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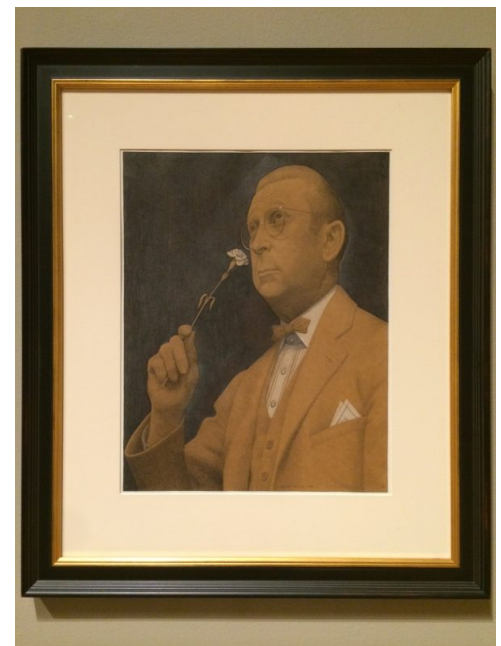


Salesman or Lawyer: Who is Grant Wood's Sentimental Yearner?

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It was difficult to pick just one piece from “Marks of Genius: 100 Extraordinary Drawings from the Minneapolis Institute of Art” to write about. In the end, I settled on *Grant Wood's Sentimental Yearner*. One of nine commissioned illustrations (two townscapes, seven characterizations) for a limited edition of *Sinclair Lewis's Main Street*, this work is wrapped up in a little art-world controversy. Some writers, such as Lea Rosson DeLong, think the piece depicts Raymond Wutherspoon, “professional bachelor/shoe salesman.” Others, like James Dennis, believe it to be Guy Pollock, the timid, bookworm lawyer.

DeLong's argument is compelling. In *Main Street*, Raymond Wutherspoon —“the most sentimental yearner in town”—is described as having a “pale, long, spectacled face and sandy pompadour hair,” which sounds a lot like the guy in the drawing. But there are problems. This guy's hair is not piled high like a typical pompadour (think John Travolta in *Grease*). He's also described as square-jawed. Take into account, also, the character's personality. Raymond calls himself “Raymie,” declares humor as an “enduring quality,” and prefers movies to books. He's a jocular guy. Does that match the personality of the character depicted by Wood?



Grant Wood (United States, 1891-1942), Sentimental Yearner, 1936, graphite, black and white Conté crayon, white gouache, on brown kraft paper. Gift of Mr. Alan Goldstein 80.91 © MBI, Inc.

Guy Pollock, on the other hand, is a lawyer, not a salesman. He is a humorless romantic, too afraid to act on an impulse and

steeped in literature and high culture. He is a delicate, tepid creature. That sounds like our guy, doesn't it? Look at his expression as he sniffs the carnation. Stone-faced. But again, there are problems. Pollock is first described in the book as 38 years old and wearing a mustache. The guy in the drawing looks to be a bit older and is very clean-shaven.

If not Raymie or Pollock, who exactly is Wood's character? It's possible that these drawings weren't meant as specific illustrations of Lewis's characters. Based on the reactions of Lewis and his publisher, Dennis suggests that Wood went beyond the book. It certainly would have been easier for Wood to follow the exact physical descriptions of Lewis's characters, but I think he wanted to do more. He wanted to capture personalities. I think he was drawing archetypes. Perhaps Wood thought a "sentimental yearner" would have Pollock's dour, day-dreamy, timid, book-wormy personality and also appear middle-aged and spectacled, like an older Raymie. He was typecasting à la 1935. It's human nature to typecast. If you don't believe me, turn on the radio, listen to someone you've never seen before, imagine what they look like, and then get online and see what they really look like. I'm always surprised and usually wrong.

That's why I've always preferred to ignore the book altogether and do what Wood himself wished us to do (as stated in a letter he wrote to Lewis)—enjoy *Sentimental Yearner* in its own right as a wonderful example of visual satire. It's an exquisite drawing of an emotionally flat-lined, timid man having a micro-indulgence. Wood employs a host of visual clues about this character, whoever he may be—impeccably dressed, flawlessly groomed, an almost imperceptible reaction to the puny flower, no smile, and only his eyes pointed skyward, a faint shaft of light descends above his head emanating from what must be some kind of thought bubble just outside the picture plain.

What interests me most, though, is the style. It's Wood's style that

really delivers the punchline. How a subject is rendered, or editorialized, contributes greatly to an audience's reaction to the content. When qualities of a style match the qualities of a subject, the subject is stylistically reinforced.

One way to think about it is by using pop psychology. A friend of mine used to say that those who try to diagnose artists by their work were victims of "Van Gogh Syndrome," or VGS. If I were to VGS Grant Wood, I would guess he suffered from some degree of obsessive-compulsive disorder. Why? Because his execution is ordered, flawless, tightly controlled, and cleansed of unintentional marks. In a sense, one could say that the *Sentimental Yearner* is the drawing of a meticulous, obsessive-compulsive-looking character, rendered in a meticulous, obsessive-compulsive style. That's what I call stylistic reinforcement and, by the way, great satire! You'll find more extreme examples of stylistic reinforcement in Grant Wood's later work, including *Daughters of the Revolution*, *Midnight Ride of Paul Revere*, and, his most celebrated piece, *American Gothic*.

As a postscript, I'd like to share a personal connection I have with Grant Wood. I grew up 15 miles north of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, where he lived and worked. At age 18, I left home and moved to Cedar Rapids, where I worked on an industrial roofing crew. Fortunately for me, I was awful at my job and was fired after a month. With nothing else to do, I began hanging out at the Cedar Rapids Art Center, which houses the largest collection of Grant Wood's work in the country. It was like going to church for me. After a couple weeks of daily visits, the director, Stan Wiederspan, who by this time knew me on a first-name basis, hired me to catalogue its permanent collection! For the rest of that summer and the summer after, I got to live with all of those Grant Wood paintings and drawings, memorizing every brush stroke and pencil mark. It changed my life forever!

Dan Mackerman is currently a full-time painter and sculptor living

the Twin Cities metro area who also teaches painting in his private studio. Highlights of his career include projects with the following institutions: The Smithsonian Institute National Building Museum and the Phipps Center for the Arts, Disney, Animal Planet Television, Paisley Park Studio (Prince), The Mayo Clinic, Central California Children's Hospital, The Children's Hospitals of Minneapolis, St. Paul and the University of Minnesota Amplatz. His work can be found in over 43 collections throughout the country.

Dan will be in the MIA's "[Marks of Genius](#)" Drawing Studio on Thursday evening, from 6 to 9 p.m., as part of the "[The Artist Is In](#)" series, where he will be on hand for informal drawing demonstrations, gallery talks, lessons, and to share his personal philosophy of drawing. Whether you're a doodler, a draftsman, or somewhere in between, pick up a pencil and get drawing.

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