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A Vision of Racism Diminished

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“A Vision of Racism Diminished,” by Kyle Reilly

Instructor’s Note

In the following essay, Kyle responds to a visual prompt, a Norman Rockwell painting of the first day of school for a child caught in the turbulence of civil rights school integration in the United States. The paper first describes Rockwell’s ability to portray people in such a way that we respond with understanding to them – the little girl walking in pride and perhaps fear, the deputies shown only partially and impersonally. Kyle then deals with the details and contrasts of color, and how these communicate a great deal about the child’s stressful situation. Finally, he notes particular accents in the image which conceptualize for us the personal impact of integration. With Kyle’s clear and diverse wording in a well-organized essay, the painting comes alive for us and illustrates for us how an image can be a composition that speaks as loudly as words.

Writer’s Biography

Kyle Reilly is a sophomore Physics major from Detroit, Michigan. He is a very slow writer, but then again you can’t rush an artist, or, apparently, a physicist. When not slaving over calculus problems, Kyle enjoys acting in the Cedarville plays and hanging out in the dorm.

A Vision of Racism Diminished

Growing up in Detroit, one realizes that racism still plagues the human race. As diminished as it may be in recent years, (or perhaps just hidden) it still thrives in some pockets of society. In the long history of social strife that has led to the current state of affairs, few pieces have been as memorable as “The Problem We All Live With,” an oil painting on canvas by Norman Rockwell. In this piece, Rockwell utilizes distinct people, contrasting color, and a plain, accented background to make a commentary on the issues surrounding the integration of public schools.

People in images have the ability to evoke emotions in viewers more powerfully than most other visual elements. Rockwell clearly knew this, and knew better than most artists of the last century how to portray the emotions of his subjects and how to capture the emotions of his audiences. This particular painting has a rather simple appearance, with little action and only a few fairly distinguishable persons. The picture centers on a small, pretty, African-American girl. She holds two books, two pencils, and a ruler in her left hand, walking in the plane of the canvas. Four gentlemen walk in step around her, two behind and two in front, all wearing gold badges and armbands signifying their position of "Deputy US Marshall." From this context alone, one can determine that this piece depicts an instance of the integration of public schools during the 1950s and '60s. Rockwell makes use of the postures and actions of these people to help create the emotion of the scene. The girl holds her head high and leads her gait with her chest, showing a true, yet humble, confidence. Surrounded by her guards, she pays no mind to the rest of the world, heading for her destination with gusto. However, she walks out of step with the guards, appreciative of and reliant on their protection and authority, but showing that she remains her own person.

Rockwell portrays the deputies rather differently. Most strikingly, Rockwell leaves off the heads of the deputies in the picture. This portrays the guards as impersonal, detached from the situation, almost part of the scenery, in order to exemplify the actions of the US Marshall and US government as a whole, rather than those of the guards specifically. To further emphasize this point, Rockwell shows the guards walking in step, all with the same arm position, showing their unified representation of the State. The five walk confidently toward the left hand side of the scene, aware of the tension exhibited in the background, but unshaken in their determination to accomplish their goal.

Along with his varying treatment of different people in the painting, Rockwell uses contrasting colors in different areas to create different moods and themes,

mostly in relation to these people. One finds the clearest example of this contrast in the center of the piece, in the clothes of the little girl. The small black child immediately catches the eye of the audience, wearing a white dress, white shoes, white socks, and white ribbons in her black braided hair. This further sets the girl apart as the main character of the painting, adding to the effect of her uniqueness among the four men. Rockwell also uses this stark contrast of color to bring out the message of his painting and of the event which it commemorates. The color white almost always symbolizes themes such as purity, innocence, and peace. He thus portrays the girl as pure in her intentions, innocent of the hate shown in the background of the picture, and at peace despite the opposition to her mission.

Although the other color contrasts in the picture appear much less stark, they convey significant messages. One can see an example of this in the hands of the men escorting the little girl. Since Rockwell does not show their heads, the observer can only see the skin of the men on their hands. He uses these small objects to subtly demonstrate a proof of the argument underlying the Civil Rights Movement. He paints the hands with detailed shading, thus capturing the many skin tones found in various places about the hands and between different hands. For instance, the man on the right in the foreground has a much darker right hand than left hand. This cannot be a lighting effect, as the man on the left in the foreground, who holds his hands in an almost identical position, has nearly the same color and tone in both. Rockwell uses these small differences to show that no two “whites” have identical skin tones, nor do the two hands of a person necessarily. This demonstrates that a rational person cannot truly think in terms of “black” and “white,” or “colored” and “white,” for every individual simply has a unique variation on the universal human color. This then serves to prove the fact that “all men are created equal,” and that a person’s character and value has no correlation with his or her skin color.

The background of a picture, like the foreground, has the ability to form the message and feel of a picture, while creating much of the context of the scene. Rockwell makes some interesting choices in the creation of this background, giving little of the context in the body of the background and instead using only accents to reveal the setting. He portrays the five characters walking to the left, directly perpendicular to the view of the observer. They walk along an undistinguished concrete sidewalk, at the base of an undistinguished concrete wall. The bland background allows the audience to pay more attention to the other details of the picture. Furthermore, the plainness of the background emphasizes the normalcy of the emotions expressed in the accents, in the context of the picture.

Graffiti makes up two of the three accents in the photo, giving the clearest context in the picture through painted words on the wall. Top and center there appears the word “NIGGER” in large, faded black letters. While not specific to a certain town or date, this simple word works with the other elements to paint a clear picture of a 1950s or ‘60s city plagued by racism. This word has rightly become a deeper cultural taboo than any other in the last half century, and thus this simple graffiti evokes emotions of sadness, rage, regret, and many others in response to the blind racism depicted here. The other instance of graffiti hides in the top left corner, almost hidden by the man in the left of the foreground, but its effect has no less power than that of the centerpiece. In much smaller letters, “K.K.K.” appears, almost as if scratched into the concrete by some young, passionate gang member. Again, few other letter combinations parallel these in driving the emotions of an audience. Rockwell finishes these small but powerful emotional punches with a sign of the immanent but invisible crowds. In the top right corner, just covering the last letter of “NIGGER,” the wall shows the splattered guts of a poorly aimed tomato. Its mangled body on the ground beneath evidences the angry and demonstrative, though unseen, crowds nearby, directly connecting this act of disrespect and animosity to the scene presented in the foreground. Rockwell brings these elements together with a

bland and unobtrusive body for the background, allowing the accents to grab the attention and emotions of the audience.

The distinct people, contrasting color, and plain, accented background in the Rockwell painting “The Problem We All Live With” reverently commemorates the struggle of integrating public schools in the mid-1900s, which serves as a reminder of the ugly past and an exhortation to a more beautiful future. Humanity may never fully eradicate the problem of racism, but the example of school integration gives some hope of its diminishing in the years to come.

Rockwell, Norman. *The Problem We All Live With*. 1963. Norman Rockwell Museum Collection, Niles, IL. *Discovering Arguments*. Fourth ed. New York: Prentice Hall, 2012. 315. Print.