

WHAT STUDENTS SAID ABOUT *American Gothic*

A SAMPLE CLASSROOM CONVERSATION FOR LESSON 1: NOTICING KEY DETAILS: READING VISUAL TEXTS

TEACHER: How did you know to notice the pitchfork?

STUDENT: It's front and center. **(Call to attention: Details at the beginning or in the center of things are important.)**

TEACHER: Pitchforks also are a symbol in our culture. They can stand for work, earthliness, temptation, and the devil. **(Call to attention: Details that lead to meaning, details with multiple meanings, and symbols that resonate with meaning are important to notice.)**

STUDENT: I noticed it because the pitchfork is directly between the two people. **(Call to attention: Physical spaces and relationships are something to notice.)**

TEACHER: The pitchfork also seems to make a direct statement about the influence of work on relationships and lifestyle. **(Direct statements of relationship and principle.)** Do you see the pitchfork anywhere else on the painting?

STUDENT: The pitchfork is repeated in the pocket of the man's overalls, and even a little bit in the church window in the home's dormer. **(Call to attention through repetition.)**

Next, our students tend to notice the expressions on the faces of the subjects:

TEACHER: *(Jokingly prompts)* How would you describe the expressions? Loving? Joyful?

STUDENTS: Unhappy. Tired. Neutral. Dour *(Vocabulary development! Yay!)*

TEACHER: This is a call to attention: major characters are to be noticed in any text, and their expressions and emotional state, and the way they relate to each other, are things to notice about them.

STUDENTS: The woman is standing slightly behind the man. He is looking straight ahead at the painter. She is looking up and askance. **(Call to attention: Character relationships and positionality relative to others are something to notice; in this case, there is also a rupture: the different stances and directions.)**

Students often have an intense reaction to the woman's standing behind the man, and to her fatigued and unhappy expression. We point out that this can be a rule of reader's response—notice and try to explain your intense reactions.

TEACHER: What did you notice about their clothes?

STUDENTS: The man is in a dress jacket over his work overalls. The woman wears a brooch and a dress apron. **(Ruptures: It's weird that he is dressed up but over work clothes, and she is dressed up but ready to work.)**

TEACHER: What can we infer from this?

STUDENT: That as soon as the painting is over they are back to work!

TEACHER: What else do you notice?

STUDENT: It's a rural or farm setting. **(Call to attention: Noticing the context and setting of a piece is always important.)**

TEACHER: What else?

STUDENT: There is a church window in the dormer. **(Rupture: This is in fact part of the American Gothic architectural style, and it is a rupture from typical architecture, so it must be noticed.)**

TEACHER: What do you think that means?

STUDENTS: Maybe there is something about heaven and hell with the church window and the pitchfork. Or about how religion can be oppressive and make people unhappy. Or that Americans work hard because of the promise of heaven. How Puritanical are we?

TEACHER: What else? What do you see over their shoulders?

STUDENTS: The barn is over his right shoulder. The gardening tools and plants are on the porch over her left shoulder. **(Call to attention: Clusters and accumulations of details are to be noticed; comparisons and contrasts of details often constitute a rupture.)**