic

analysis of *My Last Door* indicates the mental imprint of the door that is closed or old, which is not the common one. Based on the semiotic interpretation, the painting *My Last Door* shows the black colour quoted door at the centre is the point of attraction to grasp the attention of the observers. It looks like the door is at the centre of the grey colour wall, where the door has a diagonal shape, and it is inside another square shape of wall. So, basically, the entire painting is formed with the geometric shapes of a square and a rectangle. There is no use of the primary colour. The use of black shows the essence of dark, whereas the use of blue indicates the warmth. So, the colour depicts the contradictory sense of appeal of the painting. The signified meaning of the painting can refer to choices, freedom, ending and transition,

as the signifier depicts the painted image of a door with its rectangular form and its placement on canvas. Additionally, the door functions as a symbolic sign whose meaning is a cultural or social construction. In that case, a door signifies entry or the exit, liminality, which indicates a space between spaces.

Interpretation

Discourse is structured as a set of language, ideas and patterns that shape and are determined based on presentation and delivery. In that way, it generates the interpretative meaning and layers based on the varied contexts and perspectives. So, Discourse is the social practice which denigrates the meaning of the text based on its social performances and behaviour. Leeuwen (2008:6) states, “A discourse as a social cognition, a socially specific way of knowing, a social practice they can be, and are, used as resources for representing social practices in the text”. The word ‘social cognition’ denotes how people think and understand other people and the social context. On the basis of that, the meaning is generated or a message is created on the particular topic. Like any literary text, the painting can also be analysed through discourse analysis where its message is generated by the observers or the readers as per their understanding level, background and socio-cultural context. Those spaces function as a site of meaning production for any piece of work. Therefore, discourse refers to the particular knowledge about the world and shapes how the world is understood and how things are done in it.

From the perspective of the discourse analysis, the meaning as well as message of *My Last Door* is that near the end of life or the last stage of life, where death is a black, dark and unpleasant moment. Before reaching that point, the vivid experiences of life are represented with a mixture of primary and warm colours, like in the painting. The light grey and blue are warmer and softer for the eyes, as well as to get a sense of pleasantness and softness from them. Hence, one of the connotative meanings of the painting can be life at the edge towards the end, and before that phase, it is colourful. In the language of Roland Barthes, the semiotics holds two layers of meaning. One is denotative, as literal meaning the other connotative meaning is emotional or cultural associations that carry the meaning. Allen (2004:21) describes, “A denotative statement is a first-order statement: a statement which concerns the literal (first-order) meaning of the words that make up that statement”. The first order is the literal meaning that explains the image objectively, whereas Allen (2004:22) states, “Connotation, an implied, second-order, plane of meaning will continue to be of enormous importance in Barthes’s structuralist, and indeed his post-structuralist, phases”. The implied meaning breaks the notion of the rigid structure of the language system and expands its horizon based on the multiple aspects where meaning can be multiple and varied. In the same vein, *My Last Door*’s denotative analysis can be a door without hope, ambiguity and despair in the context of American society due to war and its impact on it.

The phrase 'Death of the Author' refers to the rise of the readers. Barthes (1977:1) coined the term 'The Death of the Author'. It means that in the modern world, the author has limitations until they produce their works. Once they are published or produced, there is no command over them by the author since the reader's background, cultural values, and ideology shape and determine the meaning of the texts. The implication of 'The Death of the Author' in O'Keeffe's painting is the depiction of the closed door as a transition or loss. Both meanings can be formed based on the observer's perspective and understanding. Micheal Foucault emphasizes the meaning-making process of the text. The subject in any discourse can have more than one meaning, and the meaning-making process is determined by the audience or readers. In the language of Foucault, the subject or the doer is associated with plural forms such as positions and functions. Miller (2021:3) mentions, "Foucault: 'The subject is a plurality of possible positions and functions. In other words, the subject is constituted by the rules. So, discourse is subjective with the constitution of impersonal rules. Discourse produces subjectivity: how a person thinks and regulates personal spaces, such as bodies, as well as places. In that sense, the painting of O'Keeffe is not just a private expression, but on a broader level it represents perception, space and identity. In *My Last Door*, the subjective perception can be a door to rigidity. The space is the personal space of O'Keeffe as a person, as well as the

space of the female in the male-oriented society during 1941, which depicts her both personal and professional identity as an artist and woman. Furthermore, Foucault asserts in his book *Discipline and Punish* about knowledge and power. According to him, knowledge is power. Flazon (2013:5) asserts the terms of Foucault that, "man, power-knowledge, subjection". This indicates that discourse is related to power, knowledge and subject. Subjective knowledge can generate power as a form of domination, as he has mentioned in *Discipline and Punishment*, whereas power is repression that becomes the inner voice of the subject for themselves as well as for others. The painting of O' Keeffe is an example of the production of subjective knowledge, which generates the power to set up the new avant-garde by female artists in the phase of art during the time of 1941. Additionally, the painting reveals the inner insight of the artist, which becomes new knowledge and a tool for upcoming artists.

The closed door of the painting resembles the female life and their status in the 1940s. Society is male-centric, where men have a higher status quo than women. Men have more opportunities and privileges than women. The construction of gender norms and rules has defined the roles of men and women in society, where both are obligated to perform certain acts. However, Judith Butler views gender as a repetitive act. Bulter (2004:11) asserts that "it is a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint. Moreover, one does not 'do'

one's gender alone. One is always 'doing' with or for another, even if the other is only imaginary". The 'doing gender' is the notion of responsive and creative rather than implied and improvising from the social constraints. But in society, one does not perform one's gender alone. The roles of gender always come with others' performance and attachment. Which is not independent but rather visible and interpreted by others. Therefore, the life and role of the woman are interpreted by society rather than by themselves. The application of this discourse in the painting of O'Keeffe represents the interpreted story of the woman's life, which is like a dark and closed door in the context of misogyny.

Georgia O'Keeffe's *My Last Door* is a piece of rhetoric that holds the art of persuasion depending upon the context. The term 'rhetoric' refers to the method of persuasion. Aristotle coined the terms 'ethos', 'pathos', and 'logos' as the three pillars and ways of rhetoric to persuade the readers or the audiences, which evoke the appeal system. Braet (1992: 4) illustrates "most arguments derive their power of persuasion from a fusion of ethos, pathos and logos". The combination of the three dimensions produces the form of conviction to form the new argumentation. The painting of the O'Keeffe also appeals to the senses of the observers not only in terms of its composition but also as the form of rhetoric that consists of logos and pathos as the centre of attraction that appeals to their audiences and based on those appeals audiences can generate new

argument, forming new meaning and contextualise the work accordingly.

Conclusion

Georgia O'Keeffe's *My Last Door* is not only a form of art, but it transcends its abstract form to become a site of a deep social, political and personal commentary. With the compositional structure, colour symbolism and layered meaning, the painting emerges as a visual discourse shaped by the artist's context and identity as well as the society. The use of abstract forms and dark, muted tones signals both personal transition and broader social and cultural disillusionment in a post-war and patriarchal society. Semiotic and discourse analyses reveal that *My Last Door* is not merely an aesthetic object but a rhetorical act that confronts established power structures and gender norms. It embodies the dual experience of loss and resilience, offering a silent yet potent resistance to the constraints of its times. Georgia O'Keeffe's work thus stands as an avant-garde intervention that redefined American art and carved space for female subjectivity in a historically male-dominated field.

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