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2.Points of View

When the novel meets art

School edition



1. The first novels

Lots of contemporary artists, especially painters, took their inspiration from 1700's novels. Their writers are considered the fathers of the English novel, with a particular attention for Daniel Defoe, who's the actual inventor of this genre. The reasons why painters were inspired by his works, that can be seen as old and anachronistic, are very interesting. The 18th-century novelist were representative of the middle class and its values; there are themes and motifs in these novels that can be actualized and used as a critique for the society, as these artists did. It's true we're talking about great personalities in art's history such as Frida Kahlo, Henri Rousseau and Andy Warhol, who could give their artworks powerful but sometimes hidden meanings.

Nevertheless the extreme realism we find in these books lets us understand better the messages hidden in these pictures. In the following pages we will analyze some paintings that represent the strongest meanings of the novels they looked at.



Portrait of Daniel Defoe

1. The first novels



1. The first novels

All humans

This painting was made for the private collection of Kahlo's family and it belongs to the first period of the famous painter, when she was stuck in bed because of the accident on the bus. Despite the artist is still immature, the technique and the typical features of painting are perfectly identifiable. As the artist said in one of the many letters she wrote to the sister, the picture takes its inspiration from the novel *Robinson Crusoe*, by Daniel Defoe. Between the many hours she spent on paint, she read some books, that sometimes inspired her paintings. The message is very clear: racism was very present at the time and touched the artist in a particular way. The two half of the paint are perfectly symmetrical and this shows how people are identical, though their skin is different. The theme is strongly linked to the novel, in which white's supremacy is accepted and unquestioned. The text is filled of references to the dominance of Europe society, that is absolutely the best and most civilized. Kahlo, knowing that white people still considered other ethnicities less important than themselves, decided to actualize what was normal in 1700 and make it a message of brotherhood and equality.

1. Frida Kahlo, *All humans*, 1927. Pastels on paper, 24x33 cm, private collection.

1. The first novels

Mother Earth



2. Henri Rousseau, *Mother Earth*, 1910. Oil on canvas, 13,5x20 cm, New York City, MoMA

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This picture was recently recognized as authentic with great joy. It is again inspired to *Robinson Crusoe* and it represents the importance of nature in the novel, but also in the life of the artist. Rousseau was very interested in exotic places and in the relationship between humans and nature. The Earth has human features, in particular it's a woman, and this probably shows that Henri looked with disgust the low consideration of women in society. Civilization is bad, in contrast with the pure, equal and genuine nature, that is regarded as the mother of all creatures. This theme is extremely actual, considering the more and more worrying situation of our planet, dangerous for our lives and all the ecosystems. The big eyes in the sky have different interpretations: they could be God's eyes and would symbolize the religious presence, very important but controversial in the novel. They would be in black and white because God is present but it doesn't belong to human world. Another interpretation wants the eyes to be Earth's ones, that always look at human beings. They're surrounded by grey clouds, symbols of pollution.

1. The first novels

War is an egg

The last painting of this chapter is an Andy Warhol's artwork, he made for an exposition with the theme of war. He chose the famous episode of the novel *Gulliver's travel*, by Jonathan Swift, in which the tiny population called Lilliputians is fighting for an egg. This war prevents two young lovers to stay together, because of the fight between their families. In the novel this episode was the symbol of the uselessness of war and so it is in the painting. The egg is made with a collage technique and all the pieces have sentences or quotes against war. The artist represented the pain linked to wars by the division between the two figures (the lovers) and the withered flower on the egg. We can understand that the painting is strongly against war but that the artist hasn't any hope for change: humans will continue to spoil the world because of their personal gain.

3. Andy Warhol,
War is an egg,
1962. Collage,
23x23 cm, New
York City, MoMA

